Of Ghosts and Men

Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category: Gen
Fandom: Sherlock (TV), Supernatural
Relationship: This will be full of relationships, of all kinds, but listing them would be spoilers. The story is gen, however, I don’t want to mislead anyone.

Character: Sam Winchester, John Watson, Mrs. Hudson, Mycroft Holmes, Greg Lestrade, Sherlock Holmes, Dean Winchester, Castiel, Original Characters

Additional Tags: Adventure, Angst, Humor, Character Study, Post-Reichenbach, Supernatural Elements, Friendship, Fierce attachments, People ready to kill and die for each other, Basically, all the drama from both shows, Crossover, superlock, Drama queens, Bizarre but nice domesticity

Series: Part 1 of Of Ghosts and Men
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Of Ghosts and Men

by stardust_made

Summary

A year after Sherlock Holmes's death John Watson returns to 221B Baker Street hoping to turn a new leaf. He finds that a stranger has come to town—while John was gone Sam Winchester moved in to the flat below. John's interest is piqued, but he isn't the only one curious in the household. Both men are trying to come to terms with their past, but as is often the case the past refuses to stay away. Sam and John are taken on a journey where adventures and revelations are going to put new and old relationships to test.

Notes

Some warnings: Language, disturbing images and themes for the entire story, i.e. non-explicit violence; non-explicit mentions of off-screen torture, suicide and mental-health trauma. I know it sounds like a lot, but I'm only trying to be respectful to my readers and warn properly. There won't be anything that can't be seen on one of the shows. There'll also be humour and adventure so they'll hopefully balance things out.
For the Sherlockians, this is post-Reichenbach. For the SPN portion of readers, this picks up shortly after 8.09 'Citizen Fang' at the start of the story and loops back into season eight by the end. As long as you're familiar with one of the verses, you should be able to follow without a problem.

'Of Ghosts and Men' has its own tag at my Livejournal where there are in-between chapters posts on writing it and some visuals. Go for the tag 'The Epic Crossover'!

Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoy! This was an epic undertaking and it would mean a great deal to me to have some feedback.
Chapter 1

Even before he went to war John knew no one would have called him a man who was afraid of his own shadow. Then again, it wasn’t his own shadow that used to haunt him for almost a year. Also, fear was hardly the accurate word to describe the feeling. There wasn’t one accurate word for that. Not a thousand could convey that mixture of irrational hope, strangling melancholy and skull-crushing awareness. The whole experience was just cruel—John felt that summed things up aptly.

Three months he’d been away, travelling “to get his mind off things”. (Wasn’t the way people spoke around truths just charming?) And while John had felt the change even before he took off, in the last four or five weeks of his trip there hadn’t been any external reminders. All thoughts of Sherlock had belonged to John only, no shadows to prompt them. So the last thing John expected upon his return was to be confronted by a literal one.

It was brutally evocative, as if to punish John for letting go at last. Of course context played part in it. After all, in a place like Sweden for example, there were very few matches to strike a fiery path of painful associations. Not only had Sherlock and John never been there, but it seemed like two-thirds of the country’s population consisted of blonds. On the other hand project an elongated dark shape on one of Baker Street’s walls and it acquired immense power, the kind that transformed chaos into meaning.

But it wasn’t just the surroundings or even John’s perceptions. Because yes, John was crossing Baker Street’s familiar threshold for the first time in over four months, so being a bit raw was to be expected. Yet he was prepared to bet that a tougher man would have also frozen on the spot if the first thing his eyes fell on, the very first thing he saw as soon as he opened the actual front door, was the shadow of a tall man with grown hair, the outline of his upturned collar in stark relief against the whiteness of the wall.

John didn’t have the time to even wonder how his brain had distinguished these details. It all sort of arrived together as a complete image, like one of those drawings where your eyes looked at a jumble of fragmented features, then something shifted, and suddenly an old woman’s profile flashed into cohesion. The term was *gestalt*, if John remembered correctly. Sherlock would have been proud of him for finding the scientific explanation of the phenomenon, but there was an even simpler one. (No, not as simple as the fact that John never stopped wanting to see Sherlock. That was the default explanation, but John employed it only when there was none other available.) Three seconds after John had faced the shadow, its owner came into view to reveal himself as being tall, having long hair and wearing a jacket with the collar up. The latter was undoubtedly to stop the strong piercing wind—the man’s face had patches in that particular shade of red that cold brought on, so he’d obviously just got in. More importantly, he didn’t look the type to go around with his collar up trying to look cool.

Or mysterious.

He was big and broad and very good-looking, in an unobtrusive but unmistakable way. John had never seen a man so out of place and considering that *all* sorts used to visit Sherlock, that was quite an achievement.

He shook himself mentally. All of that had arrived in his head in the space of a few seconds on a
separate track. The rest of him was still trying to overcome the suffocating longing at the sight of—

“Hi,” the stranger said. John took a breath, social competence kicking in, but speech was still not an option. The man gave him a discerning once-over that somehow managed to be respectful. He hesitated, then spoke again. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

He sounded nothing like Sherlock, either, despite having a masculine voice. American. A low yet soft timbre, the kind that was probably good at soothing people or making them open up and share. John felt his posture straighten into a rigid frame in automatic defence. He told himself to relax. He felt dizzy. He felt thrown off. He felt like he should turn around and walk all the way back to a Scandinavian country of choice, he wasn’t ready, he wasn’t ready.

But he also felt alert. Curious, for the first time in months. He opened his mouth and shook his head at the man in a silent enquiry. The other shifted from foot to foot, suddenly giving the impression of taking up most of the hallway. His hands bunched up into fists in his jacket pockets, the gesture cautious rather than aggressive. There was a wrinkly bit between his eyebrows when he said, “I’m Sam. You must be John.”

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“So you’ve got a new tenant,” John told Mrs Hudson once they’d finished with the usual exchanges of people who hadn’t seen each other for a while. A couple of times while talking to him Mrs Hudson’s smile had stretched to her ears, her eyes going misty. John was very glad to see her, too, most of his tension draining away just listening to her chatter. They were upstairs in the flat and he was even gladder that he’d stopped feeling like running away. He hoped it wasn’t only because he was distracted by his piqued interest in the stranger who had come to town.

Earlier, downstairs, John hadn’t had a chance to do more than introduce himself back, then hear Sam say, “I moved in a month ago, in 221C. Nice to meet you,” before Mrs Hudson had showed up, greeting John with happy noises and hugging him. Sam had given the reunion scene a shy smile and murmured, “I’ll leave you to...” then disappeared quickly. In hindsight, his presence as well as his retreat had been disconcertedly subtle for someone his size.

“Yes, a very nice young man. Keeps himself to himself,” Mrs Hudson said after a short pause, fussing around with the torn wrapping paper of her gift. She’d been delighted by the gift itself—a Nordic teapot—and now headed to the kitchen carrying it pressed to her bosom. John considered following her, but decided to stay in his armchair and wait for her to come back with the tea. He didn’t have a lump in his throat just from looking at the empty chair across and that seemed like something too precious, too fragile to abandon so quickly.

He could hear the water running. “That is a lovely pot, John,” Mrs Hudson called. “Look at that porcelain!”

“I’m glad you like it,” John called back. “Anyway, I’m surprised you found anyone to move in downstairs. No offence, Mrs Hudson, but that basement flat is a dump. The bloke must be pretty desperate.”

“I know, it’s just so gloomy, isn’t it? And all that damp! But I couldn’t offer him Sherlock’s room, could I?” Mrs Hudson appeared at the kitchen doorway, face drawn in concern. “Not without asking you first. And I wasn’t even sure if it was right to ask, you know. You said you wanted to move back in once you came home from your trip, but I didn’t know if you’d still want to do that. But even if—I mean, I still won’t rent it out. And thank God I don’t have to—the flat rent is sorted out, you
remember…”

John remembered. Mycroft insisted that it was Sherlock’s doing, that he must have made arrangements before his suicide, providing for the few people he cared about. John had been quite taken aback with Mycroft wording it like that; so much so that for a moment he’d forgotten he was suspicious Mycroft himself had something to do with it. But the bottom line was that a bank transfer to Mrs Hudson’s bank account had taken place three days after Sherlock’s death, the sum equating the amount of three years’ worth of rent for the entire flat, both Sherlock’s and John’s shares. One of the things that lent credibility to the theory that Sherlock had done it was the way the transfer appeared on Mrs Hudson’s bank statement. “Rent,” the sender had put succinctly.

Of course it would have been a child’s play for Mycroft to trace down the owner of the bank account, but he had said he’d tried and failed to do it. Then added that the mere fact of his failure served as proof that Sherlock was behind the whole thing.

John came back to reality to find that Mrs Hudson had finished talking and was looking at him with some apprehension. He smiled to reassure her.

“It’s all fine, Mrs Hudson.” He didn’t know what was fine, much less whether all of it was, but he wanted to cut down the treating him like a sick person to a minimum, for both of their sakes. “I’m glad it’s worked out and…Sam? Yeah, it’s good that you’ve come to an arrangement. I don’t think I’m ready for a new flatmate.” Mrs Hudson nodded, eyes practically smothering John with understanding.

He got up from his chair. “But,” he said with a small smile, “I think I will be moving back up here.”

“Really? Oh, that’s lovely to hear, John! I’ll be very glad to have you back! Now, I’ve kept this room clean, and the kitchen, your room, too.” Mrs Hudson stopped abruptly before launching into what John was sure was a detailed report on her housekeeping routines. Her hand tugged at the sleeve of her dress, touched the frill there. “Sherlock’s bedroom is—Well, you better come and see for yourself.”

John hadn’t planned on avoiding Sherlock’s bedroom, but he hadn’t exactly stopped to contemplate going into it, either. He didn’t move as Mrs Hudson turned her back and headed through the kitchen in the direction of the bedroom.

It was an opportunity. There was going to have to be a first time—John couldn’t avoid the place forever. The bathroom was right next to it, for God’s sake. John suddenly pictured himself going past that closed door day after day, never breaking its seal, until in his mind it turned into a tomb, a cold, creepy tomb that brought chills to him at night until it ran him out of the house for good. No, if he was to come back, and he bloody well was going to come back, he couldn’t avoid places or things that were connected to Sherlock.

Everything was connected to Sherlock. It used to be his home. It was their home. But John wanted to try and live in it with the memory of his friend and not with his ghost.

He followed Mrs Hudson, feeling some weight lifting in his chest at the prospect of standing at Sherlock’s bedroom door with her rather than alone.

The room was completely empty.

Mrs Hudson was looking at him in apprehension, but to John the sight brought nothing but relief.
The sitting room, the kitchen, even the bathroom—their shared space he could learn to be in again. Sherlock was still not going to be there, but John was. The rest was time, hopefully. John was even planning on keeping some of Sherlock’s belongings around the house, maybe shift them a bit, but keep them.

Sherlock’s bedroom was another thing. John wasn’t a masochist.

(Mrs Hudson had cleaned properly and there was not a single item left, and the air still smelt of Sherlock, just the faintest whiff. Enough to make John ache so much that he couldn’t physically move, the ache making his muscles surrender to it, like all of John used to surrender to it those first few months.)

“…pretty much as it was.” Mrs Hudson voice floated to him. “Well, you know some of his books and the equipment went to that school, but while you were gone Mycroft emptied the bedroom. He said he’d take all of Sherlock’s things back to their family home, but he said he’d ask you to visit there, see if you’d like to keep anything?”

John just nodded. His extremities were beginning to tingle with life again. Mrs Hudson patted him on the arm. “I’ll go and make us that tea,” she said.

John took in the room’s quiet nothingness for another long moment, head void of any coherent thought. He then tried to turn both left and right at the same time, momentarily disoriented, before his legs listened to him and returned him to the kitchen.

“So,” he and Mrs Hudson started at the same time. John gestured to her. “Ladies first.”

“Oh no, no—you go,” she said. “I was only going to ask about your trip, but you’ll be telling me about it for days to come, and I hope you’ve got pictures—Oh!” She made one of her patented chirpy noises as she swivelled from her spot by the sink to look at him. “I have a new laptop! I’ve only had it for a few days, because the old one…The one from you and Sherlock from a couple of years back—it stopped working the other day, just like that, out of the blue. Sam said he could try and fix it for me, but then he said it was the actual machine, a hard-something or other. I wanted to keep it, because it was from you boys, but it turned out I had to pay over a hundred and fifty pounds to get it fixed. So we went to Currys and Sam helped me choose a new laptop. It was a good bargain—we looked up in another shop on the way back and saw the same laptop, but it was ninety pounds more! Anyway, I wasn’t sure I’d know what to do with it, but Sam set it all up for me, showed me what to do—it’s not that different from the other one, really. I asked him to get this thing for me, what was it—” Mrs Hudson abandoned her tea duties to turn around again and face John with an expression of earnest concentration.

Her face lit up. “Skype!” she exclaimed, turning back to the kitchen counter. John couldn’t help his grin. He pulled out a chair for himself.

“And who do you want to talk to on Skype, Mrs H?” he asked.

Mrs Hudson spoke over her shoulder. “Mrs Turner. She’s on her computer all the time. She’s been talking to her sister in Spain and kept telling me all about Skype—no costs, she said. Well, I never! I’m going to try and find out if I can get in touch with some friends I have in Florida, maybe I could talk to them. No biscuits,” she lamented, pouring the tea. “I thought of bringing up some, but then I heard you at the door and forgot all about it.” She added milk and sugar and stirred. John let the sounds of the familiar ritual wash over him.
“There you go.” Mrs Hudson sat down as well, putting John’s cup in front of him. His fingers wrapped around the warmth of the porcelain gladly. He smiled at his landlady in gratitude.

“It’s so complicated, just the language of it,” she went on and it took John a moment to realize she was back to talking about the laptop. “I don’t understand half of what Sam’s saying. I know how to google things. It’s so funny, isn’t it? It sounds like ‘goggle’.” Her eyes crinkled in amusement. “I was saying it like that the first couple of times when I began using a computer, so silly. I told Sam and he was trying not to laugh. He’s been ever so patient with me, showing me things until I remembered how to do them by myself. Well, I remembered at the time and then forgot the next day—my head isn’t what it used to be, not at my age.”

“Does Sam know a lot about computers?” John asked, before taking his first sip and humming, his eyes closing. He’d missed his tea.

“I think he does, but then I think you all do.”

A memory appeared, quite promptly invited. John cleared his throat before smiling. “Well, not all of us. Sherlock used to mock me that by the time I’d finished typing just the title of his latest case, he had solved the new one.”

“Oh, but he was really good with that sort of thing, wasn’t he? That head of his!” Mrs Hudson’s eyes widened for emphasis and she shook her head. John didn’t say anything, just looked at his hands still wrapped around the cup. They both remained silent for a moment. Mrs Hudson spoke first.

“Yes, look at me chatting about, that was what I was going to say—you can show me your photos on my new laptop. It’s got such a nice screen, John, lovely colours.”

“Erm, sure—we’ll look at the pictures on your shiny new laptop. There aren’t many, though, only the ones I took with my phone, but it’s got a good camera. So,” John added quickly, seeing Mrs Hudson draw a deep breath, “do you know what Sam does for a living?”

Mrs Hudson brushed over the damp ring her cup had left on the table and got up.

“He’s a student, doing some course over here, not sure what,” she said, washing her hand. “He doesn’t have a job, but the rent is very reasonable. An old friend of mine from America sent him, so I was only too glad to take him in.” She returned to the table, avoiding John’s eyes. John gave her a quick searching look. Their eyes met, then Mrs Hudson looked at her hands again. “John… Do you think you’re really up to moving back in?”

“Mrs Hudson,” John said quietly, clasping his fingers over her bony ones for a brief moment. “Don’t worry about me. Whatever happens…The worst is over. It’s got to be, right? And I don’t want to look for another place. This is my—” John swallowed. “It’s the only place in London that I’ve ever felt home.”

Mrs Hudson chased his fingers back across the surface of the table and gave them a quick squeeze, then sniffed.

“I’ll do your shopping on Monday,” she said. “And wash some of your linen tonight, do some ironing, too. I’ve dusted in the sitting room a few days ago, but I’ll do it again later today to be ready for tomorrow…” She got up to take her half-full cup to the sink, talking more to herself than to him. “I’ll go out now and see if I could buy a new shower curtain and a matt for the bathroom floor. We’ll need to call a plumber these days; the water pressure has been atrocious, keeps changing all the time.
One moment it’s scalding, the next it’s freezing…”

John took a big gulp of tea and stretched his legs under the table. “Thanks, Mrs Hudson.”

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Sam lifted his head from the book at the sound of steps down the stairs, followed by that of the front door closing. He listened carefully, but couldn’t hear anything else. The steps hadn’t been those of Mrs Hudson—he was able to distinguish those, and anyway, he was pretty sure he’d heard her go down to her flat five minutes earlier. It looked like John Watson had left the building.

There was a knock on his door.

“Yes,” he called softly.

The door creaked open and Mrs Hudson’s head appeared in the gap. Her expression was tense and guilty. Sam knew both feelings better than most; he wondered whether his face broadcasted them so loudly. Dean used to say he could read Sam like an open book just by giving him one look, but it’d been a long while since he last said that.

What he really hoped was that Mrs Hudson was a better actress. From his very short personal acquaintance with John Watson Sam could tell the man was neither trusting nor easily fooled.

“He’s gone,” Mrs Hudson said. “He’ll be back tomorrow, he’s moving back in.”

Sam closed his book. “All right.”

“Will you spend the night there again?”

Sam hummed. Mrs Hudson opened the door fully and stood underneath its frame like a vibrating statue of nerves. “Do you think he’ll show up?”

Sam shook his head. “There really isn’t a way of telling.” They’d had this conversation a few times only in the last week, but he knew how it was for most people, so he didn’t mind. Mrs Hudson was actually taking things pretty well. Sam was impressed. He’d been impressed from the very start, back home—way more to the lady than what met the eye.

This was the most ill-at-ease he’d ever seen her, though.

“Are you okay?” He scanned her face quickly. “You didn’t tell him anything, did you?”

“No. No! I could never. It would—” She bit her lip and lifted a hand to her forehead. Sam got up. “Is there anything that’s bothering you?” he asked. “Anything you’re not telling me?”

She kept on shaking her head. “No, it’s not that. Oh, what are we going to do if John sees him, Sam? He seems better than before he left. It’s the first time in over a year that I’ve seen him almost back to his usual self. This is such a mess, such a mess; I just don’t want to think about what would happen if —”

“Mrs Hudson,” Sam interrupted her, gentle but firm. “We can’t worry about ‘what if’ now. We’ll cross any bridge when we get to it, all right? I wish we had more time. And I do understand you want to protect him, I really do, but what options do we have? We can’t tell him, you know we can’t.
Can you ask him not to move back in? No.” They both said the word at the same time. “So we'll just have to figure out what's going on as quickly as we can and just deal with it.”

Mrs Hudson nodded, then sighed. “I just wish John wasn’t involved.”

“Me too,” lied Sam, giving her his most sympathetic look.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

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For the Sherlockians, this is post-Reichenbach. For the SPN portion of readers, this picks up shortly after 8.09 'Citizen Fang'. I plan on updating at least once a week. I'm also trying to write this so that as long as you're familiar with one of the verses, you should be able to follow the story. I hope you enjoy and thank you for reading!

Beta by my wonderful friend and awesome writer sirona.

Original entry over here at my Livejournal.

Sam was learning to appreciate the difference between loneliness and a sense of isolation.

It wasn’t the case of feeling just the one, so that he could put it against the memory of the other and nod wisely. No, he felt both at the same time, yet he was pretty good at telling which was which. Must be the result of personal growth. Great.

This kind of loneliness was an old thing. He’d made its intimate acquaintance five years ago in what turned out to be a whole alternate reality created around him—because that was his life, that was Sam’s life. The alternate reality was gone after six months, every atom and every second of it. The experiences remained, solid and authentic. Monumental loneliness amongst them, the kind without equivalent in Sam’s life up to that point. He’d felt lonely before—God, had he ever—and he had since. But the kind he felt back then, when a fake demi-God tricked him into believing Dean was truly dead? That was special. Loneliness that came into the world with its name, as it were. Sam remembered driving alone, working jobs alone, eating and sleeping alone in his silent, dimly lit motel rooms. All he felt was pain circling around the loss of Dean, Sam’s fixation with killing the creature who’d taken away his brother included. Perhaps that was the reason he felt lonely back then, but not isolated. It would have meant feeling cut off from other people and Sam really, really could not have cared less about other people.

Now he did, yet obviously not enough to actively seek them out.

It was the job that did it, or at least exacerbated things. Sam had never been the social butterfly, even back in college. He didn’t mind other people’s company, but he didn’t need it, either. He was pretty happy on his own. Mostly because he rarely was on his own—usually Dean was there. Sam sometimes tried to get his head around the fact that Dean was this whole other person. His presence had always been so woven into the very fabric of Sam’s life that it was kind of hard to count him as ‘people’.
No, Sam could go on without company for a while, but the job, that was a different story. Hunting was an isolated business by default, he knew that. Even when hunters paired up, it was out of necessity. Naturally, bonds were formed—people were people. But there was hardly ever enough time for the bond to deepen before someone got killed. The depth, the substance of the relationships normal people had? Not your average hunter’s cup of tea, to con a local expression. It was stupid to form attachments if you were a hunter—no one was in a hurry to make that mistake more than once. Even when hunters were hanging out together, like they used to in The Roadhouse, it looked like a bunch of people having fun in a bar, but in reality they were all cautious, broken strangers exchanging info, comparing notes, picking up tips—basically, attending a staff meeting in an office that happened to play music and serve alcohol. Sure, they checked on each other, watched each other’s backs, grieved…But again, that was more about a general sense of belonging to a very exclusive club rather than a deep, personal commitment. The latter was rare, but Sam had seen it. He had had that in his life as well, and he didn’t mean just Dean.

Dean. Sam and Dean were the biggest exception. Nobody said just ‘Sam’ or just ‘Dean’. When people spoke about them, it was always ‘Sam and Dean’, or ‘the Winchester boys’. Funny how in all the crap they’d gone through for having each other, they hadn’t really stopped to celebrate what they were: two people who had each other in a world where everyone was alone sooner rather than later.

Not so funny now, when Sam was actually alone. Still, at least this time it was by choice.

And it wasn’t like he needed other hunters to make buddies. He needed them to talk the job through, or to just talk at them, so he could hear himself better. He needed another perspective. He had questions. He hadn’t missed Bobby so much since those few weeks after his death, when the reeling pain was gone and the realization that Bobby really wasn’t there anymore had hit in a thousand distinguishable ways. Bobby would have been great for this. Hell, Bobby might have even had a blast, never showing it of course—the poster boy of grumpy old man. A job that looked simple at first, but had turned out to be such a challenge—Bobby would have risen to it. He would have helped Sam to suss out the whole damn thing, before it drove him completely nuts.

But Bobby wasn’t here. No one was. Sam knew two people in London, two. Katie, the nice girl who worked at Speedy’s and probably had a crush on him, and Mrs Hudson. The longest he’d talked to Katie was two minutes once, on the topic of doughnuts. Sam knew it was his doing, both the loneliness and the isolation, but he was in a dead-end street; he wanted to reverse but simply couldn’t. There was no drive in him, strong enough to get him out.

He had talked to Mrs Hudson a few times, found her a surprisingly patient listener; must have been all that living near someone in need of an audience. But the things Sam really needed to talk about were either too personal for him or too close to home for her—pun completely unintended, because Jesus, poor Mrs Hudson. And now with her added concern about John Watson Sam didn’t have the heart to involve her.

If he really was that desperate, he could have contacted a local hunter. It wasn’t that hard, you only needed to know where to ask. Sam knew, but…No. Too risky. Mrs Hudson left him in no doubt that her dead tenant had meant a lot to her. ‘Like a son’ came to mind. Whatever was done had to be done carefully, and Sam knew all too well how hunters worked: shoot first, say the Latin later. He’d done it, too; everyone had. He couldn’t bring a stranger into this.

For his own reasons as well. A stranger meant working a job with someone, side by side, and that was too close to home for him.
Besides, experience showed that hunters everywhere read their metaphorical “News of the World” trash and Sam had made the front page a couple of times. “Sam Winchester starts the Apocalypse, read all about it!” They’d all read all about it. The usual ratio of truth vs. sensational fiction was preserved in gross favour of the latter and there was never any space for the good press on front page. How about “Sam Winchester hauls Lucifer’s ass back into his cage, goes down with him”—somehow that hadn’t made it even to page 15 in small print.

He couldn’t risk the reception. Too many old scores, too many agendas. Sam drew attention to himself? It would’ve been like sticking his neck out as a free for all—no one knew who or what might come after him. He had to lay low. Keep waiting, keep doing research, keep working out.

At least after a whole month with no progress (nothing but being alone in this dark, damp basement flat; alone in this big, strange city) there was one thing that promised change. John Watson was back to Baker Street. Sam counted on his return to stir things up, because he was running out of options. He knew his hopes weren’t unfounded. After he’d turned this business inside out, Sam had come to the conclusion that if anyone was the key to Sherlock Holmes, it was John Watson.

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He had done his research for this job like he would have with any other. The difference here was that a lot of it was there for him already. Sam lived in the guy’s house. He was called in by one of the very few people Holmes had been close to. There was no reading up on lore or trying to find some obscure witnesses accounts from decades ago. As a bonus, Sherlock Holmes was something of a celebrity in his country. (Or had been? The local popular culture seemed to share the same goldfish memory traits with the culture back home.) Sam had taken full advantage of that and dug up everything he could find on the internet. Because a close person’s perspective on someone was a double-edged sword—Sam preferred to be thorough and gather as much neutral information as possible.

Holmes had had a website and Sam perused that diligently, too. It was quite fascinating. Sam supposed that some would have found Holmes’s big invention, The Science of Deduction, far-fetched. But far be it for him to question something simply because it was a bit out there. It was truly impressive—the man had obviously been a genius. And one for whom there had been nothing more important than his work so that was a big point to keep an eye on.

But Sam had good instinct about people; and better still, he had experience. The work might have been the sole focus of Sherlock Holmes for a long while, but then Doctor John Watson had appeared in the picture.

John Watson had a website himself—a blog. No two websites could have been more different. It was a good reflection of the two men, because as good as Sam was with people, he would have never put his money on those two in the Dynamic Duo tests. Yet obviously they had passed with flying colours. Whatever press there was about Sherlock Holmes, it always mentioned both. Mrs Hudson didn’t seem to be able to speak about them separately for a long time. On the internet there had been fans of Sherlock Holmes and fans of John Watson, but there was a substantial group of people who had been fans of ‘Hat-man and Robin’. (Sam thought Dean would have found the Batman reference funny. Possibly would have been relieved, too, to discover that as long as two dudes weren’t incredibly unattractive and spent a lot of time together, people on the internet inevitably started writing porn about them.)

However, the speculations about the nature of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson’s relationship had far surpassed the fantasies of a small circle of fans. There had been hints and downright
confirmations from ‘a source close to the couple’ in plenty of articles and even TV programmes. Sam had found himself wondering. He’d thought that where there was smoke, so he just asked Mrs Hudson plainly. She replied that no, the two had been just friends, then she’d added the ‘as far as she knew’ bit, followed by the ‘one never knew for sure about this sort of thing these days’ wise remark. True or false on the romantic involvement aspect, the relationship had obviously been strong and intense enough to raise so much attention—it was wise to keep an eye on that point as well. The most important things to a man; the things he would come back for.

Or wouldn’t leave because.

When nothing had happened and no rituals had worked; when Sam had exhausted Sherlock Holmes as a research subject, then tried more rituals, rare and even ridiculous ones; then he’d focused on John Watson. He had studied his blog, entries and comments and all. The exchanges between Watson and Holmes had further painted the relationship that had transpired from every source, but here, it was in the two men’s own words. A unique kind of relationship: spiky, symbiotic, self-sufficient. Sam had lain in bed sometimes, unable to sleep and swaying too close to pondering his own relationships, and he had turned his mind to the former occupants of the silent flat in which he was spending his nights. (John Watson had an awesome bed. Sam had never had a more comfortable bed while working a job. Scratch that—Sam had never had a comfortable bed while working a job.)

All this had made him consider John Watson’s personality. Dean would have probably remarked something about that; said, “Sammy, always such a sucker for the poor bastards: the families, the loved ones; it’s our job, Sammy, we gotta do what we gotta do.” But it wasn’t just sympathy for someone who was left behind. It was curiosity. Who was more interesting? Someone who was evidently extraordinary or the man who had become his closest person in the world? (Especially when the latter appeared so unremarkable.) For Sam there was no contest.

Or maybe it was just frustration talking. Either way, by the time John Watson was about to return from his trip abroad Sam had been twitching with anticipation to meet the man for real.

His first impression was of someone very short and washed out who looked like he’d seen a ghost. (Ha, Sam wished.) A few seconds later ‘very short’ and ‘washed out’ remained, but John Watson had straightened in military fashion, face losing any trace of vulnerability. Sam had found himself looking into a pair of grey-blue eyes that had seen a lot; that told you they had seen a lot, then calmly asked you to keep your distance.

Sam’s eager anticipation had been completely justified.

***

John’s return to Baker Street was subject to some strategic planning on his part.

He’d told Mrs Hudson he would be back on the following day. He was well aware that between feeling determined to move back in and feeling good, there was a world of difference. John didn’t know how far into the future ‘feeling good’ was even an option, but the alternative was worse. Every accommodation John had tried during the last fifteen months had only served to make him feel like leaves scattered by the wind. Or rather, like one of them, dropped on some pavement on its own. It wasn’t an entirely new experience—some parallels could have been drawn to how John used to feel before he’d met Sherlock.

His whole life used to divide to Before Sherlock and After Sherlock. Now there was a third divider: After Sherlock’s Death. Loneliness filled two of the three chapters, so John could at least try to live
where the remaining chapter had taken place; where for all too brief a time he hadn’t felt alone.

This was all premeditated. His instinct once he had spent five minutes in the building spoke to him as well. Suddenly the thought of more nights at the hotel had made him genuinely recoil. He’d considered his options just before flying back to London, and staying at a hotel had seemed the most acceptable at the time. Calling one of his very few mates and asking to crash at theirs for a night or two would have been worse. People still treated him differently, after all this time. A very small number didn’t, but John felt his relationship with those wasn’t the kind to ask for such hospitality.

The truth was that he had wanted to rest from it all: the sights, the sounds, the contemplations; let his guard down for a bit. And the only person around whom John had been able to be entirely unselfconscious for days on end was gone.

A step of John’s plan was to arrive at Baker Street not earlier than seven in the evening. Like with everything else, there was going to be darkness before dawn in this, too, so John made provisions his first night at Baker Street was fully occupied with unpacking and sorting through his stuff. He also made sure he told Mrs Hudson just how much he’d missed her Shepherd’s Pie. As a result, around eight John had had a nice dinner, telling Mrs Hudson little anecdotes from his trip and listening to her filling him in on the local news. He tried to slip in a few questions about Sam, but without much success. Mrs Hudson knew very little about her new tenant (books, libraries, jogging, first time in London) or maybe didn’t care to know much, judging by how flighty her interest in the topic was. Only after she’d gone and John had started doing the dishes—he couldn’t stop her from clearing the table for him—he’d realized that he was glad Mrs Hudson didn’t extend the same degree of care to all her tenants. Not that he had doubted it.

Still doing the washing up, his mind took advantage of the practiced routine and wandered off, returning to the third person in the house. John had bumped into Sam at the front door on arrival. Sam was on his way out for a run in the warm August evening—the weather had turned overnight and the air smelled like the summer had never been dethroned by rain and freezing wind. John had taken one look at Sam in his t-shirt and immediately resolved to sign up for the gym. (It crossed his mind that twice he’d met Sam and twice he’d gawked. The man must have thought John incapable of other expressions.)

Sam had pulled his earphones out of his ears, greeted John, and extended a friendly offer to help with the moving in. John declined—he couldn’t quite say why. He didn’t have that much stuff, anyway.

He spent the night unpacking and trying to figure out how much of his own belongings he wanted to keep. The TV was on at the background, the sound providing a necessary lull for John’s wobbly mind. He tried to calmly accept the memories as they arrived, sneaky or bold, but he also stopped them from pulling him under—he was adamant to establish some boundaries from the first night.

Slowly John’s mind settled as he kept moving to and fro downstairs as well as up and down between the two floors: putting stuff away, taking other things out, reorganizing; touching things that were material and familiar. He began thought-surfing, his mind jumping on a subject, loosely rolling it over, then moving onto another one. How was Greg doing? Did John want to temp again? What made a bookworm keep so incredibly fit? Where were all of Sherlock’s boxes with the old files?

At ten o’clock the living room looked a mess; not one to match what the flat used to look like, but if John let his senses take it all in in a blur, there was the illusion of that particular familiarity.

John was tired, far more than when he’d landed after his nine-hour-long journey back home just two
days earlier. He got himself a beer and dropped in his chair, drinking slowly and staring at the TV, changing the channels until something caught his attention for a while, then changing again. He ended up watching most of Jonathan Ross, despite not knowing two of the guests: a young opera singer and a radio DJ whose jeans were so tight he couldn’t sit comfortably on the sofa.

When the programme was over he turned off the TV and sat in silence for a moment, feeling his heavy head droop, lower and lower, until his chin was an inch away from his chest.

He got up with some effort and looked around. It seemed he’d overestimated himself—it was close to midnight, and somehow he hadn’t made that much of a progress with sorting his or what was left of Sherlock’s things out. There was tomorrow. Earlier in the evening he’d texted Greg to let him know he was back and to offer meeting up for a beer over the next few days. But Greg hadn’t replied yet, so at least the mess promised that John would have something to do tomorrow night, too.

He shuffled about downstairs for another few minutes, doing bits and bobs like visiting the bathroom and putting the dry dishes away in the cupboard, before he made his way up to his bedroom, turning the lights off in his wake. Upstairs, he didn’t put on the lamp—the streetlight was enough for him to change quickly and slide under the covers. The sheets felt chilly in the warm room, but they smelled clean; generic but nice. Good old Mrs Hudson.

John lay on his back for a moment, then turned to his left side, facing the room. His eyes went to the window—he’d forgotten to draw the curtains, but didn’t feel like getting up. He tried to remember if the house had always been so quiet. Well, on those nights when Sherlock didn’t give a wild, free rein of his eccentricity.

A lump appeared in John’s throat, as if he had a whole plum stuck there. He swallowed thickly around it, felt it loosen, felt his eyes burn. He turned to his other side, wiped his eyes over and over again, then shut them tight.

***

Sam lay in his bed with his hands tucked under his head, eyes closed. The traffic outside had slowed down, but there was still noise from the roll of tires over the road; occasionally, an engine growled, showing off. Sam missed riding in a car, missed the motion, the passing scenery—there if you wanted to look at it, but not taking offence if you didn’t.

He remembered how much he’d missed riding shotgun each time Dean was gone. That sense of being absolved of responsibility and being allowed to drift off—he’d missed that. He had badly missed the noises the Impala made; it sounded all kinds of different in Dean’s hands, always reflecting him: his contentment, his resignation, his boyish playfulness, his anger. Sam thought about his brother behind the wheel somewhere on a road far away, maybe right this second—and his wistfulness drained out of him. Until very recently anger would have replaced it in a flash, but now hurt, hurt and loss burned against the inside of Sam’s lids.

He opened his eyes, trying to belay his mind around the present. He breathed in and out slowly, tuning in to the house, listening to it. His gaze went to the ceiling and Sam wondered what it was like to be back to a place you’d known and loved, when all its familiar noises were gone.
Chapter 3

Three days after he met him John tried to kill Mrs Hudson’s new tenant.

He had almost gotten all the way down to Oxford Street when Harry sent him a text message cancelling their ‘catching up’ at the last moment. Halted in the middle of the human traffic, John stared at his phone’s display and felt the familiar surge of anger and disappointment rise in him. Bloody Harry. She’d been the one insisting they met up, too, but that was Harriet all over. She always went on about meeting up; left messages on his blog or called, projecting that vibe of sincere involvement, like they were the kind of brother and sister who were also mates. But scratch and look beneath the surface, and there was little substance to be found. John had never harboured any illusions about their relationship, but just how fake it was had become transparent when he’d made a friend in Sherlock. With Sherlock, what really mattered—trust, respect, a sense of genuine companionship, understanding, care— had been where it mattered, sugar-coating entirely lacking, thanks very much.

Yet John was still affected. He had sometimes treated the Holmes brothers with indulgent, benevolent condescension, but who was he to judge? Siblings. Where did one start to untangle the threads of that ball?!

He tried to focus on his suddenly freed up Friday night, but all he did was sway on his spot, uncertain. It was only a quarter to six; the sun was still in full rein. After considering and dismissing the idea of taking a walk in Hyde Park, John eventually headed in the direction of the Underground, thinking that he’d work out where he wanted to go by the time he got to the station.

He hadn’t. More turning on the spot followed, until John thought ‘Fuck it’ and walked back home.

As he turned the key into the front door lock, a voice inside called out a panicked warning, but John had already pushed the door in with the usual force. It collided with something; a loud, “Whoa!! Watch out!” floated from above; drops of paint rained all over the place as John gaped upward to observe Sam swaying precariously on top of a ladder, trying to preserve his balance by smacking both of his hands on the freshly painted wall, failing, and textbook crash-landing on the floor.

“Jesus!” John was on his knees by his side in a second, instinct kicking in as if he’d left the field a week ago. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” Sam said, face twisting as he looked up.

“How’s your breathing?”

Sam took a deep breath, then nodded quickly. “Fine.” He propped himself on his elbows, his expression still dazed.

John checked his pupils to find that the only anomaly was the startled widening of Sam’s eyes at the sudden invasion of his personal space.

“How many fingers am I holding?” John asked.

Sam was about to reply when in a split second he froze with his mouth half-open. He looked at John, something thoughtful and akin to melancholy taking over his features.
“Are you okay?” John asked again without thinking. He was still holding his fingers up.

“Yeah,” Sam replied quietly. “Yeah, I’m good. Three,” he added in a beat. John lowered his hand. They regarded each other in silence, Sam sitting and John crouching next to him. Sam spoke first.

“It’s just…you’re a doctor.”

“I am.” John was taken aback by the inconsequential remark. He could see that whatever had taken place in Sam’s head, it was being pushed away, judging by the twinkle that appeared in his eyes. Hazel eyes, John had discovered in his recent close encounter with them. Hazel, or rather pea-green, with specks of amber in the irises, the exact same colour but not the shape of the amber speck in Sherlock’s—

“If you’re a doctor, then I guess that’s like being hit by an ambulance.” Sam’s lips were doing a funny thing as he spoke, trying not to smile. His face suddenly scrunched up and he felt up his knee.

“What’s the pain like?” John nodded at it.

Sam prodded the knee gingerly a few times, and his face cleared. “It’s okay, actually. It’s probably just bruised.”

“Can you stand up?”

“Yeah, yeah, I think so.”

John stretched out his hand; Sam used it to haul himself up, suddenly looming over him. John watched him for any signs of pain, but Sam just rolled his shoulders and neck. His eyes drifted down to John’s chest.

“Your shirt.” He pulled an apologetic face. “Sorry.”

John tried to see the damages, but only managed to get cross-eyed for his effort.

“It’s fine,” he said. “It’ll come off in the wash. Don’t—Don’t do that.”

Sam looked at him in confusion and following John’s eyes, looked at his hands. Some of the paint had transferred onto Sam’s temples and cheeks after he’d run both his hands through his hair, pushing it away from his face. He seemed to consider something for a moment, then bent over to pick up the ladder. John watched him set it up with what looked like intent to get back on it.

“What are you doing?” John asked, frowning.

Sam shrugged. “I’m covered in paint anyways, so I might as well finish the job.”

“You just fell off a ladder,” John said with emphasis.

Sam’s eyebrows drew close and he peered at him as if John was an endearing child that was talking gibberish, but John had developed the thickest skin when it came to being given looks—he wasn’t going to be phased by one now. He was about to switch into a full commandeering doctor’s mode, when an embarrassing thought hit him.

“Um,” he said, scratching his head and gesturing about. “Sorry about that. You know, crashing into you.”

Sam’s face grew animated. “No, no, it’s not your fault. I thought the house was going to be empty for at least a couple of hours. Should’ve put up a sign or something. But Mrs Hudson left five
minutes before you did, and said you’d be gone for the night, so…” Sam lifted one shoulder.

“No,” John said. “Yes. No, I mean, I was supposed to be out but, er...Change of plans.”

“Sure.” Sam ran his hands through his hair again, the gesture obviously a habit. John said nothing this time. “So you’re—” He pointed at the wall, instead. “You’re painting the wall.” Nothing like pointing out the blindingly obvious, John, rang in his head.

“Yeah.” Sam was already climbing back up the ladder, taking his brush and the tin of paint with him.

“I noticed Mrs Hudson had redecorated in her flat,” John said. “Did you do that for her?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I did.”

“That’s nice of you.”

Sam looked down from the skies like some god of earnestness. “Least I can do. She’s a great lady, and she’s—she’s been real good to me. She mentioned she wanted some work done, so we changed the wallpapers. I did some DIY there, then offered to freshen up things here.”

Sam wiped his hands over his hips now, betraying his nervousness. John realized he was gaping a bit again while looking up from that angle. Well, the man was at least six foot three, plus he was perched on top of his mount Olympus.

“Right,” John said, giving a firm nod. He pointed at the steps leading upstairs. “I’ll go and stand over there now.”

Suddenly Sam smiled at him sincerely, a small, yet luminous smile, rounded off by a pair of dimples visible to the naked eye all the way from the ground. John blinked at him, closed his mouth and finally moved to walk around the ladder, very careful not to touch it. Once he took his place on the stairs he turned to face Sam again, only to find him twisting around recklessly to look at his hips. John tensed.

“Man, I need to change, too,” Sam said with self-reproach. “I look like I just groped myself.”

It was John’s turn to grin. A thought occurred to him—something he should have really offered much earlier. “You need a hand with that? I mean, finishing painting.”

Sam scrutinized the wall for a while. John couldn’t see much of his face to figure out what was delaying the answer.

“I think it’s more or less done,” said Sam. “I only wanted to redo the edges anyway, over here along the ceiling—that’s why I had to use the brush. This could have been worse,” he said, using the brush to point up and down John.

John examined his shirt again. Funny that he couldn’t tell if Sam was joking. The man was all about the use of his facial muscles, but his voice was soft and even and hard to read.

John cleared his throat. “Okay, then. I better go and put this in the laundry. Come upstairs if something hurts, especially your head,” he added.

“I’ll be okay,” Sam said. “But thanks.”

John headed up. Sam’s voice stopped him before he’d turned the corner.

“If you need any help—Mrs Hudson’s complained about the hot water, and I used to—I’m good
with that kind of thing too. Anything you need fixed, just say.”

John gazed at him for a moment, the implication of what he was hearing twisting in his mind into lovely irony. The left corner of John’s mouth mirrored the twist. Sam was watching him, patient but expectant. John shook his head and the words were out of his mouth before he knew it.

“It’s ah…It’s strange having someone offer to fix things in the flat, you know. As opposed to breaking them or causing general havoc.”

There was a pause. “Your flatmate,” Sam said. It wasn’t a question.

“Hmm.” John’s nod was slow. “He was a bit eccentric.” He laughed quietly. “A lot actually.”

He looked up at Sam to find him standing motionless, his hands hanging loosely by his sides. His face was like his voice: soft, even, hard to read. “So I hear,” he said.

John nodded again, bit his lip. He thought of changing, maybe going out. Going down the pub on Friday night, maybe asking Sam to join him for a pint.

“Thanks for your offer,” he said at length, then gave Sam a quick stretch of his lips. “I might take you up on it.”

“Sure thing.”

John started up on the rest of the stairs to the flat.

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Maybe it was staying at Baker Street for too long or maybe it was all the research—no, all the thought Sam had given Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, but the simple truth was that he’d lost objectivity.

Not that it hadn’t happened to him in the past—he was often connecting or relating to people, it was who he was—but it had never happened in such a subtle way, like a drip. Not like a rush, the kind he felt for the anguished loved ones, or on rare occasions even for the monster of the day; a hit that was there for a moment, strong like copper taste in his mouth, then gone, sometimes mere hours after the Impala drove off from the place. It had to go away. It was the natural order of things, it was survival. If Sam was to let those poor souls follow him, they’d have piled up behind the Impala like a grotesque imitation of the empty cans on the back of a newlyweds car until they had to make it stop. Sam and Dean remaining trapped in it forever, incapable of moving with the weight of all that care, pity, regret, sympathy. No. A job was a job—they had to let go in order to keep doing what they did.

But when had a job ever lasted for more than a few days, a week tops? When had Sam been alone all that time? This was new, unprecedented, and the bottom line was that he’d lost his distance and found himself unable to predict with any certainty anything about John Watson. After their chat in the hallway Sam had felt hopeful, to the point of thinking that he might even get an invitation for a beer upstairs. Or something. It was what any dude would have done in John’s place.

But maybe not over here. Plus, Sam had the feeling that men like John Watson were the same in pretty much every country. They didn’t do what many dudes did, no matter how deceptively ordinary-dude-like they appeared.

That was the train of Sam’s thoughts after a couple of days passed without him seeing anything of John Watson. He’d also considered what he might have done to be friendlier. He needed to get on the guy’s good side. He needed to make some progress, get into that hospital, talk to Holmes’s
brother, talk to that inspector. Sam was stuck. He didn’t have the resources they had back home. For one thing, there was no back-up at all. For another, he stood out here like a sore thumb—one of Mrs Hudson’s more accurate assessments on his chances of going unnoticeable in St. Bartholomew’s Hospital or New Scotland Yard.

And people here were different; he had to constantly take that into account. Even if Sam had had the confidence to work his way near DI Lestrade, he was pretty sure the inspector would have told him nada. Or at least nothing that Sam hadn’t already found out for himself. (Gregory Lestrade looked like an old dog that wouldn’t fall for tricks.) Sam’s best shot would have been with the girl, Molly Hooper, but like with Lestrade, Sam had factored in that it was a small world after all. He was Mrs Hudson’s tenant, officially, so he was running the risk of someone recognizing him. John Watson was the link to both Sam’s potential exposure—Sam knew for sure that John and the inspector had stayed in touch—and to Sam’s chance to talk to these people.

So yeah, Sam needed to establish some sort of friendly connection to the man. Because he was damn close to calling it a day and freaking out Mrs Hudson by telling her she’d lost her marbles and there was No. Job. Here.

Which brought Sam back to his trouble, namely, his inability to say where he stood with John. Would he drop by, seek any kind of contact? One moment Sam’s gut feeling was all, “Course he will. I’m likeable and we kind of had a moment back in the hallway—he’ll come by.” The next it was more like, “The guy was just civil. He’s forgotten I even live here.” Sam was glad Dean wasn’t around—he would have probably called Sam a love-struck teenage girl, plucking the petals of a flower with ‘he loves me’, ‘he loves me not’ on his lips.

Sam also suspected that Dean not being around was part of the problem.

He had always known their relationship crossed over to the unhealthy, and here was another piece of evidence. Sam didn’t just need anyone to serve as his soundboard—he needed his brother. He needed Dean’s old black and white outlook and his instinct about people. He needed Dean’s grounded perspective, born out of experience, but also his sudden, devil-may-care outbursts. The grounded perspective gave Sam a pointer; the outbursts gave him a direction when Sam was too deeply burrowed in his own meditative hollow.

Dean helped Sam to get a grip of his own head. Every time Sam had gotten really lost, it was either because Dean wasn’t there or he was, but they had failed to communicate so spectacularly that once it had literally resulted in bringing about the end of the world.

Now Dean was not there once again.

Initially, the heat of righteous anger had kept Sam going, but it was quickly replaced by acute hurt. That was about right, another sign of his ever-building maturity. Over the last few years he and Dean had talked about that—about how Sam was no longer Dean’s little brother, a boy. Seemed it was finally very true. Sam had tried to show Dean that he was a grown-up, not an attachment to him that Dean always had to consider, protect; that Dean didn’t have to define his life through Sam anymore. He remembered a conversation they had, maybe a month or two before Dean disappeared. It had started innocuous enough, but at the end there was a lot of strain in both of their voices, and Dean had spoken with some rare, grave maturity. “I look after you, but that’s what I’ll always do, okay? It doesn’t mean I don’t get it. Sam, you have always, always been way more your own person than I’ll ever be. Even when we were kids. And I know that, I can see that.”

There had been such an uncomfortable mixture of resignation, admiration and odd wistfulness in Dean’s voice that Sam had left well enough alone.
He hated remembering things like that because they confused him further. Immature or not, he wished he felt resentment, because it made Dean’s absence more bearable. They hadn’t spoken for two months, two months. Not since the ill-fated night of the incident with Benny. Dean had tried to call him, but had stopped after the third time Sam hadn’t picked up, only to show up in Kermit—

But not before Sam had already left.

Dean had followed Sam’s trail in vain for three days after that night, trying to speak to him, until he’d finally gotten the message. Sam found that out from Cas, when he had asked Cas to help him smuggle some firearms to England. Sam had been tempted to fish for some news about Dean, anything. He might have even managed it without Cas realizing what Sam was doing—it wouldn’t have been the first time. But aside from feeling like a dick to Castiel, Sam would have also hated himself for his weakness. He might have needed Dean, but it didn’t mean he wanted to see him. Dean had made his choices. He had manipulated Sam using one of his biggest fears; moreover, he’d done it with something pre-planned in cold blood no less, and for what? To protect a vampire. After all the grief Dean had always given Sam for his own relations with ‘monsters’...A vampire who Dean considered not just a friend, but obviously a brother, the brother he trusted, he’d always wanted but never had, what with Sam failing him—

He was bitter and hurt and yes, once he let himself plummet back into the memory, resentful. It still didn’t mean he didn’t miss Dean. The whole thing made Sam feel like a dog that had entangled itself in a long, heavy chain—maybe its own.

***

On Wednesday night there was a knock on the door. Sam had been completely engrossed in a book speculating on the whereabouts of a tablet with ‘God’s word’. (The same tablet Kevin was working on? A second tablet? A completely different kind of tablet? A hoax?) So much so that it took him a moment to realize he was in London and not in some random motel room back home, while Dean was out buying unhealthy food.

He opened the door and was faced with a determined looking John Watson who gave him a quick once-over and said, “Do you mind giving me a hand with something upstairs?”

Chapter End Notes

Original entry at my LJ over here.
The ‘something’ turned out to be moving furniture. It looked like John hadn’t given the whole thing much thought, though, because they got it right after quite a few changes. Sam was the one to make the suggestion of having the couch face the TV, which they had moved right next to the fireplace. He must have hit gold, or a nerve—or possibly both—judging by John’s expression when he’d looked over his shoulder to the couch.

Sam ventured to explain himself, in case he’d overstepped his bounds. “It’s just that back home, every living room you go into, that’s the set up: couch facing the TV. And you’ve got the fireplace here, so that’s kind of nice, right? Plus you can put the coffee table in front of the couch, put your feet up…”

He’d trailed off, spotting that John was already trying to visualize how this would look. He was glad to have John distracted. Gave Sam a moment to get over the pinch he felt remembering the time he’d spent not so long ago on a similar couch, with a woman under his arm and a dog at his feet. It didn’t even sound like his life. On the other hand, a couch facing the TV, a coffee table to put up your feet, a beer in hand, another person next to you—it sure as hell sounded like something he’d be yearning about. All these years, all that he’d been through, and still the child who wanted to be normal.

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” John had said.

So they’d moved the couch.

They put the two armchairs in its place, backs against the wall, the small table between them. Sam thought it looked all right, but John scratched his head, walked around the room, looked at the chairs again, and said he wanted his chair—the homey, old-fashioned one—with its back to the kitchen door, where apparently it used to be some time ago. They put it there, but then John took one long look at the big leather chair left solitary right under the graffiti smiley face, and pointed at it. “Can we try and see if we could put the big table here, instead, and move Sh—the chair between the two windows?”

So they’d done that, too.

(Sam had asked about the smiley face. Mrs Hudson said that in a feat of boredom Sherlock had sprayed it on the wall, then used it as shooting practice. Very precise hand, from what Sam could see, so he’d made a note of that—good to know the other party’s strengths as well as weaknesses. Mrs Hudson had welled up while she spoke about the incident, as if the ridiculous drawing—not to mention that it looked kind of sinister—and the holes in her wall were a precious memento of Sherlock. That had been one of the first times Sam admitted to himself he was not just doing the job as a favour to her, but was actually quite intrigued.)

Over an hour and a half after they’d started the manoeuvres John walked to the kitchen portal and examined the room in silence. Sam stood in the middle, still and readying himself for another go.

“I think that’s it,” John told him.

“Yeah? If you want to try something else…”
John’s smile was self-deprecating. “I know this is like lifting feathers for you, but you can stick a fork in me—I’m done.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

John walked into the kitchen and showed up with two bottles of beer, passing one to Sam.

“Cheers.”

“Cheers,” Sam murmured. They both drank in big gulps.

“Listen.” John lowered his half-empty bottle. “Thanks for that.”

“Hey, no need to thank me, man. I’m glad to help.”

“No, I really appreciate it. That was a lot of pushing and lifting, and it was nice of you not to swear at me or, you know, punch me after the first half hour.”

Sam only shook his head, smiling.

“I’ll buy you a dinner,” John said. “I’ll probably ask you to look into the plumbing at some point, so it’s only fair. If you don’t have any plans for Friday night, you can pick the kind of food you like and I’ll look up some—Oh, shit. Sorry.” John bit his lips, awkward. “Just remembered. I’ve got plans for Friday night, sorry. How about tomorrow, then?”

“John, it’s fine. Here, you got me a beer, right? We can just sit down and drink that, and call it even.”

John didn’t move. His eyes jumped to the TV, returned to Sam, awkward, and Sam felt his spirits drop—turned out, he had misread the situation after all.

“Or you know, I can just finish this.” He quickly drank another third of the bottle, looked around where to leave it. “And be on my way.” He placed the bottle carefully on a takeout menu on the table and wiped the condensation from his hands onto his jeans.

“Sorry,” John said. “I was hoping to catch the second half of the game.” He looked at his feet, then at the couch. “I was going to invite you to stay and watch it, but it’s football so I reckoned—I mean, it’s not your kind of football, it’s—”

Ah! “It’s soccer!”

“Yeah. So it’s probably…not your cup of tea?”

“Actually, I quite like it.” So good when he didn’t have to lie. “I used to play soccer in high school.”

“Really? Were you any good?”

“I was okay, I guess. My team won the Division Championship once, I was thirteen.”

John looked surprised and kind of pleased. “Nice. Erm, shall I put the TV on, then?”
“Sure, yeah.” Sam walked over to the couch. “Who’s playing?”

***

John closed the door after Sam and listened to his steps down the stairs until they died out. He didn’t hear the door to the basement flat close, but didn’t expect to, either. This was not a man who banged doors. This was a man who didn’t even bang his beer bottle on the table. (Also, was mindful of leaving rings on wood, apparently, but John had the feeling that was a whole other person underneath.)

John remained still for a moment, facing the closed door with his head bowed, before turning to the newly arranged table. He sat down, opened his laptop, propped his elbows on the table surface and lifted his entwined fingers to press them to his lips. The cursor blinked on the screen in question.

There really was no debate about whether he wanted to know more about Sam. The debate was whether he was prepared to deal with what he might find out. Experience taught John that his choices tended to have some pretty serious consequences.

Speaking of which, he could easily point out the string of events that had led to him spending a nice couple of hours with Sam, drinking beers, watching football, and chatting. Firstly, over the weekend he’d managed to put his own stuff in order, taking two big bags to the charity shop on Marylebone Street. He’d also gone through what was left of Sherlock’s belongings in the living room, but ended up adding only two items to the bag: a spare copy of a pocket Oxford dictionary and a small pouch with some random objects in it. John couldn’t fathom the purpose of the pouch and hadn’t even tried. It smelled funny, which was enough for him, and it was tucked behind some clutter in the cupboard by the window, so God only knew how long it’d been there or what Sherlock had needed with it.

The week had then begun, with John officially looking for a job. He didn’t really want to take advantage of the pre-paid rent, but more than that, he was already about to start climbing the walls. He went for the locum jobs or the ones where he would have had to cover shifts. No matter how restless he was beginning to feel, he didn’t want to commit. His future, near or distant, seemed as obscure as it had been right after he was invalided back home from Afghanistan. The obscurity wasn’t as hopeless and thick as back then; and at least now after his return to Baker Street he didn’t feel so rootless. But on the other hand there was the ache of missing Sherlock like two limbs, so whatever deity was responsible for John Watson up there, it had made sure to restore some balance in his misery.

Lestrade had called on Sunday night, apologizing for not responding to John’s text earlier. He sounded tired and a bit jaded, but also pleased to hear John in his own way. They made plans for Friday night. “Unless another bastard snaps at the end of the week and kills his boss,” Greg had said. “Friday two weeks back I was home at midnight.” John called Mike Stamford as well, arranged to speak to him later in the week and see if they could catch up. (He wasn’t keen on going near Barts, but he was sure Mike would meet him someplace else.)

The rest of John’s week had looked wide open. He’d sent his CV around, read up on ‘Starting your own medical practice’, watched telly, and done some shopping. He kept moving little bits and pieces around the sitting room and the kitchen, trying to find where they fitted best, but the entire space continued to seem off-key. John was struggling—with the big picture, with finding purpose in his everyday life, with the mental energy it took to ignore Sherlock’s empty armchair as the evenings progressed and John sat in his own chair, watching TV.
He hadn’t even come close to the sofa since he moved back.

So tonight he’d turned off the TV, stared at the fireplace for a minute, then marched downstairs and knocked on the basement flat door. In a moment Sam had opened it; John took one look at his three-day stubble and the rolled up sleeves of his worn plaid shirt, and knew his request for help with some lifting and pushing wouldn’t be declined on account of wild plans for the night.

So that was the factual chain of events. What had really made him seek out the other man’s company was a lot more difficult to trace back. If pressed hard, John would have gone for a mixture of curiosity, boredom and something akin to loneliness. But even beyond that…You just couldn’t forget about Sam or ignore him, not in such close proximity. He was nothing like Sherlock—well, he was perhaps of the same age. And there was the same peculiar blend in the eyes, something John had never seen in anyone else but Sherlock: some innocence at odds with wisdom way beyond the average. But the rest…Two completely different men, charming in completely different ways. And evidently John was a sucker for long legs and bright eyes not just with the ladies. Oh, that was almost funny.

He passed a hand over his face and looked at the screen again, unseeing.

He wished Sherlock had been here tonight to deduce Sam’s whole background and life. If Sherlock had been here, just for a moment—

There it was, the good old bargaining—‘just for a moment’. “Sure,” as Sam would say. John had been surprised to discover the man was capable of it: sleek, unmistakeable sarcasm. (His surprise at that particular detail in turn took him by surprise too. He hardly knew the man. How could he presume what was typical of Sam in the first place?)

John wasn’t Sherlock, but it didn’t take a genius to spot some things. Like the whole physicality thing. Sam wasn’t just tall. He was broad, he had muscle, he worked out. (Yet he also managed to avoid looking bulky. There was something refined about him, all the more striking for his height and good shape.) John had watched Sam’s body in motion in the first part of the evening and he’d seen someone so in habit of using it, so intimately familiar with its capabilities and its limitations that it was obvious it played a big part in Sam’s everyday life. Nothing academic about that.

Oddly enough, although Sam’s physicality was powerful, it played second fiddle to the person. Not that John could say much about Sam’s personality, and yet…What John knew for sure was that there was an alert, sharp brain working in Sam’s skull. And while the brain tied in with the student persona, there was actually another discrepancy that John had spotted—more subtle, something that might have evaded most others.

He had enquired about Sam’s studies. For a moment he’d even been convinced that paranoia had gotten the better of him, because Sam spoke about his subjects with fluency, confidence and most importantly with the kind of engagement no one could fake. It took John a moment of quiet, during which Sam had gone to the loo, to put his finger on what was wrong.

Culture studies—so far so good. Myths and folklore, that sort of thing—likewise. Only there was a singular thread running through everything Sam told him, and oh yes, John recognized that. He remembered how in the beginning of his acquaintance with Sherlock he had tried to put together a mental list of Sherlock’s range and depth of knowledge and skills, only to come up with a bizarre combination befitting the man’s uniqueness. Sherlock and Sam shared more than that intense spark about their thing—there was the same dark twist in both of their interests, the same one-track mind that was decidedly morbid. Sam spoke about legends, but there was always an underlying horror
story in there. He spoke about folklore—’lore’ he called it, his lips curling around the word like it was a type of sweets he’d had since childhood—sometimes fairly recent North-American folklore, sometimes very old or obscure, but inevitably there was a grim end to each tale.

“What was the name of that course again?” John had asked him. Sam recited the long-winded title once more, and it wasn’t like John could tell him, “Hold on, let me get a pen to write it down, because I’m suspicious about your backstory.” There was something about ‘narrative construct’ maybe? And definitely the actual word ‘monstrous’.

John had enquired about degrees and universities. He’d played it down—nothing but a friendly, almost driven by courtesy attempt to chat. Sam replied in the same casual manner. He talked in short, relaxed sentences, telling John about Stanford University, about undergraduate degrees and a change of heart about a career in Law. It turned out Sam wasn’t actually attending any college in London—the course he’d mentioned was something he wondered whether he should pursue back home. He said he’d wanted to get away from it all for a while, so he’d come to London and was now taking advantage of the amazing resources the city had.

That was the portion of the program that got personal—and interesting.

John couldn’t say with absolute certainty if Sam was lying about his academic background and his current situation. It was possible, just as it was possible that John was a paranoid sod. But he was pretty sure the personal things Sam shared would check out. Sherlock would have undoubtedly found enough evidence to prove it on the spot, but John was content to trust his gut. Everything about Sam exuded honesty when he spoke about spending years on the road, about recently trying to settle down and failing—the condensed, private mess of feelings the latter evoked in Sam had been impossible to miss.

John knew a lost soul when he saw one. He had observed Sam sitting at the other end of the sofa, his body language that of a man with an inherently trusting nature, but nonetheless one whose invisible defence perimeter stretched wide and ironclad. All the time he’d spent up at John’s, Sam had been comfortable as if he was used to being in strange environments. John watched the way his eyes changed when he spoke about his past. He watched the way Sam kept looking at the fireplace, fingers absently stroking the soft sofa cushion, and he recognized it: the stray who’d slept where it was dry and safe, who’d absorbed whatever little comforts and warmth there were to be found, before having to go back into the cold night. Who had been pushed to face the low and dark of life’s back alleys—demons, other people’s and his own. No, Sam was telling the truth.

Besides, no one spoke about their brother the way Sam did if the brother weren’t real.

The cold facts were these: Sam had lost both of his parents, he had been raised by his father—a whole bag of mixed feelings there, but John didn’t pry. It seemed like the father had taken the mother’s death badly and set up a business as a mechanic, travelling from town to town all over America.

“That was why I never got to see if I was really any good at soccer,” Sam said, the second half of the game over and forgotten. “Most I spent in the same school was a couple of months, tops.”

John had given Sam’s eyes and the sad, wrinkly bit between his eyebrows due consideration. “That can’t have been nice,” he said.

Sam’s single laughing exhale surprised him. “It sucked majorly. I hated it, I hated being on the road all the time.”
From what John gathered Sam had taken off to go to college, but around (or after?) his father’s death he had gone back to his nomad’s life-style again, criss-crossing the country with his brother and trying to “make sense of some stuff”. There were hints of personal tragedies, but John didn’t push. What he was really curious about was the brother, Dean. The way Sam spoke about him...It was almost like he was possessed and Dean managed to slip into his speech without Sam’s intention. John could tell this was the kind of relationship where the other had become such a part of the person’s life that it was hard to speak about oneself without mentioning him.

After all, it was thanks to being British that John managed to keep his stiff upper lip and not make references to Sherlock in every conversation he had.

All John had on the brother was his name and the fact that he was older than Sam. Sam had put it quite simply that his brother had looked after him his whole life. It seemed like there’d been a big fallout recently, though, but despite giving him his best ‘curious yet not aggressive’ look John got nothing out of Sam. He wondered if it was over a third person—a woman? Or maybe John just lacked imagination.

“What about you?” Sam had asked at some point.

“What about me?”

Sam looked at his hands and smiled. “If we’re doing the whole ‘getting to know each other’ thing, it’s your turn.”

John had let his head thump the backrest of the sofa, then puffed his cheeks up, looking at the ceiling. For a fleeting second he’d thought of meeting Sherlock in that lab at Barts, of the first time he’d lain eyes on that pale, long face; the first time Sherlock had focused his crystal, bright, alien eyes on John and recited the facts of half of John’s life in the space of two breaths.

“Let me see,” John told Sam. “My parents are also dead, but they were both around when I was a child. You can say I had a pretty average childhood. I’ve got a sister, Harry—we don’t get on, never have. She was the one who stood me up the other day when I got home early and knocked you off the ladder.”

Sam had done an ‘I see’ expression.

“What else,” John continued. “Went to med school, then joined the army. I spent some years in Afghanistan until I got shot and invalided back home. That was about four years ago. Then I met Sherlock.”

He turned to look Sam squarely in the face. Sam’s gaze hadn’t wavered—it continued to exude the same genuine quality.

“The other day when we spoke on the stairs…” John stopped to rephrase, opting for a more direct approach. “How much do you know about Sherlock?”

Sam hesitated for a second. “I’m not sure. The main things, I guess. Mrs Hudson speaks about him—about both of you, and I’ve seen some stuff on the internet. I’ve read your blog.”

John nodded sharply once. Sam’s fingers started playing with the sticker on the bottle. “Sorry. It probably sounds very intrusive, but I didn’t mean to—”
“It’s fine.” John cut his sentence short. “It’s all out there anyway.” The pause stretched for a few seconds, then John stood up. “You want another beer?”

Sam examined the contents of his bottle. “I’m good, thanks.”

John went to get himself a beer, popping into the loo before that. When he returned Sam’s empty bottle was on the table and he was standing with his hands in his jeans pockets, shoulders bunched up a bit, making him look like an awkward schoolboy.

“I better be off. It’s real late,” he said. John didn’t object. He opened his mouth to say something suitable for parting, when Sam spoke again.

“Listen, I just wanted to say…I’m really sorry for your loss.”

John’s nod had been automatic, his entire being schooling itself to go through the routine. He’d looked up to Sam—

A pair of eyes had met his, eyes like two soulful pits; their gaze both reaching out and guarded, the boundaries perfectly drawn. In a rare occurrence since the fall, John had felt someone’s attention on himself, Sherlock’s name at the bottom of it, and had still remained whole afterwards.

“Thank you,” he’d said.

He then saw Sam off and came to his laptop to stare at a blank Google search page.

Briefly, he wondered what people used to do in such cases a hundred years ago. Waited, he supposed. Waited to see; waited for the answers to any questions they had about their stranger to arrive in a letter after a month or even three. And in the meantime?

John bowed his head and closed his eyes for a long moment. He then reached to slowly close the lid of his laptop, got up and started getting ready for bed.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

This is unbetaed—apologies for any mistakes or roughness of prose. And in relation to that, if you have a Livejournal and a moment to spare, please have a look at this poll for me. Thanks in advance!

Some specific warnings for this chapter: Mentions and implied homophobia. Descriptions of physical violence within the R-rating.

Photos of The Tavern can be found here. For those of you who read "The Poster Girl", perhaps you remember the pub John and Lestrade visited while working the Veronica Havisham case? Same place—it was hard to resist self-referencing. Ironically, although I've been to a fair number of pubs in London, I haven't been to that one. Next time I go I'll have to visit it, like a pilgrimage of sorts:) Anyway, as always I hope you enjoy and thanks for reading!

John met Greg Lestrade at The Jerusalem Tavern or just The Tavern—a pub in Clerkenwell John used to frequent when he was a student. It wasn’t too close to Barts to make him feel uncomfortable, and he was fond of the place despite its usual crowd being not quite to his liking: lawyers and bankers and such, most of them too full of themselves. But often there were also tourists, mingling in and adding spice, as well as people from North London; mates who’d come down to Clerkenwell on Friday night for a few pints—a different social group altogether, rougher and warmer, often at the same time. John chose the place for the familiarity—he and Greg had popped in for a drink there a couple of times in the past.

He had to wait alone for nearly an hour, nursing his drink slowly. And when Greg did show up finally, apologizing and looking harassed, John could see this wasn’t going to be one of those times when they stayed for last orders. He was disappointed but also a little relieved. He’d had the time to watch people interact and he was no longer entirely sure how his people’s skills would hold up against an entire night out. John felt at ease with Greg, but as he picked up the two pints and wove his way through the crowd back to the table, he was very aware that it’d been a long while since he had socialized for hours at a time.

“Thanks, John,” Greg said with feeling, taking a sip immediately. He quickly wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Sorry! Cheers to you, mate. Welcome back.”

John lifted him glass in thanks and they both drank together. Greg let out an audible sigh.

“God, I needed that. That wanker St—Sorry, no names!” Greg’s face changed to mock hauteur. “A particular senior officer has been a real...discomfort in my backside.”

John smiled at Greg’s effort in posh phraseology.

“Is it the same one?” he asked. “The one you said about the last time?”
“That’s the one.”

“Still making your life miserable, then? Sorry to hear.”

“Ta. But never mind that. You’ve just come back from your trip! I’m not going to turn the night into one long whine. Just wanted to get it off my chest.”

John had started the ‘No, no’ part of his reply halfway through Greg’s sentence. “No, go ahead,” he said.

“Ah, no. I’d much rather I forgot all about it.”

They’d opted to stay in; the weather wasn’t great, but outside was still packed with people. John and Greg were sitting at one of the few tables in the pub, the one nearest to the door. Greg now placed his elbows on the table top and looked at John with tired but interested eyes. “So how was it?” he asked. “Enjoyed yourself?”

They talked about John’s trip on and off for half an hour, digressing from time to time. John felt himself relax—he was content to share some random details about his time abroad, but appreciated not having to make it sound like an exempt from a Tourist Guidebook for Greg’s benefit. They both knew the real reason for the trip anyway, so nobody acted like it was a genuine exploration of exotic worlds.

“I was going to ask if you fancied some fish and chips,” Greg told him. “But when you said about all the seafood you’d had…And now I’ve sat down, I don’t think I can get up.”

“How come you’re working under so much pressure?” John asked. “I thought that, you know. It’s better now after Sherlock’s name was cleared.”

Greg shrugged. “It is better, but some people are still—At the end of the day my performance and success rate were directly connected to Sherlock, so people are not going to forget that easily. Or forgive.”

John hummed. The both peered into their glasses in silence.

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“Any interesting cases lately?” John said at last.

Greg’s face took on his hound dog expression that John associated with detective work. “Not the kind that you—Not that kind of interesting. But I’ll tell you something you will find interesting. I don’t know what’s going on, but in the last few months it’s been like an avalanche: so many cases you can track down to Moriarty’s network. We’ve got two of his people in the morgue, murders that no one can solve; even Sherlock wouldn’t have managed to figure it out, I’m telling you! Doors and windows closed and locked from the inside, not a trace of DNA anywhere in the place. One of the victims didn’t even have a clear—” Greg suddenly shifted, uncomfortable. "Sorry, John, I shouldn't be talking to—" He paused, face fallen. "Ah, sod that," he said gravely. "Can't share details, though. Sorry."

"That's fine." John was experiencing dull tension in all his muscles. "You were saying about Moriarty's network?"

Greg's face acquired a conspiratorial air again. "It's like it's finally coming apart at the seams, is all
I'm saying. I didn’t notice it at first, because it was happening across the board, but after we got hold of a few others, those ones alive, who all turned out to have worked for Moriarty—well, for people who worked for people who had worked for the bastard—I thought something might be up.” Greg leaned across the table, lowering his voice. “It was to be expected, but only when I went nosing around in the other departments I saw the scale of it. I’m telling you, his network is falling apart. I suppose with the boss gone…it’s like something has struck it right in the middle."

“Right,” John said, eyes glued to Greg’s face.

“Well, I said it was falling apart,” Greg dragged. “I don’t know the full scale of his network, but from what I gather it was pretty big, and looking at things lately, I should say it has fallen apart.”

John pondered that for a moment. “Why now?” he asked. “Do you…Do you think Mycroft’s got anything to do with it?”

Greg leaned back against his chair's backrest. “Maybe,” he said slowly. “Can’t get anything out of the man.”

“Oh. You see him, then?”

“Yeah.”

“Right.” John had a lot of questions, only he wasn’t sure what they were.

He hadn’t seen Mycroft Holmes in over six months. The man was still a sore point that John found difficult to approach even in his own head.

Mycroft had been relentless in his efforts to clear his brother’s name—and less than six months after Sherlock’s death he had succeeded. He’d done it very publicly, no room for any speculations whatsoever, all the while keeping in the shadows. By then John had already put some things in perspective and no longer found an outlet for his grief in blaming Mycroft. Especially after evidence had come to light to prove something John had known immediately: that Sherlock was not a fraud; that he had to have jumped under a threat.

Only knowing for sure had somehow turned out to be worse. The tape had rewound in John’s head and he’d been forced to relive it all. He still found it hard to breathe at the thought of Sherlock being forced to say those things to him, of not being able to say goodbye to John for real. Their last exchange a fraud—John hated the perverse irony of that with passion. Every time he thought of how he had just stood there on the ground, useless and stupid and useless, and all the while Sherlock had been desperate up there, needing help, needing someone to figure it out and help, but John had done nothing, nothing to protect him, just—

“John? You all right, mate?”

John cleared his throat. He knew that look in Lestrade’s eyes. He knew Lestrade knew the look in his eyes. “Sorry,” he said. “Just thinking…”

Lestrade’s lips pressed in understanding. He watched John for a few moments, patient and obviously trying to see which way the wind was blowing. When John didn’t elaborate, he stirred the boat to safer waters but not to the shore, still giving John a chance to say something if he chose.

“How are things at Baker Street? How do you find living there again?”
John gave the question some consideration. “It’s fine,” he said eventually. “I’m still getting used to it, but it’s not just the place. I need to find a job. I’ve sent my CV to a few places so I’m waiting to hear back.”

Greg was nodding. “But you’re all right being back there?”

“Yeah. I’ve finally cleared up some of the clutter, shuffled some things around. You should come over for curry.”

“Yeah, that’ll be nice.”

John hummed. “Mrs Hudson’s got a new tenant,” he added in a beat.

Lestrade’s eyebrows shot up. “What, in Sherlock’s room?”


“Oh yeah, I remember that. It wasn’t very nice.”

“No. But rent’s very cheap, and it’s a prime spot.”

“That’s true.” Greg took a big gulp. He was downing his pint much quicker than John, stress obviously showing. “Have you met the bloke? Is it a bloke?”

“Yes, Sam. Yeah, I’ve met him.”

Greg waited in vain for John to continue, then looked at him, curious. “Is he all right?”

“Yeah, yeah, seems so. American, doing some academic research over here. A bit of a lost soul.”

“Huh.” Greg finished his pint. They exchanged a look, then John's eyes shifted to the door absently.

“Do you want me to run a check on him?” Greg asked levelly. John delayed his answer.

Did he want that? He did, but he’d rather he was the one to do it. It wasn’t something he could explain to Greg, though. It wasn’t something he was sure he knew how to explain to himself. Sam wasn’t someone he knew how to explain.

“No.” He shook his head resolutely. “It’s fine. The bloke’s a bit strange, but it’s not like that’s against the law.”

A smile curled Greg’s upper lip, the lines around his eyes suddenly visible and benevolent. “And if anyone knows how to deal with strange, it’s you.”

John made an indefinable grimace—he hoped it didn’t come across like he had taken offence.

Greg yawned and stretched his feet under the table, narrowly missing John’s. “My round,” he said. “Same?”

John nodded. Greg got up. “I might have to go after that one, though. My head’s getting heavy and downing pints isn’t going to help.”
“It’s all right. You should go and get some sleep.”

“We’ll do the curry soon.”

“We will,” John said with a decisive nod. Greg nodded solemnly back and headed to the bar.

John waited for him, feeling like he was the one glued to his warm seat. A cardboard coaster had found its way into his hands. John played with it absent-mindedly; the chatter around was lulling him and breaking his thoughts, taking away their complexity and leaving them down to basic forms.

He fished out his phone. Mrs Hudson picked up after the third ring.

“Hello John. You all right, dear?”

“I’m fine, Mrs H, sorry to bother you. Erm…Could you give me Sam’s number, please?”

***

Sam was both disappointed and relieved to find John alone. The disappointment was on account of missing a golden opportunity to be introduced to one of the people who topped his list of most wanted interviewees. Sam knew John was out with DI Lestrade, so this would have been perfect to meet the man; very inconspicuous, too, seeing that Sam and John hadn’t made any plans for tonight so John’s idea to call him had to have been spontaneous.

The relief he couldn’t quite pinpoint. Maybe it was the melancholic mood he was in, which meant that the mere thought of having to be alert and careful in a stranger’s company made him weary. Not that he could relax and be himself with John, but…it was different. They knew each other already, true not for real, but…John was different. Sam wasn’t sure what it was or why, but the idea of having a drink with John without actually working the job was kind of nice. Didn’t matter why anyway. It wasn’t like Sam was on the clock; it wasn’t like anyone was in immediate danger. The world wasn’t going to end if Sam Winchester had a beer on Friday night.

Or at least Sam hoped so!

“Ta,” John said taking the glass Sam offered. Sam sat across from him, knees instantly banging against the underside of the old wooden table. The pub seemed ancient. Sam had noticed a sign outside dating the place back to 1720, but John had quickly dispersed the illusion saying the building was indeed that old, but the actual pub had opened back in the nineties when he was a student. Still, it was an awesome place, and nothing like any joint back home. There were a lot of people in but even more outside, despite the lousy weather. Evidently, nothing deterred the British from being out when it was officially the summer.

“So you’ve been out much since you arrived?” John asked.

Sam’s gaze had been curiously roaming his surroundings, but now returned to his companion. He shook his head in reply, pulling a semi-regretful, semi-uncaring face. “I haven’t really made any friends yet. I mean I’ve been out a few times but that’s all. Usually I’m pretty tired in the evening anyways. And London’s so expensive I don’t know how people even manage to go out regularly.”

John lightly scoffed. “We don’t. Not all of us anyway. Most people save their cash for Friday night, then everyone rushes down the pub and starts acting like booze is going out of fashion. You don’t
want to be out on the streets when pubs close on Friday night, I promise you.” He suddenly smiled. “Listen to me, I sound like what your old man must have sounded like when you were growing up.”

*You sound nothing like my old man,* Sam thought. *That wasn’t what Dad was worried about when we were growing up.*

John took a sip, casting him a quick look above the rim of his glass. “I should be encouraging you to go out and party all night, now that you’re here,” he said. “A young guy, no commitments…” His voice undulated just barely to give the end of the sentence a turn to a question.

Sam looked over his shoulder, pretending he was being distracted by someone by the door. When he turned around he discovered that John was still looking at him with an expectant expression.

“I’m sorry, what?” Sam said.

“I was just saying—if you’re young and single, London is a great place to be out and about.”

“Sure,” Sam said, making a non-committal face.

“You don’t like partying much.” John said.

“Not so much, no. Do you?”

Something flashed in John’s eyes at the sudden turning of the tables. “Erm…” He hesitated, face slacking a little with sadness. “I don’t know actually. Not anymore. And I can’t even remember how I was when I was young—too far back now.”

“Oh, come on,” Sam said, giving him a small smile. He wondered if John was on his way of getting a bit hazy. He must have had something like three beers before Sam joined him, so this had to be his fourth. And the British drank in pints so that was a whole lot of beer. Then again, not everyone was like Sam. But there was something relaxed in John that hadn’t been there before. Or maybe Sam’s perceptions were playing tricks on him—he was done with his pint, so at this point Dean would have bought him another, then started teasing him that soon Sam was going to be like a baby giraffe learning to walk.

John went to get him a drink, not bringing a new one for himself. Sam tried to pace himself but it wasn’t easy. They talked about the things John thought had changed since his youth, then about the cultural differences between America and Britain. Sam found himself chattier and chattier, describing the bars back home, talking about playing pool and about the characters you sometimes met. Then the conversation naturally turned to the types of drunks. Unfortunately that coincided with Sam having gotten half of his second pint in him, so against his better judgement he heard himself talk about Dean’s ways of being drunk. About the goofiness and the Casa Erotica and how sweet Dean became. Sam was pretty sure Dean would throttle him if he heard any of that, but at least Sam wasn’t telling John about the guilt and the self-doubt. Because whenever Dean was drunk, he loved people. And Sam wasn’t just people; he was kind of top of Dean’s list on sober days, so there was a lot of love for ‘Sammy’ when Dean was drunk.

But where there was love for Sam, the guilt was never far away: how Dean hadn’t done this or that, hadn’t protected Sam when he should have, how he hadn’t stolen whatever stupid toy Sam had cried his eyes out for when he was six. Yes, when Dean was drunk the drill of guilt swivelled and swivelled, getting pretty deep and pretty far back in time.
It was an uncomfortable train of thought. It made Sam feel guilty for making Dean feel guilty, their present situation included. It made him lose his footing—he hadn’t forgotten Dean’s betrayal, but while anger was useful to ward off the pain, these days it failed to work for Sam. Still, Sam would have rather moved to London permanently than talk to his brother. Didn’t matter that sometimes he missed Dean like air.

“Sam?” John had ducked his head and was trying to catch his eye. Sam shook himself mentally.

“Sorry,” he said.

“It’s fine.” John remained silent for a moment, then sighed. “You should see my face when I start thinking about the kind of drunk my sister is.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Bloody awful. Nothing lovable about her. Worst thing is, she does some stupid things that she then regrets, but you can’t fix everything with an apology, right?”

“No,” Sam said.

“And people just stop trusting you at some point,” John added, shrugging.

“Is that what happened with the two of you?”

John seemed to start at the direct question. From his limited interactions with the British Sam was aware that they weren’t all that comfortable talking about personal stuff, but he was genuinely interested. John opened his mouth to reply, but no words came out—he seemed to be contemplating from where to start. His face turned pinched. “Amongst other things,” he said.

Sam waited, but when John’s expression indicated he was about to change the subject Sam didn’t press.

“You should definitely go out more,” John said. A return to a subject, then; a safer one. “London is, well, London! I started missing it in the last few weeks of my trip, which was—It was a good sign.”

Sam nodded.

John smiled, his face loosened up and friendly. “It’s good to give the local scene a try. I don’t mean parties. Just, you know, the bars, the restaurants, the clubs. Meet some girls.”

Amelia’s face instantly floated before Sam’s mind’s eye. “You’re preaching to the wrong choir,” he said quietly before he could help himself.

John started nodding but abruptly stopped, chin still half-uplifted. “Oh,” he said, awkward. “Sorry. Meet some young men.” Sam looked at him baffled. “Or both?” John added hurriedly. His wide eyes jumped from above Sam’s head to the floor on his right.

Any distracting traces of Amelia disappeared when Sam joined the dots. “It’s, it’s girls,” he said. He wasn’t sure where to look, either.

“I didn’t mean to—I’m not judging,” John said. “Honestly, it’s fine. And most of all, none of my business.”
Sam tried to keep his face straight. “I thought British people didn’t talk about this kind of thing.”

“We don’t. You just saw why.” John used a finger to illustrate an invisible point. “It’s—” John shook his head. “I’m appalled at how bad we are at it.”

“It’s not that bad, actually.” Sam thought for a moment. "You could’ve assumed I was gay and tried to kick my ass for it?” he offered. He looked at John and grinned, warm and slightly oozy. “Now that’s what I call ‘appalled’.”

John laughed, his face suddenly nothing like that of an ex-military. That was a pretty cool paradox of a guy right there, Sam thought, pretty cool. Sam had been so right to look forward to meeting him.

They smiled at each other for a few seconds, the atmosphere cleared up from any awkwardness.

“Oi, I’m talking to you, mate,” a voice said behind Sam. The smile vanished from John’s face as his eyes shot up to a point above Sam’s shoulder. Sam turned his head around and found himself looking up at a red-faced dude in his mid-thirties. He was standing too close for Sam’s comfort, the thin smell of sweat rounding off his roughness. The whites of his eyes were murky, and the look he was giving John wasn’t very bright, either.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t hear you,” John said.

“Well, you would’ve, if you ’adn’t been busy starin’ at your boyfriend.”

Frowning, Sam twisted in his seat to look up at the dude properly. He didn’t even spare Sam a glance in return. He had the air men like him had everywhere around the world when they’d had too much to drink. Sam did a split-second scan of their surroundings: door right behind the man, two equally gruff looking guys at the bar less than a foot away, their eyes trained on Sam and John’s table. Sam faced John again. They exchanged a swift glance and Sam’s stomach tensed up, a match to John’s shoulders.

The dude was talking to John, his thick accent making Sam’s ears prickle. “Me and me mates over there,” he was saying, “reckoned you were on the telly.”

“Well, sorry, but you were wrong.” John was already dragging the feet of his chair back in preparation to get up. “Shall we?” he addressed Sam. Sam nodded.

“Oh, I know we was wrong,” the man crooned, swaying forward. His protruding stomach brushed against Sam’s back. “You were the bloke who lived with that psycho detective who threw himself down that building.”

For a moment John seemed completely shut off, standing ashen and unblinking. His eyes pushed an invisible button behind Sam’s jaw, making it spasm to the point of pain. Sam turned around properly in his seat and lifted his eyes to the douchebag. “We’re on our way out,” he said. “You’re blocking it.”

The man’s eyes finally lowered to him. He took in Sam’s face and hair, the look lingering. “No one’s talking to you, princess,” he said, aiming for funny but sounding as if he had bile in his throat. With his peripheral vision Sam saw the shapes of the other two men shift as if they’d snickered.

Sam turned to John. “Let’s go,” he said. John was still looking wooden, but immediately nodded.
Sam pushed his chair back as if there was no one behind him, and rose. There was a flicker of surprise in the watery eyes that met his. Sam would have put himself through college if he had a dollar each time someone looked like that when they saw how big he actually was. “It’s your delicate features, Sammy,” Dean had told him once. “They hide what a Sasquatch you really are.”

Some people withdrew with their tails between their legs when they were faced with all of Sam’s six foot three, but some took it as a challenge. Judging by his nostrils and his stance, the douchebag was one of the latter. The two guys at the bar took an instinctive step forward, pack instinct strong and pulling. It was near closing time but the pub was still busy. The air was filled with the noises of groups of people in various stages of intoxication; only a couple of visitors had paid a very distracted attention to the little scene.

Sam looked the man squarely in the face. “We don’t want any trouble,” he told him, keeping his voice the perfect balance of polite and warning.

The guy stared back at Sam. “I told ya no one’s asking you,” he said, tone pugnacious. His breath smelled of beer that had been spilled on the carpet two days ago.

Sam could feel his face darken, but knew how this played out, knew himself. He took a breath; then, when John shimmered into view by his side, caught his eye. They each went around the asshole and to the door. Sam let John ahead, following closely behind. They walked out into the night, finding half a dozen people braving the chill, smoking and chatting.

Without a word, John took a sharp turn into the narrow passageway to the right. Several steps into it, and there was no one coming at them from behind. Sam had already sobered up from the abrupt, crappy interruption of the evening; his mind was clear, his body seized by that unique mixture of blood rush and deadly calm. His senses were so heightened that he didn’t need to look at John to feel that he exuded the same.

The narrow alley was completely quiet, but civilization was just round the corner. Sam thought how back home so many bars were at least a mile away from the nearest town, so this would have been a close call. Or there would have already been a brawl in progress. Part of Sam regretted that this wasn’t back home.

Turned out, no need for regrets. Before he realized what he was doing, he had turned around and was blocking a punch aimed at his kidneys.

The fight was quite a blur, as fights tended to be. Sam had the privilege of two sons of bitches coming at him at once—the two minions who’d stood by the bar. Sam couldn’t avoid a punch in the gut and the shorter of the two just about managed to catch Sam’s throat. Sam’s elbow connected with the guy’s jaw, but the taller one threw himself at Sam’s back, trying to hold him restrained for the other to hit him.

Sam felt the weight of another body, felt arms around his torso like a vice, heard the expletives and the harsh breathing, all material and grounding. He propelled himself backwards and hit the wall with considerable force, squashing his ‘backpack’ and making him groan. What a loser, trying that on a street with stone and brick walls not six feet apart. Sam bashed him a few more times against the wall with his back, using his freed up arms to fight off the other guy who kept flinging himself at him. Sam gave him a well-aimed kick in the groin, then turned around, punched the taller one in the gut and when he doubled over, smashed his knee against his face, finishing him off.

The shorter one must have recovered quickly, though, because Sam received an unexpected, strong
blow to the ear. He swayed on his feet and drove his elbow back with as much force as he could, then turned on his feet. The second guy was unsteady, clutching at his chest. For a split second Sam’s eyes flew away from him, searching on instinct. He registered the sight of John throwing punches, some blood on his pale, focused face. He didn’t seem to need any help—the chief douchebag already looked pretty dead on his feet.

Sam blocked quite a powerful attack on his stomach—that guy kept coming back! Sam ducked to avoid a punch in the face, then caught the second punch by grabbing the guy’s fist in both his hands and twisting his arm. He pivoted until the man was right behind him, gained leverage, and threw him over his shoulder. The guy landed on the ground with a yelp. Sam gave him a couple of kicks that took him out of the game.

He turned around, panting, and found John right behind, his own chest heaving.

“All right?” Sam wheezed.

John nodded and cast Sam’s face a sweeping look of assessment, then bent forward with his hands on his thighs. Sam let him catch his breath; in a few seconds John straightened up. “Come on,” he said. They gave the moaning bodies on the ground a final look and trotted back in the direction of the main road.
They took a cab back to Baker Street. As soon as they climbed into the car and made sure the driver couldn’t hear them, John turned to Sam. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “I’m good. You?”

John did a peculiar rotation of his head. His eyes were intense and flashing with the moving lights outside the window. “Yes, I’m fine,” he said. “Does anything hurt when you’re breathing?”

Sam opened his mouth to speak then suddenly felt a big grin split his face in two.

“What?” John asked bemused.

“It’s just,” Sam threw him a playful sideway glance, “I’ve known you for like a week and you keep asking me that.”

John’s teeth’s enamel glistened pearly with his quick smile. “Should I be worried?” he said.

“Kind of not my fault both times,” Sam pointed out, lips refusing to pull back from the grin. Adrenaline was still pumping through him, plus it was funny.

John’s giggle told Sam that they were on the same page both about it being funny and about the adrenaline.

They were sitting next to each other. John had bowed his head while giggling; he stayed like that for a few seconds, chest still showing his recent exertion, before shifting in his seat to turn more to Sam.

“Sorry to get you into a fight,” he said, all traces of amusement gone. “It was not why I called you, believe me.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. Those guys were total wankers—it’s what you call them over here, right?”

John gave a soft, bitter snort as he nodded. His eyes unfocused and he seemed lost in thought. “Hadn’t been in a fight over it before,” he said at last. Sam knew what he meant and didn’t press.

“People kept showing up all the time,” John went on. “Talking about Sherlock, making nasty comments. It got better after a while, but I don’t know when they’ll stop.”

“I thought his name was cleared up a while ago.”

“It was. Properly too, not like it usually happens. You know, anything that’s not sensational news makes it to page seven in small print.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I know.”

“Mycroft, Sherlock’s brother—he has some connections, so he made sure Sherlock’s name was
cleared very publicly. Turns out, the British public has a pretty good selective memory.” John’s eyes moved to the window behind Sam. He scratched his jaw, the gesture filled with a suppressed surge of emotion. “I worry that some people will always remember the—it was a lie, but they still remember it.”

“Hey, man, look,” Sam said quickly. “Those guys were just some douchebags. There’ll always be people ready to believe the worst of you. That’s just people.”

John’s eyes went to Sam’s window again and for a few moments Sam watched him blink in regular intervals. “Thanks,” John said eventually, eyes returning to Sam’s. “Not just—for back there as well.”

“Don’t mention it,” Sam said quietly.

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John wanted to take care of whatever minor injuries Sam had suffered so he insisted that Sam came upstairs. Sam on the other hand insisted that he was okay, so they went back and forth on that one for a while until finally Sam caved in.

John fetched his medical bag and took care of a few scrapes, mostly on Sam’s knuckles. There was also a scratch on his neck, where something sharp must have caught at the skin. A bruise was going to show up on Sam’s right cheekbone very soon, so John gave him some instructions how to treat the area, adding that he’d be monitoring him in the following days anyway. Sam seemed distracted under his ministrations. The association with the stray dog flashed through John’s mind again—it was as if Sam was bewildered why the incident would bring about so much care on his person.

John saw him off and went straight to the bathroom. He took a shower then cleaned himself up, applying antiseptic where necessary and treating some broken skin. He experienced light abdominal pain on the right, which he knew would be gone by the morning, and his left ear felt a bit tender. He didn’t do a second thorough examination for injuries—the quick one he’d had in the cab on the way back sufficed. Like Sam, John knew his own body quite well. There was no cause for alarm.

He made himself a cheese sandwich and a cup of tea, took them to the sitting room and sat in his chair, putting the TV on with the volume low. It was gone midnight, but he was nowhere near sleepy.

He wasn’t hyper, either. His hands were steady, his breathing calm, and his heart-rate placid. In short, he was the perfect mirror of Sam Winchester. Because Sam had shown the exact same indicators when John had checked him up; because ten minutes after the fight Sam looked like it had never happened; because he had then proceeded to take his injuries in his stride as if they were something regular for him, something that—

John all but jumped out of his chair. He marched to the kitchen, picked up his laptop, returned to his seat and plonked himself back into it, opening the lid before he’d even fully sat down. He went straight to his search engine’s page; his fingers moved hastily over the keys, going back a couple of times to correct a wrong letter until finally he pressed the ‘Enter’ key. He waited the whole of a second for the results to pop up. When they did, he slowly leaned back in the chair and stared at the screen.

“Your search—Sam Winchester,” the message read, “- did not match any documents.”
The page proceeded to give John some advice what to do. But he really didn’t need to check again if he’d spelt all the words correctly. He didn’t want to try more general key words, either. He knew that what he was seeing was simply impossible. These days no one who fitted Sam’s parameters: American, early thirties, even remotely involved in academic work, no one like that could exist without a single mention on the internet. No trace of him on Facebook or any other social platform. Not a single comment on someone’s blog. Not a mention in connection to an article, or a course, or a study, or a research project. Not a single tag to a photo. Nothing.

But yes, John did very much want to try different key words. He deleted Sam’s first name, typing four letters in its place, then hit ‘Enter’ again.

This time his eyebrows rose.

“Your search – Dean Winchester - did not match any documents.”

John pushed his lips forward and watched the screen, unseeing. Now he felt his heart speed up, but it had nothing to do with the fight earlier. There were about five different voices in his head, advising things that were mutually exclusive. His instinct so far had been right—there was something strange about Sam, and here was the proof. But his instinct had also told John, albeit without a single logical reason, that Sam could be trusted. Well, that was why it was called ‘instinct’, wasn’t it? There didn’t have to be a logical reason to back it up. How was it that John had trusted Sherlock when they first met? On instinct. Of course, Sherlock’s whole demeanour hadn’t broadcasted anything other than ‘eccentric, public school, a bit of a precious wallflower’. While on the other hand John had just seen Sam take on and knock down two guys in a fight with skill, experience, and some well-managed ferocity.

It meant nothing. John only had to think ‘precious wallflower’ and ‘Sherlock’ to snort and know that it meant nothing. Instinct—that meant something, never mind that John didn’t understand where it came from. It didn’t matter what things looked like. It didn’t matter what Sherlock had appeared to be or hadn’t appeared to be—John had simply trusted him. The same went for Sam, despite the fact that the circumstances were sort of reversed.

John rubbed his temples. He had to go and lie down. His mind was a bit of a mess and his body was still tingling with the rush from his discoveries, or rather the lack of them.

He closed his laptop and rose from his chair, then winced—the fight might have long left his mind, but the physical consequences of it were present. He gingerly made his way to his bedroom, thinking how convenient it was that at least for a while he had a genuine reason to keep an eye on Sam daily.

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Bruises unlike people weren’t mysterious. At eleven o’clock the next morning John was examining Sam’s bruise to find it had reliably manifested itself where expected and as expected.

“You should get this,” John told Sam, scribbling the prescription on a piece of paper he found lying around. Correction—a piece of paper from a bunch of sticky notes neatly placed next to a pen on the table. There wasn’t much furniture in the room, hardly any belongings, either. John had a momentary suspicion that in anticipation of him calling in Sam had put away all the personal effects that could reveal anything about him. The place was unnaturally tidy.

John had forgotten just how unappealing the basement flat really was. For one thing, it was dark. For another, John fancied that he could catch the faintest trace of damp in the air. Although that could
have been due to the fact that it was raining again today, and the window was open. But the darkness was worse—the light was on mid-morning, for crying out loud. How did Sam stay here during the day? Somehow John couldn’t imagine that when the sun was out it was much brighter, but with the weather now it was downright depressing.

At least the interior had changed for the better. There were still some brushes and big boxes of paint in the corridor as well as some boxes with tools and a ladder, but the renovation works seemed to be over. Before, 221C had looked a right dump, but while Sam was rummaging through cupboards in his kitchenette John took a proper look around with approval. Sam had done a great job. Really, Mrs Hudson should have let him stay for three months rent free—what he’d done with the place dramatically increased its chances to be rented out again after Sam left.

Funny. Not that John didn’t know it but this was the first time he’d stopped to think that Sam was here only for a while before going back home, probably soon.

The worst part about the basement flat was the low ceilings. They were okay for John, he had to admit to himself grudgingly, what with him being a bit taller than an average bloody hobbit. But the top of Sam’s head literally brushed against the ceiling. He walked around like an oversized hunchback. It was just wrong.

John was examining the excellent job on the wallpaper on the far wall when there was a noise behind him. He turned to find that Sam had returned to the room, looking slightly sheepish. “I thought I had some of the good coffee left,” he said. “But I don’t. I’ve got herbal tea…”

“No, thanks,” John hurried to say. “You don’t have to—”

“I know you said coffee,” Sam went on over him, apologetic. “But it’s really crap. I usually just get mine from Speedy’s anyway. I’ll go grab us something now.”

“No, no, it’s fine.” John stopped him. “I had tea and breakfast upstairs.”

Sam hesitated. “You sure? I’ve got water and some orange juice.”

“It’s—” John began, then stopped. Sam’s hands were in his pockets and he was doing the shoulders bunching thing again. John cleared his throat and smiled. “Water’s fine, thanks.”

Sam disappeared for a second and came back with a glass of water. He passed it on to John, then retreated to the table under the windows. They stood at both corners of the room for a moment, looking at each other.

“Um, have a seat,” Sam said, chin pointing at the old, comfortable looking armchair behind John. John lowered himself into it; Sam sat back on the chair that was still pulled out from when John had examined his face earlier. The pen and the sticky notes were now situated next to Sam’s elbow—it was obviously his preferred seat. The only other item on the table was Sam’s laptop, again at that end.

John regarded him in silence. Sam’s polite expression appeared as if someone had printed a photo of it, then cut it out and stuck it on his face.

“I looked you up on the internet last night,” John said. He thought he saw a ripple pass over Sam’s features, but couldn’t swear on it. He wondered what Sam’s response was going to be to his ‘cards
Good move. Something eased in John’s chest.

“Because,” he started slowly, putting his thoughts in order as he spoke. “I saw you fight yesterday. And I don’t know how it is across the pond, but over here students spend way more time in the library than in the gym.”

Sam rewarded John’s wit with a quick sideways smile. “So,” John continued, bending forward in his chair. “Where’d you learn to fight so well?”

“Um, I guess I’ve just been around,” Sam said. “Me and Dean—you spend as much time on the road as we do—did, you meet all kinds of people. So you learn to take care of yourself.”

John was smiling and shaking his head long before Sam had finished his sentence. “No one,” he said, voice as quiet as Sam’s, “gets that good from the odd bar fight. Just as no one gets a clean page from an internet search on their name. It just doesn’t happen.”

Sam didn’t avert his eyes but said nothing. Only the tapping sound of the rain outside disturbed the quiet in the room.

“Is that even your real name?” John asked. “Sam Winchester?”

“Yeah, that’s my real name.” Sam seemed to have gone into some hushed stealth mode.

“Okay.” John licked his lips, contemplating without taking off his eyes from Sam. “Are you a… dangerous criminal?”

Sam’s soundless, dry exhalation of laughter refused to let John in on the joke. “No,” he said, lips still twitching. “I’m not a dangerous criminal.”

John nodded once. “Can you tell me who you really are?” he asked calmly.

Sam pushed his fringe off his forehead distractedly, fingers lingering. For a moment he looked completely far off, almost sad in whatever he was considering. John wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw some hesitation creep up on his features. Or was it something calculating? John could feel his heart beat in his chest, not frantic, just…there. He was fascinated by how impossible Sam was to read yet also how expressive he was, how genuine. A mystery without a crime to his name. Yet?

Sam seemed to have come to a decision. He puffed up his cheeks then blew the air out abruptly before standing up, body like a giant awkward live wire. His hands went to his pockets straight away, but then he took them out.

“John, I’m sorry,” he said, regret plainly written all over him. John vaguely wondered whether this was the first time Sam had called him by his name. “I just—I can’t tell you much, man, I’m sorry. But I promise you—” He bore his eyes into John’s with conviction. “I’m not some psycho. I’m not some scumbag who’s dangerous to people, honestly. There’s just stuff that—I can’t talk about it.”

John would have given the guy an entry under the word ‘sincere’ in any dictionary.
He stood up as well. “Right,” he said. “Okay.”

Sam was looking down as if John was the one towering over him, with an axe ready to chop his head off to boot. John’s eyes fleet over the wrinkly, worried bit between Sam’s eyebrows, then went up to the ceiling which looked like it was about to fall on Sam’s head.

“Um.” John shuffled from foot to foot, before standing upright and immobile. Sam’s expression turned slightly wary.

John nodded to himself. “Right,” he said again. “Sherlock’s room is empty upstairs. The rent is paid and I feel stupid living on my own in the whole flat. So if you fancy some company, and space that’s more suitable for your size, it’s…there.” John finished with another firm nod, then swallowed. Talk about feeling stupid.

There was no describing the emotions on Sam’s face, because there was no capturing them without the help of some recording device and the use of slow motion. “You sure?” Sam said, sounding very unsure himself. It was the kind of uncertainty people felt when they were worried that reality was about to turn on them, point and laugh.

“Yes,” John replied quickly.

“We just met and you’re asking me to move in?” Sam said, and at least now John could pinpoint some things: Sam was perplexed, and amused, and maybe it was John’s imagination but he seemed a bit chuffed, too.

It was John’s turn to offer an ironic smile. “Not the first time that’s happened to me. So far, the best way to get a flatmate, hands down.”

Sam’s dimples burst into view. He lowered his head, grinning, then raised only his eyes. “Can’t argue with experience,” he said. “Um, thanks,” he added.

“No problem. Think about it,” John said. He was feeling pretty calm, especially for someone who might be crazy. The man had told him straightforwardly a minute ago that he was unwilling to reveal who he really was. He could be a psychopath—what real psychopath owned up to it? Or he could be one less on the dangerous, more on the creepy side madman. And John was going to let him in in his own home. No, he actively invited him there. No, no, John wanted him there, because potential for Sam turning out to be a nightmare notwithstanding John actually liked the guy.

More than that, evidently he trusted him, too. Plus, Sam was mysterious, and that was enough of a credential. Sherlock’s room wasn’t there to have dull people living in it.

“I’ll talk to Mrs Hudson,” Sam said.
Chapter 7

Sam did talk to Mrs Hudson, only the conversation sure wasn’t what John must have expected.

“Oh, that will stir things up a bit now, won’t it?” Mrs Hudson was looking very concerned, but also kind of hopeful. “When Sherlock finds out someone has moved into his bedroom he’ll get vengeful, I should think.”

Definitely hopeful.

“I guess,” Sam stuttered. He was always caught off-guard when Mrs Hudson showed herself as being not quite like any old lady in his acquaintance. Most of the time she was normal and sweet, fretting over stains on the carpet or going on and on about the latest chemicals they’d put in whatever she used to clean the lino. Then next thing you know, she was discussing the potential of Sam being killed in his sleep as if she was talking about whether the sun would finally come out over the weekend.

On the plus side, Sam felt huge relief that there was at least one person he could discuss things freely with. If Mrs Hudson wasn’t on board, his job would have been next to impossible.

“I’m going to have to leave most of my hunting stuff downstairs,” he told her. “The way it’s all hidden now is okay—nobody would think of looking twice.”

Mrs Hudson was nodding. “But you’ll have to take a gun or two upstairs with you,” she said, then added musingly, “I wonder where you could put it. Sherlock’s bedroom—Well, you can’t put anything in there that John wouldn’t find if he decided to have a proper snoop around.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Sam took a sip from his coffee, mind in a whirl. This new turn of events was great; unexpected but freaking amazing. Thank God he no longer had to spend all his time in constant fear that he’d hear John’s muffled cries upstairs and would rush up only to find he was too late to save him. But there were some new obstacles now that he had to work out. Such as that John might have asked him to move in, but Sam had no illusions whatsoever that he wasn’t going to be watched closely.

As if hearing his thoughts Mrs Hudson said, “You know that John might go through your things, don’t you, dear?”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “I know.”

“He isn’t that kind of person, but from what you said about your conversation I don’t think he’ll just leave things there.”

“No, no. I know.”

Mrs Hudson tutted sadly. “I wish it was all sorted out while he was still away.” She paused, then looked at Sam, eyes round and filled with discretion. Her voice lowered. “But you do think Sherlock will finally show up? I wasn’t imagining things, I promise.”
“Hey, no.” Sam’s hand twitched across the table to hers. “Don’t worry, Mrs Hudson, I believe you. It’s just…Nothing’s gone the way it should.”

He wasn’t lying. Nothing so far had gone like any job Sam had ever worked. He knew his dad’s journal by heart, and there was nothing there to explain the patterns here, either. There was no end to the instances when Sam thought he’d feel so much happier if he could talk things through with Bobby, and this job was big like that. He badly needed to get some straight answers about what was going on.

The only plausible theory he had at present was that Sherlock had disappeared with all his stuff. Sherlock’s brother had arranged the removal of every single personal effect of Sherlock’s the day before Sam arrived. There wasn’t much to make Sam suspect anything but a coincidence—apart from the timing.

Coincidence or not, there was a simple fact that led to a simple conclusion: Sherlock’s belongings had left the building and there hadn’t been a sighting of him since. He had to have been bound to an item or some remnants of his DNA. One of the main goals Sam hoped to achieve with his impending change of quarters was to gain some access to the brother. Although honestly? He had no idea how he would procure any information from the man, what with failing completely to procure any information about him.

Sam’s research had really hit a wall with Mycroft Holmes. All he had was Mrs Hudson’s descriptions, in particular of the relationship between him and Sherlock. (Animosity didn’t begin to cover it, but there was also the eldest Holmes going out of his way to watch out for his sibling. And from what Sam gathered, Sherlock had really begrudingly considered his brother his only intellectual superior. It seemed that they’d had a very complicated relationship. Sam knew a thing or two about that.) Nothing concrete had come up about Mycroft Holmes, no matter where Sam looked: there was no address, no job title or work address, no names of friends. Sam couldn’t even find where the Holmes’s familial home was!

Despite having Mycroft Holmes’s personal cell number, Mrs Hudson had shown clear discomfort when Sam asked her to call him under a false pretext.

“Oh, you don’t know him, Sam,” she’d said. “He’s worse than Sherlock. He’ll only look at me and he’ll know I lied to him to get him to come over. It’s best he didn’t see you, either.”

“Oh, Mrs Hudson, I get it,” Sam had replied soothingly, in reality not quite getting it. Because come on, seriously, who had such an omnipotent eye? “But I gotta find a way to track him down,” he’d added. “He could be very important and I can’t even get to the man to tail him for a bit. The only thing that came to mind was to get him to come over here. Then I can follow him when he leaves.”

Mrs Hudson had been shaking her head repeatedly while Sam spoke, and proceeded to explain that Mycroft Holmes always arrived in a posh, dark car with a chauffeur who looked like “someone from one of those films about spies”.

“Mycroft insists he works in the Government administration,” she told Sam, eyes round and animated, “but I don’t think that’s true at all. Besides, Sherlock once said Mycroft was running the country, although I think he was just being dramatic. But there were a couple of cases they worked together, and there were some Americans involved, from your secret services, I believe—very unpleasant people, Sherlock sorted them right out, thank God.”
Mrs Hudson had looked a bit distressed at the memory; Sam let her be. In general she didn’t shy away from doing whatever was necessary, so that was a reason enough for Sam to trust that she had a point in being as reluctant as she was. He really didn’t want to make anyone suspicious, let alone someone like the character dimly emerging into view. But the bottom line was that the man was elusive—Sam hadn’t even seen a picture of him.

He deeply doubted Mycroft Holmes would be approachable at all. If Sam couldn’t use his people’s skills, and obviously he couldn’t exactly extort information by force, then he would have to rely on nefarious means and somehow get John’s unwitting help.

It wasn’t the most comfortable of thoughts. Funny how over the years Sam’s scruples had shown an extraordinary flexibility, but now the notion of manipulating John was like a piece of gravel in Sam’s shoe. True, in the past the stakes had been pretty high. He remembered siding with Meg, siding with Crowley. It hadn’t mattered how loathsome any short-lived union with a demon had seemed—in their desperate attempts to stop being pawns on Heaven’s chessboard, and later too, with the Leviathans, he and Dean had done some pretty questionable stuff. But in the big picture it had meant saving billions of people, so they had to accept it was worth it.

Was it all that different here? Much smaller deceit for much smaller stakes. Everything worked in proportion. Trouble was, Sam had long learned to doubt good intentions, his own included, almost as much as he deeply resented bad ones. It was always about hard choices with this job, always. It burned at Sam’s soul like the flame burned the edges of a piece of paper—licked at them for a moment before being put out, until the next time came along and the flame claimed that little bit more, turning the paper to ash.

He straightened his shoulders and his gaze returned to Mrs Hudson. “I’ll figure something out,” he said to her, unsure what question of hers he was answering and who he was reassuring.

If Sam had to lie and manipulate John in order to finish the job, then that was what he was going to do. The only alternative was not finish the job, and the result of that could have been the demise of the very man he had qualms about cheating. Sam might have not filled in all the blanks yet, but there was something he continued to be pretty sure about. Logic and all the research dictated it, but beyond that, his hunter’s experience was thrumming through him, telling him he was right.

Holmes’s name was cleared up. His nemesis, Jim Moriarty, was dead. That left one thing that could have made Sherlock Holmes’s ghost stick around: John Watson. Sam didn’t know what Holmes would want with John, but ghosts weren’t human, they didn’t work like humans. No good could come out of this. Worst case scenario Holmes was after John to form a new ghostly partnership, and for that John had to become a ghost himself, which meant he had to die first. Sam wasn’t taking any chances. The ghost had to go, and Sam was going to do whatever was necessary to take him out.

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Three days after Sam moved in upstairs John found a temp job. Sam felt as if he had that enchanted rabbit foot back in his pocket—not only was he back in 221B legitimately, not only was he making friends with the person closest to Sherlock Holmes, but he also didn’t have to worry about being suspicious. Sam knew he would have found it very difficult to explain why he was always around when John was in, and went out only when John was out. Because there was no way Sam was going to leave John alone in the flat now that he’d moved into Holmes’s bedroom and had likely pissed off his ghost to no end.

He found himself really hoping that there would be a pissed off ghost. He was itching to do
something—he was itching for a real job. It was confusing at first, but the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. During the year Dean was gone Sam hadn’t missed hunting at all. At first he’d been reeling with his brother’s sudden disappearance, and then he’d met Amelia, putting a start to the second era resembling normalcy in his life. But while ironically Sam’s life at present also had some normalcy to it, he was no longer in the frame of mind to want it. Hunting always came back to him, no matter whether it was through the front door or sneaking through the window, like it had done in the shape of his brother literally sneaking through Sam’s window on that fateful night ten years ago, asking Sam to hit the road with him.

The family business. It was like a stick that Sam kept throwing far, far away, adamant to never see it again, but somehow every time the stick transformed into a boomerang mid-air, returning to Sam’s life to send him back to square one.

He sometimes wondered about his year of normalcy, lately more and more. He asked himself about his choices: leaving hunting for good as he had then thought, settling down with Amelia in Kermit. He asked himself how much they were made because he’d finally been left completely alone in the world. It essentially boiled down to the question of whether if Sam had known that all the while Dean was alive and fighting for his life in purgatory, he would have done things differently. Would he have tried to get him out of there? Of course he would. It was impossible to imagine how he would have slept at night, done anything, really. But what would have happened then? Would he have followed Dean along their never-ending yellow brick road leading them further and further away from Kansas? Dorothy wanted to find her way back home, but Sam and Dean had turned their backs on Kansas when Sam was only six months old, and it often felt like all they’d done since then was running away. Would he have kept running with Dean? Was there ever going to be light at the end of the tunnel for them? Sam still didn’t know.

Where Dean was concerned the way Sam had felt these last fifteen months had changed quicker than the English summer sky. He’d grieved for him. He’d tried to let go. He’d been weak with happiness to have Dean back. He’d quickly withdrawn under Dean’s disappointment with his choices. Then Benny had come into the picture, and with him resentment and hurt had taken over in Sam’s heart. Until there was the fall-out. Anger, then bitterness, then more hurt. The anger fading away, the bitterness and the hurt recently more and more mashed up with something that Sam privately knew resembled pining for Dean a lot.

Last time Sam was left for too long without his brother, he’d deteriorated big time, not to mention he’d turned into a demon blood junkie. He was grateful he’d grown up enough to keep himself out of trouble now; to keep it together, really.

And together he kept it. He stuck to his regime only adding caution on account of having John in such close proximity. Sam worked out in the flat and went for a run whenever John was at work. Unfortunately, he visited libraries and places of interest a lot less, forced to time his outings with John’s. John wasn’t a very sociable creature, Sam concluded, and once again blessed the New Cross NHS Walk-In center for deciding they needed John Watson’s medical services.

Sam spent a fair amount of time on the internet as he always did. He continued to enjoy the rare opportunity to have regular sleep in the same bed, a comfortable bed. He ate healthy as he’d gotten used to a while ago. (He and John had done the shopping together, each watching the other out of the corner of his eye to see what items he put in the trolley.) Last but not least Sam maintained vigilance where it came to any potential unwanted supernatural visitors.

The one thing that changed for Sam was that suddenly, he had companionship in his life. It wasn’t a dramatic change, because John wasn’t a dramatic person. But Sam felt it palpably nonetheless. There
were countless ways in which sharing with John was different than sharing with Dean. Sam wasn’t sure it was only residual anger that made him think John was way more suitable to his own life-style than Dean had ever been. True, sharing an actual flat or a house, and without the stresses of the job, made any comparison unfair. Sam had never lived with Dean that way—their cohabitation had always been born out of extreme circumstances. They had often not so much shared but lived in each other’s pockets. It was different here. Sam and John both had their own rooms as well as a common space they could venture out into and retreat from at their will. A luxury he and Dean had never had. More than that—this was a real house, Sam had to admit, careful to swallow around the lump in his throat when he first realized it. It wasn’t a motel room, it wasn’t an abandoned, crappy house, and it wasn’t the Impala. Yes, most of Sam and Dean’s life-time of sharing of quarters had consisted of sharing the compartment of a car.

He had no idea how they would have been around each other if they’d had this. The lump hardened when he thought of Dean still not having this.

But there was no denying that John was closer to Sam’s idea of a good roommate. John was calm and softly spoken. He let Sam do his own thing. He naturally treated him as an equal. He watched programs like ‘Time Team’ that Sam found interesting. He was considerate about noises and personal space and having his stuff in some order; all of that in a way that showed it wasn’t an effort for him.

On a couple of occasions Sam caught John looking almost stranded in his own home, when faced with examples of Sam’s roommate personality. Which was odd, because if anything, in that respect Sam was pretty much a mirror to John.

Only this morning he’d found John staring at the empty sink as if he expected a Grodur to come up through the pipes. Sam had just done the dishes, then dried them and put them away.

“I feel like I should spill my coffee on your newspapers or something,” Sam told him teasingly in a moment, after John failed to register his presence. “Or leave some empty beer bottles lying around.” He kept smiling, but John didn’t react to the joke. Hands still pressing hard on the edge of the counter, he stood perfectly still without saying a word. Sam froze at his spot by the fridge, grateful there was some space between them. He wasn’t sure whether to have a crack at another joke or to apologize—why, he didn’t quite know, but it felt like the right thing to do.

Eventually John lifted his eyes to meet Sam’s. “It’s just…I’m going to need some time to get used to this,” he said.

“Sure.” Sam paused. “Do you mean having a roommate again?” He tried to keep his tone respectful.

“No,” John replied in a beat then finally turned to Sam fully. A small smile was trying to brighten up his hooded eyes. “I meant having a flatmate who actually keeps beer in the fridge and doesn’t leave mothballs in my cups because he urgently needed his hands free. That sort of thing.”

They took their hot drinks to the sitting room, where John spent an hour and a half telling Sam stories about Sherlock that made Dean look like a candidate for roommate of the year. Sam spent the time taking turns to gape, laugh, recoil in disgust, and exclaim, “No way, man!” He’d been able to piece together some things from Mrs Hudson’s very vivid descriptions of the kind of tenant Sherlock had been, but this was a whole new level of freaky. The guy had kept corpses parts in the house. Not just that, he’d kept them everywhere. (Sam got John’s reference about the beer in the fridge. Mrs Hudson had told him about the bag of thumbs—or was it toes?—in the fruit and vegetables compartment, but Sam hadn’t believed her. Now the thumbs or toes didn’t seem like much compared to a severed
Holmes had had no understanding of the concept of privacy, and he seemed to have considered John as his own, private test subject for a number of experiments, half of which Sam was sure John had never really gotten the point of.

Which didn’t stop John from missing him like hell, from what Sam could tell. Oh, there weren’t tears shed or even a catch in John’s throat, and Sam didn’t expect it. But there were longer than natural pauses here and there, a bitter-sweet curl of the lip while reminiscing about something that made Sam gag (and blush a little bit) just listening about it. There were John’s eyes as well, averting to the fireplace to rest there. Or going to the left corner of the mantel, because apparently no living room decor was completed without an actual human skull on display. But beyond that, Sam could just feel it—he could tell without a shadow of a doubt that John had been happy living with Sherlock, no matter that the dude was coming across as a freaking menace.

Sam wasn’t surprised at all. He’d interviewed people, tens and tens of them, from all walks of life. He knew how illogical emotional attachments were, as well as how powerful.

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John wasn’t sure exactly what sort of a flatmate he’d expected Sam to be, but he quickly discovered that if his puzzlement was any indication, he must have hoped for something along the lines of ‘exciting’ or at least ‘interesting to live with’. Around the end of the second week of their flatshare he had to revise some things. He knew he hadn’t been unreasonable in his expectations. No riddle wrapped up in an enigma was supposed to be borderline dull, yet there Sam was. Not to mention that he was a bit of a health obsessive, constantly pouring glasses of water for John, praising herbal teas and apples and salads, and inviting him to go jogging with him every day. (John was considering taking him up on his offer—it would be nice to get fitter.) Sam was also a book worm exactly the way Mrs Hudson had described him, and he was as interested in going out at night as the average pensioner in a small Welsh village.

But the odd thing was John’s own expectations. He kept surprising himself. He hadn’t expected to ask Sam to move in, but he did. He then expected one kind of a flatmate, but Sam turned out to be a very different one. Yet instead of being disappointed, John found he liked living with Sam. It was early days of course, but he could say with some certainty that he enjoyed the companionship. He found Sam unobtrusive and considerate, and as a conversationalist he wasn’t dull at all. He was very well-read and they shared some interests. John’s initial impressions of a sharp mind were confirmed in tens of practical and academic ways.

In terms of the actual flatshare, Sam was a bit of a godsend. He clearly relished the fact that he had a place to call home, judging by the way he kept doing domestic stuff like tidying up and doing the dishes, or bringing in more and more items for his new bedroom. Such as a set of fireplace tools for instance, which Sam sheepishly mumbled he’d bought despite the fact that the fireplace didn’t actually work, because they made the bedroom look homey. Mrs Hudson seemed to indulge him, too, agreeing to his every whim to furnish the room as he wished. John found it a bit cluttered himself, but now that Sam had let it slip that he’d spent some time in his past actually squatting in derelict houses, John didn’t have the heart to judge him.

Besides, the less the room reminded John that it used to be Sherlock’s, the better. He hadn’t found the transformation easy at all. That didn’t manifest itself in some sudden resentment of Sam, thank God. Or at least John hoped not—he hoped he wasn’t suppressing it. It was something inside of John, difficult but only his own. It was like…It was what he knew a tiny kidney stone must feel like: discomfort, pain, inner pressure, frustration—and a feeling that sometimes he was wearing his skin inside out. This home had never been anything else than Sherlock’s, first and foremost. As the saying
went, all roads led to Rome; well, for John all roads that started with Sherlock led to Baker Street. John couldn’t imagine that Sherlock had ever lived anywhere else. (His therapist had suggested this was about John’s inability to imagine that Sherlock had existed before John. The session ended with John’s insight that the real question was about his own existence before Sherlock.)

Sam moving into 221B meant that John had to daily wade through his own experience of grief and growth. He did it with the stoicism on which everyone who knew him well had commented at least once.

He himself didn’t think it was particularly stoic to get on best as you could with whatever life dished out for you.

***

Living with Sam turned out to even have its unexpected bonuses. One of them was excellent, regular nutrition, not just because of the health thing. Sam always asked John whether he wanted anything when he was making tea or coffee. He remembered how John liked his tea from the first time, and did a fairly decent job in making it, especially for an American. But beyond that, Sam always brought in food for both of them when he made any. John could see it wasn’t something Sam did because he wanted to butter him up. It seemed he did it automatically, without really thinking that John might have eaten out or not be hungry.

Within two weeks John was already getting into the habit of calling his new flatmate on his way back from work to check what he wanted to do for dinner. They went out once, to a Tapas bar; they also got takeaway a couple of times. John wasn’t sure how Sam was doing financially, but he observed a thing or two and concluded that while not exactly well off, Sam wasn’t struggling, either. And even if he was, there was a solution for putting food on the table as John quickly discovered. Katie, the new girl at Speedy’s, had a massive crush on Sam.

“Food for two?” She’d smiled at John after he did indeed pick up lunch for two for the second time in three days. John smiled back. He liked Katie—she was curvy and freckled and brown-haired, her friendly face shaped like a heart. She was a bit young for him, he thought wistfully, but a little smiling was completely in order.

“I—Um, I have a new flatmate,” he told her. “You might know him actually? Sam. He lived in the basement flat.”

Katie’s eyebrows froze up. “Oh.” She played with the folded edges of the paper bags. “He, erm… He’s moved in with you?”

John heard it, of course. That was the curse of living in a modern city. No, John corrected himself—that was the curse of exclusively picking for flatmates tall blokes with delicate features. John’s flirting chances always plummeted as a result.

He gave Katie the stretch of the lips and the firm eye contact that transmitted ‘not that it matters but not gay’, then said, “Yes. Sam wasn’t comfortable downstairs and I could do with splitting the bills.” He chose to ignore why he was effectively lying to the girl.

“Oh, right,” she said, thawing. “That makes sense. Here, they just delivered the strawberry cheesecake—how about I give you two a slice each, on me.”

“Oh, that’s—That’s very kind of you.”
Katie was already busy sorting out the two slices; she kept chattering, neck turning pink. “No problem at all, not at all. You’re both regular customers, especially Sam, so he deserves a treat. I mean you both do! And I know he watches what he eats, but you tell him Katie said hello and said that a little bit of sugar won’t harm him, right? I mean he is in such a good shape anyway, right?”

John was momentarily befuddled as to whether he was expected to give opinions on Sam’s shape or on the daily consumption of sugar for the average male.

“I’ll tell him you said hi,” he said diplomatically. “Thanks again.”

Sam’s smile when John passed on the cheesecake and the greetings was a bit embarrassed. He made no comments, so John couldn’t help himself.

“She’s a very nice girl,” he said after hastily swallowing the first mouthful of his seafood baguette. He was so hungry he’d started eating while still standing in the kitchen.

Sam only hummed in agreement, head stuck in the fridge. John watched the strong line of his back for a moment.

“You two seem to be on friendly terms,” he offered, before adding, “What are you looking for?”

“I don’t know if I want a beer or some of that wine Mrs Hudson gave us,” Sam replied, his tone expressive in its hesitation. John suddenly felt a rush of warmth for him, for doing something so mundane. It made life seem normal and somehow, maybe even nice.

“Seafood goes with white wine,” John said. Sam pulled out the bottle that Mrs Hudson had left for them, complaining the wine had turned out to be too acidic for her stomach. “More and more that’s been happening, John,” she’d said, her little face crestfallen. “I don’t even know if I’ll be able to drink any wine soon.”

“So I was saying,” John went back to the subject once they’d sat down at the table, “that you and Katie seem to be on friendly terms.”

Sam shrugged. “We’ve talked a few times.”

The left corner of John’s mouth went up. “You know she fancies you, right?”

“I guess.”

John waited. “You don’t like her,” he said questioningly.

Sam was swirling the wine in his glass gently, eyes following the circular motion of the liquid. He shrugged again. “It’s not that,” he said, then finally lifted his eyes to John. “I’m not really interested in that kind of thing at the moment.”

John regarded him carefully, then nodded, and bit into his lunch again.

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The last thing that moved Sam close to the perfect flatmate was that he was a handyman with the best of them. He’d already gotten into Mrs Hudson’s eternal good books by fixing everything under the
He was standing around with a cup of tea in his hand.

“Did you have your own business?” he asked.

“What, like paying tax and insurance?” Maybe it was John’s imagination, but there’d seemed to be that sarcastic trill in Sam’s voice that John was beginning to recognize as uniquely his. “No,” Sam went on. “It was more like I got jobs wherever I found them.”

John pondered that for a moment. He wondered whether he should take the opportunity to ask about Amelia. He hadn’t expected being let in on something so private so casually, but that was Sam, still unpredictable. John had just taken a breath to speak when he heard the front door bell. Before he even had a chance to move, Mrs Hudson called from downstairs. “I’ll get it, John!”

John’s ears tried in vain to hear who it was—the speech was intangible and the voice too quiet. Sam poked his head out from under the sink, neck straining as he looked up at John. They exchanged a glance—John didn’t even know what communication passed between them, but he felt himself straighten up. He left his cup on the table on his way to the door that opened directly to the landing. Steps could already be heard up the stairs. For a fleeting moment they seemed vaguely familiar; for an even shorter instance John thought that Sherlock would have already figured out not only the identity of the visitor but possibly their query as well.

Curious, he stepped out and turned to face the stairs.

His brain must have instinctively distinguished the sound the tip of an umbrella made when it tapped against wood, because his stomach muscles tightened with the awareness of who it was before he consciously knew it. A second later Mycroft’s primly dressed figure came into view unhurriedly, his cool gaze lifting to rest on John’s face.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sam listened to the soft press of feet on the steps and allowed himself to relax a little. No evil creature took the stairs anyways, let alone in such a measured manner. He was still curious as to who it was, though, so he quickly slid out from under the sink and got up on his feet, wiping his hands in his shirt.

Through the open door ahead he could see John looking down at the approaching visitor, his expression unlike anything Sam had seen on his face yet—a cross between shaken and severe. Sam caught himself holding his breath; in a flash he visualized his gun under the mattress in the bedroom.

One last step, and the visitor was finally in full view. A tall, formally dressed man in his mid-forties, whose big forehead stood out as Sam observed his profile. Sam rarely called anyone a gentleman, but if he’d ever seen a person look like the quintessential English one, the man in front of him was it. It took Sam around two seconds to work out who he was, just as John said, “Hello, Mycroft.”

Mycroft Holmes’s small smile didn’t really show any emotion. “Hello, John,” he said. “Good to see you.”

John nodded. He didn’t move or speak. Sam frowned inwardly. He expected at least a spark of warmth between two men, who must have seen enough of each other to form a relationship. And after all, they’d shared the loss of someone who had mattered to both of them. John himself had told Sam about the eldest Holmes’s part in clearing up his brother’s name. John had to feel some appreciation at least for that, right?

Didn’t look like it. John wasn’t hostile as such—he was just very, very still.

“May I come in?” Mycroft Holmes asked. His voice wasn’t very deep, and kind of velvety. He was already very far from what Sam had imagined him to be. In fact, Sam hadn’t imagined anything in particular, but somehow Holmes was still a surprise.

John blinked a few times, then stepped aside freeing the way to the living room. Holmes nodded his thanks and pushed the door open, then disappeared inside. John’s and Sam’s eyes met across the space. Sam waited for instructions—he was dying to be introduced, but he wasn’t going to intrude against John’s wishes. Thankfully, John pointed to the living room with his head before following Holmes; Sam waited for a second, and made his own appearance through the kitchen portal.

As he walked in, he saw Mycroft Holmes looking around the room without turning his head—only his eyes glided from one spot to another. When they got to Sam they lingered but only for a perfunctory once over.

“Sam, this is Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock’s brother,” John said. “Mycroft, this is my new flatmate, Sam Winchester.”

“Nice to meet you,” Sam said.
“How do you do?” Holmes nodded, before immediately adding, “I would offer my hand for a hand shake, but you hadn’t had a chance to wash yours after your little plumbing inspection.”

Sam dropped his gaze automatically to his hands, then he looked up, meeting Holmes’s eyes. They were blue but nothing like John’s soft gray blue. Or Sherlock’s intense green blue, from what Sam had seen on pictures. The plain color of Mycroft Holmes’s eyes was just about the only thing that could deceive anyone with two brain cells that they belonged to an unremarkable man. The look Sam was given was calm with a touch of indifference, yet all the while making him feel like he was being x-rayed.

Holmes’s left eyebrow lifted slightly.

“You’ve travelled a long way for your studies, Mr Winchester,” he said. “Although ‘studies’ would be the inaccurate word, seeing that your research in London at present is more of a…hobby.”

“Um, yeah,” Sam replied then froze, realizing the implications of Holmes’s remarks. No, worse—realizing he had no clue what the remarks implied. He turned to John without thinking, seeking explanation for the man in front of him.

John rolled his eyes. “Don’t show off, Mycroft,” he said. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Holmes turned his gaze to John, bowing almost imperceptibly in silent apology. “I was passing by,” he said. “I thought I should come up and say hello. We haven’t spoken since before you left. I’ve been meaning to call you and speak to you about Sherlock’s belongings.”

“How do you mean?” John asked, frowning. “I thought that was all sorted out. I assumed what you’d left here was stuff that wasn’t important.”

“That is indeed the case,” Holmes replied pleasantly. “I was talking about your visiting our family home. I’m sure that my brother would have bequeathed you all of his belongings with the exception of a few items, but I thought I’d save you the trouble of wondering what to do with them. You could come and choose what you’d like to keep.”

John shifted from foot to foot. His lips stretched, but the smile that reached his eyes was not particularly joyful. Wary and a bit dry, more like it. “Wouldn’t it have been easier to do that here? Then pack the rest and take it away?”

“Yes.” Mycroft Holmes dragged. “But I talked to Mrs Hudson and she told me about some changes in the house. Problems with the pipes and the electrical system. You know how it is with these old buildings. You were gone and the flat was empty. I didn’t want to risk Sherlock’s belongings suffering some damage.” There was a pause for a fraction of a second. “You know, like catch fire, for instance.”

Sam’s heart stopped in his chest for a long moment, before resuming its work, uncertain.

“Right,” John said and frowned again. “Okay. I’ll come to, uh…We can talk and make arrangements.”

Sam shifted, then smiled at both when they looked at him. “I’ll let you catch up,” he said. He turned to John. “I’m going to go out for an hour or two.”

John nodded. Sam smiled at Mycroft Holmes and got another nod in response, a slightly formal,
On his way to his bedroom he heard Holmes speak again. “I like what you’ve done with the place.”

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Sam had come up with his plan on how to tail Mycroft Holmes weeks ago, when he’d first asked Mrs Hudson to call the man and lure him to Baker Street. Now he put the wheels in motion and struck out immediately—the very first taxi he stopped agreed to his offer to park further up the road and wait there, then follow the black car outside 221B when the time came. (Holmes’s car was both expensive and entirely without character. It put Sam even more on edge.) Sam didn’t give the taxi driver any explanations—an offer of a double fare as well as a bonus twenty-pound note in advance did the trick, just as Sam had expected. The dude didn’t seem the type to oppose to some shady business anyway—he had the kind of shifty look and red-rimmed eyes that suggested late nights and dubious morals.

Sam then hid in Speedy’s, hoping that his wait wouldn’t be a long one. It wasn’t about the money. He’d brought some cash with him that he’d hardly spent anything of, plus he had his fake credit cards if things got desperate. He had earned a few bucks already, too, with this handyman services. No, Sam didn’t care if the taxi fare would cost him a fortune—he wanted to get a move on as quickly as possible after finally having a new lead.

Katie’s face lit up when she saw him. “Hiya. How are you, Sam? Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Hey, Katie.” Sam gave her a quick smile and sat by the window. It was very cold outside with a heavy smell of upcoming rain so the place was quite full, but there was an empty table by the window. Thank God. Sam would have had to stand by the door otherwise, and that would have drawn too much attention, both to those inside and outside. Now Holmes had to purposefully look at Speedy’s front window to notice Sam, who had all the right to be sitting there, having a cup of coffee after his delicate retreat from upstairs.

Sam didn’t think he was in any danger of a chance encounter anyway. From what he’d seen, he highly doubted Mycroft Holmes frequented coffee shops—more like the restaurant of The Ritz.

“What can I get you, Sam?”

Sam looked up at Katie’s beaming face, realizing belatedly that Speedy’s was a self-service place. Damn, it’d been weeks and weeks, and he still forgot things like that; so different from home. “Hi,” he said again. “Sorry, Katie, I'll come to—um, okay, thanks! Coffee, please. Milky.” He secretly enjoyed trying the local lingo, breaking a few long-lasting habits as well. Dean would have gasped in mock shock at Sam’s dramatic departure from his typical triple red eye. Sam didn't intend to drink more than a few sips of his milky coffee anyway.

It would have been nice to do this with Dean—the stakeout, was what Sam meant. Although maybe drinking coffee and gossiping about the local everything wouldn’t have been so bad either. Sam was sure Dean’s running commentary would have been gold.

He realized Katie had said something and quickly turned his head away from the window to look at her. “Sorry. What did you say?”

Katie’s dark red nails flashed as she waved her hand in an ‘Oh, it’s not important’ gesture.
“I was just saying that we have some freshly baked croissants. If you fancy one with your coffee. On the house,” Katie added the last bit in a mumble.

A tall figure flashed outside in Sam’s peripheral vision so he stretched his neck to check. It wasn’t Mycroft.

“No, that’s fine,” he replied distractedly, not looking away from the street.

“Are you having your coffee here?” Katie asked.

“Yes. No, actually. Takeaway, please.”

“Okay.”

For a minute all Sam could hear was the typical sounds in a busy coffee shop, then Katie placed his coffee in front of him. “There you go,” she said, the dimple on her chin softening with her smile.

“Thanks.” After a few seconds Sam felt a presence by his chair and looked away from the street again, only to find that Katie was still there. He looked up at her, confused, before realizing that she was probably expecting him to get up and leave. “I’ll…drink some of it here,” he said.

“Of course, yes,” she said quickly, but still didn’t leave. “The weather’s been a bit nasty today, not much for a walk.”

“No.”

“But it’ll be sunny over the weekend, they say.”

“Great.”

A couple of touristy-looking men in their sixties came in so Katie went to serve them, leaving Sam’s attention undivided. It wasn’t a big deal—he was used to observing and listening one thing while engaging elsewhere. He spent half his life pretending to be someone else: a janitor, an FBI agent, a priest. But right now he still wanted the outside world on the backburner. It allowed him to fully tune in to the rush that impending pursuit brought. There was a relay in him now controlling everything, stopping unnecessary details but letting in the smallest thing that had anything to do with the job at hand. His senses were humming, loaded in their pre-emptive strike mode. They were the result of a mini-evolution that had taken place within Sam's lifetime—the honing of Sam’s perceptions had meant the difference between life and death.

“I was hoping for some sun,” Katie said, having returned by Sam’s side, unnoticed. He gave a little start, then nodded. “Sure.”

“There’s this festival in Hampstead Heath—Not that I wouldn’t have gone in the rain, but it’s nicer when the sun is out.”

“Yeah, totally.” It might not be a big deal, but Sam still wished Katie would go away.

“Actually,” she said, “one of the guys who was supposed to come with us has other—Erm, something came up and he won’t be able to make it so we have a spare ticket. That’s my mates and I, they’re really fun, so if you fancy—If you don’t have anything planned…You know.”
The meaning of Katie’s words caught up with Sam and he abandoned the window for a few seconds to blink up at her. He had no idea what to say. She was looking at him expectantly, face quite pink; her hands were in her jeans pockets under her apron, and she now tried to tuck them in even further.

“Ah…Yeah, okay.” Sam heard himself say when the silence had stretched for too long. His neck was trying to turn to the street on its own volition. “Can I get back to you tomorrow? I just—”

He couldn’t help it and peered out. The car was still there. Of course it was still there. Sam hadn’t kept an eye on it for like ten seconds. Mycroft Holmes didn’t seem like the kind of guy who’d rush out, even if the building was on fire.

“I need to check something with John about Saturday,” Sam finished, meeting Katie’s eyes again. He was going to figure out what to do later. Now he just wanted her out of the way, no matter how sweet she was.

“No, no, absolutely,” she replied hurriedly. Her eyes dropped to his smiling lips, then slid down his neck and shoulders, before jumping up to his face again. “You let me know,” she said.

Sam nodded and turned his back on her, heard her walking away. He wished again that Dean was with him, so that he could flirt with Katie while Sam was left in peace to keep an eye on the target. Then again Dean would have probably given him a suggestive grin while wriggling his eyebrows and kicking Sam under the table, urging him to try his luck.

The old Dean would have done that. Dean post-purgatory was a different kind of soul, and Sam hadn’t even had a chance to figure out if he could do something about it. Because Sam had been too busy unpacking his own emotional crap—

His thoughts were interrupted abruptly at the sight of Mycroft Holmes stepping out on the pavement, his open umbrella obscuring his head from view. The driver came out to hold the back door open for him, which earned Sam a few extra seconds allowing him to leave Speedy’s in an inconspicuous manner.

“Bye, Katie,” he called in the direction of the counter. Katie’s head popped up from behind the cakes display. “Bye then,” she called back. “Let me know about Saturday.”

Sam was already at the door watching the black car pull away from the curb and join the light traffic. He waved at Katie and sneaked out. In a second he was diving into the taxi. The driver had already started the engine; as soon as Sam was inside the car was in motion. The other car was about two hundred yards ahead.

It drove down Baker Street then crossed the big road, but instead of continuing all the way down to Oxford Street it turned into the first street which allowed a right turn. The taxi followed; Sam just about managed to catch the back of Holmes’s car disappear into the first street on the left. Sam had walked around the area enough to know that this had to be a quiet, one-way street, the type that had residential buildings on both sides. He could feel himself grow curious and slightly anxious. This was an unexpected detour. There wasn’t heavy traffic on the main road, so it wasn’t to avoid that. What were the odds of Holmes visiting someone else in such close proximity to Baker Street?

The taxi driver had meanwhile also taken the left turn, and now suddenly came to a halt at the sight of their target parked neatly outside a very imposing apartment building that looked at least a hundred years old. The back lights were on—the engine was running. Sam did a swift calculation in his head. Mycroft had to have literally bolted out of the car, rushed up the stairs and let himself in—none of
these buildings had free access, someone had to buzz you in—for Sam to have missed him. So he was still in the car. What was going on? Was he waiting for someone to come out of the building?

“What do you want to do, mate?” the taxi driver asked, his accent thicker than the accent of those assholes the other night.

“I don’t know yet,” Sam replied, eyes not leaving the car.

“Well, I can’t have me cab slap bang in the middle of the road!”

Sam was just about to tell him to pull over, when the words died on his lips. The engine of Holmes’s car switched off just as the back door, the one by the pavement, opened. Sam tensed up in anticipation…

No one came out. No one got in either. Sam looked and looked, and still nothing happened—the door remained wide open.

“What’s happening?” the cabbie asked, peering through his front window. The drizzle that had started fifteen minutes ago was getting stronger.

What was happening? Sam knew there was pretty much one thing that could be happening. He was made out. His hand went to the back of his jeans seeking reassurance in the hard weight of his gun. He looked at the meter, handed another twenty-pound note to the driver, and climbed out of the taxi.

“Thanks,” he said before shutting the door.

“You sure?” the driver called at him after opening the side window. “I can wait for you.”

“No, it’s fine.” Sam waved him off, eyes trained on the other car’s open door.

He heard a muttered, “Suit yourself,” then the taxi drove past him down the street—Montagu Mansions, as a sign helpfully informed Sam. The brick red of the façade glowed even stronger under the gray open skies.

Sam slowly walked to the car. When he reached it, he did a quick scan of his surroundings before bending down to peer inside through the open door.

Mycroft Holmes ducked his head to meet his eyes, then tilted his chin indicating the empty spot next to him. “Get in, Mr Winchester. I won’t keep you long.”

***

In the varied and numerous ways in which Sam had felt in danger in his life, sitting in a posh car while talking to an immaculately dressed British public servant had never featured even remotely. Sam was ready to wager it hadn’t happened to any hunter. It was the kind of thing where you had to be there to comprehend that it was even possible. Because he definitely felt himself alert and apprehensive in a way that was quite real. And the car was posh—it had beige, genuine leather upholstery, and it was shiny and clinical in a way that would have made Dean scowl. Mycroft Holmes was also without a shadow of a doubt immaculately dressed. He wore a three-piece dark blue suit with some fine stripes; his burgundy tie had a knot that could be upheld as a standard for all knots in the world; and there was a bunch of little details (like his cufflinks) that were so perfectly in place, Sam was sure Holmes would feel savagely undressed without any of them.
Sam let himself scrutinize the man in response to the heavy gaze he felt upon himself. It wasn’t malicious; there hadn’t been any threats as such, verbal or otherwise. All Mycroft Holmes had done was lock his eyes on Sam, releasing him only when Sam shuffled to turn and face his ‘host’—Holmes had then moved his umbrella from where it was propped next to his right leg, as if providing more space. Sam had no intention of sitting as close to the man as the umbrella had been. Neither did he think he could invade Holmes’s personal space like that, and live to tell the tale.

There it was: that vague feeling of threat that was impossible to attribute to any particular gesture or word. It wasn’t the kind of red hot danger Sam knew too well. Mycroft Holmes wasn’t a scary man, definitely not in the traditional, violent way. But there was something chilling about him, from the way he kept his lips pressed making them appear far thinner than they were, through his posture—back in the flat he’d looked like he had his umbrella permanently stuck up his ass—and most importantly to his aloof, disconcertedly astute eyes. Sam was beginning to see that he might have to revisit his disbelief that anyone could have the kind of omnipresence of sight that Mrs Hudson had described Mycroft as having.

Sam thought of everything he’d found out about Sherlock and felt immensely grateful that the Holmes brothers hadn’t been the dark side equivalent of the Winchesters. They would have made for some of the most formidable enemies Sam and Dean had ever met.

“I would say that you have no reason to be afraid, Mr Winchester,” Mycroft Holmes said softly, “but a mere verbal reassurance would hardly put an experience hunter like yourself at ease.”

Sam had already decided the best course of action was to let this play out, with him saying as little as possible. He hadn’t thought that Holmes would facilitate the process by rendering him speechless. Sam tried not to give away how stumped he was by this unexpected dive in the deep.

“I’m a busy man,” Holmes’s tone somehow managed to be both brisk and bored, “and I don’t like to…‘beat around the bush’ if I may be allowed to use this charming idiom. I know who you are and I know why you are currently residing at my late brother’s old quarters.” Holmes paused. Under his gaze Sam could almost feel ice crust forming on his skin. “You are wasting your time, Mr Winchester,” Holmes continued. “Sherlock’s ghost is gone.”

“How can you be sure? And how do you even know about any of this?”

“It’s my job to know things,” Holmes said matter-of-factly. “As for my certainty, it’s quite simple—I took care of the matter myself.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that the item to which Sherlock was bound has been burned.”

Sam felt like he was trying to regroup mid-flight. “Are you sure? What item was that?”

“His DNA samples.”

“Yeah, of course. I meant what was the item exactly.”

“And I told you—his DNA samples. My brother kept a collection of samples of his own DNA. Not by far the strangest item in his possession but in this case, of unique importance. I burnt all of them.” Holmes looked at Sam in expectation of more questions. It wasn’t an inviting look.
“No offence,” Sam said, irritation traceable in his voice—He wasn’t going to sit humbly through a discussion that involved the only subject he was damn well versed in!—“but again, how can you be sure? Ghosts have been known to—”

“Mr Winchester, I am sure because I saw his ghost go up in flames.” Holmes’s demeanour was obviously impatient now. “Perhaps I should have taken photographic evidence to satisfy your suspicious nature? I hope I will be excused for being too distracted by the fact that I was parting with the last remnants of my brother.” Holmes looked at him pointedly. “I would have thought that of all people you would appreciate the sentiment.”

Sam rolled his head in an apologetic gesture. He was busy mentally pinching himself for having this surreal conversation at all.

“Listen,” he said, lifting his hands. “I’m not trying to pick a fight. But you just show up out of the blue, talking about hunting and about Sherlock’s ghost, and you expect me to take in everything, just like that? Why tell me now? I’ve been lying there in wait for like two months.”

“Surely you can answer that question yourself?” There was a tiny line between Mycroft Holmes’s eyebrows that indicated a genuine puzzlement. “Obviously I was hoping that in the absence of any sightings of Sherlock for two months you would figure out that his ghost had left with his belongings.” Holmes tilted his head, acquiring an expression that told Sam he was being considered a bit of a moron. “Especially considering the suggestive fact that John returned to 221B and Sherlock’s ghost still failed to make an appearance.”

“Yeah, okay,” Sam said quickly, “I thought that was the case, but I couldn’t just leave, not without knowing for sure. That was why I was tailing you. I needed to check whether there’d been any unusual occurrences in your family home. How was I supposed to—It’s not exactly every day that we meet family members who not only don’t freak out about the whole thing, but actually take care of it themselves.”

Holmes turned his head to face the screen that isolated them from the driver, presenting a full profile view of his prominent, long nose. He pushed his lips forward in a thoughtful grimace that suddenly gave him a shimmer of something very human. Nevertheless, Sam thought that he would have had a snowball’s chance to get anything out of the guy on his own. All in all, this was a fortunate turn of events. No matter that it was making Sam’s head spinning.

Or that he still didn’t know how much of what he was hearing was true.

Mycroft Holmes sighed and looked at Sam sideways. “I confess that I underestimated your commitment. I also didn’t account for John’s propensity to seek out the company of mysterious men who promise danger—a notable oversight on my part, in light of the fact that it was how he got involved with Sherlock in the first place. Therefore the necessity to interfere now.”

“How so?”

“John Watson was my brother’s best friend. His well being is important to me. But to answer your question more directly…” Holmes’s eyes suddenly got the barest but unmistakeable look of cool menace. “Because your job is finished and it’s time for you to go.”

His fingers twitching, Sam managed to huff a smile. “Look,” he said, still trying for the middle ground. “We’re on the same side here. Okay, you say you saw Sherlock’s ghost go up in flames. I
don’t even know how you knew what to do or whether you did it right. Or,” Sam lifted his eyebrows ominously, “if what you saw was the real deal. Ghosts are nasty things, full of tricks. Sorry, man, but I’m not taking any chances, and I’m sure you don’t want to risk it and see John hurt, right?”

Mycroft’s gaze had turned completely cold. “I don’t think this is any of your business, but let me tell you that no matter his manifestation, human or otherwise, my brother would have never hurt John Watson. You on the other hand attract danger and bring death to everyone around you.”

Sam stared at Holmes’s unblinking eyes, feeling his face heat up as if he’d been physically slapped. The sting was indeed real, deep and painful; dizzying too. Sam wasn’t used to hear his worst, most intimate fears voiced out by someone else. Not just voiced out, but used so mercilessly.

“I see you understand my point,” Holmes said evenly. “Like I said, I’m a busy man, so I won’t indulge your attempts at self-deception. You wish to stay, because you want to stay—it’s quite a nest you’ve built yourself there.” His face softened enough for Sam to register it through the fog that still filled his vision. “And despite some frostiness you might have perceived between myself and John, I was able to see with my own eyes that he is doing much better, undoubtedly thanks to your company. Had your occupation been less…gruesome, I would have encouraged these new developments whole-heartedly. But Mr Winchester…Now that you have no other reason to stay than your personal ones, every day you spend with John not just threatens his safety, but makes your inevitable parting more difficult for both of you.”

Holmes pulled his umbrella up and locked his hands over its handle, looking down at them. The thick dark clouds outside made the sparse light in the compartment eerie.

“Sherlock’s death devastated John,” Holmes said, not looking up. “Unlike you, he doesn’t have the forces of Heaven at his disposal so a loss is a loss to him. He doesn’t form relationships easily—in fact, I would venture as far as to say that his budding friendship with you is his first genuine attempt at a real relationship since Sherlock died. Now think of the possible endings that lie ahead for the two of you.” The blue eyes finally slithered up to Sam’s face. “Imagine him having to experience another loss so soon—that’s what you risk putting him through.”

Sam was reeling worse than he had for a long while. He couldn’t even keep his gaze trained on Holmes. He needed to think. Everything he was hearing was true, yet he wasn’t clear on anything one bit. He thought that this was what he’d always imagined striking a demon deal would feel like: being inexorably pulled further and further down by something that had reached in and got its hand inside of you, because you’d let it.

He bit his lip and bowed his head even lower, letting his fringe obscure his face. Next to him Mycroft Holmes might as well have been subjected to petrification. The scary thing was that Sam was still able to feel his gaze.

He abruptly ran both his hands through his hair. He needed to clear his head, work out what to do. He had managed to tell the Devil to shove it up his ass and back off, damn it—no man, not even Dean, was ever going to tell Sam what to do with his life.

“Thanks for letting me know about Sherlock,” he said, looking Mycroft Holmes squarely in the face. “But let me tell you this. If he’s not my business anymore, same goes for John for you. And it’s sure as hell none of your business where I choose to live.”

He opened the door of the car and got out before Holmes had the chance to say anything, then bent forward to look in again. “I’ll see you around,” he said, careful to keep it neutral. His voice was
hardly heard over the rain that was now pelting down. The couple of seconds he had to catch Mycroft Holmes’s expression told him nothing.

He closed the car door, turned on his heels, dug his fists in his jacket pockets, and walked quickly in the direction of Baker Street without looking back. All his instincts, body and soul, told him to run, but Sam did it only after he turned the corner and was safely out of sight.

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Chapter End Notes

Bonus visuals <a href="over here">over here</a> at my LJ. I post little updates there sometimes in-between chapters.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Beta: A big thank you to @enname for her competent beta and for the help with the medical terminology.
Warnings for this chapter: Non-graphic descriptions of injury.

John heard Sam come in, but didn’t move—he kept gazing at the empty craters of the fireplace, his fingers wrapped around a half-full, cold cup of tea. His right hand was resting next to his thigh, warming the leather of the sofa, or perhaps getting warmed by it.

The falling rain and the silence of the flat had softened down the spikes that Mycroft’s visit had raised on John’s metaphorical back. Another feeling had replaced them, filtering in as the opalescent dark grey light was filtering into the room. Mycroft meant Sherlock, the associations many and obvious, yet there was nothing distinctive to them, no particular memory in sight. Sherlock was just there, in that abstract way in which he existed, invisible, both around John and in him. The feeling of loss had filled up John’s ribcage, but without any labels like ‘anger’, ‘missed’, or ‘regret’ attached to it—a deep, uneventful, painful feeling. John’s eyes had welled up as he sat in complete stillness, the tears swimming in their mini-lakes, tugging the hurt upward, until it appeared in perfect symmetry on both of John’s temples. It dug in there, and he bore it. He was even grateful for it, because it was localized and somehow measurable. It meant he only had to wait long enough and it would lessen, maybe even spill.

Sam walked into the flat through the kitchen door, so John didn’t see him. He heard him put the kettle on, calling softly his “Hey,” to John.

“Hey,” John called back, the greeting already part and parcel of his new flatmate.

Sam popped in his head from the kitchen. “Tea?” he said. A few droplets of rain raced one another down his neck.

“What happened to you?” John asked, getting up immediately. Sam looked quite bedraggled. Apart from his face, that was. It shocked John with its sudden…neatness. Sam’s hair was completely wet and flattened back—it bared his features and threw them into a new order, making them stand out starkly: the wide nose, the high forehead, the finely shaped eyebrows, the expressive mouth. And as always with people, the eyes, or rather what lit them from within.

In this case, darkened them too.

John realized he had stopped and was standing staring at Sam, silently, while Sam was dripping from under the kitchen portal, equally silently. Neither had bothered answering the other’s enquiry.

“No tea for me, ta,” John said, passing to the bathroom from where he returned with a big clean towel. He handed it over to Sam who wiped his face first, then ruffled his hair, drying it a bit.
finally dragged the other end of the towel along his throat and collarbone.

“Man, it’s raining out there,” he muttered.

“You didn’t take an umbrella?” John said, then actually listened to both their words. He grinned, the Fawlty Towers quote inserting itself. Sam stopped the second episode of the hair drying and peered at John from under the towel as if he was looking up from under a small tent. “What?”

“Nothing, we’re just both... “Specialist subject - the bleeding obvious,” you know.” John quoted Basil Fawlty, chortling. Sam’s lips curled in a dry smile. “Yeah.”

The kettle clicked behind him, indicating the water had boiled. Sam turned his back to John and poured water into a large white mug. Maybe it was one of the cups John had found in the flat when he’d moved in first. They had to be Mrs Hudson’s. John couldn’t imagine Sherlock taking cutlery and crockery with him wherever he’d gone. No more than he could imagine Sam doing it.

A mild, flowery scent wafted to John’s nostrils. Herbal tea.

“Where did you go?” he asked.

Sam shrugged, taking the jar of honey out. “Just out.”

John nodded to his back. “Even that’s a secret?” he asked. He didn’t know if it was the whole atmosphere—there was now a strong candidate for a storm outside—or if it was Mycroft’s visit, because yes, Mycroft brought along associations of Sherlock, but also secrets. Or maybe it was the mood John was in, feeling a bit raw, a bit defenceless—but also past caring about the defences of others. The question carried with that mood naturally, and Sam must have picked up on it. He turned around and looked at John calmly, not replying.

John regarded him to his heart's content—no furtive glances, no guarded expressions—wondering how wide Sam’s secrets spread to encompass his every step.

Then he remembered the hooded look in Sam’s eyes when he’d come in.

Right.

“Did Mycroft kidnap you?” John asked, then quickly congratulated himself on finally managing to catch Sam by surprise. Not to mention for already having his answer. “He kidnapped me,” he clarified, “the day I met Sherlock. What did he want?”

Sam had managed to put his poker face on. “To check me out?”

John sighed. “Did he offer you money? Although why he’d want you to spy on me is beyond me.”

“What? No, no money.” There was a trace of amusement in Sam’s voice, but on the side of ironic. He had crossed his right foot in front of the left one, and was leaning back against the kitchen counter with his large cup in his large hand, striking a casual pose. Was it real? Sam might have looked bedraggled, but he didn’t seem particularly ruffled. For an umpteenth time in the last few weeks John asked himself what kind of a life his new flatmate had led to make him so... unaffected.

“Did Mycroft try to intimidate you?” John returned to the matter at hand. “He’s very good at it. You don’t seem the kind to scare easily, but I know Mycroft—he could be pretty terrifying.”
Something flashed in Sam’s eyes—John wasn’t sure whether it was a confirmation of John’s words, or whether it was something of Sam’s that was hard and unyielding, and maybe a little bit terrifying, too.

“I just hope he’ll leave me alone,” Sam said. “He’s kind of protective of you.”

John snorted. “A nice way of saying he can’t keep his nose out of other people’s business. You should have seen him and Sherlock—they were always at each other’s throats in seconds.”

“Yeah, I was going to ask you, but seriously, man. That sounds pretty bad.” Sam pulled a sincere appalled face. “I thought you and Mycroft would be like…Friendly, I guess. Then I worked out he and Sherlock can’t have been close.”

“No, not exactly,” John said. “They were just so childish sometimes. But, um, it’s not just that.” He crossed his arms across his chest. “The way I was with Mycroft…It’s complicated, and not just because he and Sherlock didn’t get on.”

Sam was listening intently, cup steaming in his hand. “What happened?” he asked.

There really wasn’t any quid pro quo here, John knew that. Sam was keeping all his cards close to his chest, and yet…

John nodded to the tea. “Fancy another drink instead of that?”

***

They each took an umbrella and still had to run, skipping over puddles and checking if the other was keeping up. John took Sam to a pub that was tucked away and not on the well trodden tourist paths so he hoped that even if there were any tourists who’d sought refuge from the horrid weather, their number would be small. John had really wanted to go out—the rain both dissuading and oddly alluring—but wanting to be out didn’t mean he didn’t wish for privacy.

As he and Sam tried to go through the door at the same time, John was relieved to see that he was right—there was just one couple inside the pub: early twenties, sitting pressed to each other on the bench at the table by the window, and watching the torrents of rain with forlorn expressions.

Sam headed to a table far at the back, shaking himself like a dog—John hoped he wouldn’t have a patient with a cold on his hands after today. Sam had changed into dry clothes at home, but he had only one jacket. None of John’s would have fitted him, the man was a giant. As a whole John felt more comfortable when they were both sitting in each other’s company, especially in public, but now there was an additional practical downside to their vastly different sizes. Even the short distance had been enough to make John’s shoes squelch when he walked; it couldn’t have been different for Sam. But the pub was pleasantly warm, and for medicinal purposes John ordered them both a double scotch without consulting his drinking partner.

He took the drinks to the table where Sam’s eyes lit up in commendation of John’s choice. They took a sip at the same time, Sam spending a second to pass and hold the glass under his nose, before drinking. He looked at John in silent invitation.

So John spoke. He told him pretty much the whole story about Mycroft’s part in Moriarty’s plan to bring Sherlock down: how Mycroft had had Moriarty under lock and chain, how Moriarty had
managed to manipulate Mycroft to offer him Sherlock’s head on a silver platter. Okay, John didn’t word it exactly like that for Sam, because it was harsh and untrue, but he was still resentful, and it wasn’t going away. He was resentful of everything surrounding Sherlock’s death. He hated that day, he hated the entire year, maybe he even hated Mycroft a little—if not for helping Moriarty then for failing to help Sherlock. John was stupid, a bug under the shoe of the Holmes intellect, but Mycroft? Mycroft had both power and a formidable brain. The only thing that made John still talk to him with any modicum of forgiveness was the thought that Mycroft knew that very well himself. So if John had felt utterly devastated by the irreversibility of what had happened, at least he knew that realistically it had never been within his power to prevent it. Mycroft was a stuck up, cold bastard, but he’d cared about his brother. More than that, he’d looked after him. So John didn’t want to think how he slept at night.

Mycroft had provided Moriarty with all those little private details about Sherlock’s character and history—tiny straws that Moriarty had arranged around the stake, until there’d been enough of them to set Sherlock alight, exposing him as a fraud. Because like Sherlock had said it himself, when you told a big lie, you wrapped it up in a truth and it made it more palatable.

John had to pause a few times to drink from his whiskey and gather his thoughts. He could hear how low and scraped his voice sounded, so Sam had to be hearing it too. He was beginning to want to hear Sam speak, have him pull John back, anchor him to the present. That was something special of Sam’s—he was softly spoken, giving some heavy credibility to the saying ‘It’s always the quiet ones’, although John still didn’t know what was the ‘it’ about this particular quiet one. But he trusted Sam for his voice, for the quiet seriousness in it. Or maybe it was the whiskey talking. Either way, he found himself looking up at Sam in expectation.

“There’s one thing that I don’t get,” Sam said slowly. “And that’s why Mycroft let Moriarty go in the first place.”

John pulled his head back, frowning. “I—I don’t know. Why did you think of that?” He’d expected some comments on Mycroft’s actions, some questions about Sherlock’s death even, but not this.

“It just doesn’t make sense. You get the guy, you keep him locked. Why let him go?”

John pondered that. “Because he didn’t have anything against him, I suppose. Even Mycroft and the powers he serves can’t just keep a man locked up indefinitely without charges.”

“Yes, but you said he told you they were interrogating him. Doesn’t sound like the kind where there was a lawyer present.”

“No…But they still had to let him go in the end, right?”

“I guess.” Sam was looking thoughtful. He took a sip from his glass. “Did Sherlock ever find out?”

“What? That his brother had provided his nemesis with all he needed to bring Sherlock down?” John asked dryly. “I hope not. But he probably figured it out. Or maybe that evil maniac told him.”

“God.” Sam’s face looked thin and sickened. “I can’t imagine—if I had to go, knowing that Dean had laid the groundwork for whatever—whoever…”

“He didn’t know,” John said on impulse. He’d had that conversation with himself enough times already. “Mycroft, I mean,” he clarified. “He didn’t know this had been Moriarty’s plan all along. Moriarty was clever, really clever. I don’t think he was more—but he managed to trick both Mycroft
and Sherlock.”

Sam said nothing for a moment, eyes contemplative. “Maybe not,” he said at last. “I read that they found his body on the roof of that hospital. Suicide, it said everywhere.” Sam bit his lip, before taking a careful breath, eyes on John’s face. “Do you think it was true? That he killed himself? Because then maybe somehow Sherlock had managed to beat him after all, you know. To make him do that.”

John swallowed, but the whiskey had worked his magic—he found the contraction of his throat less scraping than he’d expected.

“It’s true, that was conclusive,” he replied. “The theory is that he did it after Sherlock jumped, as some sort of a ritualistic double suicide.” John fought an impulse to grit his teeth. “Like ‘together in death’ sort of thing.”

Sam stilled, his eyes big and knowing. The noises at the background had faded almost completely, even the sound of rain.

“That’s,” Sam began—with quiet seriousness—then never finished his sentence.

John made an indefinite gesture with his shoulders. “It was—it doesn’t matter. Although back then, it was like rubbing salt into an open wound, you know.”

“Yeah. Must have been.” Sam hesitated. “Does anyone know what happened exactly? On that roof?” His face came alive with an apologetic set of lines all over it: eyes, forehead, dimples. “That’s if—if you don’t want to talk about it, then just—don’t.”

John was sure that he would never want to talk about it, but right now he didn’t feel any real reticence, either, which was rare. He told Sam the truth—that no one knew, but everyone speculated. That John had believed Mycroft, because if anyone was able to deduce with any accuracy what had really happened, it had to be Mycroft. Mycroft thought that Moriarty’s was actually quite a simple scheme: use the force of public perception, then strike with good old blackmail. Moriarty had planted the doubt that Sherlock Holmes, the “boffin”, the genius detective, was a fraud. He had then found subtle ways to insinuate that Sherlock was maybe more than that, that he was a criminal himself. Which was where Moriarty’s alter ego Richard Brook came in—the harmless actor hired by Sherlock to play the part of James Moriarty.

To this day John felt sick at the memory of Moriarty’s performance as Brook. He hated the man more than anyone or anything, but the bile rose in John’s throat not when he thought of Moriarty in his exorbitant suits and accessories, but when he remembered ‘Brook’. ‘Brook’, with his metrosexual jeans and cardigan, with his casually messed up hair, the exact opposite of James Moriarty’s sleeked back hair that made his head look like the head of a reptile in its new, shiny skin. ‘Brook’, with his neurotic little mannerisms and his round sincere eyes, their blackness even scarier than when they’d been cold or smirking.

‘Brook’ had been the end of Sherlock. Because people had bought it that Sherlock was a fraud, thanks to the spreads in the newspapers, but it would have blown over in a day. But they’d also bought that Sherlock had hired Richard Brook to play James Moriarty, and then, for a short while, everyone believed that “the poor actor” had been forced to kill himself in the hands of the evil genius Sherlock Holmes, before the evil genius Sherlock Holmes took the plunge, unable to bear the disgrace of his exposure.
In reality? Mycroft was convinced that Sherlock had been the one forced to jump, that he’d been instructed to lie to John in his last call to him in order to preserve…What had Mycroft called it?

“‘The continuity of his fall from grace,’” John quoted. Sam’s eyes widened, quite engulfed in John’s narrative.

“What was the threat, do you know?” he asked in a beat.

“Obviously it had to be something huge,” John replied. “Mycroft thinks it was a serious threat to the national security. Actually…” John hesitated. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound. “He said they had intelligence to suggest that was the case.”

“Wow.” Sam stared at John, but John had the feeling he was just placed in Sam’s eyes’ way. In a moment, Sam was seeing him again. “I know I keep saying it, and it’s probably starting to grate on your nerves but I’m really sorry, John.”

“Thanks.” John lifted his glass to his lips to find it empty. Suddenly, his body felt heavy as if all of his clothes had been hanging on it for an hour, heavily soaked. He looked over his shoulder and squinted, trying to see outside. It seemed that the rain had stopped. He turned to face Sam again.

“Another one or shall we head back?” He really didn’t want to drink more, or stay at all.

“No, man,” Sam said. “Let’s head back.”

***

As usual, the damp made everything smell stronger. In the rare clean air of post-rain London, John’s nose had been able to pick up the slight stale ‘pub’ odour that his hair and clothes had absorbed. His sense of smell was still heightened when they walked in through the front door, which was probably why he caught the whiff of rotten eggs immediately.

But not before Sam, apparently. Because Sam had frozen in his spot, nostrils working overtime, all ordinary expressions draining out of his face. “Can you smell that?” he asked, tense.

“Yeah,” John said. “I think Mrs Hudson’s eggs have gone—”

A splash of water thrown in his face blinded him for a second and made him splutter. He rubbed his eyes, then stared in dismay at Sam's hand, currently holding an open flask.

“Good,” Sam said, then sniffed the air again. “Sulphur,” he whispered. John was still gaping at him, water clinging to his eyelashes, but before he had the chance to speak, Sam had pushed passed him.

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“Mrs Hudson!” he shouted. “Mrs Hudson!” He tried to attack her front door, but instead collided with her.

“What,” she began, her eyes round and alarmed, but Sam interrupted her. “Show me the amulet I gave you.”

Mrs Hudson’s mouth fell open and her fingers fumbled with the collar of her blouse, until they managed to find something under it. She tugged at it and pulled out a thin silver chain on which there was a little pendant hanging. She lifted it to Sam’s face with a trembling hand. Sam nodded and grabbed her by the shoulders, lowering his face to hers.
“Go back inside,” he said with urgency. “Lock the door, then do the salt, like we talked.”

“Oh dear.” Mrs Hudson hiccupped, voice close to tears.

“What’s going on?” John asked.

“I’ve not heard anything, Sam,” Mrs Hudson said quickly. “I’ve been back there all the time and—”

“Sam,” John said. Sam looked at him for a split second, but his eyes had already returned to Mrs Hudson when John repeated. “What’s going on?”

“We can’t risk it,” Sam told Mrs Hudson. “Can you smell the sulphur? Right, just go in, please. And stay inside, whatever you hear, all right?” Sam looked up to the ceiling, then down to Mrs Hudson’s anxious face. “Salt on the windows and at the door, you’ll be safe, I promise. There’s a trap here and inside, too, but they could still find a way around them. Go! I’ll be back in a minute, I just need to check—”

John suddenly exploded. “Can somebody tell me what the hell is going on?”

“Oh!” Mrs Hudson jumped. Sam tilted his head, lips pressing tightly, his expression pissed off at no one in particular. He lightly shoved Mrs Hudson inside her flat and shut the door behind her, then turned to John.

“John, I need you to listen to me and do as I say. Please. Please.” The second word made Sam’s eyes flutter shut with emphasis. “Don’t ask questions now, all right? I promise you I’m not crazy, but what might be in the house is.”

“What is it?” John asked.

“Not now, please,” Sam said, jaw pushing forward.

John’s eyes flicked between Sam’s, then his jaw mirrored Sam’s. He nodded. Relief swam over Sam’s features. “Right. We’re going upstairs. We’ll go through the main door. I need you to stay close—stay right behind my back. Whoever you see upstairs, I need you to stay put. Do nothing, do you understand?”

Sam lowered his face again. John had a fleeting impression that Sam was about to put his hands on his shoulders, too, but he only gazed at him imploringly. “You’ll just have to trust me, all right?”

“Who will I see?” John asked, genuinely baffled.

Sam shook his head. “I don’t know. Hopefully nobody.” He was still clutching the flask in his hand and now lifted it decisively, then made a move to go up the stairs. “Come on.”

They crept up, their effort a bit useless what with the creaking board and all the shouting downstairs. John would have pointed it out if he didn’t think that keeping his mouth shut was implicit in the ‘do nothing’ request.

Sam established eye contact with him outside the door of their flat, asking mutely if John was ready. John transmitted back that he was—at least he hoped he was, considering that he still had no idea what was happening.
Sam burst in through the door into an empty room. John watched him swinging around in all directions, flask in hand, body poised to attack whoever appeared out of thin air—evidently by making them sneeze from the water in their nose.

“All right,” John said, fighting a sigh. Why? Why always the crazy ones? “Can you tell me what’s going on now, please? This is ridiculous.”

Sam’s face was still tense. He ignored John in favour of examining the windows, rubbing his fingers along various areas then looking closely at them, and even sniffing. He did that with both windows, then shook his head ominously. “Something’s wrong. The smell was too strong. It was sulphur.”

“What was sulphur?” John asked, his hackles raising quickly again.

Sam turned to him, expression grave. “I need you to come to my bedroom. Stay right behind.” Not waiting for John’s agreement, Sam straightened up, face transforming into his warrior’s one from a minute ago, then he started walking carefully towards the kitchen. John followed him, stomach clenching with discomfort, the kind one felt when one discovered that someone one quite liked might actually need serious help for their mental health.

Sam pushed at the bedroom door with two fingers; it opened with a faint creaking sound to reveal nothing remarkable, but Sam’s shoulders didn’t relax. He was by his bed in a second, hand sliding under the mattress at the feet.

John’s heart jumped in his throat.

“Oh, okay,” he said, quickly licking his lips. “Sam. Put that down.” He lifted his hands in a pacifying gesture while his chin pointed at the shotgun in Sam’s hands.

Sam was checking whether it was loaded. He looked up at John through the parted curtains of his hair and his face immediately turned panicky.

“No, no,” he said, lowering the gun and lifting his free hand in a similar calming gesture. “It’s not what you think. No real bullets. Just rock salt.”

John was about to keep talking Sam into putting the gun down, but now his mouth shut almost audibly. He blinked, then opened it again. “What?” he asked stupidly.

Sam shook his head, eyes closing quickly, then turned his back on John to rummage through the drawer of his bedside table. He produced another pendant, visibly the same as Mrs Hudson’s. “Put this on.”

John gaped at him again. He’d forgotten how common this arrangement used to be for his features only a few years ago.

“John, please,” Sam said, eyes doing the pleading thing.

“No,” John replied, irritated as much with Sam as with himself, for almost falling for it.

Sam tilted his head again, his face turning sort of…bitchy. “Put this on.” He clapped the pendant against John’s chest. “I can’t have my attention divided, worrying about you.”
“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” John said, nostrils flaring, “but I’m not doing anything until you tell me what’s—”

They both started at a clattering sound below the bedroom window. John almost swore, then rolled his eyes at himself, but Sam gripped the gun tightly and raised the string, pendant swinging at eye-level in front of John’s face.

“Either put this on,” he said, “or I’ll have to draw on you.”

Always the quiet ones.

John looked at his shoes, resigned, hand lifting to pinch the bridge of his nose.

A mighty crash and a high-pitched scream filled the air, coming from downstairs. For a split second they both locked eyes in horror, then John was out of the room and running up the stairs to his bedroom, hand frantically trying to get his mobile out, while he calculated how many seconds it would take to fetch his gun and get to Mrs Hudson. He heard Sam’s voice behind him, calling his name from the landing, then thudding steps down the stairs. Good! Crazy or not, Sam was a big man with a shotgun. Whoever was attacking Mrs Hudson had to be delayed by the sight, enough for John to—

His fingers had barely just clasped around his gun when another shout came from downstairs, but while the first time the voice hadn’t been exactly recognizable, now there was no doubt it was Sam—crying out in what sounded like terrible pain.

John flew down the stairs, jumping two steps at a time and almost crashing at the corner. Even in his room he’d been able to hear the commotion on the ground floor, Mrs Hudson’s voice rising in panic, calling both Sam’s and John’s names. Everything peaked in bright colours in front of John’s eyes, his heart pumping fear and adrenaline, only his gun cold and sharp, moulded into his palm.

He reached the downstairs landing and turn left to Mrs Hudson’s flat, then came to an abrupt halt.

At John’s feet, Sam was howling on the floor, while Mrs Hudson fretted over him, her gentle face distorted with anguish. There was a big, violent mess of a wound on Sam’s chest, under his left shoulder, just below the collarbone—it looked like something had burned through most of the jacket and the shirt, managing to reach the skin and burn some of it as well. At the familiar smell snapshots of visuals stacked up on top of each other in John’s brain within half a second. Burnt flesh, one of the few sense memories from Afghanistan he knew he’d never forget.

He dropped on his knees next to Sam’s prostrate form and tried to assess the damage. Sam’s face was red, eyes rolling in his head, neck straining. He seemed beside himself with pain, but the instant John ordered Mrs Hudson to call 999, his hand shot up, fingers clasping around John’s lower arm. With supreme effort Sam focused his eyes on John.

“No,” he moaned. “No—No ambulance.” He cried out again, his free hand flying up. John instantly reached out to stop it—he knew the instinct to press a hand where the pain was, but in this case it was going to mean agony and the danger of infection. But Sam battled his grip only to press his hand to his head.

“No—No,” he kept moaning loudly, palm pushing hard against his forehead. “Cas. I need Cas.”

“We need to get you to a hospital,” John said. He could hear himself, his voice terse but clear and
calm, at odds with the mess in his head. The field, he knew what to do there, like the trained soldier he was. This here? Amulets? Sulphur? Who had burnt Sam’s chest so viciously and why? And where had they disappeared? What was cas?

Meanwhile Sam was still writhing, fingers like vice around John’s wrist. “No hospital. You’ll have to…patch me up.”

He yelped, eyes fluttering shut. “Castiel…P-please!”

Mrs Hudson reappeared next to John with a cold washcloth, wiping Sam’s face.

“Is the ambulance coming?” he asked. “Stay with him, I’ll run up to take my bag—What?”

Mrs Hudson was making anxious noises, looking up at him from the ground with swimming eyes. “The ambulance’s not coming, John.”

“What? Why?”

“I didn’t call them.”

John frowned at her, incredulous. She shook her head and sniffed. Sam was panting heavily next to her, almost unconscious. John was sure one of the pants was ‘cas’.

“What is cas or…castiel, do you know?” he asked, then even before she’d shaken her head, he went on. “Never mind that. Let’s get an ambulance.”

“No, John.” Mrs Hudson got on her feet and grabbed his hand, her frail fingers suddenly digging hard. “If Sam says no hospital, we can’t take him there. He’ll explain later. Can’t you do something for him?”

John couldn’t believe his ears. “Mrs Hudson, he needs—The affected area is less than 1%, but we’re talking deep, partial thickness, second degree burns. He’s at risk of pulmonary failure from shock! I don’t know what’s going on, but I can’t treat him, not here, not alone.”

“Then take him somewhere private, John.”

He stared at her, his professional instincts at war with everything else that was happening. He didn’t understand any of it, and they were all going to sit down later and have a pretty serious chat, but right now he was going at it blind.

He looked down at Sam, who was whimpering, face twisted in pain, but whose eyes were struggling greatly to stay open and bore into his.

John took a breath and turned to Mrs Hudson. “Go get Katie or someone else. I need help to get him into a cab.”

“Where are you taking him?” Mrs Hudson asked already scuttling to the front door.

“Barts.”

***
His head was crammed to the seams with lead, heavy and choking him up with its taste on his tongue. The pain where the demon had burnt his protection was searing, but secondary to the lacerations in his mind. Barely lucid, he felt himself being dragged outside, bundled up into a car, each motion making agony flare up from the epicentre of the pain, until he couldn’t tell if it was the flesh wound or a burning imprint on his brain.

He only prayed for oblivion. He knew any help was far away, Dean, Dean, Dean—

John was shushing him, telling him he’d call Dean—No! He had to warn Dean, keep him away, Dean, keep Dean away, tell Dean—

John was talking to him. John couldn’t help, John wasn’t a hunter, John didn’t know. John was in danger! He tried warning him, but John shushed him again, calming him down, his blurred face the sole cool colour in the miasma of reds and oranges and purples. He clung to John’s voice and closed his lids, following the path of pure white light. It had a name, and he knew it; he didn’t know how he knew, but it ran through all the synapses of his brain, clear and bright—the only thing that brought hope. The thing that had repelled the demon trying to slam into him; stopped the possession in an explosion that both hurt indescribably and promised salvation.

Castiel.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: a few references to past physical, mental and psychological trauma.

A few visuals for this chapter can be found at my LJ [over here](#).

John had always been good at compartmentalizing.

It wasn’t something he could take credit for, inasmuch as it cost him no conscious effort. He just worked that way. It was a character predisposition that his experience in the medical profession and the army had further developed. He sometimes wondered whether it hadn’t even been one of the reasons to pursue careers in both fields. Few jobs out there required the ability to separate things to such an extent. Actually, it was more like isolating one layer from another, then operating in them one by one, the transition smooth enough to prevent your mind from veering off.

John could do just that, and he appreciated it. He never used to realize how useful this sort of thing was until he turned thirty and self-reflection entered a different level. John also suspected that his late awareness was connected to the fact that this particular ability was at odds with who he was in general—or rather, who he wasn’t. He didn’t have a cool, rational mind. His brain wasn’t organized, methodical, able to detach. On the contrary, he was intuitive and his emotions were inseparable from his decision-making or actions. Actually, John often acted without thinking, on occasion the driving forces behind the action completely obscured from his view. Even when afterwards he tried to figure out why on Earth he would do this or that, it wasn’t always clear.

Case in point. No, case in both points: John sitting outside a room in St. Bartholomew’s hospital, while his new flatmate was lying unconscious in a bed behind the door situated on John’s right hand-side. Point one—John had gone over each separate strand of the myriad running through his head in a perfect example of his ability to compartmentalize. Point two—Sam Winchester was the new flatmate with whom John had actively gone and formed a relationship, fully aware that something about the man might be majorly off.

In the last half hour John had again examined the incident that brought them here, trying to list all the details he remembered, analyze them, and deduce something. So far he could say only two things with certainty. One was that Sam had mental health issues—John was leaning toward paranoid schizophrenia—and two was that there had been a very scary, non-imaginary attack on Sam’s person leading to both physical injury and mental shut down. Everything else was a mystery. How had Sam’s attacker managed to burn him so badly and disappear without a trace? Why would anyone want to attack Sam in such a vicious way? John had noticed traces on the skin at the injured spot suggesting there used to be a tattoo there. The wound was too precisely focused to have been a coincidence, so the tattoo had to be the intended target. Was this the work of another person with a mental health illness? Why were that person and Sam left unsupervised? Was it possible that Sam was part of a cult? Perhaps he’d managed to escape, came to hide in London, but he was found, and this was a form of punishment? It was beyond far-fetched, but what other explanations were there:
that Sam was a patient who’d escaped from a mental health institution? What were the odds of another patient escaping, too, and coming after Sam?

Mrs Hudson’s part was also a mystery, and it bothered John a great deal. It also put the one spanner in his otherwise coherent theory that Sam had had some sort of psychotic episode triggered by heaven knew what obscure element from his traumatic past. But while Sam might have been bonkers, to put it in layman’s terms, John had known Mrs Hudson for years to be one of the sanest people in his acquaintance. She was not given to flights of fancy and she was unflappable where most would have run screaming. She had her idiosyncrasies, but peculiar displays of mental instability were not one of them. John went through his observations of her since he’d come back, and there wasn’t a single thing to suggest a deterioration of her mental or physical health—thank God. So if she’d acted out of character, it meant she knew something and trusted it enough to defy common sense. Plus, all speculations aside, there was one fact that was indisputable: both she and Sam knew each other better than they showed, and they shared some secrets.

And wasn’t that just great? Because who wouldn’t want to be excluded from something so big right under their nose, right? John had barely contained himself from shouting at Mrs Hudson, that’s how cross he was. He’d called her earlier to let her know he and Sam had made it safely to Barts, but that surprisingly Sam’s wound wasn’t responding to any treatment. Sam's brain scan had shown his brain was going haywire, so now he was having the full works done. John then tried to ask some questions, but Mrs Hudson told him it was best to wait for Sam to wake up and talk to John himself. John had pressed her and managed to extract a promise to provide Dean’s number if it came to that. He could hear she was still shaken and distraught, so he let her be. He was very worried about Sam, but as soon as Sam got better, words were going to be had between all three of them. John felt like an idiot for being kept in the dark all this time.

As soon as they’d got into the cab he’d wondered about calling Sam’s next of kin. In the hospital Sam’s phone had fallen into John’s hands and he had a legitimate reason to go through it. If anything it only added to the puzzle that was Sam Winchester. There were only three numbers in the address book: John’s, Mrs Hudson’s and Katie’s. (Earlier John had hesitated whether to call Katie, who’d been scared out of her wits when she’d seen Sam, frayed and whimpering on the floor. In spite of that, she’d helped John get him into the cab and even offered to go with them. John decided that the hour was too late for a call, so he sent her a quick text message from his own phone. The truth was that he didn’t want to talk to anyone.)

There was no clue as to how to get hold of Dean. No number, no text messages, and all call records were deleted. John had checked the folders for received files, photos, videos, anything, but they were all empty. It was like Dean didn’t exist.

Perhaps he didn’t. Mrs Hudson could have also been deceived about him being real. Sam was delirious in the cab. He’d stopped the whole cas thing—Was that some oil? Like castor oil? Why?—and Dean’s name had fallen from his lips in pants and sobs that were frantic, but a little heartbreaking too. Considering Sam’s mental health, it was quite realistic to consider that his brother was imaginary. The kind of connection that Sam had with Dean rarely existed in real life anyway, so it stood to good reason it was Sam’s brain that had created it.

John rolled his painfully tight shoulders and scrubbed over his face with his palms. He looked up to the lights on the hospital corridor ceiling, then down to the clinically illuminated floor. The ambience was quite depressing even without John’s diverse range of worries about Sam.

He was tense, and he had already moved through the other layer, the one that was full of memories associated with Barts. John had met Sherlock here; here, he had lost him. But there were also so
many instances between birth and death, such as Sherlock working here and being his caustic self or his amazing self; Sherlock being introduced to Jim Moriarty here, who’d turned up in another fake persona: ‘Jim from IT’, Molly’s new boyfriend who was actually gay and who left his number to Sherlock.

The last moments John and Sherlock spent together had been here, in a room he could go to in three minutes. Three minutes, and he’d walk into the same space but at a different point of time. The chair on which Sherlock had sat was probably still there.

John’s head lolled forward and drooped between his shoulders as if someone had cut the string that held it upright. He’d propped his elbows on his thighs and now watched his hands hang limply, fingers loosely entwined.

Right. Sam. Hardly anything was left from the tattoo, otherwise John could have tried to look it up on the internet, see if it symbolized something. At least he had that lead he could chase later, once Sam woke up. There was no way he wasn’t waking up. It didn’t matter how worrying and puzzling the results of that brain scan had returned, it did not matter—John was not losing another person in Barts, or he would set the bloody hospital on fire.

He straightened and sniffed, then kept his back straight looking in expectation to his left. Molly was supposed to bring more news.

Molly had been instrumental in Sam’s clandestine admission here. Just seeing her had required yet another separate layer for John to go through, because Molly didn’t mean Sherlock the way Mycroft did, but the combination between her and Barts came pretty close.

John suddenly realized that he was here, too; here, at Sherlock’s place of death, in his second home while he was still alive. Did John mean Sherlock as well? To others like Molly? He probably did. John thought that if spirits existed, now would be the time for Sherlock’s to show up, because John and Molly here in Barts...

He twitched in his seat, chin going abruptly to the left again, in vain hope that some sound would come from that direction. Where was Molly? What took her so long? What if there was something seriously wrong? Did she wonder who John’s new friend was and why John was so concerned about him?

Well, obviously compartmentalization only went so far.

John checked his mobile to see whether there were any calls or text messages. It was close to midnight—no wonder he was getting more scattered and losing the ground under his feet. The shock from earlier alone would have sufficed.

God, Mycroft. He’d seen Mycroft today too, opening the gates for Sherlock associations. Who’d have known they’d keep coming? It seemed like John’s meeting with Mycroft had been a week ago, but no—it was only this afternoon.

He frowned, an itch travelling under his skin. He couldn’t reach to it to scratch it, couldn’t chase it as it slithered quickly all over his body. He couldn’t even name it, he only knew that something was off. Too much was happening too quickly. The last time John had had that feeling, there’d been Sherlock and a maniac involved—and at the end they’d both been dead, right here.

He was probably reacting to some sort of mental overload. The whole day was one for the books.
Sam came into consciousness not with a start but with a gentle flutter—an appropriate association seeing that he instantly recognized the touch on his forehead. He’d never forgotten the relief that touch had brought in the past when it had reached to the wreck that had been Sam’s mind, and extinguished the excruciating pain from it by absorbing it. Actually ‘relief’ was a pretty inadequate word to describe the feeling. Sam’s mind had been close to shattering completely, Lucifer always there, taunting, singing, reminding him of their torturous years in his Cage, as if Sam’s memories hadn’t been vivid like black oil set on fire. Sam had really thought his mind would collapse and he would die. He certainly would have died. Then he’d been touched by an angel, and after months of agony Sam had felt weightless with the lack of it.

Now his eyelids lifted open and an unearthly face swam into view.

“Cas,” Sam said.

“Hello Sam.” Damn, it was good to hear Castiel’s low, flat voice. It was good to hear his own thoughts again.

Sam shifted slowly, then raised his head and scanned his surroundings. Hospital room, night time. He looked back to Castiel’s impassive form—he was standing next to Sam’s bed, completely still—then met his eyes. Castiel didn’t look worried, but there was something gentle in there. Sam moved to sit up, disturbing covers and bandages. He twisted his neck to look down at the place where his tattoo had been, going a bit cross-eyed. The skin was perfectly healthy, no traces of either wound or ink. Sam’s fingers went to it without thinking, his eyes returning to Cas’s.

“Thanks,” he said.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come at once,” Cas replied, the apology making him sound even graver. “I felt the attack, but I was…delayed.”

“You felt it?” Sam frowned. “How? I mean, I felt you in my head, the moment that demon tried to possess me, but I couldn’t think straight.”

Cas had pursed his lips in some indefinite emotion—he was still hard to read sometimes. Sam thought it seemed like regret.

“What happened, do you know?” he pressed. “Why couldn’t that demon possess me? He evaporated in a second, like something smoked him out.”

“Something did. It was me. Actually, it was my imprint on your mind.”

“You mean from when you did the transfer back then, with Lucifer?”

Cas looked up to the ceiling, his expression the kind he had when he had to explain complex things by putting them into simple language. Thankfully, on his child-like face the look never seemed condescending.

“The wall that Death had put in your mind to keep away your memories from the Cage—and that I later destroyed, for which I am still sorry—I didn’t rebuild it back then, but…Your mind was disintegrating, Sam, and when I took that pain into myself, it was like opening a portal between the
two of us. Once a portal is open, the transfer could go both ways. Your agony was transferred into me, but I must have left my imprint on the remnants of the wall, forging a connection between us. No demon can posses your mind..."

"Because it’s been touched by an angel," Sam finished. Wow.

Cas’s blue eyes shone kindly. “It seems that something good has come out of my terrible conduct.”

“Hey,” Sam said quickly. “Don’t worry about it. It was—You weren’t yourself back then.”

They looked at each other for a couple of seconds, then Cas finally shifted like a statue coming to life. “The more important question is why a demon wanted to posses you.”

Sam could feel himself animate too. “Yeah. I know! I was trying to think, but—Never mind. The demon knew what he was doing. Cas. It went for my ink—he knew where it was, and he had something in his hand, I don’t know what. He just slammed his hand in there and, um. Basically it burned through the skin.”

“Have you been hunting?”

“No, no. That’s the thing. I’ve kept really low. I haven’t worked a single job since you dropped me off here two months ago.” Sam could feel his jaw tense. “It doesn’t make sense.”

Cas made a few steps up and down along the bed, then turned to Sam again. “We have to tell Dean.”

“No!” Sam took a breath, then repeated calmly. “No.”

“Sam, this is not the time to be resentful. You are in danger and we don’t know why—”

“It’s not that,” Sam interrupted him. “It’s not because of…how Dean and I left things.”

“You and Dean didn’t ‘leave things’. You did. He’s been trying to contact you and you wouldn’t speak to him.”

“Well, I didn’t want to speak to him, but it’s not about that. Cas, think about it. Why would the demon want to wear me as his meat suit?”

It took Castiel a couple of seconds for the bulb to light up. “You think they want to use you to gain Dean’s trust.”

Sam spread his arms. “It’s got to be something like that, right? Why me otherwise? Where can I go or what can I do that could be of any use to them?”

“You could go to Kevin.”

Sam was shaking his head. “No. They would have tried that trick with Dean if it was that. I’m all the way over here and Dean is right there. Any progress on the demon tablet? Has Kevin managed to translate something solid?”

“Not as far as I know.”

“But he’s safe at Garth’s? Dean’s keeping an eye on him?”
“Yes.” If it wasn’t for the parting of his lips to say the words, Castiel could have successfully modelled for a still life painting.

“Okay,” Sam said. “There you go, then. The demons must have needed me, because they needed Dean.” He squashed his sigh before it was even born. “They’ll never stop using us against each other, Cas. They know the surest way to get to Dean is to get me.”

“We still need to warn your brother. A demon may try to use him as a vessel and I don’t know if my imprint would protect him the way it did you.”

Sam remembered the literal imprint of Castiel’s hand on Dean’s arm, when Cas had pulled him out of Hell. It was on his body, though, not on his mind.

Then another thought occurred to him and one that made him sit up in his bed, while talking. “Have you seen him lately? When did you last speak to him?”

“I was with your brother when I heard you or…felt you.”

“But you said it took you a while to get here,” Sam said, watching Cas carefully. Cas’s gaze jumped around the room, seemingly caged. “Yes,” he said, then shook his head, self-repentant. “But I have no recollection why.”

Sam ran his hands through his hair. “Okay. First things first. You have to go and make sure Dean’s okay. Just check on him and come back, all right? Don’t tell him anything!” He gazed at Cas with what he hoped was half-pleading, half-assertive eyes. He’d like to see anyone try to boss around an angel more successfully.

Cas nodded and flickered out of existence. Sam had barely had the chance to blink a few times into the empty spot in front of his eyes, when the familiar fluttering sound filled the air and Cas’s form was in the same spot again.

“He’s fine,” Cas said, then added, “Perhaps a bit startled by my sudden appearances and disappearances.” He looked sideways, face focused. “He’s calling me now. His language shows he is frustrated.”

“Okay, look.” Sam spread his hands to stop Castiel from going on. He didn’t need help imagining the language Dean was using. He could see his brother’s face in his mind’s eye and hear his voice, every word. “Cas, you need to keep an eye on him, all right? Don’t tell him anything!” He gazed at Cas with what he hoped was half-pleading, half-assertive eyes. He’d like to see anyone try to boss around an angel more successfully.

Cas nodded and flickered out of existence. Sam had barely had the chance to blink a few times into the empty spot in front of his eyes, when the familiar fluttering sound filled the air and Cas’s form was in the same spot again.

“I’m not comfortable lying to your brother.” There was no reproach in Cas’s even tone, but Sam could feel the hairs on his neck prickle.

“Cas,” Sam said, tone patient and imploring. “You know that if Dean finds out about all this, he’d want you to bring him here. For all we know, this is exactly their plan. I don’t know who’s behind it, but I won’t be surprised if Crowley’s getting desperate to get his hands on Kevin and the demon tablet. Even if their plan to posses me failed, think about it—if both Dean and I are here, it leaves Kevin unprotected. Garth—He means well, but he isn’t the most experienced hunter out there. No one’s better than Dean, you know that. He has to stay put.”

“You should have thought about that before running away.” Sometimes Castiel’s voice dropped so
much, it was like he talked directly through your skin. Sam avoided his eyes.

“I had to come here, because Mrs Hudson needed—” Sam’s eyes widened. He stared at Cas. “John.” He’d forgotten about John. The demon attack, Castiel, talking about the tablets and Dean—Sam had been transported into his world, and had completely switched off the current one he was in.

“John?” Cas frowned.

“Yes, my new roommate. He’s the best friend of the ghost I came to—They lived together and now I live there with John.”

Cas was still frowning. Sam felt like he’d said too much, like he’d accidentally posted his inner most private thoughts as his Facebook status. He was being a moron, because there was nothing private in what he’d said. And he’d just found out he had a permanent Cas imprint on his mind, so this was really not the time to be bashful.

Oh God. Did that mean that Cas could hear him all the time? All his thoughts? Or maybe even feel stuff that Sam wasn’t aware of himself?

Something must have shown on his face, because Cas tilted his head sideways in that unique way of his, as if he was trying to see something with added thirty degrees to the angle.

“What is it, Sam?”

If you needed answers, then you had to ask the questions.

“Cas, was this the first time that you could…feel me?”

Cas’s eyes grew intense. Great, it was as if Sam had told him to go into his mind, not stay out.

Cas straightened up. “Yes,” he said. “You worry that I’m able to perceive your thoughts. I’m not. Even if I were able, I wouldn’t do it.”

“No, of course not,” Sam muttered. “Um, sorry.” He took a breath. “Right. John. I need to figure out what to do about him.”

“Does he know you’re a hunter?”

“No.”

Cas’s lips moved for a few seconds, until he finally decided to speak. “You have a tendency to keep secrets, Sam. It seems to be a specific trait of yours, although my frame of reference with humans is so small, it’s completely ignorable. My own experience shows that keeping secrets isn’t very wise. But again, I don’t understand how the human mind works.”

Sam’s smile was one-sided and bitter, but not biting. “You probably understand it better than most of us.”

They remained silent for a moment, Cas obviously waiting for him. Sam’s feet touched the ground and he pushed himself upward, then cast a glance down at his body, clad in a hospital gown. He hoped it wasn’t one of those where your butt was showing at the back. He wasn’t going to check in front of Cas, though.
Okay, time to go home.

“Cas, can you do something for me? Can you, I don’t know—wipe the minds of the doctors in the hospital? Everyone who might have seen the wound or any scans, x-rays, you know. Or at least any record of me here?”

Cas nodded. “I’ll do that.” Sam got the feeling that Cas was about to disappear abruptly, but he remained in his place. “Would you like me to do it with your new friend as well?”

Sam remembered John’s pale, focused face, the hardness and alarm in his kind eyes, then there was a taste of whiskey on Sam’s tongue, and John’s, “Cheers,” softly sounded in his ears as if John had said it right next to him.

“No, that’s okay,” Sam said. “I’ll speak to him.”

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John was just about to get up and start pacing up and down the corridor, when there was finally a sound breaking the monotonous, eerie quiet. It didn’t come from the far door on the left, however, from which John had expected Molly’s return. He turned his head to the right and a second later, he was on his feet facing Sam, who was looking perfectly well, cheeks rosy and—

Not a trace of a wound on his chest.

John could feel his own features pull taut in stunned disbelief, as his fingers went to the spot where only a few hours ago there’d been a messy, raw, four inch in diameter flesh wound; the blistered flesh the result of a severe burn. He tugged at the hospital clothing, then ran his fingers over a smooth, warm patch of completely healthy skin, the muscle underneath firm and reacting to his touch with a twitch.

Sam’s eyes were waiting for him. John was lucky his hadn’t fallen out of their sockets before making the journey up to Sam’s face.

“I know this will sound crazy,” Sam said, and through his daze John registered the swooping relief to hear him speak again, “but you’ve got the evidence in front of your own eyes. What you saw back in the flat—it was a demon attack. A demon tried to posses me by burning off my protection tattoo. Something happened—I’ll explain later—and he couldn’t. And now I was healed by an angel. Castiel.”

Some time later Sam spoke again, voice slightly worried. “John? You okay?”

John cleared his throat. He couldn’t feel his extremities. “I—” He tried the throat one more time. “I’m fine.”

He looked at the flawless skin again. His mind kept going over what Sam had said, but it was completely impervious to its meaning. John tried in vain to really comprehend Sam’s words, somehow push them through if only to tear them apart and reject them, but it was as if there was the Great Wall of China in his head. He was running through every possible medical explanation for what he was seeing and what he’d felt under his fingers, but there was none.

None but the obvious one: that he was dreaming. It was worrying how uncannily realistic the dream
was, full of sensory gravitas, and there was an incredible amount of details, all accurate to the last one—well, aside from the whole healed by an angel wound. The continuity was perfect too.

He was at a loss how to proceed. Sam’s eyes had turned rounder, filling with understanding. He took John’s left hand, placing the palm on the same spot that John had examined. His lips pressed together in something that looked almost like commiseration.

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” he said. “But feel this again. It’s real. What I’m telling you is real. It’s the truth.”

John had to focus, but yes—he could just about feel Sam’s heart, beating inches away below his own hand. It was barely there, but enough for John to know that if he was able to feel that, it meant the heart in Sam’s chest was far from calm. And that suddenly felt more real than any element of their surroundings, or anything Sam had said.

A sound to the right made John start and snatch his hand away, then shove Sam back into the room.

“In,” he hissed. “Stay there.” He shut the door in Sam’s confused face, then turned on his feet and shook himself into mental composure. Regardless of whether what Sam was saying was true or whether it was the product of a delusional mind, it was not safe for anyone to hear him talk about any of this. Or worse, see his miraculously healed wound.

John had been right to act so quickly—a second later Molly appeared into view carrying what was probably Sam’s x-ray. John watched the way her ponytail slightly trembled, but never really swished or bounced. Molly’s face was drawn and her eyes wider even than before, when she’d first seen Sam. John should find a way to thank her, properly. He hadn’t spoken to her in something like five or six months. The last time they’d met was when she had dropped off George to where he was supposed to meet John for a pint. George was George Parish, another pathologist whom John considered a mate. They’d got on from the start, and it helped that George hadn’t just tolerated Sherlock’s condescending attitude and impatient demands, but had even had the sense to admire him. John would have called George tonight, if he was in London, but he’d gone to Australia to spend two months with his girlfriend—they had a long-distance thing going on. So Molly was very kind to help John, after he’d called her out of the blue.

She’d always been kind. John was able to see it now, with the help of distance. Her hopeless crush on Sherlock had only enhanced what had already been there—a friendly, generous character.

Her nose almost twitched with anxiousness as she turned to him. “Any change?” she asked.

“Ah…No,” John said, then scratched his eyebrow, looking away. “Anything new?”

“Well, um, that’s the—There’s something. The doctors don’t know what to think. I thought you should see it.” Molly was already pulling out the x-ray. “It should be visible even here. I—I was in a hurry to show it to you. They think someone has tampered with the equipment…”

Molly’s small, girl-like voice was easily drowned by the noise in John’s head as he reached out for the x-ray. He didn’t know what he was going to see, but he already had a bad feeling about it.

He turned his back to Molly choosing to lift the x-ray to the light overhead behind him.

She was right, he could see it easily even against this light. Sam’s ribs, frontal—and the engraved writing along every single one of them. Strange symbols that meant nothing—
And how could they mean anything? How, when their presence in a living body was impossible, impossible. It could not be explained by anything known to man.

John kept staring, his head tilted upward and his eyes unseeing. He was grateful that he’d chosen to turn around so Molly couldn’t read his face. He had to think quickly. Get Sam out of here now, then he’d figure out what to tell Molly.

“What do you think?” she said quietly behind him. John lowered the x-ray, turning to her. “Looks like someone’s silly practical joke to me,” he said, trying to stretch his lips into a small smile. “I should keep it as a souvenir for Sam.”

Her lips twitched in a futile attempt at assertiveness. “I, um, I have to take it back, actually,” she stammered lightly. “It’s been hard already with questions about who the patient is…” She looked at John’s hand. He hesitated then handed her the x-ray. He really didn’t want to, but the least he could do was avoid causing Molly more trouble than he might already have.

“Ta,” she said, visibly grateful. “They want to do another one. But someone’s coming to look at the equipment first.”

“Um, good,” John said. “Fine. Hopefully Sam will be awake by then.”

She nodded, eyes going to Sam’s door. John tensed, already imagining having to block her from going in there. But Molly’s eyes returned to him. Her upper lip curled inward giving her a nervous air. John was busy wishing her gone and planning possible exit routes. At least Sam could walk fine now. Something told John he was probably good with stealthy sneaking.

“I didn’t ask before,” Molly said, big brown eyes resting on John without pinning him. “I wanted to ask—Um, how have you been?”

John was so entangled in his thoughts, that he was momentarily taken aback by what she meant.

Then he caught up.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Thanks. Erm…you?”

She nodded a few times. “Fine, thanks. You know, little old me—happy with my cadavers, same old, same old.” She laughed shortly, obviously embarrassed by her attempt at a joke. John remembered that Molly spent half her time around Sherlock embarrassed, but at least John had figured out even back then that she was just shy in general.

He smiled at her kindly. She smiled back, then looked behind her shoulder in the direction from which she’d come. “I’d better take this back,” she said.

“Thanks, Molly.” John had no idea how he would explain to her why they’d left without checking out. She could really get into trouble. He might even have to call Mycroft…

He realized Molly had stopped in her tracks and was now half-turned to him again. Her eyes met his, then jumped away. She cleared her throat and managed to look back at him properly, her face suddenly dropping.

“Do you still miss him?” she asked.
John drew his next breath very carefully, taking his time. “Yes,” he said. "I do."
Sam tried to eavesdrop on the conversation in the corridor for a few seconds, but those two were freaking quiet. He assumed it was the same girl he’d caught a glimpse of in his semi-lucid state earlier, the one John must have called and who’d helped them in. Obviously someone John trusted, and it didn’t sound like she was possessed, which was all Sam cared about right now. Whatever she was telling John was moot anyway. John already knew the truth and in a few moments the young doctor lady was going to be none the wiser about the very existence of Sam Winchester, thanks to a heavenly intervention. Sam only hoped Cas wouldn’t take long.

Meeting a real angel would have helped a whole lot to convince John that Sam wasn’t crazy. Sam thought they were half way there—John had shoved him back into the room after he’d heard steps in the distance, which had to mean his instinct was to keep Sam safe and give him the benefit of the doubt.

Sam tried to remember how long it had been since he’d spoken plainly about the whole deal with demons and angels, and the supernatural thing. Of course he and Dean had to drop the bomb on people all the time when they were on the job—Charlie Bradbury came to mind. But that was different. It was out of necessity rather than making the choice to confide in someone you shared something with already: love, friendship—living space. This here was a peculiar situation. Sam kind of had to tell John, because too much was happening to be explained with lies. Yet he also didn’t have to; he could have just disappeared, right? Could still do it, ask Castiel to wipe clean the minds of both John and Mrs Hudson, then get Sam the hell out of here. Even if Mycroft Holmes had lied about taking care of Sherlock’s ghost, it had been too long without a single sighting. That job was done, like 99%, there was no point in kidding himself. Sam’s presence at 221B sure meant more danger to John than that one percent, especially now that Sam’s cover had gone bust.

Yet who could possibly want him possessed, and why? Like Sam told Cas, it had to have something to do with getting their stinking paws on Dean. If this was about Kevin and the tablet, the demons would have skipped Sam and gone directly to Dean, tried to burn through his ink—Sam didn’t even want to imagine them succeeding. How weird that he, Sam, should be the one to have the mental bond with Cas that had probably saved his life. (He had no illusions whether the demons would have let him live after he’d done their dirty job.) He’d always known that out of the two of them, Dean was the Winchester who shared a deeper connection with Castiel. It was the case from the very beginning, but that year in Purgatory must have cemented their bond for good.

Cas would look after Dean well. It took supreme effort for Sam to ignore the ingrained distrust he felt at the thought of anyone other than him having Dean’s back, but he had to believe Dean was better off with Cas right now. Sam’s whole being was an entangled, irrational cant of his brother’s name. Asking Castiel to protect Dean was the voice Sam chose to listen to. Because underneath the logic that an angel had a better chance of saving Dean’s ass, Sam couldn’t coax a crystal clear reason out of himself as to why he didn’t just drop everything and go back to Dean. It kept going back to Dean’s protection in a loop—his brother could be reckless, especially if he thought Sam was in danger, so until Sam had figured out what exactly was going on, it was best to keep Dean in the dark, safe. But was it really safer that way? If Dean knew something was up, he’d be prepared.
Sam pushed his hair away from his face, stretched a few times and took a deep breath, then wrinkled his nose in disgust—hospital air, not the finest fragrance in the world. He’d hated it since very little. Dad never compromised when it came to their health and always took them to a hospital, no matter how risky it might have been at the time.

Right, back to the present. He’d just have to face the music about the whole thing with Dean. It wasn’t like Sam could work out who and why had tried to slam into him right now, so he might as well tackle something he could. And whether he liked it or not, when an incident like that happened, he and Dean were always, always in it together, so it was the smart thing to pull his head out of his ass and be honest with himself.

Man, Dean was wrong teasing Sam about wanting to ‘feel their feelings’ all the time. Sam didn’t enjoy it at all, but nine times out of ten it had to be done. His brother was a damn hypocrite anyways, because he was chock-full of the stuff, while he was busy acting like some tough guy. Sam didn’t think he knew many people who felt things more keenly, more intensely than his brother. Like beneath all his layers of clothing, you suddenly got straight to Dean’s heart—no skin or tissue to protect it, nothing. Sam would have done anything to protect it, but trouble was, he was often the thing that left that heart bleed raw.

Lately, he’d shied away from thinking about their relationship, but now he was forced to do it. And he admitted to himself right away that if things between them were different, there wouldn’t have been anything more natural than letting Dean know, so the two of them could figure this out together. Sam couldn’t ask for a better partner. Dean wasn’t just his brother, and the one with whom Sam worked so smoothly it was as if he worked with a part of himself; he was a damn good hunter, the best.

Sam didn’t know exactly when in the last few months the tables had turned, but now he definitely felt discomfort when he wondered what kind of reception he’d get if he called Dean. He was still pissed at him and it still hurt, but evidently Sam would never, ever stop being ‘Sammy’: looking up to his big brother, eager for his approval and affection—never Dad’s, always Dean’s—with his metaphorical little chest contracting anxiously about whether he hadn’t done something stupid or let Dean down. It was a conscious effort to remind himself that Dean had been a dick, using Amelia to send Sam away on a wild goose chase. He’d relied on Sam’s worst fears, because that other dick Holmes had been right—everyone Sam had ever cared about died a horrible death; everyone connected to him—he brought death. Dean knew that about him, but he’d still done it, and for what? To protect a vampire, a friend; someone Dean evidently cared about enough to do that to his own brother. The other side of the coin of their unhealthy relationship was that at least until recently Sam had known he always came first, no matter what...

Okay, maybe this was a whole lot more about Benny than about Amelia. Everything was such a mess and Sam just didn’t want to go back home, because it meant he had to wade in into it. Even thinking about it unsettled him. What if his stubborn refusal to speak to Dean had been the final straw, and Dean now drove around in the Impala with Benny riding shotgun? Or maybe Dean had really wanted to apologize. Maybe he’d have chosen Sam over Benny, if Sam had at least asked him? But what if now, after months of stewing, Dean had turned the final corner and really didn’t want to have anything to do with Sam? Turned bitter, while he’d gone over all the ways in which Sam hadn’t been the brother Dean expected…

Sam kept walking up and down the small hospital room, feeling restless like he hadn’t for ages; almost like he was when he was hopped up on demon blood. Or actually when he wasn’t—when he was craving it. Damn it, Castiel, come on! Sam knew only a couple of minutes had passed since John had pushed him back into the room, but it felt like an eternity.
Remembering that John was here brought him from boiling point down to simmer. John was so…
grounding; probably the reason why Sam had confided in him. It was hard to say why exactly. Sam
had done it on instinct and it felt right. He wasn’t ready to pack it and say goodbye. It would have
been damn hard to pack it and never say goodbye. Whatever was going on, John had become more
than Sherlock’s ex-flatmate or even Sam’s current flatmate. Making a new friend had something to
do with Sam’s reluctance to go back home. Even if said friend was clearly using Sam as substitution
for his own dead best friend. Sam could live with that. Actually, he would have probably freaked out
if there wasn’t something weird in their relationship. He suspected he had long lost any skills to have
a ‘normal’ relationship.

The door opened and made him tense up in anticipation, glad to have something finally put a stop to
his thoughts. He wondered if John realized how furtive his face was as he came in, shutting the door
behind himself quietly.

They looked at each other in silence for a couple of seconds, obviously unsure on what page the
other was. John spoke first.

“We need to leave as soon as possible. Molly just showed me the x-ray of your chest. There were…
squiggles on your ribs.”

Sam nodded. “Sigils,” he clarified. He could instantly feel his mind rein itself in, calm down and
focus. “Enochian sigils—that’s angel writing. Hides me from them.”


“Because they’re not as friendly as popular mythology might lead you to believe.” Once they got
home, hopefully safe and soon, there was going to have to be an introduction to the supernatural in
some form or other, all the more that John was clearly the kind that wanted to dot the i’s and cross the
t’s.

“How did this angel find you, then?” he asked promptly.

“I prayed to him,” Sam replied, relief spreading through him. If John was asking questions, sensible
ones at that, it meant he had already believed him. “Plus it looks like he and I have some sort of a…
mental bond,” Sam added.

“Okay.” John said. His arms were close to his body in an almost military fashion; Sam noticed his
fingers were moving as if he was testing whether they could. Which for John meant ‘mental stress
but in control’. He now looked around. “Is he here?” he asked. “I mean…Cas. Is he invisible?”

“No,” Sam said, then corrected himself. “He can be invisible, but he isn’t now. He’s going around
the hospital erasing all records of us being here. Like wiping the minds of everyone who saw us
here.”

John’s eyebrows rose. “That’s quite handy.”

“Yeah.” Sam had to agree whole-heartedly.

“Won’t people, I don’t know…panic? I mean it’s an angel, so what—wings?”

“No, no wings. At least you can’t see them.” Sam was beginning to wish they were already home, so
he could start from the beginning. It would be kind of awesome actually, to finally be able to tell someone properly, details and all; to be able to tell John about it, someone Sam lived with. He hadn’t lived with many people in his life, but it sucked that he’d only been able to share what he did with those who were also hunters. Well, it had been his choice, really, not to tell Jess or Amelia, but now he was dying to tell John.

Of course there was the problem of Sam’s actual job at 221B, but he wasn’t going to think about that now.

Meanwhile John was clearly hanging onto his every word, if his unblinking stare in expectation was anything to go by. Sam elaborated on the current topic of the appearances of angels.

“Angels use humans to go around,” he said. “They’re called ‘vessels’. An angel has to have your permission to have you as his vessel, so that’s a better deal than what you have with demons. Anyways, Castiel looks like a normal dude.” Sam reconsidered quickly. “Well, he’s more like—He’s strange. You’ll see what I mean. But definitely human. He looks like a door to door salesman, but a bit raggedy.” Sam recalled his very limited experience with door to door salesmen. “And definitely not pushy or a sleazy,” he added. “Blue eyes, wears a trench coat. Stares at you sometimes.”

John was still keeping it together quite impressively; only his glazed eyes gave out what a load his brain was processing.

“So now what?” he asked. “Do we wait for him? Or can we take off? Because Molly said they wanted to run more tests—”

“No, man, we’re out of here. Cas should be back any second and he’ll…” Sam found himself searching for the right word, but there just wasn’t one. “He can transport people from one place to another in like a second,” he said, then his eyes finally left John’s face to look at the floor by his right. “That’s how I got here. In London, I mean. He brought me here. I couldn’t get through customs with my guns and all my hunter things.”

John blinked a couple of times, then scrubbed his palms over his face. When he emerged from underneath them, he was shaking his head. “You and I,” he said, pointing at Sam at the ‘you’ part, “are going to sit down and have a conversation about some things. All right?”

Sam nodded vigorously, putting on an obedient expression. “Sure. Yeah.” He hesitated, but what the hell. “I’m kind of looking forward to that,” he confessed.

It wasn’t clear what John’s reply would have been, because in that instant Cas popped into existence right behind him. John followed Sam’s eyes—or maybe the sound—and turned on his spot, coming almost nose to nose with Cas.

“Jesus Christ!” he breathed out with a start.

Castiel frowned lightly. “I’m not him,” he said, not stepping back. “He had a beard and longer hair. My clothing is also contemporary.”

Time to intervene. “No,” Sam said quickly. “That’s…that thing, when people exclaim ‘God!’ or ‘Jesus!’ You know?”

Cas looked to him over John's shoulder. “It was hard to discern from his tone of voice,” he said.
Sam's lips twitched; his eyes averted to his side, habitually seeking to meet Dean’s, but his gaze dropped to his feet mid-flight like a bird with broken wings.

Meanwhile John was goggling at Cas, before some of the lines on his face smoothed out.

“You’re Cas,” he said retreating slightly and looking at Sam who gave a nod in confirmation.

“I believe the use of the short version of a name is appropriate only when there’s a level of familiarity,” Cas replied. “You and I are not acquainted.”

John blinked at him, further dazed, but then straightened himself up. Sam half expected him to salute.

“John,” he said. “I’m Doctor John Watson.”

“Castiel,” Cas said. "I'm an angel of the Lord.” The expression was Castiel's serious, pleased one; the one he had when he did human rituals, and thought he did them appropriately.

“Erm…Nice to meet you,” John said.

“Nice to meet you too.” Cas turned to Sam. “Now we have all been introduced, I suggest that we leave this place immediately.”

Sam nodded while taking a couple of steps forward, placing himself within Cas’s reach. The last thing he saw before they materialized in the familiar surroundings of Baker Street’s living room was John’s disoriented face, lips still parted as he stared at Castiel.

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John didn’t know what he’d expected from travel that was instantaneous; mostly because he hadn’t even been aware the bloody thing existed until five minutes before it happened to him. But aside from the momentary feeling that the ground was on the ceiling and that his own head was where his feet should have been, he had to say that it was just…


He didn’t know how long he’d need to get his head around the implications of getting from one point to another like that. There was the vaster and much more complex matter of the method of transportation: namely angels. One of which stood like a slightly shabby piece of rock in the middle of John’s own living room. Sam had immediately rushed down to Mrs Hudson’s to make sure she was safe for the night.

Castiel was looking around the living room with interest that was very different from the kinds other visitors showed when they turned up at Baker Street. Such as Mycroft, who John was convinced saw the Matrix, or some of Sherlock’s clients who would start at the more morbid displays of Sherlock’s ideas of interior design. But Castiel’s cobalt blue eyes were calm and lit up with vague curiosity, the kind that ramblers in the woods felt when they came across a beehive or an ants’ hill.

“This place reminds me of Bobby Singer’s house,” he said with his back to John. “But it’s more modern and…clean.”

John thought it would be good to know who that was, but he found his tongue was too big for his mouth. He looked around helplessly, ignoring the pins and needles along his spinal cord.
Then a thought came to the rescue.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” he offered, then realized it came across more like he was wondering aloud rather than actually asking. He coughed. “Or any drink? Erm, do you drink at all or…” His lips remained rounded on the ‘or’ while he tried to finish his sentence.

Castiel faced him. “My vessel doesn’t need food or drink,” he said, “but I understand it is customary to accept a beverage when it’s offered in good faith.” His voice was soft yet really deep, like gravel being walked over. “I would like a cup of coffee,” he finished with a polite nod.

“Ohkay,” John said. “Good. I’ll, ah…Have a seat?”

“I prefer to remain standing.”

John opened his mouth, then shut it again just in time to prevent himself from giving a verbal permission to an angel to stand upright. His arms were spread a bit; he used a hand to point at the kitchen, and hurried past Castiel to make the coffee. It felt strange to even think about coffee at one o’clock at night.

Yes, because other than that everything else about this situation was completely normal.

He busied himself with Sam’s coffee machine, feeling Castiel’s gaze from under the kitchen portal. John looked back at him over his shoulder.

“How long have you known Sam?” he asked, in part because he wanted to know, in part because this was weird.

“It’s difficult to say,” Castiel replied. John wondered if his voice ever carried much emotion. “Sam spent some time in Hell, in Lucifer’s Cage, and time runs differently there. But if we count from your vantage point it would be around five years.”

John stopped half-way through reaching for a cup. “Five years?” He didn’t know why he was so surprised. “That’s a lot of time.”

“For you, yes. For me, it’s the equivalent of a second.”

John frowned, hand continuing its journey for the cup retrieval. “So why did you help him? If I’ve literally just met someone—”

“It doesn’t—” Castiel stopped and looked up, clearly trying to formulate his response better. “Angels don’t have the same perception of time as humans,” he said. “The five years I’ve known Sam are nothing, because I’ve lived for thousands of years. But the bond we’ve built throughout those five years cannot be quantified.”

John tried to comprehend all this, failed on the whole ‘living for thousands of years’ thing, and settled for understanding what Castiel meant about the rest. He passed him the coffee, then took the milk out of the fridge and put it next to the sugar bowl, pointing to both in an invitation to his unique guest to help himself. Castiel remained in place, however, fingers clasped around the handle, holding the cup close to his body.

John leaned back against the kitchen counter crossing his arms over his chest. The smell of coffee
seemed to have stirred his brain a bit. “Do you know why Sam was attacked?” he asked.

“No.”

John waited for Castiel to continue, but he just went on looking around the kitchen.

“Is Sam in danger?” John persisted. “I mean, is this sort of thing normal?”

Castiel’s gaze returned on him. “Demon attacks are common, but not to Sam and Dean. This is highly unusual.”

“Right.” John digested that bit of information. His mind was trying to fan out in about thirty different directions.

“So Dean is real,” he said, because that seemed the most comprehensible.

Something akin to confusion appeared on Castiel’s face. “Dean Winchester is real. Why would you ask?”

“Erm, I don’t know,” John said, feeling chastised, quite appropriately. “It was something I was wondering about earlier. You know, when I thought Sam was—Never mind.” Change of topic. “Is there anything I could do to help?” he asked, feeling ridiculous even voicing it out aloud. Like he could do much compared to what he’d just witnessed. He still had to offer, though—he didn’t know much about the shades of grey here, but between demons and angels, it was pretty clear which side he should be on. That aside from the fact that a demon had maimed his flatmate and basically tried to kill him. John could catch up on the shades later—at least he felt he knew Sam.

It dawned at him he still might need to fix sounding so presumptuous, though, despite that Castiel didn’t look offended at all. He was now watching him with benevolent interest.

“I meant if there was anything I could do to help Sam,” John told him. “I can’t imagine you’d need my help. Actually, do you need my help? Can you help him?”

Castiel sighed and put his cup on the table, taking a couple of steps closer to John. John tensed up involuntarily, but tried not to show it. The blue eyes met his and John was taken aback to finally find emotion in them. Regret perhaps?

“I don’t know what’s going on right now,” Castiel said. “And I’m in a difficult situation myself.” Suddenly, he looked very human. “But I’ll always help Sam and Dean Winchester if I can.”


“They are my friends,” Castiel said. “We have been through a lot together.”

The sound of Sam’s steps echoed through the house as he obviously ran up the stairs; in a second he was in the kitchen.

“Mrs Hudson’s fine,” he said, barely even panting. “And she’s safe for the night. I’ll give downstairs a proper sweep tomorrow. I need to work out how that demon managed to get inside the house. There are traps everywhere.” The last was directed at Castiel, who turned to face Sam at close proximity.
“I need to go,” he said. “I must check on your brother.” He hesitated, then looked up at Sam, eyes turning uncertain and almost imploring. “Sam, I still think we should tell him about the attack.”

“No,” Sam said with conviction, then his face mirrored Castiel’s. “Let’s figure this out first, all right? Tell you what, tell Dean you’ve heard rumours that Crowley’s planning something—that should put him on the alert.” Sam paused. “Just—Keep Kevin safe, okay?” he said. “And watch out for my brother.”

“I am always watching out for your brother.” The reply was delivered flatly, but John had no doubt Sam read much into it.

“Yeah,” he responded, barely audible. “I know.”

John could feel his own eyeballs itch from keeping them fixed on Castiel, but he wasn’t going to risk blinking right now and missing Castiel’s dematerializing in thin air.

“I’ll be in touch,” Castiel said, obviously parting. He made a tiny, almost imperceptible motion; John held his breath…

“Cas, wait!” Sam’s voice cut through the air and made John start.

Castiel remained in his place, watching Sam in unhurried expectation.

“How is he?” Sam asked quietly.

Castiel’s gaze was much more intense in its search of Sam’s face than it had been when he’d examined his surroundings or John. “He’s hunting,” he said in a beat. “I believe he misses you.”

Sam’s face told John that his hopes to capture the finer things in life with words were still just hopes. Longing, sadness, reticence—these were just a few words showing the tip of the iceberg for what was happening in Sam.

And while John was busy watching Sam, Castiel had disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to the wonderful enname for the beta!
“Satan,” John said, feeling his eyebrows aim for the skies. “You actually managed to take control over Satan. Who was possessing your body.” He dropped against the sofa backrest, glad for the cushion there.

They were both sitting on the sofa, drinks in hand and empty plates with crumbs on the coffee table in front of them. Earlier Sam had tried to mumble something about whether John had wanted to get some rest, but in lieu of an answer John just walked straight past him to the kitchen and made the sandwiches. They’d wolfed them down, food making their cheeks bulge from time to time when they were in too much hurry to talk to wait to swallow.

Sam was now hunched forward, playing with the label on his beer bottle. “Yeah,” he answered John’s statement of awed disbelief. John wasn’t sure whether the answer was so short because Sam didn’t want to boast, or because the memory was too painful.

“Did you manage to exorcise him?” he asked.

“No, you can exorcise only demons, and you can’t do it for yourself anyway—someone else has to exorcise the demon out of you. Lucifer was an archangel, remember? A fallen angel but still an angel.”

It was the second time Sam had referred to that. Funny how while John’s mind was evidently happy to come on board with the idea of literal Heaven and Hell, not to mention the whole lot of supernatural stuff in-between, it stumbled over remembering that the Devil had once been one of the good guys.

Although judging from what Sam had told him about angels and heaven so far, it was quite a stretch to call any of it ‘good’. At least not according to the way John’s concept—the popular concept—was built. John had pondered these matters in his own time, most recently with Sherlock’s death. Now that they suddenly ceased to be abstract theological arguments and became real things that happened to real people—had happened to the person sitting next to him—John felt like his mind was a loft room trying to accommodate a massive Victorian three-piece wardrobe.

Maybe he just needed to expand it. It was his mind, not an actual room.

God, he felt strange. He was alert, yet sort of removed from himself—probably his psyche’s coping mechanism. It was going to four o’clock in the morning after a frankly insane day, but he had no intention of stopping now, even if it meant rolling sideways, comatose. He had his cushion.

“How did you get rid of him then?” he asked Sam. How did one get rid of the devil inside? That was a good one.

“I didn’t,” Sam said quietly. “I jumped in the Cage taking him with me. And Michael,” he added in a beat with a little nod, as if he was confirming he’d have chips with his burger, thanks. Maybe Sam’s experiences had made him so formidable in the way he had this calm, matter-of-fact perspective. Or
maybe he had already been someone extraordinary, and that was why these things had happened to him, not any Tom, Dick and Harry.

“And you stopped the Apocalypse,” John said to make sure, but mostly because he didn’t know how to comment adequately on such an unprecedented act of courage.

“Yeah. Everyone kept telling us we couldn’t stop it, but we did.”

“You did, you mean.”

“No,” Sam said. “We did. If it wasn’t for Dean…” He trailed off, then started again. “He showed up at the graveyard where the prize fight between Lucifer and Michael was about to happen. Lucifer was already riding my ass. And because Dean hadn’t said ‘yes’ to Michael, he’d gotten to our kid half-brother, Adam.”

John felt sorry for the poor boy. He would have liked to see anyone try and say ‘no’ to the archangel Michael.

“Anyways,” Sam continued, tiny cracks of tension breaking the smooth surface of his voice, “Dean was supposed to stay away. No one should have even known where the fight was happening. But he found out and he drove in, in the Impala.” Sam looked at John over his right shoulder. “And if he hadn’t, I don’t think I would have managed to get hold of Lucifer. I still don’t know how I got him.” He leaned back at last, bottle in hand—there was one last sip at the bottom. “It was the Devil, man. He wasn’t just wearing me—I was squashed somewhere in there like nothing. I was helpless like a baby.”

“What happened?” John asked, voice dropping on its own volition.

“Lucifer went crazy. He used Dean as his punch bag. He was beating him so bad—I was punching him for like—Lucifer was furious, he was going to kill Dean. And all Dean kept doing was talk to me. He was just…there.” Sam swallowed. “I couldn’t—I was watching my own fists punch his face, this disfigured…thing, there was blood everywhere, and I was yelling inside but I couldn’t hear my own voice. I think I was pretty gone at that point.”

Sam paused. His hazel eyes lost focus and turned almost emerald under the slanted light from the lamp by the window.

“And then I don’t know what happened,” he said. “But suddenly all I could hear and see was Dean; not Lucifer, not myself. Just Dean. And this…force filled me up to the brim, you know.” Sam raised his eyebrows lightly, evidently still rather awed himself. “I could do anything, I was so powerful. So I just grabbed Lucifer by the balls.”

John remained silent, catching his metaphorical breath. “And that was when you jumped in the Cage,” he said. “Taking Lucifer with you.”

“Yeah.”

“Right.” John mulled that over. “Is he still in the Cage? Lucifer, I mean?”

“Yeah.” Sam’s forehead acquired its typical expressive wrinkles. “Both him and Michael.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” John said, only half in jest.
Sam just smiled. They drank in unison, then John got up and brought Sam another beer. He waited for him to take a swig, before asking: “How did you get out of the Cage?”

John thought he’d heard it all, but it turned out he really hadn’t, because now he was listening about Sam being brought back soulless, walking around without his actual soul, then finally getting it put back in place by—

“Death,” John said, suitably deadpan, because come on! “Death, capital ‘D’, put your soul back in.”

“With a wall in there, to protect me from my memories,” Sam clarified, as if that was the bit John needed to suddenly take the whole thing into his stride. His face must have shown he was still not quite there, because Sam continued. “My soul had been in Hell for over a year, and time runs differently there—”

“Yeah, Castiel said,” John interrupted rudely, but it was good to contribute to this conversation with something other than questions and goggling.

“Yeah. So. Um.” Sam seemed to search for words, and John had the impression it was for his benefit.

“What was it?” he prompted calmly.

“My soul,” Sam began, sounding hesitant. “It’d been locked in there with Lucifer and it had been completely—I had some memories later, when the wall kind of broke, and it was…You don’t want to know. The way Lucifer put it I was his bitch in every sense of the word for like decades.”

John’s stomach churned, cold shivers running up and down his arms. He had a powerful impulse to shoot something or awkwardly put his arm around Sam’s shoulders. He obviously wasn’t going to do either, so he settled for some more questions.

“How did Death manage to get your soul back?”

“Dean put himself in coma to go talk to him,” Sam said conversationally. “They made a deal—or something like that.”

John pursed his lips, thoughtful. “You and your brother make a lot of deals,” he observed.

Sam snorted. “Yeah. You’d think we’ve learnt.” His face grew pinched. “The last time Dean disappeared—he went to purgatory, but I didn’t know—Anyways, I didn’t try to find him. That was why, because of the deals. I was kind of lost, really lost. Bobby was dead; Cas was gone, too…I felt so tired and there was no one. Dean was gone—” Sam took a sharp breath. “So I just drove for weeks and weeks and couldn’t make myself do anything. Like, I thought I’d—I don’t know, fall apart or something.”

John was familiar with the feeling.

“But in the end I decided I wasn’t going to look for him,” Sam said. “You’re right, he and I make a lot of deals, and it never ends well for us. There’s always something waiting to bite us in the ass, a whole bigger price to pay. I guess I just wanted to put an end to all of it. Or maybe if I hadn’t met Amelia, I’d have changed my mind and looked for him. It’s hard to imagine not looking for him, ever, now that he’s back.”
“How long was he gone for?” John asked. “Actually, forget about that. How did he manage to come back? Purgatory, you said.”

“He was gone for a year. He was there with Castiel, and he made a new friend—a vampire. His name’s Benny. He knew a way to get out of there.”

Sam turned to face John; his expression became engaged a bit like a lecturer’s. John welcomed the sight.

“Purgatory is the place where all supernatural creatures go when they die,” Sam started. “It’s not meant for humans, so there was a spot there, kind of like a portal probably, and Benny knew where it was. So he helped Dean get to it in exchange of using Dean as transport out of there.”

John’s interest was piqued by this Benny bloke and his friendship with Dean; something told John he might have been knocking on the wrong door when he’d thought a woman had caused the rift between the two brothers. But he should probably mind his own business.

Besides, he’d just had a very worrying thought about something said earlier. Clearly it was his lot in life to lag behind.

“Hold on,” he said. “You said that Lucifer was still in his Cage, but then you said he’d told you that you were his...um, bitch. When did you speak to him again?”

“Oh, he wasn’t real,” Sam said with the odd kind of mundaneness John was beginning to grasp was typical. “He was—He was in my head. Once the wall fell, I couldn’t tell what was real, and it got worse and worse, until I was in agony. My head was just a playground for my Lucifer hallucination and I was losing my mind; there were memories of torture and—I was probably going to die.”

“What saved you?”

“Cas.”

Things were beginning to fall into some vague big picture at last.

“He was the one who broke the wall,” Sam continued, then hurried to explain. “He wasn’t himself. He was—it’s a long story, but there was a war in Heaven and he was just...I guess he’d just gone crazy with the pressure.” Sam summed up, lips twisted in accepting regret. “And then he was gone. When he came back, he—Never mind, that’s not important. What he did was, he kind of went into my mind and took it all in. All that pain, the memories, Lucifer—Cas absorbed it all. He said that had formed a connection between us. Like, he’d taken it all from me, but some part of him had in turn, I don’t know—Fused in my mind, I guess. So when the demon tried to posses me earlier, he hit an angel barrier and got smoked out without a trace.”

That answered one of John’s questions about the incident. He took a sip of his warm whiskey, but there was no way he was going for ice now, what with a more immediate kind of worry pushing forward.

“Do you know how that demon managed to just pop up there out of thin air?” he asked. “Can they take a different form or...Are they invisible? I feel like an idiot asking but—”

“Hey, you’re not an idiot,” Sam said quickly. “You can’t know about any of this.” His eyes flicked
up and down John a couple of times. “You’re kind of taking it all in pretty well,” he commented with
dry amusement.

John’s huff in response carried the same sentiment.

Sam suddenly got up and walked around the coffee table toward the window. John thought he’d
open it, but Sam crouched down instead and began rummaging through the books, the papers and
the other assorted items at the bottom of the book case, all the while talking. “I’ve got the whole
house secured. There’s anti-demon protection everywhere, anti-angel protection, too, just in case. I
checked at Mrs Hudson’s and it’s all right, all there; and my room is—”

“What’s it look like?” John asked, an uncomfortable suspicion blooming in his stomach.

Sam replied, his back still turned. “That’s what I’m looking for. A small pouch, filled with some stuff
—”

“I threw it out,” John cut in, standing up guiltily. Sam stood up as well, turning to face him.

“You knew about this?” he said, incredulity mixing with cautious suspicion.

“No. God no,” John replied, scratching his temple and avoiding Sam’s gaze. “I was clearing up after
I came back, and I thought it was something of Sherlock’s. I had no idea what it was for, but if you
lived with Sherlock, you stopped being surprised at anything you found. Like you said before—you
don’t want to know.” A wee flame of wonder came alive in John’s chest at the ability to speak about
that with any modicum of humour.

Sam’s lips twitched. He took a breath and looked around, clapping his hands together lightly.

“Okay,” he said. “So this is how they were able to find me.”

“Sorry about that,” John muttered. He knew it’d been an accident, but he still felt really bad about it.
Accident or not, it could have cost Sam his life.

“It’s okay. Honestly.” Sam had the wrinkly bit between his eyebrows that John had learnt to interpret
exactly as the word ‘honestly’ spelled out. “You didn’t know. But I still don’t see how he managed
to escape the traps.”

“Where are they?” John asked. He tried to remember if he’d come across anything else sort of
strange. Oh God, he hoped he hadn’t thrown away any traps. Or moved them from where they were
supposed to be. Sam was here when they re-arranged the furniture, so at least John couldn’t have
done it then. And there wouldn’t have been a problem in the first place if someone had bloody told
him about any of this.

Meanwhile Sam had disappeared in the direction of the kitchen and was already back with
something that looked like a Wood’s lamp. He walked over to the IKEA lamp between the two
windows, right next to Sherlock’s leather chair, and switched it off. The room plunged into darkness
—Sam had already switched off the other source of light, the small lamp by the kitchen portal.

John was just about able to distinguish Sam’s shape in the blackness, but that was all. His eyes didn’t
even have the chance to adjust—a soft click was heard and Sam lifted the powerful black light to
illuminate the space above and around.

John looked up; his jaw slowly fell open as his eyes travelled over the sight before him.
The whole room had transformed into an artist’s magical canvas, squiggles and drawings glowing everywhere: on the doors, along the fireplace frame, on the floor. And on the ceiling above John’s head there was a big circle divided into areas that were filled with strange symbols. John rotated around his axis, taking in the entire space. The big circle had a twin under which you would have stood had you stepped into the flat from the front door.

John gazed around for long seconds, brain automatically attempting some recognition of patterns or letters, but it was an exercise in futility. Nothing looked like anything John had ever seen, and even if there was a familiar detail, he was too taken with the visuals to discern it.

“A Devil’s trap,” Sam murmured when John’s eyes returned to the circle above his head.

John looked at him. Bathed in the scant, ghostly light of his handiwork Sam appeared in tune with everything John had found out about him tonight. He was wearing a plain light grey t-shirt that now stood out in luminescent contrast, making his chest seem massive, almost inhuman. His broad shoulders danced with his shrug.

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” he said. John realized that he hadn’t made a sound since the lights went out. “And I know it’s—”

“It’s beautiful.”

Sam looked around. “That’s a new way of putting it,” he said quietly.

John kept examining the sights around him, human or otherwise. Enlightenment was rather aptly coming to existence.

“The corridors downstairs,” he said. “The renovations at Mrs Hudson’s—it was all for this?”

“Kind of. The ink didn’t work so well on the wallpaper, but she did want to re-decorate for real.”

John nodded, squinting at the writing along the fireplace frame. He had no idea whether it was part of the trap above or something that kept angels away. Some of the symbols seemed like letters from some ancient alphabet. John’s brain was still catching up with what he was seeing, busy with associations, trying to establish connections.

And suddenly, where it was failing to do it with the visuals, it managed to produce an abstract connection—stark and vivid like all the graphics around him.

He turned on his spot and squared his gaze on the obscured face before him.

“Sam,” he said. “What exactly are you doing here?”

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When Sam was sixteen going on seventeen, they spent the whole of four months in Arizona. In part it was because Dad had been wounded by something that to this day Sam called ‘the banshee’; in part because Sam had kicked up a major fuss about needing to stop and study properly. (In his mind university had already made the transition from a vague idea to a persistent fantasy.)

It was the longest they’d spent anywhere for some years and Sam relished everything about it. It was
great to have a routine, to sleep in the same bed, to talk to people and open up, unafraid that he’d
give himself over only to have to leave—sometimes without even saying goodbye.

One of the first nice people he’d met was Mr Gustafson who worked the town’s library desk on most
days. To a curious, sharp eye it couldn’t have been hard to observe Sam’s selection of books and
conclude that he was a bit lost about the potential subject of his future studies. Yet to someone like
Sam who had been starved for that specific kind of attention, Mr Gustafson’s comments on Sam’s
choice of literature as well as his willingness to listen and ask helpful questions had been precious.
Nothing was asked of him in return; it seemed Mr Gustafson simply enjoyed talking to a young, keen
mind. Sam had made a friend.

So what could have been more natural than to want to do well by said friend? When a poltergeist had
taken over Mr Gustafson’s house, terrorizing his family by impish deeds that edged closer and closer
to really dangerous, Sam ignored his father’s plan to send the family away on a false alarm and deal
with the poltergeist in their absence. He went to Mr Gustafson instead, revealing the cause for the
family’s torment and asking for Mr Gustafson cooperation. It had worked before; albeit rarely, some
people had accepted the truth and helped the Winchesters do their job. Surely Mr Gustafson would
trust Sam on top of all the evidence in front of his eyes.

Sam’s account had been met with a glazed expression on the side of frightened, pretty close to what
Sam probably wore when he saw a clown. He was then kindly seen off with the reassurance that Mr
Gustafson would call him back as soon as he processed what Sam had told him. Six hours later a
policeman and a lady from some child protection service had shown up at their doorstep asking to
talk to John Winchester. Thankfully Dad had been out. Dean had been in.

Sam remembered himself at the time: gangly, spotty, and kind of…discoloured. He also remembered
watching his big brother put his leather jacket on, ready to go out in the evenings, and thinking that
they couldn’t possibly be related. At twenty-one Dean’s looks made young Marlon Brando seem like
his rough first draft. Dean’s eyes were livelier and brighter than any movie star’s, though. They were
so vividly green it was as if some of the colour of Sam’s eyes had somehow transferred into them.
Dean’s mouth was cheekier than Brando’s, in every sense of the word, and he kept the brooding to
the exact minimum that made it attractive. Sam spent half the time jealous and consequently sullen
about it, and the other half adoring and following Dean around.

On that humid autumn day back in Arizona Dean had opened the door to the policeman and the
social services lady, showered them with buckets of charm, convinced the policeman that all was
fine, talked him into leaving, and invited the lady in to wait for Dad. Sam sneaked out through a
window at the back of the house.

A couple of hours later Dean found him at their secret spot and told him in three sentences that the
social worker was taken care of, that their bags were packed, and that the Impala was waiting
nearby. He’d lied to their dad about two policemen coming round to ask some pretty serious
questions. Dad had trusted Dean as always and they were getting out of there. Dean never mentioned
Mr Gustafson to Dad or Sam.

Sam for his part never forgot him. So when John Watson asked, voice signalling the arrival of a new
era, “What exactly are you doing here?” Sam looked him in the eye and told him he’d just needed to
get away from it all for a while.

At least he didn’t have to lie when he recalled how he’d met Mrs Hudson.

“A year after her husband died,” he started, before immediately making a detour. “You know he was
sentenced to death in Florida some six-seven years ago, right?"

“Yeah.” John’s lips stretched swiftly, the mimic giving the impression of an elastic band being pulled for a test. “Sherlock helped with that actually,” he said.

“Seriously?”

“Yes. That was how he and Mrs Hudson met.”

“Huh.” Sam had to wonder at the irony of sharing with Sherlock Holmes the dubious honour of ensuring Mrs Hudson’s husband was dead. He hurried to explain things to John.

“Dean and I took care of the late Mr Hudson’s vengeful spirit. He’d shown up around the first anniversary of his death and tried to kill Mrs Hudson’s sister. It looked like he blamed her for being caught in the first place.” Sam paused, smirking suddenly. “Although now that I think about it, he’d have probably gone straight for Sherlock if he was there. Spirits can’t travel around freely like demons; they’re kind of stuck to a spot of importance to them or an object.” Sam waved himself off impatiently. “Anyways, we were nearby, so we worked the job. Mrs Hudson found out what we were doing and was totally cool about it. She’s great.” The trip down memory lane brought back the fondness Sam had immediately felt for the unfazed, dainty British lady who had mused aloud whether she could have only the burnt bits of her wooden flooring replaced. Dean had just torched the late Mr Hudson’s ridiculously fancy and expensive fob watch in the middle of the lounge.

“She is great,” John agreed. “I must apologize to her,” he added, looking bashful. “I was a bit cross with her over the phone earlier, but I didn’t know what was going on. But I knew she knew something and—I don’t like feeling stupid, although God knows I should’ve got used to it living with Sherlock.”

Sam pressed his lips in what he hoped was an endearing mimic of seeking forgiveness. “I’m sorry we lied to you,” he said, suppressing the heat of discomfort that rose up his chest. “You would have freaked out if we kind of dumped this on you. I just needed to crash somewhere for a while and London’s pretty far…”

John studied him for a moment, then pushed his own lips forward and nodded. He didn’t say anything. Sam could see how overloaded he was; it was remarkable that he kept it together so well. Once again a confirmation how right Sam had been to look forward to meeting John Watson in person. He’d just known the guy would be pretty awesome.

John took a breath in abruptly. “Right. I think I’m going to turn in.” He tilted his head; at the angle the odd light made the chronic bags under his eyes more pronounced. “We’ll continue tomorrow night, Scheherazade,” he said.

Sam smiled. “Sure.”

None of them moved. Finally John gave a small nod. “Okay. Goodnight.”

Sam bid him goodnight and watched him leave. He slowly rotated, looking around the empty room. He’d spent too many days and nights without any sleep at all to feel affected, but there was something in his perception right now that reminded him of how he used to feel before he learnt to cope with stress and irregular sleep patterns. Maybe because so much had come to light in this darkened space, maybe because he was so far away from home, but everything felt a bit surreal, as if he had somehow travelled back in time as well.
Maybe he had. It had been surreal all along actually, listening to himself tell John about the yellow-eyed demon who’d killed their mum when Sam was only six months old; about being raised by a hunter to become a hunter; about Dad striking a deal, his life in exchange of Dean’s. About Dean selling his own soul for Sam. About helplessly watching Dean being torn to shreds by hellhounds, holding his body and watching the light die in his eyes, knowing Dean’s soul was already travelling straight to Hell. About having Dean back, Castiel raising him from perdition, about starting the Apocalypse, then ending the Apocalypse…Sam hadn’t managed to give John a fraction of the details about any of that. He hadn’t even started on the Leviathans. John hadn’t been overwhelmed, but maybe Sam had underestimated how he himself would get after telling his life’s story in the space of one night.

He felt ancient; the house felt ancient, and London of course was ancient. He looked around again. How humbling and how weird that John should call his work ‘beautiful’ of all things. It shone all around him like an incandescent tribute to all the knowledge he’d gathered along the way. He pressed the off switch on the black light and just like that every letter and drawing disappeared, taking away any trace of light.

He turned on his spot and blindly reached out, fingers aiming for the slim crevice of streetlight visible where the curtains didn’t meet or overlap. He pulled them, then opened the window. It was gone half past four in the morning—the hour when the owls had already gone back home, but the larks still hadn’t gotten up. Baker Street appeared as if it was a massive live model of itself. Sam gazed into the darkness that still seemed shades lighter than the pitch black of the room behind his back.

It was the complete stillness that made Sam’s gaze instantly jump down to where he’d detected motion. Then the stillness seized Sam’s insides in a cold grip.

The light from the nearest street lamp barely illuminated the figure, but Sam would have recognized him anywhere. Tall and thin, his pale face crowned by a black mop of hair, Sherlock Holmes stood in the shadows of the building across the street, head uplifted to the windows of 221B.

He wouldn’t have seen Sam from his spot, but Sam saw him. Before he had the chance to release his trapped breath, however, every light on the entire street went out. Sam stared and stared, but the faint, rusty, dark gray of the London sky was the single thing his eyes could distinguish. Sounds reigned for a few long seconds, his heart audible in his ears, hammering and certain.

Then the lights flickered before coming back on again to reveal Baker Street, now completely void of ghosts and men.

Chapter End Notes

A couple of visuals for this chapter can be found over here.
John managed to function admirably well at work on the following day, even if he said so himself. The lack of sleep was the lesser problem. His main efforts were directed at trying to sidestep the rest of what had happened in the last twenty-four hours. He was clearly compartmentalizing again—there was no other way to manage to talk to people about their allergies and ulcers with any degree of professionalism. The stuff about demons, and angels, and all the rest was neatly stored away, taken out only during the short moments between patients.

It was then that John felt his stomach flip like a schoolboy’s before his first dance. What Sam had told him was so earth-shattering that even though John was at the reeling stage, far from fully comprehending all the implications, he was still taut with nervous excitement. He couldn’t wait to get back home, talk to Sam more; see whether he’d figured out how that demon managed to avoid the traps. Find out what followed next. He contained himself to texting Sam just once and it was to check if he was all right.

Sam’s reply was prompt and reassuring: ‘I'm ok. Downstairs at 221C. You gotta see something.’ John started marking each patient’s back as a step that brought him closer to returning home.

His plans for the rest of the day took a turn when on his way to Baker Street his phone vibrated in his pocket. It was Greg Lestrade calling to ask if John was free in the evening for that curry. Greg sounded better and a lot more alert than last time, possibly because he was busy working a case that was “very interesting but quite baffling”. John had been thinking of giving him a call, and although the timing wasn’t great, he still wanted to see him. So he promised to ring him back after he checked whether Sam didn’t have any plans for the house tonight. He couldn’t stifle a quiet chuckle at the irony of the impression he must have left in Greg, who probably thought John’s new flatmate had turned into a party animal. John couldn’t imagine Sam Winchester ever partying wild. He was probably the fittest looking geek in existence.

Sam answered his phone after the second ring.

“I just spoke to a friend,” John told him after they exchanged greetings, “and I was wondering if the house was safe for visitors tonight.”

“It is now,” Sam said. “I’ll show you when you come back. You on your way?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I figured out how they got in.”

John sped up.

“I’ll be home in twenty minutes. So I can invite my friend over, then?”

“Yeah, yeah.” There was a very brief pause. “Do you want me out for the night?”
For a moment John was confused—this was the opposite of what he wanted, if only for the fact that it made sense for Sam to stay close until it was clear whether demons planned on making a habit of popping in for visits. Then it dawned at him what Sam was asking.

“No,” he said quickly. “It’s not that kind of friend. It’s someone from Scotland Yard. Detective Inspector Lestrade, remember? I was telling you about him. He’s the inspector who used to work with Sherlock a lot…”

“Yeah, I remember.” Sam paused again. “Okay. I’ll stay in, but I’ll be out of your way.”

“We’ll figure something out,” John said and rang off. He didn’t want to make fixed plans for the evening yet. It was nice thinking about introducing Sam to Greg, just sitting around, having food and a few beers, and chatting like normal blokes. Maybe they could even talk about the football this weekend. On the other hand Greg wouldn’t even mention work in front of Sam and John was intrigued by his latest case, plus he wanted to ask him about the progress with Moriarty’s network. And Sam was Sam. A whole bag of explosive waiting to go off in the hands of a police inspector whose job had made him suspicious and good at spotting fake backgrounds. Maybe Sam could spend some time with them at the start at least, just for a beer. John decided he’d play it by ear.

He called Greg and made plans to wait for him around six. It meant a couple of hours at home before that—enough to catch up with Sam on his discoveries. (It occurred to John that he might also need to have some rest at some point. He had another morning shift tomorrow.) He hadn’t thought there was any point in asking Sam questions over the phone. For one thing, where to start? For another, it probably wasn’t safe. Funny that now John had to be extra mindful about his conversations. Ordinary life was already getting more complicated by his new awareness. He could imagine the faces of people on the bus, while he was talking to Sam: “You bought milk, good. And have you heard from Lucifer today?”

Besides, who knew who could be eavesdropping on purpose? Tapping into people’s calls should be a child’s play for creatures with supernatural powers. Or maybe it wasn’t. So much to ask Sam about.

There was of course the possibility of big brother listening. John felt wickedly glad at the prospect—Mycroft could do with something to shake his infamous placid exterior.

***

Maybe Mycroft was a supernatural thing himself, John thought two hours later, as he stood by the living room window watching Mycroft and Greg come out of a sleek black car that detective inspectors certainly didn’t have at their disposal. You thought about Mycroft hard enough and hey presto, he popped into existence at your doorstep.

Why he would give Greg a lift made John itch with curiosity. There was hardly anything supernatural here, though—Mycroft and Greg knew each other well. John had no difficulty imagining their first meeting. Mycroft must have managed to pull off his trick of well-balanced intimidation and temptation; poor Greg wouldn’t have had a chance. Sherlock had hinted a few times that Lestrade was at his brother’s beck and call. John didn’t know for sure about that, but evidently their relationship hadn’t evolved only around the common element. Sherlock had been gone for over a year, but instead of falling out of touch, apparently now Mycroft Holmes and Gregory Lestrade drove around together.

John barely had the time to spot he was turning into a nosy Rosie, when the two men walked into the
living room. At the sound of their steps Sam appeared from the kitchen, where he’d been fixing the plumbing again. Ha. This was Mycroft’s second visit to the flat within a short period of time, and both times he’d found Sam slaving himself doing DIY. Mycroft probably thought that after years of living with the most infuriating flatmate on earth, John had found another one and—to con Lucifer’s phrase—he’d turned him into his bitch.

But John couldn’t very well relate to anyone the conversation he and Sam had had an hour ago. Turned out the damn pipes were at the bottom of the mystery of how the demon had managed to penetrate the house. There’d been some oozing on the ceiling at one particular spot in the basement flat; the weakest leak that over time had managed imperceptibly to erode the plaster and the paint just enough to break the integrity of the devil’s trap drawing. The demon had hidden in 221C in wait, faked a cry from Mrs Hudson, then attacked Sam at the most opportune moment. The whole plan would have worked beautifully if it hadn’t been for Castiel’s ‘stamp’ on Sam’s mind. John wasn’t too sure how exactly the latter worked, but he got the impression Sam didn’t understand it completely, either. Maybe there were still things that Sam had to learn himself. From what John had seen, the man genuinely thrived when he read and researched, so that wasn’t going to be a problem.

It was fortunate that Sam was also an excellent handyman. It had occurred to John earlier that propensity to attract evil aside, women’s magazines would describe Sam Winchester as a real catch: clever, good around the house, considerate, well-read, sensitive, and easy on the eye. There was of course his tendency to throw himself in literal hellish pits in self-sacrifice, but John felt that cut both ways.

He cast a look at Sam now. Almost shoulder-length, thick, healthy hair, damp with perspiration and framing his pleasant features in little waves and cowlicks; jeans hanging low on his narrow hips; a V-neck t-shirt doing nothing to hide the definition of his chest and arms. Such contrast to the man facing Sam at point blank as if there was no one else in the room. Mycroft and his three-piece suits in August, his body so shielded beneath the layers that one could only speculate whether it was flabby, or wiry, or chubby; his protruding nose accentuating his long face; thinning hair at the front. But John couldn’t be fooled that easily. He knew that while not on par with the gargantuan Holmes brain, Sam’s was still pretty impressive; not to mention that his personality could probably match Mycroft’s in strength and definition. Conversely, John was just as easily prepared to believe that if he wished to, Mycroft could switch on the kind of charisma that would make him very attractive to a lot of people.

He had a sudden, out of place, gut-deep feeling of loss. Perhaps it had something to do with all these extraordinary people around him. There’d been one single extraordinary man with whom John had somehow fitted perfectly, like two peas in a pod. John was back here, in their pod, but the other pea was irreversibly gone...

Or maybe it was time to redefine the meaning of the word ‘irreversible’. Because ever since John had remained by himself in the early hours of the morning, the events of the previous day and Sam’s words sinking in, a nebulous, infinitely fragile hope had come to life. He was guarding it and himself from it carefully, until he was strong enough to face it and take it out into a world where miracles did happen: people came back from the dead.

He shook himself mentally and looked at the tableau in front of him. Mycroft and Sam were still having a staring contest, while Greg’s eyes were shifting between them with curiosity, a hint of amusement in the lines around his mouth.

Time to play the host before someone got hurt.
“Does anyone want a drink?” John asked. He was sure he heard a sound from Greg that resembled the word ‘beer’, but it was drowned by the simultaneous “No,” which came from the two people who were technically not invited to the party.

“Thanks,” Sam added, eyes jumping to John momentarily.

Mycroft finally averted his gaze, too, to square it on John. “No, thank you, John,” he said, tone velvety. “I’ll be on my way. I’ll leave you and Detective Inspector Lestrade to catch up.” He turned to Sam again, a smile still lingering on his lips. His eyes, however, glistened warningly. “One shouldn’t impose,” he said.

“No,” Sam replied in a beat, giving Mycroft a pointed look. “One really shouldn’t.”

“Right then,” John told the room at large. “I’ll go get some beers.” His next words were directed only at Greg. “I’ll get the take-out menus. You still up for a curry?”

“Yeah, that’d be nice.”

John nodded and made the first step in the direction of the kitchen; with his body coming to life, it was as if a release switch had been flicked. Greg moved toward the sofa, while Mycroft headed to the door, Sam on his heels. John froze in his tracks, uncertain of how to proceed. Mycroft and Sam stopped as well, the latter’s face drawn tight when he met John’s eyes.

“I’ll go for a walk,” he told him. John was about to invite him to join them later, when Sam spoke again, addressing Greg who’d pivoted in his seat on the sofa to watch the end of the feature presentation over its backrest. “Nice to meet you,” Sam said.

“You too. I’ll see you later,” Greg added, eyes going to John to double-check.

“Yeah,” John told him, then turned to Sam and repeated, “Yes. Come join us later if you want, we’ll have ordered some food.”

“Sure,” Sam said quietly. “Thanks.”

Mycroft who’d acquired an unperturbed air tilted his head to speak to John over Sam’s shoulder.

“Goodbye, John,” he said pleasantly. “We’ll talk another time.” His gaze then moved to Greg, lingering for a moment.

“Yes,” John said, eyes jumping back and forth between the two. He had absolutely no illusions that he was privy to anything that was going on right now, neither between the people in the room nor in each individual’s head. “Goodbye, Mycroft,” he said, keeping his voice warm.

He got a nod in reply and the two disappeared, not closing the door. John watched the empty half of the room for a few seconds, then turned to Greg. Greg was still twisted on the sofa, the shadows in his eyes communicating loud and clear that John hadn’t been the only one picking up all kinds of vibes too obscure to decode.

“Beer?” John asked with determination.

Sam hadn’t made a definite plan of action how to proceed about Sherlock, but Mycroft Holmes showing up out of the blue, so conveniently after the appearance of his brother’s ghost, kind of spurred things forward. Holmes made Sam want to shove chests with him and snarl, which was shocking both in how much it wasn’t the kind of thing Sam did—it was way more Dean’s way—and in how much Mycroft Holmes didn’t look like the kind of man to provoke this kind of response. Yet Sam couldn’t deny it; he was following the dude on the way out of the flat and the twelve-year-old part of Sam’s brain had a powerful impulse to push him down the stairs.

They both made it intact to the pavement outside. Sam expected an invitation-slash-order to follow Holmes into the car for another tête-à-tête, but was surprised when the other turned left to Speedy’s, then stopped to face Sam. Sam was still the taller of the two but the difference wasn’t as pronounced as it was with the greater part of humanity. It gave him an odd kind of thrill—it was as if he had met someone his size he could freely pick a fight with.

The thought was quickly spoilt by the reluctant discovery that in bright daylight Holmes looked kind of haggard.

“Get into the café, Mr Winchester,” he said, erasing whatever spec of sympathy his appearance might have produced.

Sam just tilted his head in a way he was sure looked quite stubborn and a little threatening. He had been perfecting the ‘You’re not the boss of me’ look since he was six, like most boys who had an older brother, so he walked into Speedy’s at ease that his message had been transmitted without a fault.

It wasn’t Katie’s shift today—Katie! Sam hadn’t even given the girl a thought. Had Castiel gotten to her as well? Sam hoped he had. Crap, he’d told her he’d let her know about that festival. He’d have to figure something out to let her down gently. The last thing he wanted to do now was go to festivals and flirt with girls. Suddenly, after weeks of mind-numbing quiet, things were happening on all fronts.

The new guy was looking at Sam expectantly. “Hi,” Sam said with a friendly smile. “Can we get two coffees, please? Black.”

Holmes had sat himself without a word at the table furthest away from an earshot of the few people in the café. He evidently expected Sam to act as his waiter.

“Um, takeaway, please;” Sam added. The twelve-year-old was apparently still running Sam’s show, judging by the petty glee he felt. Mycroft Holmes looked like the kind of guy who drank disturbingly fancy tea with milk in suitably fine porcelain, so Sam felt a cardboard cup would be a nice touch.

“Sorry,” the new guy said, his voice surprising Sam to look back at him. “We’ve just run out of the small size take away cups. I could give you the coffee in the big cappuccino ones, but if you’re staying…” He trailed off. Sam smiled again. The guy didn’t smile back this time either. He had to be a temp—he did not look happy with his job. Sam realized he wouldn’t be himself probably if he had to temp at a café at what? Forty?

More importantly, Sam had to check on Katie.

“Sure,” he told the guy, hand sliding in his pocket for his cell. “Whatever cups you have.” He
handed him a five pound note. “Keep the change,” he said not looking up, his fingers already flying over the keys, asking Katie if she was okay.

“I’ll bring you the coffees,” the new dude said, finally sounding friendlier. Sam thanked him and turned to go back to the table. He’d just sat across from Holmes when his phone chimed in his pocket.

’Hi Sam, I’m ok, thanx 4 asking! How ru? Have u figured out ur plans for the wkend? Katie x’

Sam slid the phone back into his pocket without replying and looked up at Holmes. They barely had the chance to try and intimidate each other silently when their coffees were placed in front of them—sadly, in proper cups.

Holmes peered into his one as if it was a mysterious cave, then lifted his gaze to Sam’s face. “Thank you,” he said, every letter of the two simple words enunciated heavy with his posh British accent. He took a sip at the same time with Sam, making zero effort to hide his disapproval.

“There is an Italian café in Clapham,” he told Sam softly, “which makes the area worth visiting just for the espresso they offer.” His lips transformed into what looked like a little boy’s pout. “Their pastries are worth mentioning too.”

“Seriously?” Sam couldn’t help himself. “We’re just going to chat about culinary stuff?”

Mycroft Holmes’s face turned cool again. “You’ve lived a nomad’s life for too long, Mr Winchester. But no one’s getting any younger. Not to mention that in your line of…work, you don’t know how old you’ll manage to get. It will be smart to learn to appreciate the finer—”

“Oh yeah?” Sam cut in, not letting Holmes finish his lecture. “The finer things? Like your attention to detail?” He lowered his voice considerably, but made sure he left the sarcasm intact. “You sure you didn’t miss just a tiny part of those DNA samples you told me you had burnt?”

A look of confusion flew over Holmes’s features before turning to suspicion.

“What do you mean?”

Sam leaned over the table, voice dropping to something between a hiss and a whisper. “I mean that I saw your brother’s ghost last night. Actually this morning, it was gone past four.”

Mycroft Holmes looked at Sam as if he was just hearing about the very existence of ghosts.

“That’s impossible,” he said.

Sam pulled back and did a quick, obstinate motion with his neck as a substitute of confirming his early morning experience.

“I was very thorough, Mr Winchester,” Holmes told him in a very low voice, “and I know what I saw.”

“So do I.” Sam sighed in frustration. “Look, I know you don’t like me and you don’t trust me. I get it, okay? But I’ve been doing this for a long time. I know what I saw,” he echoed his opponent’s words, leaning forward again.
“You’re mistaken,” Mycroft Holmes said flatly.

Sam glared at him, fed up. “You know what? I don’t care what you think. You can either help me finish…this,”—he remembered to keep it quiet in the last moment—“or you can live in denial until something really bad happens.”

“From what I gather, I don’t need to wait at all,” Mycroft Holmes said frostily. “Something bad has already happened, hasn’t it, despite your cockiness during our previous conversation. Tell me, Mr Winchester—which one of us has the odds in his favour about being right on the issue we’ve been arguing about: the one who was right once already, or the one who stubbornly refused to listen.” No opportunities were given to Sam to reply; Holmes leaned forward at last, uncaring that his immaculate jacket was brushing against the table top. “I told you that you were putting John in danger by prolonging your stay here. I am not sure what managed to save you this time—”

Sam managed to insert a derisive snort of disbelief.

“But I doubt you’ll be that lucky the next time,” Holmes continued, his sternness further improved by Sam’s interjection. “You are taking an unnecessary risk with both John’s and Mrs Hudson’s lives. For what?”

“Because I’ve got a job to do,” Sam said. He realized he sounded pretty coarse.

Holmes’s left eyebrow rose. “I think we both know that’s not entirely true. But let’s say for the sake of the argument that this is your real reason. You believe you saw my brother. How long after you had last slept? And it was after your incident as well.”

“How do you even know about it?” Sam said, nostrils flaring as his eyes narrowed.

Holmes gave him a glance of bitchy condescension. “That’s not important. We are talking about your so-called sighting of my brother’s ghost. Need I remind you how fragile your mind must have been? Or I should perhaps remind you that your perceptions have not always been reliable.”

Sam felt his face muscles tighten as if someone was turning mercilessly each and every invisible screw that held them together.

“There was nothing wrong with my eyes or my brain in this case,” he informed Holmes, rolling his shoulders to relieve the tension and signal his refusal to budge.

He was saved from the need to continue—they were going around in circles—by Holmes suddenly sighing. He dropped back against the chair’s backrest. It was the most…loosened up Sam had ever seen him.

“You remind me of my brother,” Holmes said with a little eye roll that couldn’t quite conceal the trace of wistfulness in his features. “Rather brilliant, stubborn, prone to challenge authority, unable to know when to stop, even when it came to his own good.” Holmes had been addressing a point over Sam’s shoulder, but now his gaze focused on Sam again. “I don’t envy…Dean, I believe?”

Sam squinted at him in menacing suspicion. “How’d you know my brother’s name?” he asked, knowing the other would understand what the actual question was.

The eye roll was more pronounced now, commenting on Sam’s intelligence. After the Sherlock detour, Holmes’s features had again consolidated into what felt like a fridge compartment. “The
messy affairs of the Winchesters could not be of less concern to me,” he said. Sam actually believed him. “I’m not interested in your brother,” Holmes continued, eyes boring into Sam’s, “but you know better than I do others may be. Your place is by his side, not here.”

Sam regarded him in silence, feeling the slope getting pretty slippery under him. There was too much he wanted to say, not to mention that there was still the impulse to punch the guy in the face. He knew he was being played like a fiddle, every word out of Holmes’s mouth worming under his skin and into private corners, from the word go—all designed to make him doubt himself. Worst part being that he really was.

He pushed himself up to stand up. “This conversation is over,” he told Holmes with far more confidence than he felt. Holmes just followed him with his eyes, lifting his chin. It should have given him a look of reverence, but instead Sam felt as if he was a small woodland creature being dissected under a microscope.

Holmes carefully got up too. “You don’t understand the consequences of your decision to stay,” he told Sam. There was gravity in his voice, bringing a sense of acute unease in Sam’s gut. He could be wrong, but something genuine and heavy had passed over Holmes’s features at his last words.

“How,” Sam told him, trying not to sound too belligerent. “I’m listening. Explain them to me.”

Holmes studied him, unblinking, and for a few seconds Sam held his breath wondering if the man across from him was honestly weighing in whether to confide in him. Then Holmes reached to pick up the umbrella he’d propped next to his chair and the moment was gone.

He walked around the table and stopped when he was side by side with Sam. Both turned only their heads to look at each other.

“For everyone’s sake I hope this is the last we see of one another,” Holmes said without much emotion, then walked away, leaving Sam feeling totally out of his game.

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The delights of Regent’s Park failed to do their magic and Sam found himself walking at a brisk pace back to Baker Street, his head just as unclear as it’d been when he’d gone through the park’s gates an hour earlier. He shut himself in his bedroom and went straight for his laptop, doing his monitoring round for any omens or signs that Kevin might be in trouble. There was nothing to indicate supernatural activity—no electric storms, no changes in magnetic fields, none of the other signs; nothing suspicious at all. It did little to soften the plaster with which Sam felt as if his body was being encapsulated. It was only an assumption that Dean would be in Kevin’s vicinity; for all Sam knew his brother might have been working a job three thousand miles away in any direction. Sam thought of calling Garth but didn’t, following the same motives that had stopped him the previous few times. Firstly, it was dangerous; phone calls could be traced or at the very least listened to by Crowley and his lot. A prophet’s safety took precedence over any worry you had about your family. Especially if the prophet was in the middle of the crucial task of translating God’s tablet on demons and how to shove all of their asses back in Hell for good. No, Kevin had to be protected, and since Garth was the one who hosted him, for all intents and purposes Sam had to consider Garth incommunicado unless things got desperate. Besides, although Dean was right that Garth did grow on you, Sam still didn’t quite count his skinny, eccentric ass as the best in times of crisis.

A few minutes after his return to the flat there’d been a soft knock on his door and John peered in, anxiously scanning Sam’s face. He said he’d just wanted to see if everything was fine. Sam replied
in affirmative, very aware that both of them knew it wasn’t true. He hoped John also knew that Sam was only postponing a conversation for a more convenient time, when some part of the truth was going to be shared. Sam was sitting on the bed, shoulders slumped forward; John had shifted from foot to foot, eyes not leaving Sam’s form.

“I ordered some food for you, too” he told him. “Korma—you don’t like the hot dishes, right?”

“Thanks,” Sam said, lifting his eyes. John had nodded, watched him silently for another few seconds, then closed the door.

For five minutes he paced back and forth within the four walls of the bedroom, before finally coming out to join John and his guest. He had to force himself to be alert for any outgoing and incoming slips —his own distractedness meant he had to watch what he was saying, and a few beers had already relaxed Lestrade enough for a mention of Sherlock to become possible. Sam regretted not taking advantage of the excellent opportunity to subtly question the guy. He’d wanted to do that since the moment he got the parameters of the job months ago; it had temporarily been put on the back burner after the demon attack, but Sherlock’s ghost’s appearance had reshuffled Sam’s priorities again. Here was one of the chief people on Sam’s list of interviewees, under the influence of alcohol no less, but Sam barely managed to stay still and take part in a casual conversation.

It wasn’t like him. He’d worked a job in a much, much more stressful set of circumstances. He’d donned a suit or whatever costume his part had required, then gone and talked to people, sussed things out, listened for the smallest detail.

Freaking Mycroft Holmes and the seeds of doubt he’d sown. Doubt about whether Sam had really seen Sherlock Holmes’s ghost now stuck at the back of his mind, miniscule yet perceptible the way the thinnest hair felt when it stuck to the back of your throat. But beyond that Sam was worried sick about Dean. He didn’t know whether Holmes had thrown Dean’s name on the table because he knew something was cooking—Sam wouldn’t have put it past him—or because he was going for the chunk in Sam’s armour. Either way, Sam’s cell phone had been taken out three times during his walk and then in his bedroom, the scroll stopping at the single letter ‘D’ for the first time since their fall-out. (The number itself had just made the transfer from Sam’s memory into his phone for the first time since their fall-out, too.) Sam hadn’t dialled; he’d ventured out from his room instead, planning on talking to Cas first.

Sam’s impressions of DI Lestrade were vague. At a first glance the man wasn’t particularly nondescript, but Sam realized he was kind of elusive. In an entirely different way than Mycroft Holmes was, however. The two had made for a strange pair when they’d walked in earlier, but Sam had sensed some unity there. He was sure their joint arrival wasn’t the result of convenient timing just as he could tell that theirs was more than a casual acquaintance. Sam had debated with himself whether it wasn’t worth it to fish for some information about the Holmes who was alive, but Lestrade’s measuring, curious gaze on him when Sam had appeared in the living room answered that question. It didn’t matter whether Lestrade was in cahoots with Holmes or was just as clueless about some things as John was. (Unfortunately, it seemed as Sam was too.) Sam was pretty sure the dude wasn’t going to kiss and tell, so he stuck to innocent topics such as his ‘studies’ in London and soccer. John was throwing him quick searching glances—maybe Sam’s unsettlement was showing or maybe John watched out in case Sam gave himself away as a fraud. It was a comforting thought that someone had his back. John pitched in at the right moments, a natural glue to the conversation of two strangers. Sam’s fondness of him grasped him tightly, no doubt helped by how vulnerable he was feeling thinking of whatever the hell danger Dean could be in.

When the pressure became too much to bear Sam excused himself, then tiptoed downstairs to the
basement flat. He couldn’t risk talking to Cas in his bedroom, but he was done waiting. His stomach was a churning pit of tension.

“Castiel,” he breathed out, unwilling to disturb Mrs Hudson. “Cas, I need to speak to you. Please. It’s about Dean.”

He looked around the empty room. His eyelids closed on instinct as he prepared himself to address Cas again.

“Hello Sam.”

Sam swivelled quickly, filled with relief.

“Castiel,” he said. “Thanks for coming.” He squinted, unable to see well, all the more that Cas had appeared at the other end of the room.

“Cas, you okay?” he asked. Castiel’s hair seemed messier than usual and his typically loosened up tie had flipped, so now the back was showing, label and all. It wasn’t the most bedraggled Sam had seen him, but there was definitely something off warranting the question.

“I’m fine,” Cas rumbled attempting to smile. Sam’s lips quickly turned up in response, but he wasn’t particularly convinced. Great, that was the last thing he needed—to worry about Cas too. Or maybe he was just getting paranoid. The quicker he made sure everything was all right, the quicker he could get a grip.

“It’s Dean,” he said. “It’s probably nothing, but…I just wanted to make sure he’s okay.”

“Your brother is fine,” Cas replied, then frowned slightly in what seemed like disapproval. “I really wish you spoke to him, Sam. He is equally worried about you.”

Sam’s heart sped up. “Why? Have you told him anything?”

Cas sighed, then made a few steps forward. “I didn’t tell him about the demon attack. But I couldn’t lie to him that we’ve been in touch. I think he was upset.” The last was added contemplatively. “But that’s not important.” Cas fixed Sam with his intense gaze again. “I trust you’ll find a way to communicate soon. I do not wish to get involved in your quarrel. It’s not always easy for me to understand your relationship.”

He made a few more steps making Sam swallow nervously. He felt guilty as hell for getting Cas mixed up in his fight with Dean, plus it was never a comfortable feeling when a celestial being examined the pores on your face.

“Sure, yeah. Sorry, Cas.” Sam cleared his throat. “I, yeah, I get it. We’ll, um—I’ll figure something out. I just need to know he’s safe for now.”

“Rest assured he is,” Cas said. “The vampire, Benny, is with him. He’s very strong and skilled, a good fighter. Your brother is in good hands. I’m there, too, as much as I can.” Cas paused and through the noise in his ears Sam could still detect some odd humourous pride in his voice. “Dean calls us ‘Team Purgatory’.”

Sam nodded slowly once. “Right. That’s great.” His own voice was getting to him as if travelling through a long, tin pipe.
He smiled, pretty sure the strain was showing, but then again it was Cas—he was still like a child sometimes. “Thanks, Cas,” he said. “I’ll be in touch soon, but if anything goes wrong, if anything happens, anything—please come find me right away, okay? Please?”

Castiel nodded solemnly. “Of course.” He didn’t make any motion, big eyes fixed on Sam’s face, their pure blue managing to shine bright even in a room half buried in the ground. “What about you, Sam?” he asked. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “Yeah. I’m good. Thanks.”

Chapter End Notes

A couple of visuals over here.
John felt his time perceptions all messed up when he closed the door behind Greg and looked at his watch. It was just gone ten o’clock. John had been reluctant to part with Greg—it was as if they’d spent a mere couple of hours together. But he’d also been dying to talk to Sam in private all night, so Greg’s arrival four hours ago seemed twice as far back.

As soon as he climbed back the stairs to their flat John made a beeline for Sam’s bedroom. He couldn’t hear any sound from inside, but that was hardly indicative of an occupant who’d gone to sleep: Sam wasn’t the sort to go to bed early, nor was he the loud type. John knocked on the door and was invited in with a barely audible “Come in.”

Sam was using the bed as an armchair, his stomach glowing with the light from the laptop display. There was a frown of concentration on his forehead that didn’t disappear when he lifted his eyes to John.

It had felt so urgent and natural to come here, but now John realized he wasn’t sure he knew what he wanted to ask.

“Did you talk to Mycroft again?” he said, opting for one of the tangible questions.

“Yeah.” Sam gave a few rapid tiny nods. “More of what I got yesterday: I should leave, I’m putting you in danger, all that crap.” John was about to back up Sam on the ‘crap’ that this really was when Sam continued, his tone void of sarcasm. “Except I’m not so sure if he doesn’t have a point.”

“No,” John interjected immediately. “This isn’t something Mycroft gets to decide. For you…Or for me, actually.”

He stepped into the room and closed the door. “You can’t let Mycroft play you,” he said quietly. “He means well most of the time, but he is insufferably overconfident.” Something clenched inside John—he could hear the distant echo of the exact same words spoken in Sherlock’s voice. “Mycroft’s made errors of judgement in the past,” John said, pushing past that. “Big ones too. We talked…I told you about it. How he blabbed all those personal details about Sherlock to bloody Jim Moriarty of all people, remember? So he really shouldn’t be deciding whether you’re putting me in danger.”

John could see Sam’s mind was flying over vast territories, all of them tricky to navigate. He wondered whether Sam had used what John had told him about Mycroft’s blunder to get Mycroft off his back. Sam didn’t look like the kind to betray a confidence or like someone who’d be targeting another person’s weak spot without mercy, but Mycroft was capable of really pissing people off. John was sure he wouldn’t have had any qualms to use whatever intelligence he had on Sam to intimidate him.
A horrible thought struck him. “He doesn’t know about the demon thing, does he?” he asked, feeling himself go pale.

“No,” Sam said, then repeated quickly, “No, no. Um, he doesn’t. He just knows I was rushed to a hospital because someone attacked me.”

John frowned. “But he doesn’t know who. Or what. Hold on. How does he know you were attacked?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said, closing his laptop and putting it aside. “I guess he’s keeping an eye on the house and saw us leave for the hospital. I must’ve been in a pretty bad shape.”

Something was fishy here; Mycroft wouldn’t just leave it like that, restraining himself to pressuring Sam to leave. He’d want to know what happened, why the police wasn’t involved—

Oh.

Was that why Greg had called John today of all days? The very day after the incident—in retrospect that couldn’t have been a coincidence. Greg had asked John about Sam. Now that John thought about it they’d gone back to Sam as a conversation topic a few times during those four hours. But John couldn’t tell with any certainty whether Greg had been the one initiating it every time. Sam had spent very little time with them, obviously distracted and tense—Greg had commented on that. For his part John had tried to avoid talking about Sam, but not so much as to raise suspicion.

He rubbed at his forehead and moved into the room to sit on the edge of the bed, head bowed under the weight of all those things needing consideration. Sam shuffled his feet out of the way unnecessarily. He was watching John, seemingly expecting him to have a further input. John spread his arms in a gesture of defeat.

“I’m just having some difficulties imagining Mycroft letting it go so easily, that’s all,” he explained. “I was trying to remember if Greg was being nosey about you. He was actually. I only wonder if it was the case of just a curious friend.” John used his finger to point to the invisible alternative. “You know, as opposed to a spy of Mycroft’s.”

“Does he—” Sam started then rearranged his sentence. “Is he actually working for Holmes, do you know? They arrived together, so I wasn’t sure…”

“I’m not sure myself,” John replied truthfully.

They looked at each other in silence, going over the latest.

“Well.” John was the first to speak, with a small sigh. “If Mycroft wants to interfere, there’s no stopping him, so we’ll hear from him again, I suppose.” He regarded Sam with what he was sure was his doctor’s face. “Are you okay? You’ve been a bit…subdued. Is it only because of Mycroft? Because I told you, you shouldn’t—”

“It’s not,” Sam interrupted. His face had drawn up even more. John shifted on the bed to face him properly. “I’m just…” Sam hesitated. “I’m worried, I guess. About this demon thing, about the demon tablet.” John wanted to ask about that tablet, but he sensed Sam hadn’t finished.

He was right.
“About my brother,” Sam added in a beat.

John watched him for a moment, weighing whether he should speak. “I know it’s none of my business,” he said. “But what happened between the two of you? Why can’t you just call him? Especially if you’re so worried about him.”

“It’s complicated.” Sam had a pained expression.

John’s lips quirked in a bitter-sweet smile. There might have been a hint of patronizing in it.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” he said. “How complicated is it that you can’t get over it? We’ve known each other for what? A month? And even I am able to say how close you two are and how important he is to you. What could be—” He felt the familiar sting in his eyes out of the blue. Or maybe not. He’d done a great job in ignoring in whose bedroom he was, but you couldn’t ignore things forever.

Which was what Sam needed to understand too.

“He’s your brother,” John said, forcing his voice to remain casual with little success. “And he’s there.” Sam was watching him with wide, heartbreaking eyes that John didn’t wish to imagine the effect of when Sam had been a child.

“If Sherlock—” John started, then took a breath. “There is nothing I wouldn’t forgive or let go of if he was out there somewhere.” John pushed his lips forward, looked up, then slowly shook his head. “Nothing. I can’t imagine not wanting to speak to him for months. I mean, I sometimes wanted to strangle him, and we did have times when we didn’t speak to each other. Once, I didn’t talk to him for almost a week, and he knew exactly why that was.” John added the last bit ruefully. “But I always knew—There was never the thought that it could go on.”

“I didn’t think…” Sam started in a rush then puffed up his cheeks. He exhaled noisily and ran his hands through his hair. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I was just so mad at him, and then it kind of spiralled out of control.”

“What did?” John pressed.

This was how he finally found his answers about the infamous Winchester fall-out. He’d been almost right on both counts: there was a woman, Amelia. But she hadn’t been a part of a love triangle; from what John was hearing, the twisted triangle had indeed included Benny. Dean had sent Sam on “a wild goose chase” with a fake distressed text from Amelia to get Sam off his back. Apparently Sam hadn’t trusted Benny at all, but Dean had, completely. He’d wanted to help Benny with a ‘hunt’ that sounded quite complicated and involved a poor crazy guy, something of a family friend, who had died a gruesome death. Sam didn’t sound convinced about Benny’s role in that death. He was quite fixated on the part where Dean had used one of his deepest fears to get him out of the way to protect “a monster”.

John wasn’t sure Sam realized how much of his hurt was coming from plain jealousy. He didn’t want to judge, but even without hearing Dean’s side of the story he could imagine how blindsided Sam must have been, and how stubborn in his refusal to listen.

How odd that while both the Holmes brothers and the Winchester brothers had a fucked up relationship, it manifested so differently. Sherlock and Mycroft hadn’t spoken to each other for months on end; moreover, Mycroft had been unequivocally glad when John became Sherlock’s friend. While here a third wheel had shown up, evidently important enough to make Dean lie to Sam,
and Sam couldn’t get over it.

“Is it because he’s a vampire?” John asked following his train of thought and trying to understand. “Benny, I mean.”

“Yes. Yeah, that too. I don’t know, man,” Sam said, frustrated with himself. “Dean came back from Purgatory changed. And we had a hard time at first. Actually, it never really got better, the way we used to be.” Sam looked away, face pensive. “I guess there’s so much behind us that…”

John didn’t say a word, just observed him in the ‘live’ process of making sense of things.

“We didn’t have a chance to figure things out,” Sam said slowly. “Like, we hadn’t even started being brothers again, like we used to be. He was angry with me for not looking for him, and I couldn’t explain to him why, because to be pretty honest I hadn’t even worked it out myself. Dean and I…” Sam’s eyes finally returned to John’s face and he was warmed to see a similar bitter-sweet light in them. “We’ve never been any good at talking things through, you know.” Sam rolled his eyes. “Dean is what you here would call ‘bloody awful’ at it.” He suddenly hushed down, as if physically shrinking and stilling. “But we kind of knew, everything; we know each other,” he added quietly.

“So why can’t you talk now?” John asked with gentle insistence. “What’s so different?”

“I don’t know.” Sam sounded tired. “Maybe we’ve finally found our breaking point. I let him down, and he came back changed, and Benny’s so damn important to him that he’d choose to lie to me…I don’t know if there’s ever going to be bouncing back from this.”

John hesitated before putting his head into the lion’s mouth. “Are you sure you’re not just being pig-headed?” he asked, because when had he ever been able to play safe? “What you told me last night? About what you two had been through. It sounds like you managed to be fine after a lot more serious issues in the past.”

Sam lifted his intent gaze again—it was like two hard diamonds shining underneath rippling waters.

“Dean’s with Benny now,” Sam said simply. “Cas told me.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.” John protested but Sam cut in straight away.

“Yeah it does.”

Sometimes you just had to let people fracture their own skulls, so to speak. John remained quiet for a few seconds then took a deep breath, nodded with sympathy, and slowly got up from the bed.

“I’m turning in,” he told Sam. “Early shift tomorrow again.”

“Okay.” Sam nodded. “Um, thanks.”

John shook his head to negate the necessity of gratitude. He was on his way out but he stopped as he opened the door. Sam had already pulled the computer back over his lap.

“How’s it going?” John asked, chin pointing towards the laptop.

“Nothing unusual. I’m monitoring things on all fronts. I mean there’s always the possibility that it was some bat crap crazy demon wanting to go for a ride in a Winchester meatsuit. We’re kind of
famous with those sons of bitches,” he said drily. “If something else is up, sooner or later it’ll show.”

John stood on his spot with his hand on the handle, overly aware of the things he still had no clue about, but another all-nighter was out of the question. His eyelids were struggling not to close and the idea of wrapping himself up in his duvet had more allure than all the wonders of the world, no matter how literally wondrous they were.

He bid Sam goodnight and went to bed.

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A few times during his shift John’s mind darted back to the case Greg was working. Even as he’d dozed off the night before John had been startled out of his slumber by remembering he’d forgotten to mention it to Sam. It was a very odd case, and John had instantly sniffed the potential of it being exactly the kind of weird Sam would find interesting. Doubt had assailed him straight away, though —now the extraordinary world of the supernatural had been revealed to him he was susceptible to flights of fancy, i.e. hearing about an ordinary albeit baffling case, and explaining its mystery with a supernatural reason. How Sherlock would have scoffed.

Mercifully there were fewer patients today, or at least fewer who’d come in just for a chat. John wasn’t feeling on top form and he had a brief sense of *déjà vu* when he realized that he was again yearning to be back home talking about exciting things—only now wanting to do it while horizontal on the sofa. He might have been a far cry from the crippled ex-soldier who’d just been invalided back from Afghanistan a few years ago—being swept in the whirlwind ‘Sherlock Holmes’ had remedied that rather swiftly—but some things couldn’t be reversed. John knew he no longer had the constitution and the energy of a twenty-five-year-old. Three days of crazy stuff and he really needed to have some rest. At least he wasn’t fraying around the edges. No doubt another enduring aspect of Sherlock’s legacy.

John called Sam and Mrs Hudson after work to check if either wanted anything from the shop. It was a lovely, warm September day—the weather forecast had promised the sun would be out over the weekend, but it had defied prognosis and was shining a couple of days ahead of schedule. John felt a pleasant bout of energy as he came out at the end of his shift, having spent long hours cooped up in the surgery. He decided to walk home from Charing Cross instead of taking the Bakerloo as usual. His walk was quietly enjoyable and it allowed him some mental space to process the chats he’d had last night.

Actually, the time he spent with Greg had been quite nice and not particularly requiring special effort to process, aside from the small matter of whether Greg was Mycroft’s spy. John had been both hopeful and fearful to have some news about Moriarty’s network. He needn’t have feared that he’d be unsettled, like he was every time he heard about it, because there was no news on that front. Greg had told him that in the few weeks that had passed since they last saw each other there’d been no arrests or any links to what Sherlock had called “the spider’s web”. Greg had gone as far as to say (with a suitably lowered voice giving his statement some gravitas) that he believed the network had finally unravelled after the big boss’s demise over a year ago. John had had an irrational, uneasy urge to blurt out that it could have been the case of the calm before the storm, but he said nothing. Greg Lestrade was a good policeman. If he said they’d got all the big fish and some of the small ones, sufficient to put an end of the network, then John just had to trust him.

The conversation John had had with Sam was another matter. Not that John was affected by it—he was sorry that Sam was unhappy, but what choices Sam made was his own business. Who was John to have a say anyway? He only had to think of Harry to know he had no expert advice on siblings’
relationships. But as he walked with a brisk, even pace, selecting the main streets—he was still enjoying the hustle and bustle of London after being absent from it until recently—John found himself ruminating on the complexities of Sam and Dean’s relationship. That he understood and felt he was an expert of sorts. After all, he’d been the only man to form a real, sincere, meaningful relationship with Sherlock Holmes. It was funny how when he viewed it from an outsider’s perspective, as it was necessitated by making comparisons with Sam and Dean, John didn’t even hesitate to define what he’d had with Sherlock as complex. However, when he’d experienced it, when he thought about it now, only about it on its own, calling on his emotional memory, the feeling was always of something simple and straightforward. Perhaps because it was instinctively understood and integrated, like it had been the case with very, very few things in John’s life.

It was Sherlock. It was him and Sherlock. John knew what that meant in ways that he could never articulate, but all of them brought a sense of clarity and purity in him he never felt the need to dispute.

His mind was seamlessly making the back and forth transition between abstract and concrete, as John popped in and out of a few shops on his way. He was sensible enough to look at the new mid-season collections that had appeared on the shop windows—sun or no sun, the summer was over, and John could do with a new scarf. Or a new jumper, or a new cardigan, or all of the above. He spent almost an hour buying groceries, too—at some point thinking he should call Sam to summon him as a shopping bags carrier—so when he walked past Baker Street Underground station the day’s edition of The Evening Standard was already out.

Its front page made the decision whether to share Lestrade’s case with Sam a lot easier.

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“So?” John asked, looking up from the kitchen table where he’d been sitting in the last five minutes outlining Lestrade’s case to Sam, while Sam was putting the shopping away. Sam thought John looked like a job applicant who’d just handed in his resume. “Do you think—” John began. “I mean, maybe I’m imagining things, but—”

“No,” Sam said quickly. “You’re not. There’s definitely something off about this.” He leaned on the kitchen counter and gave John a small smile in response to his serious, relieved face. “To be honest if I were working jobs right now this would’ve been exactly the kind of thing I’d check out.”

John turned his chin to the left, looking at Sam sideways with a half-critical, half-bewildered air. “You’ll check it out now, though, right?”

Well, certainly Sam’s instinct was telling him to start working this straight away. It was a textbook thing: a second mysterious murder within a week, both in the same area—he was surprised none of the local hunters had already gotten on it. (Maybe they had, and they just weren’t very good. Sam still didn’t know anything about them: where they met, how you got in touch with one, how many there were. He felt safer that way; anonymity always protected him best, and it wasn’t like his reasons to want to avoid mingling with them were any less valid than before. Plus now that he had John’s company there was zero need in him to seek out his kind.)

The first victim was 25, British, male. The second 55, Russian, female. The area had a thriving Russian community so there was nothing unusual about the identity of the second victim. What was unusual was the fact that the police didn’t have a single suspect after a five-day investigation—something the press didn’t know but Greg Lestrade had confided to John.
Where it got interesting was that there was an eye-witness to the first murder. The crime scene was in a close, tucked in between a few houses, most of them rented by Russians. The eye-witness was a quite elderly British gentleman who nonetheless seemed in full possession of his mental faculties—John said Lestrade had sounded almost regretful about that. While there wasn’t any CCTV covering the close, the cameras on the bigger streets leading to it backed the elderly gentleman’s account. He claimed there hadn’t been a single soul at the crime scene. His story was that he’d been pottering about downstairs, getting ready for bed at around quarter past ten, when he’d heard a muffled yell outside. He’d looked out the front room window—mere ten yards away from where the body was found—and saw nothing, but then heard something like a howl. So he went out to check what was happening, taking a phone with him, only to find the vic’s body sprawled on the ground behind a van. The man called the police immediately and they arrived very quickly, rising whatever part of the neighbourhood that hadn’t already risen.

Sam could see why John had been hesitant about whether this was an actual job for Sam. It wasn’t unheard of for criminals to be stealthy and get away, without a trace, too. However, the cameras did show that no one had gone in and out of that close the entire evening apart from the people who lived in the surrounding houses. None of them would have had a chance to clean him- or herself up, or their property of the victim’s blood. Lestrade had told John this was one of the bloodiest cases he’d ever worked, so Sam was pretty sure the forensics were right that the killer was not one of the residents.

Not in human form anyway. Because there was one little detail that hadn’t appeared in the press and that the eye-witness himself had decided not to put in writing. He’d sworn that the only thing breaking the still of the night was a very large bird, “the size of an enormous hawk” flying off with a cry exactly from the spot where he’d found the body seconds later. Apparently the police here were very thorough, because they’d checked the dead guy for any signs corresponding with a particularly vicious bird attack. None were found. Plus, the account the eye-witness had given spoke of the kind of bird that simply couldn’t exist in this geographical region.

So yeah, this had ‘shapeshifter’ written all over it, bold and underlined.

On the other hand Sam kind of had his hands full now. The demon attack, Sherlock’s ghost, Mycroft freaking Holmes breathing down his neck… The last thing Sam should do was have more crap dumped on his plate. Thing was, he didn’t always do what he should. Choice was a big deal for him, and although there wasn’t always a list of smart reasons behind each of Sam’s choices, he felt that as a whole his instincts were right. In this case there was nothing on the demon front here or back home; Dean was safe and peachy with his ‘Team Purgatory’; Kevin was safe, too, by the look of it. He just felt this case was a priority.

And he couldn’t just sit around forever, waiting for Sherlock’s ghost to make an appearance again. Truth be told, he was stuck about what to do next. He was bugged to no end by Mycroft Holmes, as well as a bit scared about what the guy wasn’t telling him, but there was a fat chance Sam was going to back off from that job. However, he needed to work out how exactly to proceed and something told him working a proper job would shake off the dust his brain had gathered in the last few months. For instance, it had only occurred to him in the middle of the night that Sherlock’s ghost might have been under a binding spell. Someone else controlling him for their own means, which at present were completely obscure. It would have explained the irregular patterns of showing up as well as the fact that he’d not made a single attack on anyone yet—at least not in Baker Street.

Last but not least John was clearly expecting Sam to do something about this new case. Sam didn’t know whether it was guilt for lying to John, or whether it was a simple wish not to disappoint him, but he found it hard to say no. What would be the harm anyway? Either there wasn’t a job, but Sam
would have checked to put both his and John’s mind at ease. Or there was a job, and in that case more people could die if Sam did nothing about it.

He looked down to John’s expectant face and nodded earnestly, joining him at the table. “Sure,” he said. “I’ll check it out.”

John nodded curtly back and wriggled in his seat as if he was getting comfortable because he expected to spend the next couple of hours there. Sam was going to, doing research, but John didn’t have to be involved.

Apparently John had other ideas. “Okay,” he said dragging his laptop closer and opening the lid. “What’s the first step?”

“Um…” Sam was momentarily taken aback so he answered on automatic. “Going over every scrap of information that’s out there to figure out what we’re dealing with. Maybe talking to people. There’s usually one person who’s the best to talk to.”

“Right,” John said. His gray eyes were shining brightly, yet his gaze was steady. Sam thought John would have made an excellent addition in any hospital’s ER. “How would you know who that is?” John asked. “How do you figure out who you need to talk to?”

Sam shrugged. His reply didn’t come out too smooth. He wasn’t used to explaining these things, he just did them. “I…I don’t know really. Um, I mean you learn to spot things that the police ignore or don’t care about. Often because they just don’t know it’s important,” he hurried to clarify in case John got offended on behalf of his DI friend.

“For instance in this case,” Sam continued, tapping on the newspaper. “It’s obvious the eye-witness would be considered unreliable but I’d go talk to him. People who say they saw impossible or crazy things are the ones we go to.” Sam caught himself on the plural too late.

It seemed he had other reasons to worry about his slip of the tongue, not just the fact that his brain was still functioning in a ‘we’ mode. John had straightened up in his chair, his military background leaping out.

“How do we talk to him, then?” he asked Sam. “Do you want me to ring Greg and see if I can get a name?”

Sam frowned. “We are not going to talk to anyone,” he said. “I’m going to read up on this first, then go find the guy by myself.”


“It’s not—John.” Sam bored his eyes into John’s crestfallen ones. “It could be very dangerous. I mean it.”

John licked his lips again, then pulled a quick, complicated grimace. “That’s, er, that’s not actually putting me off,” he said. “Quite the opposite, just so you know.”

Sam abruptly pulled away from the table, upper body plastering against the chair’s backrest. A few responses fought to come out, but none won as Sam watched John Watson lift his chin and straighten up even further, obviously presenting himself for what he perceived as Sam’s inspection. Sam would
have given him a medal for being such an unusual, awesome guy.

What he did was try to talk him out of his idea instead.

“I can’t take risks with your life,” he told him, tone turning imploring. “I’m serious.” His eyes mirrored his tone. “If you don’t know what you’re doing, if you’re not experienced, you could die.”

“Okay,” John said reasonably. “I don’t want to die. So I’ll be very careful and follow your lead.” Sam was shaking his head as John pressed, voice not losing an ounce of its softness but nonetheless giving off a pretty steely vibe. “You can’t expect me to stay tucked in at home in front of the telly while you go out there on your own fighting God knows what monster.”

Sam opened his mouth to reply but found he had nothing. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that had their roles been reversed he’d have felt exactly the same as John did. There were countless instances in the past when he’d made Dean do something that Dean thought crazy or too dangerous, simply because Sam believed it to be the right thing to do and wouldn’t let go.

Besides, John was being pretty sensible. He didn’t want to rush in, a dagger in hand and a cry on his lips. He only wanted to back up Sam, ready to listen to him. From what Sam could tell John was actually going to do that for real, rather than just declare he would then when the time came do his own thing putting everyone in danger.

Sherlock Holmes had trained his partner well. Sam was used to working with a partner. There was really no saying ‘no’ to this.

Sam didn’t want to, either.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

John found himself unable to fall asleep until gone one in the morning, despite the fact that he went to bed around ten feeling shattered. It was a well-known medical phenomenon that on some occasions the brain experienced a glitch resulting in a paradox: the desperate need to switch off and the inability to do so. It hadn’t happened to him in a while, and he wasn’t quite certain whether he’d self-diagnosed accurately. The other hypothesis was that it was over-excitement layered over tiredness—a combination that made winding down difficult. That he remembered well from his not so distant past.

He turned up downstairs fairly early in the morning, lured by the hint of blue sky he could see when he opened his curtains—it meant the east-facing sitting room would have been bathed in sunlight. The possibility that Sam was already awake was also alluring. There was no sign of him moving about, but Sam was a rare creature: he padded around softly as if having a permanent pair of oversized kitten paws instead of feet. Because that was the thing—nothing in his physique suggested the kind of silent movement he was not only capable of, but it seemed he was naturally prone to. Or maybe it was the life he’d led. John couldn’t imagine being loud and clumsy got you very far in dead-of-the-night stakeouts and stealthy break-ins.

Sam was indeed up, sitting at the right end of the sofa with his feet stretched out on the coffee table in front of him and crossed at the ankles. His face was upturned to the near window, and for a few seconds John considered the view of the back of his head wondering if Sam was asleep. He made a couple of tentative steps into the room; the figure on the sofa instantly came to life.

“Morning,” John said.

“Morning.” Sam’s neck had twisted to allow him to face John.

John moved closer and peered over Sam’s shoulder into his lap where he found Sam’s hands wrapped around an empty mug.

“Want another coffee?” he asked. “I need a few minutes in the bathroom and then I’ll make some toast too.”

“Yeah, sounds good. Thanks.” With the windows closed the quietness of Sam’s voice stood out even more.

In the next fifteen minutes John went about his business, all the while coming up with musings and questions on Greg’s case, as if going vertical had turned him into a thought bottle waiting to be filled up. When he finally joined Sam back in the sitting room, toast and hot beverages fairly distributed, he could see from the lines around Sam’s eyes that they were on the same page, both with the nervous excitement and the lack of sleep. There was something else on Sam’s face however, that John was certain he hadn’t spotted on his own features in the bathroom mirror. Determination and a specific brand of focus that were new, but that John had no difficulty connecting to the meaning the word ‘hunter’ had begun to acquire in his head.
“Did you find anything on the internet last night?” he asked Sam taking a sip of his tea.

Sam’s lips moulded into a half-disappointed, half-resigned pout. John expected him to go ‘meh’ at any moment.

“Not much but I didn’t expect any different.” Sam took a bite from a slice of toast, chewed on it three times, and swallowed it quickly before continuing. “You basically latch onto the weird and hope there might be a lead in what you find out there. The police and the Feds rarely give away the really important stuff, and if they somehow do the media reports get it wrong.”

John nodded. What he was hearing was common sense, but he still took mental notes.

“So nothing good, then.” He considered his next question for the umpteenth time since last night. It was going to be really tricky, but if there was no other way…

“Do you want me to call Lestrade? See if he’ll let me have a look at the police reports?”

“That’d be ideal, but I don’t think it’s such a good idea.”

“Why not?”

Sam had hunched a bit, elbows on his thighs. He now straightened up. His hands turned palms up, fingers flaring open for a moment. “Well, for starters we might hit a block and need to get to the files later on, so it’d be stupid to waste what could be our only shot. I mean I don’t know how close you two are, but I’m thinking it’d be kind of suspicious if you went to him asking to snoop around the files a second time, right?”

“Hmm.” John conceded. Of course it would be. He was no longer half of the ‘Sherlock Holmes and John Watson’ duo. His concerns about asking for Greg’s help had taken this into account, but Sam had gone a step further and painted a future in which John had to actually return to the Yard for information. His solitary status suddenly shone much brighter, and colder.

Sam placed his coffee mug on the coaster in front of him. “Besides,” he said, “I don’t want to mess up your friendship with the guy.”

John had a brief sense of foresight that whatever this…job was, some boundaries were about to be tested and shifted with it. Obviously Sam knew a thing or two about that too.

Each bridge when they got to it.

“What do we do now?” John asked.

“Now we go talk to the eye-witness,” Sam said, tone suddenly relaxed, as if he’d reached a stepping stone he was confident standing on. “But I need some time for prep work. I’ve got us a great background story so hopefully we should be able to suss out what he really saw without problems.”

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Even before the prospect of working with Sam showed up on the horizon John had been ready to swear that Sam would be thorough in what he did. He was right. It was always the details that gave away a pro; the things that wouldn’t matter 99% of the time, but they were still taken care of. They went to speak to the eye-witness prepared for every eventuality, thanks to Sam’s strategic planning
and his ability to produce fake background props within the space of half a day.

The one eventuality Sam hadn’t foreseen was Katie calling his name behind them after they’d just departed. John couldn’t hold it against Sam—his slightly panicked bulging eyes told John that all of Sam’s focus had gone into what was coming ahead, leaving no resource for dealing with admirers.

“So she asked you out?” John murmured, eyes on Katie’s retreating back—the miniature black skulls on her scarf were in stark contrast to the whiteness of her top. The girl was on her way back to Speedy’s after Sam had managed to politely extract himself from going to some festival with her over the weekend. He’d told her he had visitors coming from America. Disappointment had added to Katie’s flushed embarrassment, while Sam towered over everyone with his fingers bunched up in his jeans pockets and his brow wrinkled in apology. John had wondered from where they’d borrow Americans for the weekend before remembering that Katie was going to be away at that festival on both days.

“Yeah, she did,” Sam answered John’s question, his hands still in his pockets. John was sure it was awkwardness rather than mistrust. “I’d totally forgotten about it,” Sam added.

John cast him a quick sideway glance. “You did fine,” he told him. “It was nice of you to let her down gently.”

Sam’s answer was lost to the honk of a bus having an argument with a biker, but John suspected it was something non-committal. He believed he understood where Sam was coming from. Even though Katie was a nice girl, she was practically their neighbour, and in John’s books this sort of thing was just as ill-advised as a one-night stand with someone from work. John didn’t know what to make of Sam in that respect. How a long-term thing would function with Sam’s life-style was hard to imagine, but it was harder to imagine him as a ‘love ‘em and leave ‘em’ kind of bloke. Maybe Sam should just go out with Katie and see where things could go. That opened a new line of thought to do with Sam’s plans for the future. John had a brief, grinding feeling that this was the reason he was concerning himself with the whole situation, but now wasn’t the time to address it. The last thing he would have done was to actually question Sam anyway, now or at any other point.

They found two empty seats next to each other on the Central Line—their journey to Leytonstone was going to take more than ten stops. Sam had done his homework on the area, too. His findings were at odds with what John had heard from Lestrade, in that apparently Russians were notoriously keen to avoid living close to each other. Calling any gathering of Russians in London ‘a community’ seemed to be a stretch so John was curious what they’d find. It added yet another point of novelty to the whole experience but conversely, there was familiarity as well that wasn’t lost on John. The nature of the investigation was what made a huge difference, not to mention the possible outcome if this turned out to be Sam’s sort of thing.

Back at home John had asked Sam about what he should expect. Sam laid it all out for him in the same oddly reassuring, casual manner in which he’d spoken about Lucifer and soul trading. The point where things suddenly turned disturbing was when Sam had arrived at the last stop of the plan without any change in his demeanour.

“Right,” John had said. “So say we’re certain what creatures we’re dealing with—”

“Great,” Sam cut in, continuing in one breath, “how do we kill them?”

John’s shock must have shown on his face, because Sam had frowned. “I’m not actually asking you. That would be the thing we’d need to work out next.”
John took a moment to gather his thoughts. “So you just go for it?” he said quietly. “No questions asked?”

John was sitting in the middle of the sofa while Sam had propped himself against its right armrest, his back to the window. In response to John’s words he’d looked sort of stranded for a moment, eyes flicking between both of John’s eyes. He’d twisted to look behind his back, too, then faced John again. His chin suddenly dropped to almost touch his chest. His eyes met John’s.

“We do make sure the thing we’re hunting is responsible for the killings,” he told him. “But we don’t ask many questions after that, no. There can’t be any stopping—” He lifted his head. “I mean, of course there can be. There should be, that’s not what I mean...” Sam seemed to be having a conversation with an invisible John, because John hadn’t said a word. Or maybe it was a conversation Sam still had with himself? John felt glad at the prospect.

Sam pushed his flopping hair away from his face and straightened up further. “This is not the legal system, John,” he told him. “There are no extenuating circumstances. There’s often no time to even consider the circumstances. You have to act quick, because you can actually die if you don’t.” Sam had paused, features hardening, but his voice came out very soft. “Or worse—others die because you hesitated. These creatures...they’re not human. And it’s hard sometimes, because few things in life are black and white, but that’s how it is. They’re monsters; if they’ve hurt someone, if there’s a chance they might hurt another—we salt’n’burn them, or do whatever it takes to stop them. It’s as simple as that.”

They looked at each other in silence for a few long seconds. “That doesn’t sound simple to me,” John offered.

Sam’s laugh consisted of a single mirthless exhalation, but it still managed to answer to something tightly wound in John’s chest, easing it a bit.

He now looked at his companion’s profile to find it calm but not vacant. It didn’t seem that Sam Winchester ever had a vacant expression from what John could tell, and he had the feeling he’d seen a pretty authentic picture of him. John himself was feeling a touch nervous. It wasn’t like he hadn’t talked to people while pretending to be someone else, but it’d been a while. At least the fact that there was no immediate need to improvise was reassuring.

They were going to talk to the eye-witness as two ornithologists, and they looked the part. John had taken offence when Sam came up with a convoluted line of explanations that amounted to putting a sign of equality between boring, dork-like people and John’s everyday clothes. Sam hadn’t appeared remotely chastened by John’s silent reproach. Retaliation in the shape of a scathing comment on Sam’s fashion choices was stored away for a more opportune moment. Sherlock had been a sharp, smart dresser so his views on John’s wardrobe John had been able to stomach somehow, but he wasn’t going to sit quietly and be judged by a guy who didn’t wear plaid only when he went to bed.

Today Sam had put on a dark, more formal pair of jeans as well as a white shirt with a brown sweater vest, coupled with a suit jacket in the same colour. He should have looked dull, but of course he didn’t—John had seen the same phenomenon with Sherlock, who managed to give character even to a plain white sheet.

Their ‘costumes’ had been the end of their preparation for the part they were about to play. Sam had given John full instructions coupled with a fake card identifying John as a member of the British Birds Rarities Committee. It was bloody brilliant, both the idea and the card’s execution. Sam had
waved off John’s questions about its origin saying that when you had money and experience to
know whom to give it to, you could get anything, especially in a big city like London. Evidently all
that time Sam had spent doing ‘research’ he had really done research—only not for his fake course.
John had murmured a comment to that effect, in which there might have been some residual smarting
about Sam lying to him at the start of their acquaintance.

“Um, that was actually a real course,” Sam had responded with a smile purposefully designed to
show his teeth and make him look cartoon-like apologetic. “Sorry about…You know, back then.”

“It’s fine,” John told him, meaning it. “Your course—I mean that course was real?”

“Yeah. It had to be something that would come up if you did a search for it. And something that I
was kind of an expert in. The best lies are those that have a lot of truth in them.”

John had grinned shaking his head. Sam lifted his shoulders to his ears and dropped them abruptly,
pulling a hard to define grimace.

“Hold on.” John had had an afterthought. “I didn’t do a search on the course, because I couldn’t
remember the name. But I did google you, and your brother, and nothing came up.”

Sam was already nodding before John had finished. “That’s Charlie. She’s…She’s kind of a friend.
Dean and I were dealing—” Sam’s hands had cut through the air horizontally. “Now’s not the time,
we need to get ready. I’ll tell you about the Leviathans another time. Anyways, Charlie was this
whiz kid, computer genius. She’s awesome. She helped us a lot with something, so when we parted
we asked for one last favour.”

do.”

Sam had given him one of his patent raised-eyebrows dry looks. “You have no idea. But yeah, no
digital footprint—she deleted everything out there, and I mean everything. And she put a—a kind of
a virus, I guess, that kills whatever shows up with our names in it. We figured it’d look suspicious
—”

“Well, yes,” John interjected. Sam spread his arms. “But think about it. It's got to be way better than
what there was about us out there. Or what there might be.” Sam’s voice had filled with teasing
irony. “I mean as soon as today, including your name.”

“Yes,” John had replied, buttoning his dark red cardigan. “I feel particularly dangerous as a fake
ornithologist.”

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Before talking to Mr Thomas Andrews—the eye-witness, whose name was easily procured from the
always happy to chat corner shop population—they did a quick tour of the area. Neither of them
knew what they were looking for, but both were all too aware that a small detail hidden in the big
picture could make all the difference, so wordlessly they kept their eyes open for everything and
anything. John took a few notes, all the more that some of the signs were in Cyrillic. Sam shot him a
sideway glance when John produced his notepad from his jeans back pocket, but said nothing. Nor
was his face disparaging. John briefly wondered why he’d expect disparagement; the first answer
that presented itself was that for all his sensitivity and kindness, Sam actually scoffed sarcastically
quite often.
Mr Andrews was a pocket size bald man whose clothes hung on his narrow frame a little too loosely. He wasn’t hostile when he answered the door, but after exchanging only a few phrases with him John knew that Sam would have had a problem if he’d come here on his own. Not only was Sam quite imposing, but his strong American accent seemed to make the elderly gentleman’s suspicion emanate from him. John took the lead as smoothly as he could, grateful that Sam understood him without as much as a glance—he took a step back and stilled as if trying to blend in with the background.

Just as Sam had predicted, Mr Andrews responded to their declared lack of interest in the murder with an invitation to come indoors. Their fake ID cards introducing them respectively as one member of the BBRC and one member of the American Birding Association seemed to seal the deal, and they found themselves offered a cuppa as they settled on the comfortable sofa in the lounge. It wasn’t hard to deduce by its floral pattern that Mr Andrews was a widower—something confirmed by the couple of photographs on which a slightly younger version of him was smiling next to a bespectacled lady of roughly the same age.

“How did you find out about the bird?” he asked when he brought in the tray with steaming cups. Sam had surprised John by asking for tea, three sugars—undoubtedly part of his on-going effort to get on their host’s good side.

John was the one to reply. “One of my mates from my Army days transferred to the police a few years back,” he said. “And he knows about my new line of work. So when he heard it mentioned in an informal chat, he mentioned it to me.” John offered a grimace of embarrassment. “I don’t think he expected me to follow it up, but that’s me.” He cleared his throat, purposefully not looking at Sam. “Crazy about rare birds. Would, ah...Would do anything for them.”

“It was actually my fault that we’re disturbing you.” Sam spoke, voice so close to a hum that goosebumps rose on John’s arms. “John said something about it yesterday during the coffee break. Um, we’re in Bath at the moment—there’s a seminar the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds organizes once every two years. This year it’s about the birds of prey population—” Sam’s dimples danced with his bright smile, all sent in the direction of Mr Andrews. “We won’t bother you with our work. But, I, um...I’m the enthusiast. So I wouldn’t leave John alone until we checked this out. It’s pretty extraordinary to spot...An eagle, was it?”

Mr Andrews moved to the edge of his armchair. “I’m not quite sure.” He turned to John. “It was very dark, you see. It could have been a shadow playing a trick on me. My eyesight is not what it used to be.”

John hummed in sympathy. “Left or right? Or both eyes?” he asked.

Mr Andrews perked up. “Well, it’s mostly the left one.” He launched into a detailed description of the issues he’d had with his vision. John listened and nodded, inserting relevant comments that betrayed his medical background.

“So you couldn’t see the bird very well,” he said carefully when there was a natural end of the exchange.

Mr Andrews watery brown eyes jumped to the window behind the sofa then back to John. “I saw it was a big bird,” he said. John nodded encouragingly. Next to him Sam’s expression was that of an interested scholar. “Rather large, you know,” Mr Andrews continued. “Perhaps seven-eight feet—with its wings open, I mean.”
Sam and John exchanged a look. “That’s amazing.” Sam the Keen Ornithologist told John, eyes communicating instructions to keep digging.

John produced his notepad again. “So a wingspan of seven-eight feet,” he said, scribbling diligently. “Did you happen to notice its plumage?” He was proud to be able to put to use some of the terms and expressions they’d remembered. “Colour?”

“Not really, no.” Mr Andrews did the shifty eyes thing again. “It was very quick—one moment it was there, the next it’d flown off. The streetlight isn’t all that good round here…”

John hummed with understanding again. He took a sip of his tea, quickly considering ways to get through to their witness. His eyes went around the room: a bit messy, not redecorated for a while, plenty of photographs everywhere.

One of which showed Mr Andrews with three other elderly gentlemen, one in a wheelchair. They were all decorated with medals.

John got up; both his companions looked up, startled.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, making his way to the picture to look at it properly. “World War Two?” he asked, voice genuinely respectful with added awe for effect.

Mr Andrews joined him by the shelf with the photographs, face growing grave yet proud. “Yes. Only eighteen I was, 1945.”

“It’s a real honour,” John said. “I was in Afghanistan a few years back. Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers.”

“I was an infantryman myself! Are you no longer in service?”

John shook his head. “I got shot, so they invalided me back.”

“Oh dear.”

“Yes.”

Mr Andrews looked at him, echoing John’s impressed face from earlier. John put the photograph back. If only he had Sherlock’s instinct for performance he would have been more certain whether he’d just gotten his cue.

“I had to find something else, you know.” He chanced with further improvisation. “To take my mind off things. I’ve always been very interested in nature and birds. My old man and I used to do a lot of birdwatching when I was a wee boy.”

“Where did you grow up?” Mr Andrews asked. He wasn’t moving to go back to his armchair, but continued to stand facing John. John took that as a good sign.

“Scotland,” he replied. “Renfrewshire. But my dad died when I was fourteen, so we moved to Shropshire, closer to my mum’s family.” It felt good to be telling the truth.

“I was born and raised in the Lake District,” Mr Andrews said. “Cumbria,” he clarified. John was
suddenly struck by his voice—there was no mistaking the patina that only old age was able to put on one’s vocal cords.

“Beautiful area,” he told Mr Andrews warmly. “Britain’s nature at its finest.”

Sam spoke from the sofa, tone neutral. “We can discuss it with my colleagues. See if we can’t go there for a day or two? There’s probably a lot to see.”

“Yes,” John said over Mr Andrews’s ‘Oh yes.’ John sensed the old man was about to embark on another train of thought, so a pre-emptive move was needed.

John sighed. “Well, we’re sorry to have wasted your time. I was really hoping to find out more about that bird. It sounds extraordinary, quite extraordinary…”

Sam got up, too, with a heavier sigh. Mr Andrews didn’t spare him a glance, obviously distracted. John lingered at his spot. “If you remember anything, anything at all,” he pressed, leaving the end of his sentence invitingly open.

Mr Andrews’s face grew pointed, giving him the appearance of an old badger. “Well, I never said that to the police, and I won’t be repeating it to anyone else, mind. But you boys may make something out of it.” He finally looked at Sam, then back to John. “Maybe you can even tell me what it is that I saw, because I’ve not been able to make sense of it ever since.”

“Yes, of course,” John said. “If we can. What was it? You said the bird was huge.”

The sun reflected over the top of Mr Andrews’s head as he shook it. “Not just that,” he said. He sounded frailer than ever. “It all happened very quickly, but for a moment there I could swear that it—it was sort of very bright.” He reached out and rubbed at a spot along the frame of one photograph, his thumb yellow and not too steady.

John stared at him. “Very bright,” he repeated, unsure whether Mr Andrews meant the bird had simply had light feathers. At least they now knew for sure he had seen something important.

John had no idea just how important, until he heard the old man’s next words. “Lit up, properly too,” he clarified, eyes meeting John’s, livelier and just that bit tense—a match to what was coming in waves from Sam’s direction. “Glowing sort of gold and orange.” Mr Andrews blinked quickly as if seeing the bird again. "It was like, like...Like its feathers were on fire."

Chapter End Notes

A couple of visuals for this chapter can be found here.

I am taking part in the AO3 Fundraiser—please, take a look at my bidding page.♡
I think this chapter calls for a reminder of the warnings for the entire story. They can be found [here](#). Many thanks to the wonderful enname for the beta and to the awesome SPN expert nausicaa83 for being my Bobby and letting me talk through the hunt plot with her. Thank you all for reading and I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sam scrubbed at his face with both palms until the numbness diminished—he’d lost track on the uninterrupted time he must have spent on his laptop. There was a weak, high-pitched sound in his ears and his eyeballs wanted to shrivel in their sockets. It was already dark outside, but he hadn’t noticed the evening’s arrival and consequently hadn’t turned on the lights, so this was protest against staring at the too bright screen for too long. The noise of the closing door downstairs had prompted his return to the real world after he’d inhabited the realms of the fantastical—and what others would have called ‘the impossible’—for hours. The approaching steps betrayed that Sam’s temporary roommate was back, followed by Sam’s temporary landlady. (Ha. He had a landlady. That was nice. He’d never had one.)

After they’d left Thomas Andrews’s house Sam and John walked a safe distance out of sight and stopped to do a quick recap. Sam had been more than convinced that they were dealing with a supernatural creature. He suggested to John that they should split: Sam going back home and hitting the internet while John called DI Lestrade and tried to gather as much info on both victims as possible. Sam had lost any reluctance to involve John and his connections—there’d been only four days between the first and the second killing so if there was a pattern they had no time to waste.

John had agreed without any questions and called Lestrade on the spot. Sam listened in on the conversation, once again impressed by John’s careful mixture of honesty and performance. Distracted by what they’d learned from the old man Sam had failed to praise John on how he’d handled the situation back there, but this time he did comment. John’s reaction was of pleasure at the compliment, but it was kind of blink and you’d miss it—such was the speed with which it’d been replaced by modesty. John mumbled something about learning from the best; apparently Sherlock had been “the best bloody actor the stage never saw”. This was news to Sam. Shocking how occasionally big stuff somehow managed to remain hidden from view for a long time. Sam stored away this particular detail to think about it later—they really had to crack on with the job.

On the phone John told ‘Greg’ that he’d been thinking about the case, then asked him whether he could have a look at the victims’ houses or at least at some files. “I’m not Sherlock,” he’d said, his gaze self-deprecating and distant, “but who knows—maybe I might be able to help? If you think you could do with a fresh pair of eyes…” Lestrade told John he’d call him back, so John urged Sam to get on with his research and promised to contact him. Once Sam came out of Baker Street station his phone got reception again, and a message from John was delivered: ‘*On my way to the first victim’s house.*’

That was around three o’clock. Sam looked at his watch now to find it was close to seven. John
appeared dazed and wound up, the way you did when you’d been on the ball, alert, for hours on end. Sam imagined that after all this time he still sometimes got that look himself. There was something else in John’s eyes that Sam was sure still lingered in his own, or at least he’d seen it in Dean’s plenty of times. There was a hungry edge at the pit of his gaze—Sam had spotted it instantly when John walked in and turned on the light. He stood in the middle of the room, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“Hey,” Sam said.

“Hi.” John’s hands flexed convulsively into loose fists then relaxed; he did that a few times in quick succession. Sam didn’t think he realized he was doing it. It looked a lot like pent-up energy. Or some unsettlement perhaps?

“So? Did you go to both houses?” Sam asked.

“Yes, I did.” John began shrugging off his jacket while still talking. “I took lots of notes, so we can look at them together.” His eyes went back to Sam and he spread his arms helplessly, jacket hanging from one of them as if on a hook. “But I can’t see any connection between the two. And neither can the police. They’re stumped.” He was about to continue when there was a ‘wo-hoo’ at the door signalling Mrs Hudson’s arrival.

“I heard you come in,” she told John, then looked at Sam. “I thought I’d check if you two had anything for supper.”

John looked at her, momentarily bewildered. Sam’s stomach growled.

“We can make sandwiches, Mrs Hudson,” he said.

“Oh, nonsense.” She turned on her heels and headed back out again. “I made lovely stew, you can have some.”

It didn’t take long for Mrs Hudson to be brought up to speed with their ‘shenanigans’. She’d put two and two together anyway, and showed no surprise to hear what Sam and John had been up to. “Just like old times, eh, John,” she said, eyes twinkling on her slightly worried face. “You be careful,” she went on speaking over her shoulder on her way to the kitchen. It wasn’t clear who she was addressing—Sam supposed or rather hoped it was both of them. She’d completely failed to spot the flared up emotion on John’s face at her previous comment. It’d been so quickly squashed anyway, Sam would have missed it himself if he wasn’t sitting across the table from John.

“I don’t mind you doing your kind of thing here, Sam,” Mrs Hudson called over the noise from the running tap. “As long as you don’t spill any blood on my rugs. And no intestines, please. It was bad enough Sherlock kept all sorts of vile things like that in the fridge. Oh, and in the bathtub, and in the sink…I don’t want any of that. I remember what Dean told me about that riga or ruga thing you’d just killed back then. Your doodles I can put up with, because you can’t see them, but the blood will be a nightmare to clean. I’d have to change the rugs and call people to re-carpet, and I just don’t have the money.”

Sam looked at John pleadingly, but John just boggled at him, then shook his head, equally at a loss.

“Um, okay, Mrs Hudson,” Sam called back. “And I’ll, uh…I’ll start paying some rent from this week, too.”
Mrs Hudson peered from the kitchen waving a soapy finger at him. “You’ll pay rent if you decide to stay a bit longer,” she said then disappeared back. Some melodious humming was heard over the water, betraying that once again Mrs Hudson was oblivious of the sensitive area she’d just dropped a bomb over. Sam’s eyes shot to John on their own accord, their gazes colliding before jumping away simultaneously.

John related his observations from the two victims’ houses while Mrs Hudson was still there, but Sam waited for her to leave to share his own discoveries. The dining table was cleared from any traces of dinner, and Sam’s laptop took center stage again.

“So basically I wasted Lestrade’s time,” John summed up his pursuits. He rubbed at the spot right between his eyebrows. “Nothing unusual as far as I can see—unless you count as unusual the pigsty that was the lady’s house. The amount of stuff there, Jesus. But yes, um—no connection between them.” He looked at Sam, more guilty than regretful. “Sorry,” he finished.

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” Sam told him quickly. “You don’t know what you’ve got yet. We’re just starting on this.”

John hummed, not particularly uplifted. “What about you?” he asked. “Did you find anything?”

“Actually, I think I did.” Sam took a breath then stopped with his mouth gaping, unsure. Dean wouldn’t have needed any background or clarifications; they usually jumped right in with whatever they’d discovered, theory or fact. But John was not even a freshman. Hell, a week ago John hadn’t even known the supernatural existed. Where did Sam begin with this?

John was watching him, head tilted to the right, his whole demeanour not unlike that of a dog under the command to listen.

“Okay,” Sam said. “I think we’re dealing with a shifter. That’s shapeshifters. Every culture has them. It’s in the lore, or some very old legends, sayings, or songs, that kind of thing. So I was reading up on shifter birds and wasn’t getting very far. Basically shifters tend to turn to humans or canines.”

“Not birds.”

“Not so much, no.”

Sam was about to continue when John’s eyes rounded. “Wait,” he said. “Canines. As in werewolves?”

“Yeah.”

“Werewolves. They’re real?”

“Ah, yeah.”

John appeared frozen for a good three seconds, before wriggling his eyebrows as if relieving his stuck face. “Go on,” he told Sam with determination.

“Right, okay.” Sam returned his focus to his impromptu lecture. “So shifters: turn to animals, mostly wolves, dogs, you get it. Actually, there’s variety: some shifters turn to other humans, then there are ‘familiars’ who form a bond with a person; kind of like soulmates, I guess. Um, yeah—there’s this creature called a skinwalker. It basically turns into a dog. Dean and I met one once, this dude who
lived with a family as their pet. Had a thing for the wife.” Sam gave John his best ‘This is awkward, sorry to gross you out’ face. John was close to boggling again, so Sam cleared his throat speedily.

“But there’s very little lore on shifter birds,” he rounded up. “Some Scandinavian legends mention warriors turning into eagles, which would have been great if we didn’t know the bird was glowing.”

Sam pulled his chair close to the table. John mirrored the gesture without thinking; he seemed to be on the precipice of making a suggestion—that look rarely differed on people’s faces.

“I was thinking,” he began as if on cue. “It’s probably ridiculous, but, erm…How about a phoenix? I mean, are they even real?”

“That’s not ridiculous,” Sam said. “But don’t know if they’re real, to be honest. So far we’ve not found anything to suggest they are.” Sam rolled his eyes to downsize his next comment. “You know, in our long, illustrious hunters’ career.”

Oh, freaking—Damn, damn the plural.

He hurried on. “Anyways, then I thought I’d check out the Russian folklore and dig deeper. Nothing about humans turning into birds there, either, at least not in the more popular lore. I was just going to go to the British Library, when I started thinking about what Mr Andrews had told us exactly.”

“The bird’s feathers looked as if they were on fire,” John recalled out loud.

“Yeah,” Sam breathed out. Excitement was mounting up again. He hadn’t been able to wait for John’s return. “So I did a search for exactly that: a bird with feathers on fire. And it spat out quite a few results, but then I cross-referenced it with just the Russian folklore, and…” He maximized one of the windows he had open on his laptop and turned the display toward John who scooted in closer to look.

“Zhar-ptitsa,” John read, then scanned the pictures for a few moments before lifting his eyes to Sam’s. “It’s literally a firebird?”

Sam hummed, then snorted lightly. “Case of the truth staring you right in the face. I’m so used to things being hard to work out I forget that what people tell you sometimes is exactly what you’re looking for.”

John turned abruptly away from the laptop, coming face to face with Sam and giving him a start from such close proximity.

“It’s…” John tried again. “Sherlock…Sherlock was like that. His brain was unable to work in a way that wasn’t complicated.” He finally averted his eyes. “The only times I was able to come up trumps, you know.” He looked at Sam again, a small smile tugging at his mouth’s corner. “I’d figure something out because it was right there, obvious, while he’d still be working it out in some brilliant, convoluted way.”

“He must have been a real genius,” Sam offered in a beat.

“Oh yes.” John took a whistling breath through his nostrils. “Right. Firebirds. Is that it? Is that what we’re dealing with?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think so.” Sam’s head lolled left and right in hesitation. “I mean I wasn’t so sure at
first, although it fitted the description. It’s part of the Slavic folklore but really, it’s in their fairytales. I was reading up about the different versions of it…” He clicked on another window. “So get this: the story goes that if you catch a firebird, it is supposed to bring you fortune, but it basically brings you bad luck after that. It’s quite a common set up actually. All charms work the same way—a blessing but underneath, there’s a curse.” Sam wrestled with a powerful impulse to tell John about the rabbit foot, but decided to stick to the job at hand. “Here, it’s even in Wikipedia.”

Sam found the page, then quoted, “…a magical glowing bird from a faraway land, which is both a blessing and a bringer of doom to its captor.”

John pushed his lips forward, expression thoughtful. “According to Mr Andrews’s description it was glowing, and I suppose if it’s coming from any of those countries, technically it would be a faraway land.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed. “And it’s certainly brought doom to two people.”

John got up and stood behind him, bowing to look over his shoulder. They both took in the few illustrations in silence; all of them displayed a magnificent large bird with feathers “like a bonfire that is just past the turbulent flame.”

John straightened up. “What do we do now?” he asked.

Sam pivoted in his chair to look up at him.

“Oh we work out how to find it.”

***

Incredibly, John had managed to take some photos with his phone at the victims’ homes, employing sneakiness for which Sam wouldn’t have given him credit only a day ago. The quality of the images wasn’t great, but it did allow for a visual of the scene. John had also taken extensive notes on pretty much everything, from the background information on both people to the accounts of those in their close acquaintance.

The more the night progressed the more it seemed that nothing was of use. As much as Sam and John stared at the images and the words alike, trying to find a connection no matter how tenuous, it simply refused to show up. Things were made harder by the fact that the two victims’ lifestyles had been vastly different.

These were John’s impressions. He shared them with some reluctance, evidently expecting them to be either insufficient or inadequate. But after Sam put pieces of the jigsaw together he had to agree with John. The first victim, Alex Mead, appeared to be a totally unremarkable young man in his twenties, who’d been doing quite well for himself working for a surveyors firm in the City. He was basically just like thousands of other young British males in London. The second victim, Natalia Sevtchuk, was a little bit more unusual so Sam and John spent more time discussing her. She was a Russian immigrant in her fifties, who worked as a child-minder of the three-year old girl of a young Russian couple that lived two train stops away. Mrs Sevtchuk had arrived in the UK three years prior with her son and his family: a wife and a little boy. Six months ago the young family had gone back to Russia, but Mrs Sevtchuk had stayed. The accounts of the few people in her acquaintance all seemed to indicate that she’d been quite content with her new residence and new employers. One person had mentioned a strained relationship between Mrs Sevtchuk and her daughter-in-law. There were issues with taxes and work permits, but nothing to have the police believe those had anything to
do with the murder.

It was nearing one in the morning when John’s fingers froze halfway through rubbing at his left eye. His right eye was staring at one of the pictures he’d taken in Alex Mead’s flat that he’d let Sam upload on both their computers. They’d gone over those tens of times, but now there was alertness on John’s face as he reached to pull his laptop closer, then maximized the window with the photo, his nose all but touching the screen. Sam pushed himself up from his chair and walked to stand behind John, bending over his shoulder to see better what picture he was looking at. John zoomed in the image to center it onto a darker spot in the background.

A few houseplants were visible, quite tastefully arranged—Sam was able to recognize by species only a white orchid. Alex Mead had had an on and off girlfriend, whom Sam suspected as the culprit behind the decorative flower display. That wasn’t important, however; Sam knew what had drawn John’s attention and that definitely beat anything else.

One of the small plants, a green thing with many delicate leaves, was artfully nestled into an object that was unmistakeably a birdcage.

“The birdcage?” Sam asked just to be sure.

“I didn’t see one in Natalia Sevtchuk’s house,” John replied without turning around. “But that doesn’t mean there wasn’t one. The place was crammed with things, real clutter. And we didn’t go up in her loft. She rented in one of those houses that have a ladder leading to the attic. She might have had something like that in there.”

Sam straightened up just as John turned around. “Do you think that’s important?” he asked.

“Definitely,” Sam said. His mind was busy informing him that once again things might be very simple. “Maybe that’s the connection. Maybe both of them had the firebird and then it…” He pulled a dubious face, thinking out loud. “The lore says it brought its captors fortune before bringing their doom. But neither of the vics had gotten any great fortune before they died.”

John twisted in his seat to look up at Sam better. “True,” he said, then after a quick consideration added, “Although fortune is a relative thing, right? Maybe it’s not fortune the way it’s understood typically. You know, money, success. Maybe it’s something more personal.”

“Yeah, okay,” Sam conceded. “So what had changed recently in their lives? That new job the Russian lady had. It sounds pretty good; she was happy enough with it not to want to leave with her son’s family. Maybe that’s her fortune.”

John didn’t look convinced. “It doesn’t seem, er…I know I said it could be something not typical, but a job? Not a very great fortune.”

“I don’t know, man. People find happiness in some pretty strange things. Maybe there’s something about that particular job that we’re missing, but that was important to Natalia Sevtchuk.” Sam finally walked back to his seat at the table, mercifully saving John an impending creak in his neck. “What do we know about the family she worked for?”

“Not much. The father is an investment banker, the mother is much younger, some fifteen years or so. She’s in her twenties, going to college.”

Sam shrugged. “I guess that’s unusual enough. We could go talk to them.”
John didn’t reply, and although his eyes were still trained on Sam’s face Sam knew he’d stopped seeing him. He waited him out.

“I’m thinking,” John began in a moment. “There was something in the interviews. Someone said that Mrs Sevtchuk’s son had to change his flight because of his mother’s death. He was supposed to come back next week, I think. I didn’t pay much attention, because…Well, he’s in Russia, isn’t he? So unless he’s an angel that can just pop up out of thin air—”

“Some demons can do it too,” Sam interrupted in one breath. He was constantly battling impulses to educate John further; you win some, you lose some.

“Ah…What?” John said.

“Some demons can also show up from thousands of miles away,” Sam elaborated, trying to keep it concise. “When you summon them. Like Crowley, but he’s a special case. The king of Hell.”

“How nice they’ve got hierarchy.”

“Yeah.” Sam snorted. “Anyways,” he said, coming back from the short detour. “What do you mean about the son? That he’s involved somehow?”

“No. More about…What if that was her fortune? Her son.”

Sam leaned back against his chair’s backrest and regarded John thoughtfully. “Her son coming back to her,” he said. “Yeah, that could be it. Almost literal when you think about it. What’s bigger treasure for a mother than her child?”

John hummed. They sat in silence for a moment, then started speaking at the same time.

“You go,” Sam said.

John spread his hands. “I don’t think there’s anything like that for Alex Mead, though. That was all I was going to say.”

“That was what I was going to ask. Are you sure?”

John’s index finger scratched at the corner of his right eyebrow. “Um, yes. Well, I don’t know really.” He exhaled, his cheeks deflating dramatically. “It’s hard to figure out what constitutes fortune for people you don’t know.”

“Or sometimes even for those you do know,” Sam added, wondering why he’d said that before he had even finished his sentence. John didn’t comment, just nodded.

They elapsed into silence. Sam reflected on the whole thing. It made sense; it was a road well travelled, in fact: you lured people in with the promise of something they wanted, then you made them pay. How did the Crossroads Demons make their living? That was how. As long as people existed they were going to want something pretty bad. There was no stopping them, no matter the consequences. Sam had experienced that himself, when he’d tried to bargain his soul in exchange of Dean’s: “I don’t want ten years,” he’d yelled. “I don't want one year. I want to trade places with Dean. Just take me! Just let Dean go, and have me.” The price didn’t really matter when the stakes were high. And John was right—some things were universal, but for a lot of people the definition of
fortune was a very specific thing.

“It doesn’t matter,” Sam said out loud. John looked at him questioningly. “Doesn’t matter what it was for Alex Mead,” Sam extended. “If that’s really the connection, if we’re really dealing with some version of the firebird from the Slavic fairytales, the bigger question is: how do we find it?”

The squares on John’s shirt danced on his chest as he emitted a quiet laugh. “That should be a stroll in the park, seeing that it could transform into an actual person.”

Sam pushed his hands through his hair, then leaned forward, dropping them on the table. “Nah. I don’t think we need to look far. Both people lived in the same area—that was the only visible connection, but it’s a big one, so let’s roll with it. We’ve got to go back there tomorrow, look around some more.”

John yawned, his jaw cracking and making him start. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “I’ve got work tomorrow. But not in the morning, so we can get some rest now, then make an early start?”

“Sure thing,” Sam said. “You go get some shut-eye.”

John got up but stopped before moving away from the table. “What about you?”

Sam gestured at the laptops and the papers strewn across the surface. “I’m too wound up, so I’ll keep going.”

John opened his mouth, but said nothing. He collected the empty cups and glasses from the table and went to the kitchen, from where he returned a minute later with a glass of scotch. He put it silently next to Sam’s elbow, then walked in the direction of the kitchen again. In a moment Sam heard the bathroom door open and shut. He took a sip from his whiskey, enjoying the smooth burning lick at the back of his throat, then sighed and started reading again.

***

It was three hours later when Sam saw it, once more hidden in plain sight.

***

John showed up downstairs around eight, sleepiness turning to surprise when he found Sam sitting on the sofa with his back straight, already ready to go.

“Morning,” John said.

Sam stood up and turned to face him. “Morning.”

“Did you…” John’s voice trailed off as he came closer to inspect. “Did you get any sleep at all?” he asked.


John’s grey eyes sparked silver. “Where’s that?”

Sam picked up his papers from the coffee table.
“I was looking at these,” he said. He stood next to John showing him a sheet on which he’d made a list of all the Cyrillic words John had written down while in the area. “You know how we translated them yesterday? Well, I went over them once more, using different translation software. Same thing, no changes. But,” Sam lifted a finger feeling irrepressibly like a know-it-all, “then my eye was caught by this.”

He pointed at the line where there was the number 300 under which a word in Cyrillic: МАГАЗИН.

“Okay,” John dragged. “That means ‘shop’. I wrote down how you say it; it was a funny one…” He rummaged through the mess on the coffee table, then returned with a piece of paper of his own, eyes going over its contents searchingly. “Yeah, here it is,” he said. “Ma-ga-zin.” He pronounced the foreign word carefully. “Is that it? Some connection to a magazine?”

“And what do you see above the word?” Sam ignored his question, lips already struggling not to stretch with glee.

John went back to the paper again and Sam observed his light eyelashes tremble as he repeatedly scanned the three little symbols above the word. “That’s the name of the shop, isn’t it?” he said. “Three-hundred.” He lifted his eyes to Sam, puzzled.

Sam shook his head. “That’s what it looks like. But last night I was staring at the software translations, going over the different letters in the Cyrillic alphabet and suddenly I noticed their letter ‘z’ actually looks like this.” He pointed at the fifth letter in the word ‘МАГАЗИН’. “Then I looked at the name again and I thought: what if that’s not the number three-hundred? What if it’s a word?”

John bowed his head again. “Their letter ‘o’ is like our ‘o’, so…’Z’ then oh, oh.”

“Yep. And what does that sound like to you?” Sam asked with finality.

John stilled for a moment, then met his gaze, enlightened. “Zoo? An animal shop?”

“A pet shop,” Sam said, folding the papers and putting them in his jacket’s inner pocket. “That’s what it’s called in Russian: zoo magazine, but their ‘oh’ sound more like ‘aw’, like in ‘law’.”

He stepped away from John then grinned, finally letting out his suppressed excitement at the breakthrough. It was also in response to the tendency John had in such circumstances to look like a little boy who’d just seen his first magic trick.

“Where do you hide a tree best, right?” Sam spoke heading to the door. “Come on, we’ll get you something to eat on the way.”

***

Their time at the pet shop was short and productive, thanks to Sam playing bad cop. As soon as they’d started asking questions about exotic birds, the bearded guy in the shop (who turned out to be the owner) got twitchy and defensive. It wasn’t hard to guess that he’d done something wrong, so Sam pushed him and managed to extract not just the address of the person who’d bought the ‘bird of paradise’ as the dude inaccurately called it, but also the story behind its appearance. Apparently it’d flown in out of nowhere one day a few weeks ago. The guy said he was locking up when he found the bird in the back yard behind the shop, perched on a bench, totally tame and shining ‘all over like gold’. He’d told about it to a ‘mate’ who’d mentioned it to someone, so two days later Alex Mead
had shown up, looking for a special gift to get his lady to talk to him again. (Sam and John exchanged meaningful looks at that point of the narrative. It seemed Alex Mead’s fortune was also very much in human form.) The next night after Alex Mead had been killed, the owner found the bird at the back again, concluding quite conveniently that it must have escaped from its cage. He sold it again on the very next day—Sam was sure the guy had reputation for running a questionable business with exotic species—to Mrs Svetchuk. The same story had repeated.

“Didn’t it occur to you that it was kind of strange these people were dying and the bird kept showing up?” Sam asked him with as much threatening sarcasm as he could muster. The dude looked torn between cowering behind the counter and playing stupid. “What? It’s not like it killed them,” was his reply. Sam was caught speechless, glaring at him for all he’s worth.

“All right,” John spoke behind him, then carefully inserted himself between Sam and the asshole who’d resorted to glaring back. “Give us the address,” John told him simply. “Or we’ll call the police.”

The guy looked at him, pretending that he didn’t know what John was talking about. John grinned like a teacher who’d just about had enough of his class, then nodded to himself. “The lady who’s got the bird now,” he said. “You said she bought it the day before yesterday. Give us her address and we’ll be on our way. We know you know her,” he added with authority. A minute later they were on their way to the house of Miss Rina Zelyonaya.

Walking briskly next to Sam John whipped his phone out and called Lestrade. He told him he went to the area again for a second look, one thing led to another, so now John believed there was some illegal trade going on with animals and birds at the local pet shop. He gave Lestrade the address, managed to evade his questions, and finished the conversation looking a bit flushed. “I don’t like that I have to lie to him,” he mumbled without being asked.

Rina Zelyonaya lived only fifteen minutes away by foot. Sam and John arrived at the address to find a typical two-storey, semi-detached house that was currently void of any occupants. They rang the bell and knocked on the door a few times, just to be on the safe side. On the way to the house they’d discussed the high probability of finding it empty and the necessity to do some breaking and entering. John had seemed only marginally uncomfortable with the idea, so Sam had to wonder again how much this was John Watson’s personality and how much Sam was observing the effects of the lifestyle John had shared with Sherlock Holmes. From what Sam had gathered like many extraordinary men Sherlock had seen law and social conventions as more of a guideline rather than a must; nuisances he needed to follow if he wanted to be left alone to do his thing.

Before they left Baker Street Sam had suggested they carried with them their fake IDs from the day before. It was surprising how quickly people stopped being interested in what you were doing somewhere when you presented them with an innocent and pretty unexciting back story. Luckily, it didn’t seem like they were going to need to explain why they were loitering outside the house to anyone. The property was at the very end of the street and mid-morning on a weekday there was not a single soul in sight.

“What do we do now?” John asked, faithful to his promise to follow Sam’s lead.

“Now we go in through the back door.” Sam had already seen the narrow passage that separated the building from the identical one on its left side.

John nodded, but didn’t make a move, obviously mentally pre-occupied. His eyes, startlingly bright like steel as they were set off by his silver matt shirt, darted to Sam’s then to a point above his head.
“What?” Sam asked. “If you don’t want to do it it’s okay.” He paused, before adding only half-jokingly, “Someone will have to bail me out if I get caught.”

John’s lips stretched in attempted reciprocation, but the smile was perfunctory. His eyes remained serious. “It’s not that,” he said. “I just wondered…What then?” He lowered his already quiet voice, opened his mouth to speak, but there was a delay. His tongue darted out for a full circle lick over his lips. “So far it’s been a bit—” he started. “You know, a bit like working a case. Talk to some witnesses, try to solve a puzzle. But now we’re here, the bird—” His face grew agitated. Sam bowed his head instinctively, frowning in concern.

“That thing can actually be right there.” John pointed in the direction of the back yard. His hands flew to his face, palming it, as he took a deep breath in. His fingers dragged down, revealing only his eyes; John’s gaze fixed on Sam’s face and this time stayed there. “I don’t know if I can kill it,” he said simply, words muffled in the cave of his palms. He swallowed, then finally dropped his hands. “If I have to,” he added. “If it turns to a person…I don’t know if I can kill it.”

Sam regarded him quietly for a moment. As far as freak-outs went, this was the most dignified, self-contained one he’d ever seen. “It’s okay, John,” he told him. “It’s going to be okay. You don’t have to do anything.” Sam felt his features pull tight with the effort to reassure. “I’ll take care of it. You just stay here and keep watch, yeah?”

John wasn’t blinking as he curtly nodded once. Sam nodded back, lingered, then gave him an encouraging light smack on the shoulder, and made his way to the back of the house.

***

Pacing was a well-known antidote to anxiety so John took to doing it with great commitment. It should have made him look less suspicious if he was being watched from behind curtains. Waiting for someone to show up often involved being bored and pacing about, and none of the potential observers had to know it wasn’t the owner of the house that John was waiting but his partner in literal crime. Moreover, walking up and down the pavement outside the house allowed John to regulate his breathing and reduce the revolution of the spinning cycle his mind seemed to have engaged in.

It wasn’t the whole supernatural thing finally catching up with him. He was beginning to suspect that, alarmingly, he had once again managed to take something rather big and shocking into his stride. It was the little things, if killing any creature could be considered little. But in the big scheme of things, with Heaven and Hell, with souls, with the existence of tens or maybe even hundreds of species that hadn’t quite made it into Darwin’s catalogue, coming face to face with a bird that sparkled and turned into a human—a human John might have had to kill—didn’t seem so massive.

Except that for him it was. It was, because there were things in life you couldn’t just take axiomatically. Oh, John believed Sam that supernatural creatures were evil and had to be killed. There was a life-time of experience to back up Sam’s words as well as common sense. But between taking someone’s word for it, no matter how solid and trustworthy it was, and making it part of your own understanding of something, building it into the blocks of what constituted reality for you, there was a big stretch. Immeasurable stretch, which could be covered in two seconds or in a life-time. Or never. You couldn’t force the human psyche to understand something on the special level that was neither animalistic nor highly conscious.

It had all happened too quickly. Not Sam and the rest; this case here. John was an ordinary bloke
who processed with ordinary speed—maybe even more slowly sometimes. He’d heard about the
murders only the other night, for heaven’s sake. Then blink, John was a fake ornithologist. Blink, he
and Sam were talking about shapeshifters. Blink, a shop called ‘300’ underwent transformation and
became a pet shop. John supposed that the last thing was a rather good parallel to what was
happening in his own head, where structures and forms shifted and acquired new meanings in the
space of a shallow intake of breath. And now they were here, with a real, honest to God supernatural
creature possibly hiding steps away from John. Sam had gone in to kill it. Sam killed things. Only it
was as if that was another Sam over there, and John came to a sudden mental obstacle he didn’t
know how to go over or around: which Sam was ‘his’ Sam?

Too quickly, too much. Sherlock had been a whirlwind, too; always. But his cycle had somehow
swept John in, span him in synchronicity—

“Hello,” a gentle voice said behind him, interrupting the flood of his thoughts. John swivelled
abruptly and found himself face to face with a very young woman or rather a girl, hardly even
twenty. She had unmistakeably Slavic features and was so petite that her chin was tilting upward as
she looked at John.

“Hi,” he said, after what he hoped was only a second. “Hi.”

“Are you waiting for someone?” Her accent was almost untraceable.

“Ah…” John blinked, suddenly aware that he was staring at her. She wasn’t striking or beautiful, but
there was luminosity to her kind face that was hard to look away from. He took a step back and gave
her a big smile. “Yes, actually. I was hoping to speak with the lady who lives at number twenty-five.
Miss Rina Zeli—Um, Zelyonaya.”

The tips of the girl’s white teeth glistened with her smile. “That’s me,” she said.

“Oh.” John quickly recouped, producing his phone. “Let me just call my, erm, colleague. He…He
went for a stroll.” John was trying to dial Sam’s mobile while maintaining eye-contact. The girl—
Rina pushed her wavy fringe away from her face, revealing a puzzled brow. “We’re here about a
bird,” John blurted out, phone pressed to his ear, ringing in vain.

The lines on Rina’s forehead deepened. “A bird?”

“Yes. Erm, we’re… We’re ornithologists.” John fumbled his right hand into his back pocket, fished
out his wallet, then dropped it and made a frustrated sound. His head was spinning with the effort to
multitask when the stakes were so high. He abandoned his attempt to wait for Sam to answer his
bloody phone and eagerly showed the girl the fake ID. It was a relief to see that her gaze was still
open, the light brown of her eyes warmly coloured in amber under the slanted sunlight.

“My colleague and I are experts on exotic birds,” John said, calm beginning to restore. “We found
out you might have a very rare specimen and we just wanted to look at it.” He gave himself a
conspiratorial air. “No questions asked. About how you got it, I mean.”

Rina’s eyes had widened in alarm. They travelled over John’s features; he gave her his best guileless
smile, trying to fidget as little as possible while his hand pressed the key on his mobile behind his
back, trying to call Sam again. He watched the lighter strands in the girl’s blond hair glow with the
furtive movements of her head as she looked up and down the street.

“I don’t want trouble,” she told John quietly.
“And we don’t want to cause you any trouble.” Quite the opposite, John thought. “We just want to look at the bird.” He had a sudden flash of inspiration. “If it’s really rare, I’m sure we can come to an arrangement to buy it off of you for, um, a considerable sum. No one needs to know,” he added in haste.

For the first time there was a flicker of something other than sweetness in Rina’s eyes, almost akin to distaste. John cursed his poor judgement. Not everyone responded well to bribery or manipulation. He’d known Mycroft for too long.

He tried the smile again, tilting his head in what he hoped was an endearing attempt for damage control. It seemed to work, because Rina finally shuffled.

“Let’s go inside,” she said, smiling back, uncertainty nonetheless palpable.

“Thank you,” John replied sincerely, following her with relief. He called Sam again, with the same lack of success.

“You said you were here with a colleague?” Rina asked without turning around as she unlocked the door.

“Yes.” John gulped. “He’s probably gotten himself lost. He’s…Erm, he’s American.”

They walked into a long, narrow hallway that was pleasantly cool—John hadn’t realized how warm he was feeling. He closed the door and followed Rina who walked all the way down the hallway before turning left. John was surprised to find himself into a spacious conservatory filled to the brim with plants. White blinds dropped all the way down the massive windows, the muted light giving the room the air of a dream-like forest. John opened his mouth to comment—

A voice filled his head, the words in a foreign tongue yet it was somehow instantly understood: Я могу принести вам богатство. Я могу дать вам то, что вы хотите больше всего.

I can bring you fortune. I can give you what you desire most.

Right across from him at the other end of the room, Rina stood silent, gazing at him through a shimmering haze. John tried to shake his head to clear it, his hand reaching for Sherlock’s silver knife that was closed and tucked in into his jeans pocket.

The girl took a step closer, all of her hair now shining.

I can bring you fortune, anything you want.

John fruitlessly tried to take a deeper breath. He felt light-headed, close to fainting. Rina glided further in, her face pearly white as that of the moon. John fumbled with the knife and opened it, then held it up blade forward.

I know what’s in your heart, John. You can be happy again.

John fought to breathe at all, to move. She was right there, he only had to plunge the knife into her small chest. She stepped closer still, her smile sad and human beyond any doubt. Her hand reached for John’s face, beautiful light emanating from her fingers.
I can bring him back.

John blinked back tears, clenched his jaw. There was a sudden painful spasm in his arm from his grip on the knife. Rina’s other hand lifted too, as if she was asking to be embraced. Her eyes were now two miniature golden flames.

I can bring him back.

Suddenly bright light erupted from all over Rina as she threw back her head with a choked cry, mouth agape. A dark shadow was towering behind her. Her body rippled with a sharp motion from the shadow, then her tiny form crumpled on the floor to reveal Sam, panting with a fierce expression, his silver knife dripping with blood.

***

They salted and burned not one but two bird corpses in that conservatory: Rina’s and her little brother’s. Rina’s dying body had transformed into a bird, its plumage shining for a single instant as if it was made of tiny diamonds, before turning an ordinary tawny colour—the same as the smaller bird’s. Sam had found the brother in the back garden in a massive cage, fit for a large person. The boy, not older than twelve, had been in his human form. Sam didn’t say what exactly had happened, and John didn’t ask.

“He must have killed both people,” Sam said watching the embers in the ashes, waiting out to see whether there wasn’t going to be a phoenix transformation on top of everything. He had told John this was the first case he’d ever heard of, when upon his death the shifter reverted to non-human form. “Too young probably, so he couldn’t go too far. His sister must have tried to stop him.” Sam’s voice was the gentlest John had ever heard it.

“I wonder how they got here,” John said. “What about their parents…Why did she have to buy him from the shop, do you think?”

Sam just shrugged, eyes not leaving the ashes. John didn’t press. Although his mind was agitated without all the answers, it was numb with others.

On the way back in the cab John spent ages staring ahead, thoughts sloshing about in their restricted vessel. He finally turned to Sam, more in search of some contact than to speak to him.

Sam was looking out his window, vulnerable stillness reverberating around him. John realized neither of them had said more than a few words since they’d climbed into the car.

“You okay?” he asked. “You’ve been very quiet.”

It took a moment for Sam to look at him. “I’m fine,” he said. His face had drawn in on itself, the long strands of hair tucked behind his ears giving him an almost elfish countenance. “You?” he asked, the familiar horizontal wrinkles of concern making an appearance between his eyebrows.

John just snorted, a single mirthless laugh, and slowly shook his head. His gaze dropped to his lap; when he lifted it, Sam gave him a small nod, then turned back to his window.

John spent the rest of his journey looking out his own.
Additional A/N: A few visuals for the chapter, including the sign in Cyrillic, can be found in this post.

An obscure reference/tribute to the Lenfilm Sherlock Holmes TV series (also known as the Russian Sherlock Holmes) can be found in the name of the girl zhar ptitza. Rina Zelyonaya was the name of the actress who played Mrs Hudson in that version, and rather brilliantly too.

Finally, I'd appreciate it if you stopped by to answer this quick poll for me.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

On the night after they burnt the brother and sister firebirds John dreamt about Sherlock for the first time since he had gotten back from his Scandinavian trip. There was not much clarity in the dream or many details: a mix-up had resulted in Sherlock waiting for John at a certain place for a certain period of time, while John was oblivious about it. The most distinctive bit of the dream was John’s discovery about the mix-up, and his desperation upon looking at his watch and realizing that Sherlock must have left. The way it often was in dreams, inexplicable, he knew that Sherlock was somehow also dead.

John woke up when the anguish that he’d missed his last chance to see him alive peaked so high his mind was no longer able to contain it in a dream.

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The last ten days of September slipped by in a rather uneventful fashion, especially compared to the week that had preceded them. John went to work then came straight back home, and that was pretty much it. He spent most of his time with Sam: going for a run, watching TV, going out to get something to eat, shopping…

Going down the pub, too, although that consisted of another category of sub-activities—some of them traditional such as drinking and watching a couple of games, some of them novel such as Sam engaging in competitions. Not pub quizzes, although to John, who had grown up in Britain in the 1980s, the embarrassing desire to sign them up for one was insistent and smarting like a blister that hadn’t quite healed. He doubted Sam would know much about the local pop culture, although there was no end to the surprises that giant head of his was hiding. Who knew what trivia he had stuffed in there in the three months he’d already spent in the UK pouring over papers night and day? The newest papers produced by the new printer they had bought, the money for which had come courtesy to Sam embroiling John in a dubious but evidently lucrative activity called ‘hustling pool’.

Sam was an excellent darts player and an even better pool one—skills which he wasn’t ashamed to use to make some cash. Neither was he bothered by the fact that some of his opponents heard his American accent, took in his hair and his broad, purposefully gullible smile, and reached for their wallets with that inexplicable British superiority that still lurked around on the wings of colonial archetypes. Unperturbed, Sam went on to pocket in one night what the smirking dick made in a day in one of the many shiny offices of Canary Wharf or the City. Sam showed no discrimination in turn—he cleaned up cocky bankers and cocky manual labourers on equal terms. John’s part was to step up only when there was a particularly obnoxious opponent whose participation was touch and go. Sam was to pretend to be getting sloshed; John was to pretend to be his concerned friend, trying to talk him out of the game; then he was to step back when met by the universal overconfidence of inebriated people worldwide. John had some scruples at first that marred his performance, but then a smarmy git had made a comment under his breath to his mate, accompanied by a quick, subtle gesture that nonetheless left no doubt in its suggestion that Sam and John performed sexual acts of the oral variety with each other; the stupid guy clearly implying that was somehow something offensive. So John went ahead and upped his game, playing the part to match Sam’s performance, which was quite frankly flawless.
It had occurred to him quickly that if they kept at it, there was the possibility to get involved in another back alley pub fight, but rather than being sensible about it and telling Sam they shouldn’t, John felt close to nostalgic thinking of the early days of his and Sam’s acquaintance.

Those days were less than two months ago, but for that to matter would have meant that John hadn’t learnt anything from his experiences, or that he didn’t know himself. On the surface his relationship with Sam was like a tidal wave—when a bloke introduced you to an angel or killed a creature that was trying to entice you, it made for some pretty spectacular crashing to the shore. But there were also gentle, gradually advancing underwater currents, and each morning when John woke up he found they’d claimed more territory of him. He didn’t try to swim in the opaque waters of his subconscious. He was a simple man in many ways; over-thinking wasn’t his way. He only knew that once again he seemed to be able to accommodate someone’s own brand of madness and the bag it came in—and he was fine with that.

They talked a lot, but also spent quiet time in each other’s company, each occupied with doing his own thing. The boundaries were no longer possible to define. Sam and John somehow managed to remain two relative strangers, yet on another level there was acceptance that erased the necessity of years of acquaintance or a wealth of joint experiences.

John knew this isolated, almost surreal existence couldn’t last for long; that at some point he would have to unfreeze the rest of his life, but he didn’t care. What rest of his life anyway? He’d managed to get back to having some semblance of routine several months after Sherlock’s death, but it hadn’t been anything to write home about. John had never felt more keenly just how much his life had evolved around Sherlock as he did back then. Yes, while they lived together John had gone out with mates and he’d kept jobs with varied success. He’d even had something akin to love life, or at least been out on dates enough times to feel adequate. But when you took Sherlock out of the equation none of those, even piled together, made for anything remotely fulfilling. No matter what else John had done and whom else he’d had in his life, the giant portion of both his time and his attention had belonged to Sherlock.

It had been effortless, belonging so fully. It took the emotional seeping of his discoveries about the extent to which his life had been entwined with Sherlock’s for John to finally understand why Irene Adler had told him that he and Sherlock were a couple. John had never been more committed to anything or anyone in his entire life. If things had turned out differently for them maybe John would have married one day and moved out, but he was pretty sure his commitment to Sherlock wouldn’t have disappeared with that. Or even dissipated.

Perspective was also what allowed him to see that in his unique way Sherlock had been committed to him as well; at least as much as he was capable of it.

Now John had a home, a job and some mates; could have found a girlfriend or gone out on a couple of dates if he put his mind to it. But the sum total of all of those was in no way able to provide a counterpoint to Sam Winchester and his ways. If John was lucky, maybe one day all of those would have added to Sam Winchester and his ways.

When exactly John had started thinking of Sam staying—and more significantly of himself as lucky if he did—wasn’t marked on the calendar. Sometimes a man had an epiphany; sometimes he caught his own mind sneaking through the back door, in a random thought about what kind of Christmases Sam had had and how he’d find a traditional British one.

Or how dangerous it would be to publish a book with some of the stories that Sam had already told
John. Mere days after the idea had taken shape in John’s head he found out that it was what Sam would call ‘a moot point’. Apparently, there was a series of ‘Supernatural’ books where Sam and Dean’s lives had been recorded to the last gruesome or awkward detail. These were all authored by someone called Carver Edlund, which turned out to be the pseudonym of a guy whose real name was Chuck Shirley. (John could see the appeal of a pseudonym.) In addition to being the poor author of a cult series in paperback, Chuck Shirley had also been a prophet of God, so initially John felt this kind of competition was beyond his ken.

Yet it wasn’t for long. In his random, starling-like flights of fantasy about the future, Sam wasn’t the only subject that began featuring more and more. Writing began to as well. John had had the idea of writing a book about Sherlock for almost a year; first, as means of salvation and processing his loss, but now he could feel himself earning that precious artistic distance with each day that passed. (At least that was the theory. This wouldn’t have been the first occasion when John had thought he’d be okay with something Sherlock-related only to find that he wasn’t.) There was an alluring possibility for John to put pen to paper for more than a blog entry on Sherlock and his work.

It also transpired that Chuck Shirley had disappeared when Sam had jumped down Lucifer’s Cage, so the rest of Sam’s story hadn’t been told. John bought a couple of second hand ‘Supernatural’ books from a small Sci-Fi shop all the way in East Ham, but aside from gaining further insight into Sam’s world and his relationship with Dean, John didn’t feel he’d gotten his money’s worth. (It had felt supremely surreal to be reading about someone who was making pasta downstairs.) He felt he could give that Shirley guy a run for his money and do Sam’s stories real justice. John had had overnight hits in the thousands in the peak of his blogging career. True, it was due to his fascinating subject, but John was sure at least half of it was thanks to his storytelling flair. No matter what Sherlock’s opinions had been on it!

Soon John began taking more mental notes during his chats with Sam, but not just on facts that were interesting or potentially life-saving—on what he was able to sniff as having reading potential as well.

He didn’t share with Sam any of his thoughts about the future. For one thing, Sam acquired a bit of a constipated expression whenever the ‘Supernatural’ books were mentioned. (John even kept the copies he’d bought hidden in his room.) For another, there were other tricky matters that John wanted to approach him about; one in particular that took priority over anything else.

It was on a Sunday evening while they were both watching TV that John went for it. He didn’t have to think about how to introduce the topic—his appetite for knowledge had been voracious, so asking questions or making comments without any context had become a normal way of communication between him and Sam.

What John did need to consider was his own heightened sensitivity about the whole thing—it was similar to how he felt when he was going to ask someone for a huge favour. It was absolutely preposterous to think of his request in such mundane terms—some favour that was!—but evidently John’s psyche didn’t care to differentiate between pulling strings for someone’s rehab admission and for someone’s resurrection.

In the end John decided he was just going to ask Sam plainly. It would have been impossible to lead to it in a roundabout way and pretend the idea had just popped into his head. More than that, it would have been an insult to Sam’s intelligence and to Sherlock’s memory.

“Listen,” John said at the rolling credits of a documentary about mummies. Rather than continuing straight away, he repositioned himself in his armchair to turn to Sam’s half-sprawled form on the
sofa. Sam responded to John’s change of body language instantly, resuming his upright sitting position and giving him the calm focus of his full attention.

John was well aware that his sudden urge to sniff was psychosomatic. There was nothing wrong with his nose; he was already getting anxious before he’d even started. He rubbed his hands to get rid of the beading moisture on his palms. Sam’s eyes picked up on the gesture, but whatever he made of it didn’t change his demeanour. It gave John a sudden burst of encouragement.

“I’ve been thinking,” he began, then diverted straight away. “I mean, there’s not much point of beating around the bush, so I thought I’d just say it. It would have been—I would have been an idiot for the thought not to occur to me.”

Sam’s brow crinkled with bemusement, but John was sure this was more on account his verbal expression. He sighed.

“I’ve been thinking about Sherlock and bringing people back from the dead. I’m not asking…I just want to ask you some questions. I know how serious this is,” he hurried to say, noticing Sam’s expression ripple with terse grimness, “but…I can’t not ask. You do understand that, right?” His head suddenly felt dead steady at the thought of what exactly was at stakes here.

Sam waited to see whether John had anything more to say, then sighed too. He moved to mirror John by wriggling in his seat to face him properly.

“Look, man,” he said. “I know you’ve been thinking about it. But I don’t know what to tell you. This is not…People don’t just come back from the dead.”

“You did,” John countered softly. “So did your brother.”

“That was different.”

“How?” John leaned forward. “That’s all I’m asking right now, just…Just explain it to me. Please. How does it work?”

Sam’s eyebrows waltzed with the emotional load of his response.

“Well, for starters, you need the person’s body. Then it requires someone with pretty great powers to do that kind of thing. As far as I know only angels are capable of it, but not just your run of the mill angel. I’m not quite sure how their hierarchy works, but it looks like only a high rank angel can do it. Like an archangel. I don’t know whether you need to brush up on your scripture, but there’s never been any agreement on who the archangels are or how many of them there are. It’s even harder to tell about the high rank angels. The ones we’ve met were mostly assholes anyway.”

The matter-of-fact delivery of such profound blasphemy managed to fractionally derail John’s spirits from their plummeting trajectory at Sam’s opening words. Sherlock had been cremated.

“But even if they were nice,” Sam continued, “they still can’t help you.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re either dead or locked safely away.” Sam’s big open hand lifted from his lap and his fingers started closing one by one as he was listing names: “Lucifer, Michael, Gabriel, Zachariah… None of them is around anymore.”
“What about Castiel? Is he an archangel?”

“No. Just an ordinary angel.” Sam rolled his eyes. “In their ranks anyway. Cas is pretty unusual; nothing ordinary about him.”

John frowned in confusion, hope rekindling in his chest. “But you said he was the one who brought Dean back, right? And you.”

“Yeah, but with Dean, it was after some kind of a massive operation. Castiel can’t do it alone—when he pulled me out, it was just my body. He didn’t have the juice to get the full package, so my soul stayed down there. Dean called that…version of me Robo Sam.” Sam seemed to find this amusing despite himself, but then his face restored its seriousness. “You wouldn’t want Sherlock back like that.”

John couldn’t even begin to explain what a nucleus of his entire feeling of Sherlock Sam’s comment had hit. Most people who’d met Sherlock alive would have laughed and said they wouldn’t be able to see the difference to a Robo Sherlock. To John, to have Sherlock back without his soul was by far the worst outcome he could imagine.

“Is that it?” he asked at last, refusing to believe it was as bleakly simple as that.

“Pretty much,” Sam replied, his glance at John furtively concerned.

Fine. John wouldn’t have the body without the soul, but the body was gone anyway, so…

“There isn’t another way?” he insisted. “Like…summoning someone’s spirit back?”

Sam’s eyebrows rose to his hairline. “Trust me, you don’t want to do that.”

John bit back his reply that this was for him to decide, and smiled. “I don’t know,” he said, “I’m pretty open-minded at this point.”

“John, look.” Sam moved to the edge of the sofa with the force of his seriousness. “This is not like any of the other stuff. You have no idea how dangerous it is to call someone’s spirit back. What’s dead should stay dead. I know this sounds pretty hypocritical coming from me, but Dean and I? We’ve had our losses. Our father sold his soul for Dean’s life. He spent hundreds of years in Hell being tortured. Dean did too; he spent forty years there, only it was worse for him because—” Sam came to an abrupt halt and shook his head. “Trust me, what he did, what it did to him? It’s not something you’d wish to anyone. Especially someone you care about.”

John slowly nodded. “But you were ready to trade places with Dean, you said,” he pointed out quietly. “So it must have been worth it after all.”

Sam shook his head again, gaze not wavering from John’s face. “You don’t get it,” he said. “We were already down that road. You’re not. Deals, ghosts, spirits? It never ends well. You want to bring Sherlock’s spirit back? Spirits are tortured souls who either exist in some world of theirs where they’re trapped in some vicious loop, or they turn evil. And before you say it,” Sam lifted a finger, mouth twisting, bitter, “yes, it would happen to Sherlock too. Because it happens to all of them. They stay—they turn miserable or vengeful. Or just so angry that they become evil. It happened to one of the best guys I’ve ever known. A friend of ours, Bobby. He was like a father to us. Real great guy. At the end, his ghost tried to choke the life out of me.”
Sam took a breath, tucking strands of hair behind his ears. John’s mouth was dry and he was at a loss for words, hushed in the face of Sam’s passion.

Sam’s voice dropped low with his next words. “All I’m saying,” he told him, eyes boring into John’s pleadingly. “All I’m saying is that you can’t bring him back as a spirit. You’ll regret it more if you do than if you don’t.”

The conviction emanating from Sam wasn’t just of someone who knew what he was talking about. What put the final, ironic nail in the coffin of John’s hopes was realizing that it had such strength, because for Sam this was personal. Sam cared what John would go through.

The opening hadn’t been difficult, but the departure from the conversation was. John found himself nodding a few times, God knows to whom or about what, then after an interminable moment of dazed perusal of Sam’s features he got up to turn in for the night.

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Sam hadn’t really thought that he’d have the luxury of considering his future at leisure so soon after he’d already been given a chance to do it. The year during which Dean was missing had had some good things in it, for all the turmoil and epic sense of being lost. Amelia, of course, but there was something else beyond merely a love story. Not hunting and staying put had provided Sam with that rare commodity, time, or rather with what he’d filled it: an existence where things were still happening to him, but his path was unhurried, allowing him to observe and figure out himself not in rushed, asthmatic snapshots or bitter retrospect. In real time.

He and Dean always felt that urgent thrumming underneath, no matter how monotonous their life would sometimes get. Motel rooms would begin to blend, the ubiquitous diners and bars along the roads of non-urban America connecting them into a lulling map; there’d be a sequence of easy jobs, as if lifted straight out of ‘Supernatural Hunting for Dummies’; Dean would lose the harsh contour of his jaw at the expense of more crinkles around his eyes as he chuckled under his breath often, his dorky jokes popping softly into his running commentaries like soap bubbles in a bath.

And yet, and yet…Each minute had a second skipped, each day a precious moment of peace stolen. Because deep down the restlessness that came with knowing and doing what they did never went away. Even when their lives were much simpler, before they spilled onto Heaven and Hell’s chessboard, stillness never stayed in Sam long enough to solidify and give him a wholesome sense of his future. All his life he’d made his choices under duress.

Now was different. Now he had an actual room in an actual nice house. Now he slept in the same comfortable bed night after night, week after week, going on months now. In clean sheets. He ate good food and he ate regularly. He exercised, he went out for a drink or a meal, he did the weekly shopping, and he watched TV.

Sam had no difficulty to find the bonding agent here. John Watson was still a stranger, but his ability to unobtrusively get the world grounded and level it out made Sam feel more secure with him than he’d felt with most people in his entire life. The key difference between them and John was that Sam had let him in, but hadn’t done it selectively. John shared the mundane aspects of his life, but for example he also hustled pool with Sam. (He was terrible at it, nothing like Dean’s hair-splitting perfect timing and smooth performance. John couldn’t read Sam’s back and shoulders like Dean could. John did double and triple takes to make sure what Sam was communicating, and he was kind of wooden. Sam still barely quashed an impulse to wrap him in a bear hug when they left with over a
hundred bucks in winnings, the white tips of John’s teeth glistening with his giggle as he marched next to Sam.)

Most importantly John was in on the hunting, which for the first time allowed Sam to live his normal life without forsaking his hunter’s side. It had always been the case of ‘either’/’or’ before. To Sam’s mind it had been impossible to hunt and have something akin to normal life, because normal life could never include watching the ashes of the bonfire you’d just made from someone’s corpse or remains. Yet he’d stood in that conservatory with a pale, solemn, very much present John Watson by his side, and he’d been able to unify it all: his actions, the complexity they carried, and the couch back at Baker Street.

So maybe Sam could do this. Not only was he technically still on the job of hunting Sherlock’s freaking ghost, but he and John had worked that firebird hunt together. No matter how unsettled Sam had been by it—he tried to remember whether he always got like that after such a long pause—it was a job well done. The boy had killed two people. The sister would have done anything to protect him, and was obviously laying some serious binding mojo on John. Sam’s heart had jumped in his throat when he’d seen John’s glazed expression, the knife frozen in his hand, while the girl was reaching for him, transformation already in progress. On Sam’s part the rest was instinct.

He asked John about what had happened, but only after they arrived home and John had two cups of tea. Turned out this was an unusual monster in more ways than one. Not only did it revert back to its bird form when dead, but it also bore some semblance to a siren. “She said she could make me happy again,” John told him. His cup stopped a breath away from his parted lips, but when they finally moved, it was to sip from it not to talk. Sam didn’t press. It wasn’t hard to guess what the firebird had offered John. Each person had a pressure point, which was often also their point of happiness.

So Sam wasn’t all that surprised when John finally raised the question of bringing Sherlock back from the dead.

Sam had expected it for some time; in fact, as early as Cas’s first appearance. He didn’t have to look further than his own back yard to know this was bound to happen—after all if he was in John’s shoes he would have probably breached the topic before understanding had even completed dawning on him. Sam had a few old-fashioned measures up his sleeve. One of them was downright lying, such as telling John that phoenixes didn’t exist. One thing could lead to another and Sam didn’t want to risk answering John’s questions. It was in 1861 that Sam and Dean had had their encounter with the phoenix—a slip of the tongue and John would have been alerted to the fact that time travel was possible, which opened up a whole new can of worms. Another measure was neglecting to mention certain things. Sam had straightened in advance the version of the truth he was going to offer John when the time came; it was so edited that it resembled more a promo trailer rather than the actual feature film.

When the time came indeed, Sam did really well. He told John that to bring someone back you needed his body, knowing full well that Sherlock had been cremated. (One of the first things he checked with Mrs Hudson in this devilish ghost case.) He told him only archangels and high rank angels could resurrect someone. John had shown himself as the good listener Sam already knew he was, and enquired about Castiel’s role in Dean’s and Sam’s return from the dead. Sam believed he managed to get out of that one, surprisingly by simply offering the truth.

At the hypothetical threat of having his friend back soulless, John had met Sam’s eyes in that confounding paradox of kindness and steel that Sam was beginning to understand was the essence of him.
So yeah, Sam was prepared and did beautifully. John went upstairs to his room, his shoulders like sails without wind, and Sam awarded himself about three hours of sleep for his ‘achievement’. He tossed and turned in bed, feeling sickened with himself. He hated his life so much sometimes. It sucked. But what sucked even worse was that the only person who’d really get it, the only person on whose metaphorical shoulder Sam could cry, while pounding it with his metaphorical little brother fists, was thousands of miles away, and not talking to him.

It was while he was finally slumping into the land of Morpheus that it occurred to Sam he was the one not talking to Dean.

Chapter End Notes

Once again a couple of visuals for this chapter can be found at the end of my LJ entry here.

Thanks to everyone who took part in last week's poll. I have a request for those of you who are coming from the Sherlock corner (or primarily from it). I'd love to hear your thoughts on Sam's characterisation. Do you feel that you've bonded with the character? Is he coming across three-dimensional? Do you enjoy reading the paragraphs from his POV? Any feedback would be great! Of course, the request is extended to those of you who were already familiar with Sam when you started reading. Thanks in advance.♥
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Once again one chapter had to be split into two, for reasons that I assure you were not just numerous but sound too. That decision led to another: I’ve replaced again the number of total chapters, twenty-five, with a question mark, because I doubt it I’ll manage to pack the final part of the story into six chapters, but I can’t really pinpoint in how many I will. I do apologize. One of the dangers of writing and posting in real time is that an author can plan, but it’s artistic work—it has its say in its own length, form and content. As always thank you for reading and I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fall was spectacular in London with its many parks and their abundant vegetation. Centuries old trees in majestic, warm coloured raiment presided over well-kept flower beds and bushes, the ever-present water and its happy fauna adding the final touch to the picturesque surroundings. Sam had had his doubts about living in a big city, but he was beginning to wonder whether London was like any other big city in the world.

Sadly, he had no frame of reference. He’d only ever spent a few days in a megalopolis before and he hadn’t stayed long enough even in average size cities. He had gone where the job took him. First, in the shape of Dad behind the wheel, then Dean; although with him Sam had been just in charge about where they went as the driver. The two years Sam spent in Stanford didn’t make much difference to his travelling history. He and Jess had taken several trips to near-by places, but they’d been young and in love—wherever they’d gone, their eyes hadn’t lingered on the background.

He sometimes missed being on the road so much that it was as if something jagged had lodged into the pit of his stomach. Perhaps some of it was just another way of missing Dean. The same went for the Impala and for the sights back home: stunning backdrops of mountains, or vivid horizons, so distant that you could see them bend into an elliptical line if you stared long enough. Sam even missed the way people talked: the different accents, the roughness of the phrasing, the unabashed expressiveness.

Maybe that was about Dean too.

But Sam also found himself getting used to London relatively quickly for all the vast difference there was between the place and most of his usual habitats. His natural inquisitiveness and his thirst for knowledge were quenched continuously here, but exacerbated as well. There was so much to see in London, so much to learn! The world was offered in a multi-cultured miniature globe; you shook it and thousands of flakes of history and destinies started floating around, all there to be explored.

October started the way September had ended, mellow and quick. Sam spoke to Castiel just once, briefly, having to make do with his distracted reassurance that all was well with Dean and Kevin. Cas hadn’t looked well. He’d been pale and disoriented, disappearing before Sam had even had the chance to get any more details or ask him what was wrong. Every day Sam thought about praying to him, but no matter what they’d been through together, he still couldn’t ignore the fact that Cas was a
freaking angel. You didn’t just have them on your beck and call or summon them to have a chat about their well-being. On the other hand something was definitely off. Eventually Sam’s concern became so palpable that he began considering calling Dean. What made him decide against it was the thought that if anyone knew Castiel, it was Dean. Sam wouldn’t have told him anything Dean hadn’t already noticed, nor would he have contributed with any theories, because he had none. He was feeling more and more disconnected with the big picture back home: tablets and gates of Hell, et al.

There was not much happening on local turf, either. No sightings of Sherlock, no bullying from his older brother. John had raised the question about the follow-up on the firebirds job. He’d fidgeted in his seat, rolling a pen between his fingers, then at Sam’s pointed look finally told him he believed Lestrade ought to be told something. “The police should know people are safe, you know,” he’d insisted. “People should know they’re safe.” So Sam said he’d think of something, then departed to his bedroom from where he texted Mycroft Holmes: ‘You can tell DI Lestrade his case has been taken care of.’ He hadn’t expected a reply, but he got one: ‘I will. No rest for the wicked, I see. MH.’ That was the last Sam had heard from him.

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After a long stretch of calm, the second week of October ended with a bang. Three different events happened within three days, each with its own charge of significance.

On Friday night Sam finally went on a date with Katie. It said something about Sam’s upstairs compartment that he didn’t consider that the important thing. The date itself had happened on the ‘What the hell’ principle, aided by John’s nudges in that direction. John himself had had a date on the same night, with a lady that had come to do some survey at his clinic. He’d looked at Sam as if he was going to take him to see a shrink when Sam suggested they went on a double-date. Didn’t matter that Sam continued to be perfectly justified in his reluctance to let John out of his sight for long periods of time. They had a brief, heated discussion on the topic, during which John had erupted and called Sam ‘obstinate’. Sam had retorted, childishly perhaps, that John had a temper. The end result was an overall victory for John. Sam made him recite what he was supposed to do to make sure his date wasn’t possessed, then got him to wear all kinds of protective charms. (John was still opposed to getting anti-possession ink done. And he called Sam obstinate.)

Sam’s date was awkward and the conversation sluggish at the start, much as it was expected between a girl who wasn’t exactly brazenly confident and, well, him. Surprisingly, however, he ended up having a good time. There was something disarming in Katie’s presence. She had none of Amelia’s edgy assertiveness, but Sam found that attractive. Half-way through the date, while Katie was in the bathroom, he had a small epiphany. All women to whom he’d ever been attracted had had that assertiveness about them, but more than that they’d all been strong, almost self-sufficient. All but one —Jess. Jess hadn’t lacked confidence, but she’d been able to both yield and remain herself. She’d been Sam’s rock without being hard. Katie reminded him of Jess, despite them looking like opposites. Jess had been leggy and golden haired and wholesome; Katie was a stocky brunette, who spoke softly but her eyes were made-up in dark purple.

They both had fantastic smiles.

It was while they were walking toward Katie’s place in St John’s Wood that she dropped her bombshell.

“It’s interesting you mentioned that paper,” she said, voice bolder by the alcohol. “The one you said you wrote for your course? About suggestibility and the paranormal, I think. I hope I got that right?”
“Yeah, right enough.”

“Well, you must know that, um, that…” Katie stammered, before she found her footing again. “John must have told you what a big media thing Sherlock Holmes’s suicide was. They wrote about it in all the papers and it was on the news. I wasn’t working at Speedy’s then, so a year later I start my first day and the delivery guy goes, “You know you had a celebrity living next door.” I didn’t know who he was talking about, and that was how I found out. I read more about it after that. Erm, I know it makes me sound creepy—”

“Believe me,” Sam interrupted. “You’re not. I did too.” He was already tensing up like he did when Sherlock’s name all but got mentioned.

Encouraged by his comment Katie went on. “Then I met Mrs Hudson and she mentioned Sherlock a few times, and then John came back from his trip, but I haven’t—I’d never ask him, poor guy. I mean it must have been horrible for him and he saw it too; you don’t want people in your face when something like that happens to you. I was only—I only wanted to tell him how sorry I was and I wanted to do something, offer some sympathy, but he’s got his family and friends, so he doesn’t need my sympathy. It’s like with TV stars and the likes—everyone thinks they know them and wants to talk to them, and they’re just strangers.” Katie took a deep breath. On the exhale she let out a small giggle. “Sorry, I’m rambling.”

“That’s all right.” Sam gave her a quick smile, willing her to get to the point.

“Anyway.” Her voice dropped considerably. “What I was getting at was that I think I might have experienced one of those things. When you get brainwashed and your brain starts…interpreting things in ways that are sort of…impossible.”

Sam’s neck prickled. “What do you mean?” he asked.

Her eyes squinted apologetically. “Um, it’s so funny…I must have read too much about him—Sherlock Holmes, I mean. And you know, working next door, it must have played on my mind. Because a couple of nights ago I could swear I saw him at the back of your house.”

“No kidding.”

“Yeah, I know.” Katie rolled her eyes a bit too emphatically for the gesture to be sincere; she was obviously trying to play it cool. “I got home that night after I locked up, and I couldn’t find my keys in my bag. Then I remembered I brought out a couple of boxes to the back of our building as I was leaving. I’d already had my bag on my shoulder, so I reckoned the keys must have dropped out of it. I went back; it must have been around tenish, and as I came out through the back door, my eye was sort of caught by this movement to the left, at the back of your house. You know, there’s the back wall there? And then to the left it’s the wall to next door’s? But it’s quite dark at night, really. I mean right by the back wall there’s light only if all of your windows on that side are lit up, and they weren’t.” The words began rushing out of Katie. “So yeah, erm, I caught this movement so I looked there, and I—I caught a glimpse of this very pale face, erm, gray and almost, I don’t know, luminous; like…ghostly, you know. And I’ve seen the few pictures they showed everywhere, so I swear he looked like your famous predecessor.” Katie suddenly came to a halt, turning rounded eyes up to Sam. “Sorry, I didn’t mean—that sounded really bad, I didn’t mean to imply you’re like a replacement—”

Sam tuned her out completely, mind a whirlwind of speculations. There were now three people who’d seen Sherlock, whose accounts Sam trusted; Mrs Hudson, Katie—who had no reason to lie,
all the more that she didn’t know what she’d seen—and Mycroft Holmes. The latter might have lied about putting his brother’s ghost to rest, but by saying that lie he’d told the truth that he had seen him. Last but not least, Sam trusted his own eyes.

But why was the ghost here? Why, why? Was he binding his time to strike with his full wrath? Strike who? John? Never. Sam? More likely. Sherlock’s nemesis, Moriarty, was dead, so revenge was out; unless there was another enemy, so secret, that even John didn’t know about him or her. Not likely at all. What did the ghost want? This was the strangest, most random haunting in history.

The second event was very much related to the first. As soon as he’d gotten home that night, Sam went straight to Mrs Hudson. Any concern about the late hour disappeared when after relating to Mrs Hudson his conversation with Katie, Sam discovered that someone had been through Mrs Hudson’s stuff only the night before. He didn’t have it in his heart to reproach her for not telling him straight away. She was standing in the corridor in her gown, figure frail and complexion washed out without her make-up, appearing way closer to seventy than she normally did. Her eyes showed how distressed she was, while she explained she kept the incident to herself, sure she’d imagined it.

“Because at my age, your—What did you call it once, Sam, your head? I thought it was very funny. Oh, ‘melon’.” She chirped. “That is such a funny way of putting it, isn’t it?” She switched to anxious again in a split second. “My head is just not what it used to be. I was looking for my reading glasses for half an hour the other day, only to find they’d been on top of my head all along. So I wasn’t sure whether someone had really been here. Well, at first it was more like a feeling, really. You know, when you’re sure you left something in one place, but then you find it someplace else, and you think there’s a poltergeist in the house. Only in our case they really might be!” She looked at Sam visibly worried.

“It’s all right, Mrs Hudson,” he said, thinking that it really wasn’t. What the Hell?!

Mrs Hudson seemed to have developed mind-reading abilities. “But it isn’t all right, is it, Sam? If it’s Sherlock, what does he want?”

Sam shook his head, the motion making shadows dancing on the walls—he was standing right under the corridor light. “I’d like to know the answer to that question myself,” he said.

“Maybe you should do that summoning thing and ask him?”

Sam looked at her, startled. “I—I don’t think that’s such a good idea, Mrs Hudson. Ghosts tend to get pretty mad when you try to boss them around.”

“Oh, you don’t want that,” Mrs Hudson said with feeling. “Sherlock would be even worse. I can’t imagine he’d be much different as a ghost than what he was like when he was alive. The tantrums he threw…” Her voice trailed off as she headed to the kitchen, first to put the kettle on, then to make Sam squirm in his seat under her concerned enquiries about the current status of his relationship with his brother. (Apparently, Sam had seemed pensive and forlorn when John wasn’t around.)

In the small hours of the same night, jaded from fruitlessly going round in circles, Sam caught himself challenging his reluctance to summon Sherlock’s ghost. But maybe Sherlock wouldn’t show up. Sam had considered the possibility that someone else was controlling the ghost. But to what end? Was Sherlock even aware that he was dead? It was years ago, but Sam still remembered poor Molly’s ghost, who’d been stuck in a loop, forced to relive the night of the car crash that had killed her. She was desperately searching for her husband, fearful he was dead, without knowing she was dead herself. Maybe Sherlock’s ghost was stuck like that. John believed Sherlock had been forced to
jump from that rooftop. Maybe that was why he haunted the place he’d been happy and he’d been forced to leave.

Sam felt a pang of sorrow at the thought of Sherlock’s fate. Maybe this was a ghost that actually needed his help to find peace, to be really put to rest.

Sam had to watch himself. Dean wasn’t around, and he had always needed Dean to push against and get perspective. Now he had to both keep himself human and not let his guard down. Ghosts were supernatural creatures. Ghosts killed. He should do well to remember that.

At seven-thirty in the morning there was a knock on Sam’s door, waking him up from his short sleep. At Sam’s invitation John peered in, wrapped up in his dressing gown, post-shower hair glistening above his grave forehead. He’d heard on the morning news about a triple murder in Wapping and after going online, he’d found all kinds of rumours that had made him wake up Sam. Sam’s brain kicked into gear like a good soldier and within minutes he was commending John on his instinct.

Three bodies were found with their kidneys missing. The rumours suggested the police were baffled on account of the precise incisions with which the kidneys had been removed without there being any surgical equipment at the place. The police were positive the victims had died there, so that was one mystery. The victims were a family of three, tourists from Malta: a mother and a father and their twenty-five-year-old daughter. What had made John decide not to wait was another rumour—that there’d been a fourth member of the family, the daughter’s infant little girl.

This was how on Saturday morning Sam ended up meeting Molly Hooper, properly this time. After Castiel’s mind wipe, for Molly this was their first introduction, but nonetheless Sam found her friendly and helpful, and impossible to imagine as a pathologist. In Sam’s experience, most pathologists were cynical or weird. With her nervous little mouth and her mouse-like nose, not to mention her crocheted cardigan Molly was kind of adorable. She answered all of Sam’s and John’s questions quite competently and was a real sport when it came to letting them see the bodies.

So it was at her workplace, the morgue of St Bartholomew’s hospital, that Sam had the dubious privilege to inspect the handiwork of one of the rarest creatures mentioned in Dad’s journal: an Arad. A four foot tall, reptilian-like monster which lived in centuries old cities, or rather in cavities by their underground waterways. It came out every fifty years to feed on human kidneys—the reason still unknown—before going back to hibernation.

The trip to the morgue was followed by an expedition underground, and that resulted in a filthy, damp pursuit. Sam ended up saving an infant from the horrific fate of being dessert, then had his own ass saved by John Watson, all in a day’s work. When mythical creatures from Russian folktales weren’t trying to hack his brain, John had shown himself to be not just a badass in full possession of his mental faculties, but also an awesome shot. The arad could be killed only by stabbing it or shooting it right in the small iridescent, mossy dot at the end of its tail, and John did it textbook. Sam had been hanging head down at the time, busy lamenting the fact that he never got to say goodbye to Dean. He’d signed off any chance for salvation when he remembered that John had hurt his left arm earlier when they’d fallen through the fake sewer entrance. John was left-handed, which was why Sam watched him in dismay take aim with his right hand from the other end of the tunnel, some fifteen yards away, then fire.

“Ambidextrous shot,” was John’s succinct reply to Sam’s rasped question, as they were both catching their breath slumped on the ground, in Sam’s case once again the right end up. John’s voice could barely be heard over the hissing sound the arad’s body was making, post-mortem, and the
infant’s angry shouts.

Back home John showered for what seemed like an hour. He came out looking exactly like he had in the morning, momentarily making Sam want to pinch himself to make sure he hadn’t dreamt the whole experience. John made himself a cup of tea, then when his yawn took over half of his face, he took the cup and himself upstairs, bidding Sam goodnight. His skin had the pallor of someone who’d not had the quietest of days, but nonetheless his demeanour was so calm, Sam was sure John would fall asleep pretty quickly.

For his part Sam spent ages under the scalding stream of the shower wondering whether the time hadn’t come to find the local hunters and get back in the game full-time, now that someone really had his back.

As it turned out, he shouldn’t have wondered. Before he even had the chance to seek them out, the local hunters found him. But first, a demon found John.

Chapter End Notes

Next week's update will be early on, only in a day or two.
Chapter 19

John’s startled gasp sounded muffled to his own ears. His eyes flew open; it was more like waking up from a nightmare than the gradual swimming sensation one experienced when one returned to consciousness. He was massively relieved to find that he was not just still alive, but hadn’t left the flat, either. In every other aspect, however, his situation could have done with improvement. He was tied up to a chair. His throat was dry and his tongue felt too big for his mouth. His head was pounding thanks to the blow it had taken at the start of all this.

Oh, and it would have been nice to know what exactly ‘all this’ was.

There was a sound behind him. His chair was positioned right under the portal between the kitchen and the living room, with John’s back to the kitchen. His brain reacted with its lizard part—John tried to turn around and ended up cursing under his breath as sharp pain shot upward through his neck.

“My tough soldier,” Karen said right above his head, then appeared in front of him. “I knew you’d come around in no time.” She all but bowed to come face to face with him, studying his features. There was scary enjoyment in her doll-like beautiful eyes.

John really had himself to blame for this. He could see now with crystal clarity that Karen was completely out of his league. So out that if John had seen himself walk into a bar with her, he’d have thought money had exchanged hands. But no; he, John bloody Watson, evidently still thought he was God’s gift to women. He’d flirted with Karen, was only mildly surprised when she flirted back, asked her out, went out on a date, text flirted with her, and this stormy Tuesday afternoon invited her into his house when she showed up at the door with a come hither look.

Karen blinked slowly. When her eyes opened John’s self-reproach lost a lot of its sting. Maybe not all of it was his fault after all. He hadn’t been a complete idiot—he’d followed the steps that Sam had drilled into his head, and it was definitely a human Karen who had come upstairs with him. Now a demon stared at him, although any look would have felt like a stare from such a pair of eyes: completely black, no trace of pupil or iris, the colour glossy and absolutely impenetrable.

“Hi,” Karen said. Was this still Karen, then? John really wished she would blink, just once. Jim Moriarty’s eyes would have been preferable to this.

“I’m sorry,” Karen said and suddenly she was looking at him with her human eyes again, as if miniature pairs of blackout curtains had been drawn open in each eye. “I don’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable. Well,” she dragged, straightening up. “Not more than you already are.”

“What do you want?” John asked. He was glad to hear his voice sounded fine.
An eyebrow lifted, adding to the overall expression of amused respect on Karen’s face. “That’s my John, straight to the point. That’s why I chose you. Crowley thinks he’s got safer bets on getting what he wants, but I’ve been watching you, John, long before I let you push your tongue into my mouth. I knew you’d do the trick. I’m just such a good judge of character.”

John had taken the opportunity of her little monologue to carefully test the restraints around his wrists at his back. Not a chance there.

“Another one eager for applause,” he murmured almost to himself, then lifted his eyes to hers. “The invitation must be written on my forehead.”

Karen barked a crude laugh, completely at odds with her heavy, sensual femininity. Her face promised nothing good for John in what was about to fall out of her mouth.

“You have no idea how close you’ve stumbled to the truth, Johnny,” she said. “It’s not literally written on your forehead, but I am capable of reading inside that head of yours as if it was.” Her nose wrinkled. “Useful but just between you and me, in your case it’s also a little boring.”

Right. Friend or foe, they all seemed to agree on something.

“Sorry,” he said, tilting his head pleasantly. He had to drag this out. Buying time was always the way to go when you were tied up by someone crazy. The fact that John knew that from experience was sad. If he survived this particular predicament, he was going to sit in a corner and have a good, hard think about his life choices. Right now he had to play a long game. Sam said he’d only be out for an hour. (Why, why did John put his foot down that he was staying in?) Karen called ten minutes after Sam had left, then showed up after another ten. She whacked him over the head almost immediately; he couldn’t have been out for more than ten-fifteen minutes. So, half an hour to go.

“Er, are you listening to me?” Karen said, irritation in her voice. “I can hear your thoughts, John.”

Well, John was still going to say his next words, because he needed to hear himself claim one tiny victory. “Demons can’t do that,” he said. “You can’t read people’s minds.”

“Oh, listening carefully to the teacher, are we?” Karen rolled her eyes. “What, demons can’t read people’s minds, because Sam says so? He should know better—he’s had all kinds roaming around that miserable head of his. But we’ll get to Sam in a minute.”

Karen began circling around John, her finger lightly dragging along his torso. “I’m not an ordinary demon. I’ve been around longer than most of them. I was already old when Lucifer fell. I’ve picked up a thing or two in my time, but more than that…” She’d made a full circle and now stood in front of John again, thin and sophisticated in her all-black outfit. Only her eyes lowered to John, giving him the impression that she was looking down her nose at him. “I was born by a human while she was possessed. Our kind, we have special powers. Such as picking up things from the heads of people. I only need to be close enough long enough, then listen, and it’s all there.”

She scrunched up her nose again. “Not that I do it often. I don’t like being out and about all that much. Hell is such a wonderful place—you should come visit.” She brought her face close to John’s so suddenly, he couldn’t suppress his start. “Which brings us to our next order of business,” she said.

Well, if she could really pick up on his thoughts, then John was done talking.

“I’ve come to make you an offer,” Karen announced, back from above again. “I mentioned Crowley.
You’ve heard of him. He’s the boss. Or at least he likes to think so—I’ve seen them come, I’ve seen them go, but he is special. He wants Sam Winchester. That’s not news, if you’ve followed the plot, but this time it’s quite, quite juicy.”

Karen smiled the kind of grin John imagined a paparazzo had when he sold the pictures of a celebrity crying over her lost child.

“He wants Sam’s heart,” she said, enunciating every word.

“His heart?” John couldn’t stop himself from blurting out. “His…heart.”

“Not just his heart. His still beating heart. Thump, thump.” Karen had lifted her right hand and was squeezing her fingers rhythmically.

John swallowed and frowned. “Why?”

“Crowley’s got his reasons. Actually, we all do. All demons I mean, but not all demons know that they do. It’s complicated.” Karen waved her pampered hand. “And very political. Anyway,” she continued briskly, “I can’t spill the beans on what’s what, but as much as we’d like to we can’t just rip Sam Winchester’s heart out. Turns out he can’t be possessed, either, so that’s out. Sadly, we all have to live through our limitations. I can’t even touch you with that thing he’s given you to wear under your clothes.” Karen pointed in the vague direction of the amulet that was nestled in the middle of John’s chest under all his layers of clothing.

“Which is why you and I are having this conversation,” she summed up. “Sam’s freaky brain doesn’t allow us to touch him and believe it or not, there are not that many humans who want to give it a try to kidnap him. Still, Crowley’s interviewing, and he’s got other cards up his sleeve, too. But I’m old school. I think betrayal still has its place, don’t you?” Karen’s tone was conversational, lips stretched out in a smile that was almost warm. “Besides,” she added in a beat, “the whole thing is personal to me.”

“How?” John asked, only in part stalling. Part of him could feel the damp at his armpits, but another part was curious, as if he was watching a fascinating live show.

Karen’s gaze fixed on him, making him feel as if two pebbles had landed in his eye sockets. When she spoke next, her smile was gone.

“Okay,” she said. “I won’t spare you the details, then. You can’t have missed that Sam’s got a brother. I hold both of them responsible for the death of someone who was special to me. Sam was the one who killed him, while he was running pretty demonic himself. Oh.” Karen looked genuinely surprised. “He has told you he was a demon blood junkie. Well, his trust in you makes my plan even more foolproof. Back to the point. Sam killed Alastair, but personally, I blame Dean. He came to Hell and he broke the happy little routine of torture and killing Alastair and I had had going on for centuries. Alastair became obsessed with breaking Dean, and then when he did, he became obsessed with teaching him all he knew. His star pupil.”

Karen seemed to have finally lost her focus on John. He was quite sure she wouldn’t have missed commenting on the reaction her words provoked in him.

“And who taught Alastair everything he knew about torture?” she went on, resentment obvious in her lovely features. “Me.” Her attention snapped back to John like braces released from a mile. “You would do well to remember that.”
John took a breath. “I know you can read my mind and all that,” he said. “But can I just say—you’re mad.”

Karen broke into a fit of soundless giggles. “My brave hero,” she murmured. “Okay, let’s get to the point, shall we? Here’s the deal. You let me posses you. I get to Sam Winchester. I get his beating heart. Dean gets to cradle his brother’s blooded corpse. And you…” Karen paused, and just like that John knew she was being honest. “You get Sherlock Holmes back.”

For a long moment John could hear no other sound but the gentle hum of the fridge.

“I will keep my promise,” Karen’s voice came to him. He lifted his eyes to her and clung to her features, helplessly trying to ground himself on them. His flat, Baker Street, London—they had all disappeared, together with the floor beneath him.

She was watching him, almost fascinated. John suddenly remembered she could read his mind and vehement, sappy protectiveness rose in him. Not this; she couldn’t have this, not this.

She kept on watching. Her half-victorious expression transformed, the gleam in her eyes making them seem burnished. Their hungry look betrayed that what she was picking up had made her forget her quest for a moment.

Were these the creatures Sam had had to fight all his life? Was this what he faced all the time, no rest? His weaknesses, his vulnerability all there to be constantly exploited by demons and shifters and God knows what else. Having his heart dragged in the mud like a piece of paper stuck on their shoe.

John licked his lips and rolled his neck. “I’ll pass,” he said.

Karen’s eyebrows lifted. “Excuse me?”

John just looked at her calmly, letting her read his bloody mind.

Karen’s nostrils widened impossibly on her tightening face. “I don’t think you get it, John,” she grounded. “You take what I’m offering and you be grateful, you pathetic little cockroach. Or didn’t you hear me mentioning Hell? I’ll rip you to pieces there. Before that I’ll rip you to pieces here.”

John felt his hackles rising. He made an obstinate, inviting gesture with his chin.

Karen’s eyes flooded with black again, this time the invasion of colour furious. She lowered her face to John’s to the point where their noses almost touched. John pulled away instinctively as if someone was shoving the guts of a dead animal to his face. The demon remained still for what seemed like an eternity; seconds ticked away in John’s head and as much as he tried to hush them, each carried an alternating name: Sherlock, Sam, Sherlock, Sam, Sherlock, Sam…

“Oh, I see,” the demon said while slowly straightening up. “You’re holding onto what you have, because reaching for the other would tear down those walls you’ve built with so much snot and pain, and then you’ll crumble down like a bad cookie.”

“You know what?” John said grimly. “Go to hell. Literally.”

The demon snorted. When she spoke next, her voice had become throatier. Her mannerisms had changed too; there was something unceremonious and vicious about her. Even her face had turned
craggy. John could no longer find a trace of familiarity to the woman he’d gone out with.

“Let me give you a little lecture, Johnny.” His name came out in a nasal sound. “Let me tell you a thing or two about your new friend. Help you make the right choice, eh? What do you say? I’ve got something big, John, really big. Sam’s lying to you, did you know that?”

John felt his numbing extremities revive, turning ice cold. What did she mean? He knew Sam still hadn’t told him everything, because there was so much to tell, but he wouldn’t lie to him. He’d trusted John with all that crazy supernatural stuff. Why would he lie to him?

“Hmm,” the demon wheezed, content. “I think I’ll save that for dessert. There’s plenty more to go through, but I’ll try to keep it simple for the benefit of your thick skull.”

She walked to the mirror above the fireplace, at long last putting some distance between the two of them. John didn’t know what had happened with Sam’s traps, but they obviously didn’t work. If Karen had indeed come upstairs human, perhaps the demon had somehow got into her head without possessing her and made her break the integrity of the drawings.

“Don’t try to figure it out, clever clogs,” the demon said, turning to face him. She carried herself in a way that told John he was about to be treated to a stage performance. Sam’s words echoed in his head: ‘Demons are very, very manipulative, John.’

He noticed an instant smirk twist her lips in response to his thought.

“I swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth,” she said in a sing-song voice, then snapped back into seriousness. She regarded him silently. John cursed her black, expressionless eyes—he felt like a sailor stranded in open sea without a compass.

“You think you know about co-dependency,” she began, eyes clearing. “But you ain’t seen nothing, my friend, until you’ve met the Winchesters. The things they’d do for each other, the lengths they’d go to. You know, I have genuinely wondered where they’d stop, what boundary they wouldn’t cross. They’re so…feral in how entwined they are.” Something lewd appeared around her mouth. “It’s delicious. It makes them extra crispy.” She seemed lost in her own sick thoughts for a few seconds, before returning her attention to John.

“I know you’re hoping that you and Sam can skip to the sunset together,” she said, business-like. “Have adventures, live the exciting life…”

John couldn’t help his grin as he lowered his head and shook it at the irony. The demon continued as if she hadn’t noticed.

“It won’t happen, John. And let me tell you why, in neat order. First of all, big brother won’t let it happen. Dean will never, ever let his brother go. No one can have Sammy.” She paused, her silence hard to bear like an overcast, oppressive summer afternoon. “Dean has tried. He even believes himself, the whack job, when he thinks he wants what’s best for Sam. That one’s a big liar, I tell you. Because I’ve lost count on how many times I’ve been around him. I’ve been in his head. And sure, there’s the self-loathing, some Daddy issues, too. Who hasn’t got them?” She spread her arms dramatically. “But really, you get rid of the little things, and it’s like a one-track mind in there. You get on that train and all there is on the menu is Sam, Sam, Sammy.”

John watched her eyes lose focus; her lips turned soft, musing. “Do you know what?” she said with a small shrug. “I think Dean knows, deep down. He knows he’s lying to himself; that what he really
wants is to keep his little brother for himself. It’s hard to nail it when something’s so suppressed. Denial is tricky to sniff, but I think I’m right on that one. He’s got to know on some level. I mean, do you have any idea what shit he has taken from Sam?” She suddenly put her right hand over her chest in a camp gesture. John was beginning to get more crept out by these sudden theatricalities than by her actual words.

“It honestly is like a Greek tragedy,” she said. “Sam has hurled Dean around, physically and metaphorically, all their life. He’s beaten him into pulp, lied to him, manipulated him, he’s betrayed him. He’s chosen others over him.” Her eyes jumped back to John, now derisive. “You think that this—this little fallout they’ve got going on now, you think that’s new? You think it’ll last? It’s nothing,” she hissed, back to dead serious. “They’ll be back together in a blink of an eye, and you’ll be left staring at an empty space. Do you know how I know that? Because Dean will always go back for Sam no matter what Sam dishes out for him.”

Her eyes bore into John’s, gleeful, as she started creeping back to him. John was feeling sick just from having to endure her performance, so volatile that it disturbed him more than any threats of violence. He was suddenly reminded of Moriarty again, this time the comparison putting both on par.

“Focus, Johnny,” the demon admonished playfully. “I’m going to dish out the dirt now.” She put her finger to her plump lips. “D’you know, the Winchesters have had tongues wagging for ages, both upstairs and downstairs. I mean, it’s like Dean will take anything from Sam, if you catch my drift. It kind of makes you wonder…” Her eyebrows jumped for a split second suggestively. “Well, let’s not go there. You’re squirming as it is. We don’t want you to be sick—I like Karen’s shoes.”

She’d brought her face to John’s again. At her insinuations and her closeness he felt as if a hand was kneading at his heart. He was revolted and frightened, and was really beginning to wish the eyes meeting his were black all the time. Seeing them evil and yet human turned out to be so much worse.

“Your wish is my command,” she said and blinked. It was like looking into a petrol barrel in the dead of the night.

“Okay, I seem to have digressed,” she said. “Do beg your pardon.” She did a little curtsey, her accent demonstratively upper class. “I promised you a list, so let me now draw your attention to point two of why you can’t keep your new playmate, so you might want to consider trading it for your old one.”

John lifted his eyes to her, transmitting where she could put her offer. The demon’s face turned sour and cruel at his silent display of opposition.

“Sam won’t stay with you,” she said flatly. “Sam won’t even remember your name a month after he leaves. Sooner or later Sam will end up where he always ends up, by his brother’s side.” Mockery rippled over her features. “That’s about right. I mean what kind of co-dependency we’re talking about if one isn’t as bad as the other? And trust me, John, Sam’s got it bad. You know, at face value it’s easy to think Dean’s the pathetic one, always running after Sam, always coming back for more. With Dean, what you see is what you get: Sam’s end game for him. Deep down Dean’s got no pretence that he’s anyone else’s than his brother’s.”

The right corner of the demon’s mouth curled upward slowly, the twist making her lips look like those of the Joker from Batman.

“But precious little Sammy thinks he’s his own person. Bless!” She clapped her hands. “The crap that boy tries to pull off. I’ve been in his head, too, but there you have to dig really, really deep to get
to the truth. It’s all layers and layers of self-deception. I favour Sam, you know—for who’s more pathetic. Because he is stronger than Dean, darker. He’s had more opportunities to break free. Hell, he’s even walked out on Dean a time or two. Did you know that the only times Sam has ever had a relationship with a woman were all when Dean wasn’t around? Do you get what kind of a twisted deal we’re talking about? Sam just...glides around, this, this...tower of composure and independence, but wait long enough and oh! Oh! Where’s Sammy? Ah...” The last was an overdrawn sigh of cloying sweetness, while the demon’s eyes seemed to dwell on an invisible tableau of Sam and Dean together.

John’s head felt like it was held in a vice. An impending sense of claustrophobia was making his stomach lurch forward, the throb in it nauseating. He felt buried under a ton of rotting waste that was beginning to penetrate into him, poison him.

The demon was watching him in silence. John slowly nodded to himself. “Okay,” he said. “Right. You're obsessed.”

She barked out one of her laughs. “Well, you'd know.” Her expression softened. John prayed they were heading for the finale.

“John,” she said imploringly. “I need you to understand. For the Winchesters, there’s the other, and then there’s the rest of the world. So you can kid yourself all you want, but you want Sam? Sorry, mate. He’s already spoken for. Now Sherlock…” The pause hung until John needed it to lift as a permission to breathe. “For you, Sherlock’s a safe bet.”

A thought rang in John’s head like two crystal glasses gently touching: How does she know? He should probably ask. She would probably tell him. She’d tell him, and then John would still say no, and then at least he would die knowing that he had meant to Sherlock what Sherlock had meant to him.

His thoughts were suddenly derailed by a change in the room he couldn’t quite place. The demon seemed to be confused as well. They looked at each other, for a suspended moment of time just two people double-checking the experience was mutual. Time was released when John realized that the ceiling lights had come on. Rain had started pelting down some time ago, but the room was still bright. Besides, they hardly ever used those lights anyway, so John was forgiven his confusion.

The demon’s eyes widened and she lunged forward from under the light, but seemed to hit an invisible barrier.

“Don’t try it,” Sam said from the front door. He looked like someone who’d gone through the carwash: water was dripping from him and there was something frantic in the way his jacket and shirt were askew in places. His face, on the other hand, held nothing but stone cold determination as his gaze tried to cut the demon in half across the room.

She stared back, her expression not much different. A couple of seconds seemed to have passed only, but John felt like a Wimbledon spectator; one who’d only made it to the grounds for the first time, apparently, what with gaping and being speechless. He turned to Sam again and in the next instant Sam was kneeling behind him, cutting the ropes around his wrists. “You okay?” he asked, urgent. “John?”

“Yeah, um.” John cleared his throat. “I’m fine, I’m fine.”

Sam was making small grunting noises as he was hacking away, now at the ropes around John’s
ankles. John moved and was momentarily blinded by the pain of his protesting shoulders and arms. He gave out a little gasp and abandoned all attempts to get up, waiting for blood circulation to do its job. He sincerely hoped it’d pay special attention to his brain.

Sam had meanwhile kneeled before him, done a swift search of his face, then swivelled on his way upwards and was now standing face to face with the demon. John blinked rapidly, giddy with the rollercoaster of events packed in all but twenty seconds.

“What do you need me for?” Sam demanded.

The demon closed her eyes and tilted her head back, her chest falling open with the gesture. She looked as if she was preparing to fall into trance.

“Answer me.” Fury was mutilating the usual softness of Sam’s timber. “Why are you trying to get to me? What do you want from John?”

A smile played on the demon’s lips; nothing else changed in her pose. “If I were you,” she said. “I wouldn’t worry about John, but about that reckless brother of yours.”

Sam’s head tilted, jaw clenching so hard that John’s own contracted in a sympathetic spasm. “What do you mean?” Sam asked, the warning arctic in his voice. “What have you done to Dean?”

John heard it first from the kitchen, in the glasses and the crockery—a tremor exactly like that of an earthquake starting. He shot a glance back to the demon, whose expression of utter concentration told him she was doing this. Her efforts did not bode well for the furniture; creaking sounds added to the noise from the kitchen as John began feeling the tremor under his feet.

“What is Dean?” Sam shouted at the demon. “Tell me! What have you done to him, you black-eyed, evil bitch?”

Everything was a symphony of vibration and sound now. John jumped to his feet, then grabbed hold of his chair to steady himself. He looked at Sam who was breathing heavily, eyes locked on the demon, desperate and angry. Now the walls began to creak too.

Sam suddenly took a couple of steps back, planting his feet further apart. His shoulders jumped quickly, then squared, his hands balling into fists by his sides.

The noise was gaining in intensity as objects started landing on the floor.

Sam opened his mouth and began reciting phrases that sounded like Latin, his low voice drowned by the vibrations. The demon’s eyes snapped open; the tremors dropped in magnitude immediately.

“You can’t know that!” she shouted. “You can’t know that!”

Sam just made a rolling motion of defiance with his head, not interrupting his litany. A quick frown appeared between the demon’s eyebrows and she finally swayed, arms trying to grab hold of thin air. She threw her head back, her neck a strained line of effort. Sam’s voice sped up, the words becoming more and more intangible. The tremors weakened as Sam’s voice rose.

Convulsions began running through the demon’s body and her eyes flew open again. Her mouth was quivering grotesquely. Her head started to turn right and left with such force, John thought her neck would snap.
His eyes went back to Sam whose voice was levelled and thudding into rhythm now. His feet were still planted apart; his hands had opened and now hung by his body, still. Sam’s chin had lifted and his eyes were fixed on the demon, unblinking, as he directed his words at her like lashes of a whip.

John tore his eyes away from him when the demon let out a choked growl. It was followed by a quick, piercing yell. Her head began rolling so fast that her features were blurring, and her body looked in the throes of agony.

A split second of deafening silence followed the last few words Sam had delivered, then the demon threw her head back. A blood-curdling low cry filled the air and John watched, petrified, as a tornado of black smoke erupted from the demon’s mouth. It curled around the ceiling as it kept vomiting out of her throat like a giant tapeworm, then all the black shot to the fireplace and disappeared up its chimney in mind-blowing speed. The horrible cry stopped as if someone had pulled the plug on a loudspeaker, and Karen’s body dropped on the ground, seemingly lifeless.

***

From the living room window John watched the backlights of the cab as it pulled away from the curb on its way to Karen’s home, Sam and Karen in the back seat. By the time they had finished taking care of Karen the evening had arrived. John’s eyes re-focused on the glass where rivulets reflected the colours of the city night like shattered miniature precious stones.

He turned around and looked at the mess in front of him. The overhead light was still on, the finely crocheted net of the demon’s trap that was attached to it casting a sinister, perfect shadow on the floor in front of the fireplace. (Mrs Hudson. Bloody hell. There was no end to the talents of that woman.) The coffee table had been pushed aside to make room for Karen when John had put her in a recovery position. The dining table chair that had served as John’s prison must have fallen in all the commotion; next to it was John’s open medical bag, most of its contents inside, thankfully unused. The big rug was wrinkled like a harmonica. A couple of damp towels and a few glasses were strewn around on furniture and floor alike. At least the bowl in which Karen had been sick was in the kitchen.

John was glad in more ways than one that Mrs Hudson was away on her two-day spa thing.

A few books, the brass candle snifter and the box of Cluedo were at John’s feet, having taken the plunge from the bookcase in the niche by the window. John slowly bent to pick up the biggest book, a German-English-German dictionary, then put it back on one of the shelves. He thought that he should probably make himself a cuppa first, before starting on tidying up.

He didn’t move. His brain attempted to revise the scene in front of his eyes and keep it from slipping away, but to no avail. John shuffled on his feet, trying to go into all directions at once, but not managing even a step. His hand went to the bridge of his nose and he squeezed firmly upward, pinching the skin between the eyes. ‘Splitting’ had not randomly won the honour to accompany the word ‘headache’. Yet in a way John felt the kind of numbness he imagined someone would feel watching Earth from outer space. His chin hung limply with the forward motion of his head. He stayed like that for a while, just breathing; then, without lifting his head, he turned it to the left.

Sherlock’s big leather armchair stood between the two windows, immaculate and untouched since it’d been put there almost two months ago. John watched it blankly, before pivoting on his feet like he used to do in his army days and taking a few measured steps to it. He lowered himself in.
The chair was huge. If John folded his feet under his legs and curled on himself it would have ensconced him. He continued sitting with his back straight and his feet planted on the floor, his lower arms neatly laid along the armrests. He felt stupid when the image of him there, like a crownless king on a throne, popped into his mind’s eye. But he still didn’t move.

The leather slowly warmed under his fingers and the soles of his palms. John lightly scratched it, felt the resistance against his blunt nails. His eyes roamed the room once more, before shutting convulsively. His head slumped forward, followed by his shoulders. In a moment, his chest began to shake in even intervals, in silence.

Chapter End Notes

A few visuals for the chapter can be found here at my LJ.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

To lighten up the mood of this chapter, there are two visuals at my LJ entry.

Once again I had to split the text into two chapters—what else is new? Chapter Twenty-one is coming in a few days. Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoy!

Dean wasn’t answering any of his phones.

In the taxi on the way to Karen’s Sam had called him repeatedly, then in another taxi on the way back he’d left messages after every single signal telling him to do so. He then rang Garth six times in a row, until on the seventh he answered his damn phone. Sam cut short his cheerful greeting, small relief sweeping through him at hearing it—Garth wouldn’t have sounded like that if he knew something bad had happened to Dean.

The relief was short-lived. The last time Garth had spoken to Dean was two days ago. That in itself wouldn’t have been alarming if it wasn’t for the demon’s words. Those could have been a taunt; for all kinds of beings it never got old to aim at Sam’s perpetual weak spot. But truthful or designed to torment him, the demon’s words were there in Sam's head like really bad toothache.

Dean and Garth had done some catching up at Garth’s houseboat, both checking on Kevin. At least Kevin was okay. Sam instructed Garth to go to him and stay with him until basically a Winchester told him otherwise. Garth mildly told him to chill out, because he was already there.

“Your brother was all right, Sam,” he repeated. “As all right as he’s been.” There was some gentle rebuke in Garth’s high, child-like voice. “Although, hmm,” he continued. “Now that I think about it, perhaps he was somewhat distracted. He didn’t hug me back like usual when we were parting.”

“Right.” Sam rubbed at his forehead. He looked up through the glass of the taxi window and cursed the endless string of traffic lights in London, all conspiring to blind him with their red.

Two days was a long time. So much could happen in two days, all kinds of bad. It was time to call Cas. It was time to haul ass. Only to where?

Garth spoke, drawing Sam’s focus back to the conversation. “He told me he was worried about Castiel—if that’s any help.”

“Why?” Sam asked quickly. “What else did he say?”

“Not much. Just that Castiel hasn’t been himself lately. I asked Dean again to introduce me to him, but he said he hadn’t seen him in a week.”

Sam tried to see connections, find something, anything of a pattern, but there were too many variables he had little or nothing on. It didn’t matter what had happened anyway, just whether Dean
was all right.

“Was Dean alone?” he asked Garth. He never thought he’d be hoping to hear his brother was with Benny.

“Yes,” came the reply, then Garth’s next words were impossible to hear over the sound of some pans clattering. Sam wanted to reach across the line and strangle him.

“Garth,” he said, voice stern. “I didn’t get any of that.”

“Oh. Sorry, Sam. Just making some cocoa. I said that he told me the same thing you did—to stay with Kevin.”

It sounded like something Dean would say out of principle, but it could have also meant an incident that had alerted him to danger. More questions than answers—that was all Sam got.

As soon as the front door downstairs clicked behind his back, he was already closing his eyes and praying to Castiel. When Cas didn’t appear, Sam tightened his lids and went on, begging him to show up and telling him Dean could be in serious danger. Dean was not the only one apparently—even after that there was still no sign of Cas. Sam stood motionless in the dark, narrow hallway, heart sinking deeper than it had since the start of this whole thing today. Eventually he began climbing the stairs, ascend seemingly interminable. This was bad news on all fronts; worse, this was indecipherable news on all fronts. Was this just a stupid coincidence where Dean was simply on a hunt and couldn’t pick up his phones? Yeah, because that was how sweet life was for them. What if this was all part of a master plan, something to do with Sherlock’s ghost? What if the demon bitch had lied indeed, trying to make Sam do something stupid? Maybe trying to make him leave Baker Street or London? (Where would he go?) What if he was going to put John in danger by not being here?

With each step to the flat Sam felt like he was walking back in time, to that moment last year when an explosion of black goo had left him staring around in shock having found himself suddenly, inexplicably, utterly alone—prophets, angels, and his brother all gone into the unknown, leaving Sam behind in an equally black, sticky vacuum, only in the real world.

There was one significant difference. There was someone here, now. Sam’s chest had loosened a little when he’d seen that the salt lines he and John had put alongside the thresholds hadn’t been disturbed, and neither was there any smell of sulphur.

He walked in and stopped in surprise at the sight of the room. In his absence order had been restored. Sam would have marvelled at such a display of John’s calm in the face of the storm if John’s red and slightly puffy eyes didn’t tell a different story. Sam still felt a surge of admiration. Nobody should have taken tonight in their stride; nobody who had the kind of humanity that Sam privately worried one day would dwindle and die in him. John was allowed to freak out. He was allowed to be a mess. He was allowed to smash things, or shout, or sit in a chair and rock back and forth, if that was his way of dealing. Sam had no idea whether any of those had happened while he was gone, but he felt his heart swell with fondness at what he did know: crying, followed by composure that lacked any bravado, was John Watson’s answer to the events of the day.

Another hour later, Sam had added one more thing to John’s reactions. Something that had become apparent to him—he still didn’t know whether it was also apparent to John—only half-way through their conversation.
On his way back from Karen’s Sam had quickly wondered whether John wouldn’t have wanted out on the whole hunting thing, never mind that it hadn’t even been discussed. He’d been struck by the thought that he might actually find his duffel bag stuffed with his belongings and left outside. Figuratively speaking, of course—John wasn’t a dick, quite the opposite.

John asking Sam to move out wouldn’t have been a shocking outcome. Karen had told Sam a few things, so he knew John hadn’t just gone through the trauma of coming face to face with a particularly disturbing demon. He had been tormented with the promise of Sherlock’s return from the dead. At that Sam’s mind had finally veered off its winding path of worry about Dean. He’d been amazed by John’s common sense to see through the demon’s manipulation, but also by John’s integrity to pass on even the smallest of chances of the demon’s words being God’s honest truth. Sam knew how loss and grief changed a person’s judgement. He wouldn’t have put money on himself that in the same situation, with Dean’s return from the dead offered on a silver platter, he would have had the guts to say no to whatever deal a demon had offered him. He really wanted to believe that he would have, but what he knew for sure was that John had said no. The deal in question concerning Sam’s life.

John had said no...That was the kind of person John was. That was the kind of person who’d taken Sam under his roof, accepted Sam’s shitload of crazy, both the kind that came in his wake and the kind Sam carried with himself everywhere, because of who he was. And John had still said no. If he’d asked him to, Sam would have moved out straight away and never bothered him again. John had been through enough. It would have been understandable if he finally shoved back, or at the very least wanted to put some distance between himself and all the insanity.

There was distance there, all right. Only it was far, far more subtle than kicking Sam out, and more hurtful, too. Funny that in all the scenarios running through his head, Sam had omitted the one where John distanced himself from him.

It wasn’t rude. It wasn’t even cold. But Sam had spent most of his life in close proximity to another person, one who mattered to him a great deal, so he was like a giant dish able to pick up the smallest signals in interactions. Such as the lack of eye contact, or the eye contact where Sam felt as if John was far behind a tall iron gate. Such as the fact that John answered all of Sam’s questions, but hardly had questions of his own, the wrong timing of his pauses, their unnatural lengths…Such as John’s complete failure to ask Sam even once whether Sam was all right.

It was shock, probably. The kind of shock which allowed someone to put items back to their places and make hot drinks. (At least Sam had been offered one.) Shock that allowed the person to talk calmly on the traumatic subject.

“So basically Karen doesn’t remember breaking the drawings,” John summed up on that particular part of the puzzle. Dean’s current location or fate weren’t the only mysteries they needed to unravel.

“No.” Sam confirmed. “You said she knocked you out as soon as you both came up here?”

“Yes.”

“No one else lurking in here? You sure?”

“Yes.”

“But she wasn’t possessed when she came in, you’re sure about that.”
“No. I said ‘Christo’ as soon as I let her in downstairs.”

Sam felt the right corner of his mouth twitch up tiredly. “That must have been strange.”

John shrugged, his gaze skidding away from Sam as if anything that required a response beyond the factual made him uncomfortable. “I, erm, I quickly went on saying, ‘Christ, you look amazing,’ or something like that. So, um…yeah.”

Sam’s smile faltered at John’s awkward, humourless squint to a point behind Sam’s shoulder.

They continued with the de-briefing; despite John’s lack of questions Sam still caught him up on his side of the story. One of John’s few emotional responses, a half-alarmed, half-resigned jaw drop, occurred when Sam explained to him why he’d managed to turn up at home earlier, already prepared for the rare exorcism he’d performed. While still in the British Library Sam had gotten a text message from an unknown number: ‘Leave for Baker Street immediately. Demon Antichrist.’

“That’s Mycroft,” John said briskly. “It’s got to be him. He’s still watching the house.” He met Sam’s eyes quickly. “He’s watching you too.”

Sam had to scoff at the irony. “I should send him a basket of muffins and a thank you card.”

He’d run out the library like the building was on fire, tried to catch a taxi in vain—in the lousy weather others had had that idea too—run some more, gotten on a packed bus for a short, crazy ride, then run the rest of the way.

“We need a car,” he told John after relating the tale of his journey. His comment was made in passing, half in jest, yet in the resulting dead silence his words suddenly acquired the impact of a small meteorite whooshing in to crash right in the middle of the coffee table. The blank look on John’s face managed to twist the comment into something far more intimate than getting a car.

Sam tried to keep it concise afterwards. He was running out of steam anyway, the events of the day mingling with his pounding sense of worry about Dean, about Cas too, and now about John. Different kinds of anxiety all feeding off each other until Sam felt shivers starting to run up his arms like they used to when his blood pressure suddenly dropped in his late teens. (He’d shot up so fast, his body had been going haywire.) He tried to clench and release his hands discreetly. Suddenly his father’s voice wormed out from the depths of old memories, telling him to get a grip, keep his crap together at least until the crisis was over.

He looked at the notes John had taken on his conversation with the demon. Sam had formed a pretty comprehensive picture of it thanks to the haphazard details Karen had supplied in her post-traumatic state—he’d avoided pushing her—and to John’s account. Sam still had the slippery kind of feeling that he was missing something, but he didn’t think John would keep anything important away from him. He didn’t want to press him, either. It was probably the paranoia that went with the job title.

“Okay,” he said when no one had spoken for over half a minute. John rose from his armchair, ready to retreat.

“I’ll hit the internet,” Sam told both him and himself, starting on his ‘To Do’ list. “I’ve got to check for any omens that something might be up. I’ve got to find a way to trace at least one of Dean’s phones. Got to find Benny’s number too. I’ll do some research on rituals with human hearts.” He hesitated then added. “Beating or not.”
John had moved to stand behind his own armchair while Sam was talking; his hands came up to rest on the top of the backrest. “You have no idea why they’d want—Why that,” he said.

Sam looked up at him from the sofa, feeling his face scrunch up with weariness and determination. “No,” he replied quietly, then took a deep breath and straightened his chest. “It’s not important right now. I need to find my brother before anything—”

“They’re trying to kill you.” The softness of John’s voice didn’t conceal the force of the sentence. He was looking at Sam, evidently bewildered and somehow…Reproachful?

Yes, there was that. They were trying to kill him.

He met John’s gaze, but the connection held this time. Sam slowly nodded. “Happens a lot,” he said. “You get used to it.” His tongue tripped in the following haste to clarify. “That’s—You don’t—I don’t mean you will get used to it. I meant—”

“I know what you meant,” John said. Sam’s mouth stayed open for a moment, before he used it to take a deep breath, then shut it. His gaze moved to the fireplace directly in front of him. He felt hopelessly tired.

John lingered for a moment, contemplating him silently. Finally, he let go of the chair. “I’m going to bed,” he said. “Night.”

***

At four o’clock in the morning, head heavy like a straw roof covered with fifty inches of snow, Sam came to a gradual halt. He’d been running on inertia in the last hour. He just stopped and looked blankly at the screen when he realized he wasn’t sure whether he was experiencing a déjà vu or he had already read the comments on human heart sacrifices on some satanic blog. He needed to switch off. His brain needed the rest to go on grappling with the world in the morning. There was nothing he could do about finding Dean at the moment, save from flying back home and starting to drive the roads of America. His phone was by his elbow, both sound and vibration on, waiting for a call or a text message back from Benny. At least Benny’s cell hadn’t been switched off; at least Garth had had the number. It managed to hurt Sam even through his worry and exhaustion to think that Dean had given Garth Benny’s number in case of emergency. It made it official somehow. Benny was riding shotgun, with everything which that meant…The person people would call if there was something wrong with Dean. The equivalent of next of kin. Next of kin. Next of kin. The brother you always wanted, but you were saddled with me instead. I hope you’re happy, Dean.

Dean. Dean…

What if he was already dead? What if Sam was sitting here in this house in the middle of the night, doing his pointless research, everything would be pointless…What if he was doing that while Dean was already dead, and Sam didn’t know. What if Dean had been dead for five hours? Gone, and Sam now lived on borrowed time, the last hours of his life during which he had any sense of wholeness, any sense—

He rubbed ferociously at his face, swallowing around the lump in his throat. “Castiel,” he murmured without any real hope. “Cas…Please.”

Nothing. He dragged his fingers down his face, pulling at the skin until the unnatural stretch began to burn. He let go and closed his eyes, felt his head take an instant swan dive into oblivion. He forced
himself out of it, gazing blearily around as if he’d just come into this place.

His right hand had fallen by his thigh and Sam suddenly had a phantom feeling of Riot’s nose against it. Tears pricked in his eyes without as much as a ‘how do you do’. He missed his dog. He’d always wanted a dog, ever since he was real small, but he’d never really gotten to keep one. Sam Winchester, the world’s biggest loser, a foregone conclusion. He couldn’t even keep a dog. Not even Riot, who was by some bizarre heavenly logic his, because Sam could have killed him when he hit him with the car, but he saved him. Did dogs go to heaven? He’d found Bones in his and Dean’s Heaven...Had that been a memory? Or had it been real? Whatever; it was a happy thing. After all those years he had still been able to remember so well how Bones had smelled, his nose...Two weeks Bones had been his dog, but to Sam to this day Bones was still his dog, even though he was long dead. Bones was dead, and Sam hadn’t even found out about it. Maybe Riot was dead, too, another accident, one from which there was no salvation this time, but if Sam had been there he could have prevented it, kept Riot safe, although Dean would have never let Sam keep Riot, because Dean didn’t like dogs in the car—

His eyes snapped open, a twitch running through his left leg. He shook his head and blinked at the dark screen of the laptop. His finger ran over the touchpad; the display illuminated and blinded him for a second. He wasn’t even going to risk closing the windows he had opened—he couldn’t remember which of them he’d read and whether there wasn’t anything useful in there that he might have missed. His hand was reaching to shut the laptop lid, when his eye was caught by the number one in brackets on the taskbar.

A new message in his inbox; the email address known only to a few, so very few. Sam’s heart tripped in his chest as he maximized the window, praying for just a word from his brother, just a word, anything to give Sam a lead.

He started at Amelia’s name, so formidably unexpected that it managed to put him in stupor, his brain questioning its wakefulness. At long last, still numb, Sam clicked the message open.

***

Ten seconds after John had walked into the kitchen on the following morning he felt a strong urge to flip the universe for the rollercoaster it continued to keep him on. At John’s entry Sam had looked up to him from the table, a flicker of a little boy lost flying across his miserable features, and John found himself thrown head first into having to deal with a new shift in his attitude towards Sam before he'd even brushed his damn teeth!

It was a relief as well, though. Both last night and during his fitful sleepless hours John had felt like Sam looked now. He wasn’t born yesterday. He knew himself, and he knew very well that he’d been aloof. He had withdrawn from Sam without any intention. Sam had noticed it, too, of course he had. John had found that he couldn’t look Sam in the eye or talk to him with any modicum of unselfconsciousness. It was like having an accidental fall and realizing what was happening to you while it was happening, acutely and helplessly.

John had tossed and turned all night, nearly overwhelmed with how much he needed to process: questions and oblique notions, realizations queuing for their turn while it never came. Images had been hopping in his mind’s eye like corn on a hot stove, half of them of Sam exorcising that demon. Those had something to do with John’s awkwardness around him—they certainly made his breath catch in his throat each time they appeared, as if John had stepped out into a winter morning, bracing and bright and frightening.
He’d stolen glances at Sam the night before, neck prickling at the strangeness of the man in front of him, proper strangeness of the ‘Who are you?’ surreal variety. The surreal element of the experience had actually come from the counterpoint of that question—the understanding that John did know that man: his features were familiar, and John could tell his voice from a thousand others, and Sam had saved John’s life only a few hours ago. It was perhaps the clash between familiarity and the sight of Sam so...powerful in his glacier fury and awesome skills; perhaps that clash had made John pull away from him, like the Neanderthal pulled away from fire—the beautiful thing that brought light and warmth, but was incomprehensible and uncontrollable, too.

He’d been uncomfortable in Sam’s presence, but he’d also been uncomfortable with feeling uncomfortable in Sam’s presence. John didn’t want that. He wanted to undo the day and click back with Sam, the ease and the thrill of having him as a friend both existing side by side seamlessly. It was one of those things you couldn’t just force yourself to do. Night had a funny way to mess with people’s perspective, and sleeplessness was all in favour of that, too. Dawn had begun breaking outside, smokey and cold, when John curled in on himself and wondered whether this wasn’t it for them. The fantasy of Sam being gone from his life had seemed to release some trapped nerve in him. He’d felt guilty for the feeling of relief, but had indulged himself, too—he’d needed the rest.

But maybe that was all that had been necessary—to let the fantasy breathe, to hide in it in order to allow the rest to settle. Because here John was, after only two hours of sleep, looking at Sam Winchester’s open, scraped thin face and an angry switch flipped in John’s head. Everyone had issues. Everyone had screwed up relationships that seemed discomfiting to others. Everyone was a fruitcake, if you dug deep enough. Okay, not everyone, but John didn’t care about everyone. This wasn’t everyone, or anyone. This was Sam, and there was no going back from that, which was actually quite fine with John.

“You look awful,” he informed Sam in a manner of greeting. “Did you get any sleep?”

Sam seemed momentarily thrown off, eyes anxiously checking whether John’s gaze wouldn’t abandon him again. He then shook his head, palms cupping his face before pushing his hair away from it. He gave out a little groan.

“No,” he said. “Just a couple of hours, not exactly sleeping.”

John gave a slow nod. “Anything on your brother?”

Sam’s shoulders slumped, the gesture noticeable all the more for their size. The bigger the shoulders, the more depressed they managed to look. At least there was some fairness in the universe.

“I got a call back from Benny ten minutes ago,” Sam told him. “He only said 'Your brother is fine,' and when I tried to ask him, I don’t know...anything, he just repeated the same thing and hung up on me.”

“What does that mean?”

Sam shook his head ruefully. “I don’t know, man.”

John considered Sam’s pinched features. “Do you trust him?” he asked.

Sam opened his mouth to speak, but paused, eyes on the cup in his hand. “I don’t know,” he said at last. “I mean, he’s a vampire, and he knows I was after him to kill him, when I thought he’d killed—Anyways, there’s no reason why he should tell me the truth.”
“Okay…” John still didn’t know what to make of that.

“But Dean trusts him,” Sam added with a barely perceptible shrug. “And they’ve been sticking around together, so.”

John stood in silence for a while, waiting, but Sam seemed to have finished. At least on that particular point—John had a nagging feeling that there was something else. The way Sam looked could be explained easily with his worry about his brother and his uncertainty about Benny’s words, but still…

“Anything else?” John chanced.

Sam’s head turned right to the window, bringing up his clearly cut profile in full view. He rolled his neck and looked back at John.

“I got an email last night,” he said. “From Amelia.”

“Oh,” John said. He waited for a few seconds, then shuffled on his feet. “What did she say?”

“Basically to see if we had a chance. She said that they’d been talking about having a kid—with her husband, I mean. So she wrote that before she made that decision, she wanted to know if we could… be together.” Sam lifted his eyes, vividly bright and glinting in the fluorescent light from the ceiling. “She said that we could cut all ties with the past, be honest with each other. Stick together. Just… Leave everything behind and have a fresh start some place new.”

John had to bite back another ‘oh’, this one far more insightful.

“Are you thinking about it?” he asked carefully, then the next words tumbled out of him. “About here? London?” It was a bold move, potentially mortifying in the avalanche of awkwardness it could bring, but John’s criteria of playing safe readjusted on hourly basis these days. This had been brewing for a while and it suddenly seemed preposterous that John would have been able to avoid the topic forever. Or that he should.

Sam’s eyebrows did a delicate dance, but he didn’t seem put off by John’s words. “I don’t know,” he said. “Yeah, that’s kind of—” His head seemed to bounce a bit as if it was on a spring, and his forehead wrinkled. “It’s an option,” he finished.

It occurred to John that he was just standing there like a plonker, when he should definitely say something, all the more that he had something to say.

“You know I’d be glad, right?” he told Sam, then cleared his throat. “If you stayed in London. Here or elsewhere.”

Sam nodded; tiny, vehement, multiple nods. “Thanks,” he said, eyes jumping to John’s then away. “Erm, thanks. Me too.”

Silence rang surprisingly loud for Baker Street’s noisy location.

“Right then,” John said after they’d both had a moment to recover. “I’m going to, uh—” He pointed in the direction of the bathroom.
“Yeah, okay,” Sam said, the words almost exhalations.

John made his way to the wonderful promise of a powerful stream of water on his head and neck. He was hoping it’d manage to wash away the final residue of conflict he felt, the one that stemmed from one word in the demon’s voice still lodged in John’s mind: ‘lie’.

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Sam remained sitting at the kitchen table after John had finished in the bathroom. Despite his awaken awareness that he didn’t just need a shower—he wanted one, he still couldn’t move. He felt as if he was perched on top of a flight of steps, like one of those big slinky toys Dean loved so childishly much. Round and round the twirls went, colours blending into each other, a whole rainbow of them, and all of it packed into a neat shape...But you only had to give it the first push and on it went on its descent, expanding and contracting, a visual feast of complexity and inevitability.

Sam rubbed at his eyes; they felt sore. His brain totally needed a switch off button, always had, but Sam supposed it was naïve to hope to discover one at his age.

He was just straightening up when he heard the unmistakable sound of rushing footfall—John, coming down the stairs from his bedroom. Sam felt all his muscles tighten as his vision narrowed. The push from the top...

“I just spoke to Karen,” John said from the corridor. He was holding his phone away from his body like a piece of evidence. His eyes shone incredibly light blue, piercing like a morning alarm yet also submitting to Sam. “She was crying, in hysterics actually,” John continued quickly. "She said we had to go there immediately.”

Sam boggled at him, arms spreading. He hadn’t seen that coming. “What is it? Is it a demon?”

“I don’t know. She was all over the place. She didn’t sound possessed, though. Erm, not that I’d know, but she just...She just sounded really distraught.” John’s voice was gathering on urgency. “I told her we’d be on our way.”

Sam had already rushed into his room. He was putting his clothes on, while mentally ticking boxes: holy water, gun, shotgun was out of the question, damn the big cities, you didn’t have a fraction of the freedom a hunter normally had. He was also running through another list, this one of questions. Someone close to Karen was killed perhaps? Why? Who? Her best friend? Karen had called her to ask her to come around and stay over for the night. She’d phoned her friend before she and Sam had left last night—it had been one of the conditions for her leaving Baker Street at all. Sam had made sure her house was secured. He’d met the friend—she wasn’t possessed and seemed normal enough. He hadn’t really given Karen much thought after he’d gotten the demon out of her. As soon as he’d climbed into the taxi on his way back she’d slipped out of his mind. He’d seen this kind of thing too many times to keep track. Not thing—people. Victims of demonic possession, people who were at the wrong place at the wrong time—that was all. Karen had been extremely lucky to get away with a few bruises; true, shock and trauma to probably haunt her until the rest of her life, too, but those you could cure, or learn to live with. Most of the people demons used as meatsuits never survived the experience.

Demons took pride in ‘riding’ their meatsuits hard. They caused so much damage to the body that if they eventually left it, it was a complete, agonizing wreck—the mind having spent ages in there, trapped, fraying worse than the flesh. To Sam death seemed like mercy compared to that. He hated the bastards. Here, in this cocoon he’d found away from home, he’d almost forgotten how evil
demons were, how much pain and suffering they caused. Shutting them all in Hell for good was all he should have thought about, not buried his head in the sand or gotten all emo about his small, insignificant issues.

“Come on,” he told John briskly on the way out of his bedroom. John had run up the stairs as soon as Sam had started getting ready and was now waiting for him at the landing, dressed and ready to go. Sam gave John’s jacket a quick assessing look, but of course he wouldn’t be able to see it from here.

“Got your gun?” he asked.

John just nodded, the wrist of his right hand making a fluid motion to indicate the gun was tucked in at the back of his jeans, under the jacket. Right where Sam’s was on his own person.

“Let’s go,” he told John.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sam had done everything by the book, _everything_; trouble was, it was by the hunting book. Doing that kind of job for too long made even the most experienced hunter forget that people could be just as dangerous as any supernatural thing out there.

He’d frozen at the click of a gun’s safety catch being released right next to his left ear. His brain had registered something like a very loud echo of the sound, before he realized that there had been a second click at the exact same moment. His eyes went to John to find him stock still with his arms up and his head bowed. The man behind John holding a gun to his head was skinny and had an unkept look about him. He couldn’t have been more than twenty-five, yet his hazel eyes looked disturbingly old and somehow…dried up, like tobacco leaves left in the sun. There was no reversal to that look; a look Sam knew instinctively, but had no spare mental capacity to give it a name or a job description. Karen ended up providing them for him.

Karen. It was _Karen_. Sam’s frantic search of her face had seemed to amuse her a minute ago when she’d pressed the gun to his head. “I’m not possessed,” she told him. “This is plan B.” Her features had turned harsh and almost solemn. “I’m not happy about it, but.” Sam had stared at her, the abrupt, unnatural end of her sentence dropping like lead in his stomach.

“But what?” he asked. “Who are you? What do you want?”

“My name’s Karen,” she replied, her tone suggesting that Sam was a dumbass for asking that question. “No surnames, sorry. I’m sure it’s hard for you to understand, what with being one half of the famous Winchester duo.” There was no mistaking the resentment in her voice.

Her hand didn’t even tremble when she took a few steps around to stand in front of Sam, her gun now pointing at his forehead. She gave a curt nod in John’s direction, without taking her eyes off from Sam. “That’s Tom,” she said. “There are more of us outside in the mini-van. That brings us to your second question.” Something in the way she phrased that made Sam want to double-check whether she wasn’t possessed after all.

“We’re the local hunters,” she said. “Some of them at least. We’re not exactly a big friendly community. There were a few of us who weren’t all that eager to roll the red carpet for your arrival. We don’t like you, Sam.” Sam wished she kept to the business tone; whenever emotion made an appearance in her demeanour, it wasn’t in his favour at all.

“You’ve caused a lot of trouble,” Karen went on, “and it’s resonated all the way to here. Do you have any idea how much harder it is to do what we do in a big city like London? You don’t care, do you? No, you opened the gates of Hell and let all those demons out. And as if that wasn’t enough, you started the bloody Apocalypse. For that alone I should make curry from your brains.”

Sam’s jaw clenched. “Why don’t you?” he said.

Karen smirked with derision. “Don’t try to be all macho in front of your boyfriend. Did you know…” She looked at John, her lopsided smile at odds with the displeased curvature of her nostrils. “Did you know that John here spent half our date talking about his new flatmate? Okay, that’s an exaggeration, but you definitely got a mention. Can you imagine being out with someone like me and—”
“Get on with it,” the guy called Tom said out of the blue, his voice ringing high like a young boy’s. Nonetheless Karen shut her mouth and her grip on her gun tightened with determination.

“Sorry,” she said nodding at Tom’s direction, eyes still unfa ltering on Sam’s face. “We need to go,” she said.

“Where?” John asked, quite high-pitched too. Sam’s eyes had darted to him a few times, split-second check-ups that had brought him only a confirmation that John was unharmed. A couple of times their eyes had met, to no other effect than that mutual reassurance.

“You don’t expect me to tell you that, do you?” Karen replied, finally looking at John. “If you stay quiet and don’t do anything stupid, you will be free to go. Just let the grown-ups do their business and you’ll be fine.”

John took a deep, noisy breath through his nose—a subtle reminder of his temper.

“You want me?” Sam made a point of looking from Karen to Tom. “I’m here and I’m not going anywhere. Just as long as you let him go.”

Karen snorted. “What next, matching bracelets?” She bore her eyes into Sam’s. “Don’t be daft,” she said. “We need him, otherwise he wouldn’t be here. He’s leverage. Apparently plan A went down the drain about that too.”

“What’s plan A?” John asked, voice cross. His body twitched forward in anger; Tom instantly shoved the gun to the back of his head, making John sway forward. At the same moment Karen’s eyes jumped back to Sam, her gun’s nuzzle touching his forehead. Sam spread his arms in a pacifying gesture. “Just…Tell me what you want,” he said.

“We want a demon-free London,” Tom said flatly. “There’s someone who can give us that. In exchange for you. Now move.”

Sam felt his face contort with sarcastic incredulity. “Who? Crowley? Is that it? The King of Hell offers you a deal and you believe him?”

“We do,” Tom said, exchanging a quick glance with Karen. So did John and Sam—John’s eyes had gone double their size and most of the extra space seemed to be taken by alarm about Sam’s fate. Sam didn’t even have a second to gather his thoughts, and he needed it—he had to think of a plan. His gun was in their hands. So was John’s. He’d just have to play it by ear.

It suddenly hit him that he was truly fucked. He was alone. No one was coming to save his ass. Dean wasn’t coming.

Karen sucked in her lips, then released them with a squelching sound. “The way I see it,” she told Sam, “it’s a win-win situation. The deal is on, we win. The deal is off…You’re off, too, back to Hell where you should have stayed anyway.” Sam tilted his head giving her his best glare, but Karen didn’t bat an eyelid. Her gun holding hand finally showed signs that it wasn’t cast of iron, but it was only so that Karen could point at the door behind John. “Move,” she said.

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Sam wished the dude who was currently watching them turned his back for just two minutes. That was all the time Sam needed to get out of his restraints. Hunters were used to tying up demons under devil’s traps, so they developed skills in drawing and painting those rather than in good bondage. Sam had fallen victim of his own hunter’s set of attitudes earlier, when he’d been blind for the obvious possibility that Karen herself might be luring them into a trap. Now the roles were reversed.
—Karen had tied him up well, but not well enough. Plus Sam had flexed and expanded the muscles on his shoulders and chest to the maximum, so relaxing them completely had already given him enough space to do what he had to do to get out. The handcuffs were going to be trickier (and much more painful), but still doable.

If he managed to catch a break, that was. He and John had been here for close to fifteen minutes, someone constantly keeping watch. For the first ten it’d been Tom so Sam hadn’t even dared testing the ropes. He suspected Tom was the best of the lot. He was the one who put John far enough from Sam for the two of them to be unable to communicate in any other way than talking. Sam had asked John twice if he was all right, getting a short affirmative in reply both times. John was just a shape at present, his short, greying blond hair barely indicating where his head was. Sam cursed John’s dark jeans and his black jacket. He would have felt better if he could see him properly.

Karen and the other hunters had brought them to a warehouse, judging by the smell and the sight of the room Sam and John were kept in. Disused buildings of this kind had some universal features about them: thick dust, the stale smell coming from damp and old pipes. If there was a food source near-by there was also a whiff of rot and excrement from rats using the place for their living quarters. Sam hadn’t been able to see anything of the rest of the building. They’d travelled to here mobster style: handcuffs on their wrists, bags on their heads, guns pointed at them. The bags had come off once they’d gotten to the space they were currently in. Another mistake—Sam suspected it was on account of Karen expecting Crowley to show up as soon as they arrived. Now that Sam’s eyes had adjusted to the dark he could make out the walls of a big, strangely narrow empty space with very high ceilings. The only light in it was seeping in through the cracks in the old wooden makeshift shutters covering the two large windows on Sam’s right. There was one door in front of Sam, some sixty yards away. John was to his left.

Sam didn’t know what it meant that Crowley wasn’t here yet, but he was grateful for every second of delay. In the mini-van in which they’d been transported he’d tried to push Karen on the stupidity of her deal with such an extra bastard of a demon like Crowley. Her reply was that she knew Crowley was desperate to get his hands on Sam, alive.

“What that demon told John yesterday was true,” she’d said. “They need your beating heart.”

“So you let a demon ride you,” Sam had began, despise thick in his voice without effort, managing to compensate for the lack of eye contact. Karen had cut his sentence short.

“I didn’t let her ride me. Who do you think I am? I’m a hunter, Sam. I abide by the same rules we all do—kill the monsters, save the people. I say ‘we’, but I mean the hunters who don’t live like you and your brother do. All you care about is saving each other. You live like there’s nothing above the Winchesters…”

“Do you really think that?” Sam had asked, feeling a genuine pang of anguish at her words. Silence was the reply he got, then Karen put an end of the topic. “The demon bitch got in me, then made me an offer: if she managed to get John, as long as I played along she’d leave me unscathed. If she didn’t get John, she’d make arrangements with Crowley. We give them Sam Winchester and they leave London. Every single demon to the last one.”

John had tried to speak at that point, but one of the other guys had barked at him to shut up. John hadn’t, which was when Sam heard a thumping sound and John’s sharp intake of breath, followed by a whisper of a swear word.

“Leave it, John,” Sam had told him.

demon told you was true.”

They’d travelled in silence the rest of the way, some half hour or so.

Sam had been able to hear the muffled voices of the group outside from the moment they’d retreated through that door—only exit, useful to keep in mind—but now it seemed to him the volume of chatter was rising. There were three more hunters in addition to Karen and Tom, so unless others had arrived by foot, there were now four people outside. Sam thought he’d caught the faintest noise of a vehicle approaching in the distance, but he was relieved to hear the sound transforming into the thunder of an airplane high up in the skies. He didn’t know whether they stood a chance of getting out of here, but it was easier to imagine it could happen when they were two against five than two against ten.

“Sam,” John called his name softly, startling him. Their guard pointed his gun at John immediately, more out of instinct than as a real threat.

“You okay?” Sam asked, keeping the guard’s gaze locked on himself when it’d shot to him.

“Yeah. Um. Yes.” It sounded like John was taking a deep breath. “Listen,” he said. “That demon yesterday…She said something.” John paused briefly. “She said that you’d lied to me.”

Sam was yanked right out of any escape fantasies. “What?”

“She told me you’d lied to me;” John repeated. “I don’t know what she meant, but…What did she mean?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said automatically. He couldn’t deal with this now.

“I don’t think she was.”

Sam turned his head to John’s barely distinguishable shape. It seemed like John was looking at him, too. He spoke again. “I don’t think there’s a great chance we’ll make it out of here alive—”

“John…”

“—and I need to know. What was it, and don’t lie to me. Please. All right? Please.” To an outsider, there was hardly any emotion in John’s voice, but to Sam this was the opposite of the infamous British stiff upper lip he’d ever heard.

He stared in John’s direction—this man who could so easily pass for non-descript, even now no more than a dark gray outline in a light gray dusk—and something powerful clutched Sam in its grip, claws digging in mercilessly. It took him a moment to realize he was scared, the feeling long buried under tons of pain and trauma, a scab picked raw on a body numb with wounds. This here was real. John was real. John wasn’t just somebody Sam had met like the hundreds of people he did, then didn’t think of them for years, or ever. If Sam wasn’t swaying from the shock of realization that he’d forgotten what it felt like to be truly afraid, he would have lamented his stunted sense of connection to another human being. He’d thought that John was his friend, but it had mostly been just that: thinking. A manifestation of cognitive awareness—that Sam was feeling admiration, respect and fondness for this person. The awareness had barely been interspersed with unmediated intuitive
understanding, like patchwork of small bright spots on the ground where the sun shone above the thick leafy crown of a tree. John was Sam’s friend, the only one Sam had had only for himself in a long, long time.

The thing with that kind of friends was that they weren’t inanimate objects in their glass casing, like dead butterflies pinned there so you could appreciate them at your own time, then go. They talked back, nudged and made space for themselves; they needed things from you. They asked you questions that had a pretty great chance of shattering that glass casing completely, and that particular shoe’s drop had been a long time coming.

“Sherlock’s a ghost,” Sam said plainly, soberly. “That’s why I came here in the first place. Mrs Hudson called me, because she’d seen him a couple of times.” There was much more he could say, knew he should say, but he was depleted of words that didn’t sound like horrible verdicts against him to his own ears.

The silence that came from John was stunned for all that Sam couldn’t see his face. Their guard’s face was a bit stunned, too. Dean had that expression when he indulged in one of his ridiculous TV shows—a stupid, overdramatic soap opera.

“Did you kill him?” John asked. Funny how Sam could read his silences but not his voice.

“No,” Sam said immediately, then exclaimed. “No!” He found himself incredibly glad that he really hadn’t. “I—I’m not sure what’s going on, why he’s stayed behind. I’ve seen him once only—”

“You’ve seen him?” Incredulous, but not in wonder and awe. There was no mistaking that sound, like clouds rolling over distant hills and coming closer.

“Yeah. Once.”

“When? Where?”

Sam frowned, eyes going to the guard. “Are we going to have this conversation now? In front of him?”

“Well, I don’t see a better time coming,” John shot out, not even deliberately sarcastic. “So yes, we’re going to have this bloody conversation now. Where did you see Sherlock?”

“Outside our building, across the street. It was some weeks ago.” Sam wished fervently he was able to tell John exactly when, but he had really lost track of time. Everything seemed to be happening all at once these days, present situation included.

“How can you not tell me, how…”John’s voice dwindled in dismay and numb hurt—as much as a real question to Sam as it was a deed John was struggling to comprehend.

Sam had been expecting that question from the moment he’d told John the truth. As his experiences unfurled into life with each millisecond, he wondered whether he hadn’t always expected that one day he’d have to face the music, but didn’t realize it. It was part and parcel of the whole ‘half-buried in the subliminal’ thing, where he’d somehow also failed to realize that the last few months were imprinting themselves on him for real, that he’d met one of those people who would remain a part of him for life, like Jess and Ellen and Jo and Bobby—

Who were all dead. Sam’s subliminal deserved a medal, because it kept things away from him for a reason.

Just like he had kept things away from John for a reason, the same reason. Sam had subconsciously
shifted away John’s importance, while he’d kept on lying to John more and more desperately, because John was important. It was all linked together by some indescribable, unifying force.

“I didn’t—” Sam coughed. “I guess I didn’t want you to get hurt,” he said.

“Ho—” John didn’t even finish this ‘how’. Sam listened to his laboured breathing. “You’d have gotten stuck on the whole thing,” he hurried to tell him, taking advantage of the chance to elaborate. “I’ve seen it happen, and it never ends well.”

“It wasn’t your choice to make!” John erupted. “Jesus!”

Sam’s body instinctively pulled forward in an attempt to turn to John. The guard didn’t even react to him, his expression riveted.

“Listen, man,” Sam said, then cringed at how much he sounded like he was trying to talk John down from something that he was perfectly entitled to feel. “I’m sorry, okay? But what good would have come out of telling you? You had a chance to move on and—”

“No, no,” John blurted out, his laugh a disturbing sound that was bitter and dangerous at the same time. “It was my—I don’t care! If Sherlock was there, in whatever shape or form…Jesus, he was there, Sam, and you didn’t tell me!”

“And this is exactly why!” Sam’s voice rose too, plea and anger mingling in it. “I would have had to gank him if I’d had the chance, no matter what, John. That’s what you do with ghosts. There’s no happy ending! Ever.” The words echoed darkly, Sam almost shouting them. “I wasn’t going to let you stop me. What was I supposed to do?”

His question was rhetorical, but John had an answer.

“You were supposed to tell me, no matter what! He was my best friend! You don’t get to decide what happens to him, alive or dead, do you understand that? He isn’t one of your jobs! Sherlock isn’t one of your jobs.” John’s voice was rough, like gravel that went straight to Sam’s heart, stopping its wheels from turning.

The pause was daunting this time. When John spoke next, his voice had dropped.

“You don’t get to make these choices for other people, all right?” he said flatly. “You don’t. Sherlock may be a ghost, but he’s still my best friend. I don’t care who you are, or what you’ve done, or, or where you’ve been—it sounds to me like you’ve lost any sense of perspective. I’m not some blind fool watching from the sidelines, Sam—”

“I never thought you were,” Sam interjected barely audibly.

“I’m an actual real person who has just as much of a say in this as you do. Actually, scratch that. I have far, far more right to…to deal with anything concerning Sherlock than you do.”

“This is too personal for you.” Sam wanted to explain, but even if he had the means to John didn’t give him a chance. His response was an immediate mirthless giggle.

“Of course it’s bloody personal! That’s exactly why you should have told me! How would you feel if this was Dean, hm? How would you take someone ‘ganking’ your brother’s ghost without even telling you he was there? You wanted to sell your soul for him. Why do you think the rules are different for you? What, you’re the only one who can care that much?”

Sam gritted his teeth, biting back guilt and remorse. It wasn’t that simple, you have no idea, John.
“I know you’re pissed,” he said, then had to pause and swallow. “And I’m sorry, I am. But I sure as hell wasn’t going to put you through watching Sherlock die again, or see him evil…It wasn’t going to be him, John, don’t you get that? It was going to be a shadow of him, dark and—You were only going to end up being…” So many adjectives, all maudlin, all absolutely inadequate. “I couldn’t do that to you,” he said quietly. “I couldn’t. I know I should have told you, and I’m sorry. I really, really am, about everything. But I’ve been through this kind of thing, and it’s soul-destroying. It can drown you, John. And there’s no going back.”

The quiet rang louder than ever after his last word. Sam couldn’t really say how long it was, emotion having obliterated time and space. He was dragged back to reality when he heard a loud, clamouring sound in the building coming from afar. He hadn’t even registered when the voices outside had disappeared. It looked like their guard was waking up to that realization himself. He suddenly looked panicked, turning to the door so abruptly it looked like the upper part of his body had rotated on a screw. He listened intently and so did Sam—no voices, no sound. What anyone would call suspicious silence.

The guard faced them again. From what Sam could distinguish there was hesitation on his plain features. The gun glinted as it moved between Sam and John.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” the guy said, beginning to retreat towards the door. Sam bit his tongue to keep in the snarky remark about clichéd lines from films. He held his breath and waited to be certain he was properly obscured from the guard’s vantage point, then carefully started working on extracting his hands from the handcuffs.

The door swung closed with a creak and Sam used the sound for the worst part. The stabbing pain of dislocating his thumb was just as crap as he remembered it. He muffled his gasp and began moving as vigorously as he could. His whole body was protesting, but he kept at it, contorting and pulling, trying to keep his voice down.

“What are you doing?” John hissed, unnecessarily quiet.

Sam grunted his response. “Getting out of these.”

“How?”

Sam ignored him. He’d gotten to the point he feared most, but this was their one in a million chance for salvation: Crowley was late, they were left unsupervised. What was the agony of dislocating your shoulder?

He cried out as he did it, impossible to contain it this time, or for a moment to even see through the white fog that filled his vision. He blinked quickly, shaking his body and mind to submission to his will. John’s alarmed voice was coming through the noise in Sam’s ears, but Sam had no time to talk back. In ten seconds he’d managed to work his way out of his restraints. He hastily got on his feet and scrambled in John’s direction.

“I’ll need you to…put…my shoulder back in.” He panted his words while clumsily undoing the ropes around John’s torso. John’s wrists were still trapped in a pair of handcuffs, however, and Sam had nothing—

“You wearing your amulet?” he asked, already undoing the top button of John’s shirt.

“Yeah.” The hollow of John’s throat jumped against the backs of Sam’s fingers. “Yeah. Under my t-shirt.”
Sam found the thin silver string stuck to John’s damp collarbone. He dragged out the amulet, took it off John, then managed to drop it straight away. He picked it up and crawled behind John, starting to work on the handcuffs lock with one of the sharp ends of the string. His left hand and arm were useless and burning. Sam felt his tongue stick to the roof of his mouth with the effort until the clicking sound of the lock’s release arrived to his ears, almost miraculous.

In another half a minute John was free as well. He immediately pulled Sam up on his feet and began arranging their bodies close to each other in a deliberate formation, as if they were a sculpture only John knew the name of. He placed his left elbow into the crook of Sam’s one.

“On three,” he said. Sam nodded and braced himself. The pain of his shoulder returning to its place still made him groan and sway forward, but it was weaker than he ever remembered it being. John caught him and helped him straighten up. His gaze examined Sam quickly, zooming in on the way he still held his left hand awkwardly away from his body. John took it by the wrist and carefully placed it between his hands; Sam felt his fingers mapping the area around the thumb.

They both froze, cocking their ears, their eyes locked in alarm. It was unmistakeable—a number of feet were running in their direction. John swore under his breath as Sam tore away from him. They ran for the door, standing on either side of it. John looked around in frenzy and spotted an old wooden chair lying in the near corner. He grabbed it and raised it, expectant. Sam had only one good fist, but he prepared to swing it for two.

It seemed like half a baseball stadium poured in through that door. The resulting vicious scuffle was a prolonged blur, shot through by lightning strikes of searing pain. Sam found himself flung forward and tried to curl in on himself mid-flight, when there was a loud bang in the air. A force seemed to slam into him and his landing was horrendous, making the world disappear.

He blinked back into consciousness through the sound of his blood roaring in his ears, his entire body hot and heavy like a huge, immovable log on fire. There was something wrong, too wrong; something nauseating and dizzying that made horrible sense with the words his brain registered were being shouted above him. In John’s voice. John was shouting.

“—now! He’s going to bleed to death, for God’s sake! Call an ambulance! If you want him alive call a fucking—”

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John clenched his jaw so hard he felt it contract in a threat to lock. He took a slow, deep breath and kept his gun steadily fixed on Tom. He’d stopped shouting for an ambulance when he’d realized that Tom and the guard from earlier were just watching him with animalistic glaze of adrenaline and fear in their eyes. Their guns were trained on him and there was no sign that they were going to do anything other than shoot him at the first convenient instance.

He’d stopped calling Sam’s name, too. He knew Sam had passed out. Twenty minutes, that was all Sam had gotten after that shot. Now fifteen. A miracle had to occur for John to manage to disarm the two men, get someone to trace his call to find their location, then have an ambulance arrive on time.

A miracle.

“Castiel,” he whispered, his voice odd to his own ears. The two men started; all three guns were gripped tighter.

“Castiel.” How did you call an angel? “This is John Watson. If you are listening, please…” John swallowed, then spoke more loudly. “Sam is dying. I don’t know where we are. He’s dying,
John hadn’t realized how much he still believed in miracles until he found that a miracle was not going to happen for him or Sam.

“No one’s coming,” Tom told him with cool relief. “How about you put the gun down and walk away? We don’t want to kill you. This is our mess, not yours. Drop the gun and go.”

John didn’t shift. He wouldn’t even risk a look back at Sam, crumpled behind him. As soon as Karen had shot Sam, John shot her, then stepped in front of Sam’s body—and that had been it.

That was it, the big ‘it’. He was the target of two guns that were only waiting for a split-second-long window of opportunity to send him down next to Sam. Sam, who was bleeding to death by a wound in his stomach, and John couldn’t even press something to it, or even say goodbye. That was it, in a fucking abandoned building in the middle of nowhere, and these people weren’t even real criminals. Not on the battle field in Afghanistan, not by the hand of a dangerous murderer. Not even a demon. Just plain, ugly human cowardice; just people who were going to kill him, because it was the safest, most hassle-free thing to do.

John took a step back to Sam without thinking, his whole being tuning into the moment, trying in vain to find any meaning to it. The two men shifted, too, beginning their advancement slowly but surely, encroaching. John’s grip tightened on his gun, his mind going blank in the impossibility to ready itself for what was coming.

In the white noise that had engulfed the world a sound rippled through, unintelligible and stark. John knew it wasn’t in his head when he saw the two men halt in their slithering path. The sound rang again, closer. John stopped breathing, ears physically moving in their strain to hear, then sending a shocked message to his brain when they’d deciphered the sound.

“Sam!” A deep, thudding voice. “Sam!” Too urgent to be coming from a foe, and louder still, now accompanied by steps and dull clatter.

With a sharp nod of his head Tom indicated that the guard should go to the door, while Tom stepped closer to John, aiming directly at his face. John mirrored him.

A man burst in through the door and before John had the chance to blink two simultaneous shots had deafened him. Stupefied, he watched the scene unravel, realizing his hearing had misled him. One of the shots must have been fired half a second before the other, fired to wound as well, because their guard crumbled to the floor, doubling over with a groan. As if in slow motion John’s eyes went up to the man who’d shot him to find a tall stranger whose focused, grim expression was clearly distinguishable even in the dusk. He was standing firmly on his feet, gun in hand still raised at eye-level, now pointing at John.

A motion from Tom drew John’s attention back to him. Tom had taken another step closer but to John’s left, weapon now targeting Sam. John’s head whipped to the other man just in time to see his gaze fall on Sam’s immobile form. His eyes widened, so terrified that John had an impulse to step forward to him.

“Sammy.” John doubted the man was even aware he’d spoken.

The eyes lifted to meet John’s then turned to Tom, before jumping down to Sam again. Suddenly the man was moving with loud, abrupt steps, raising his gun even higher, left hand flying to cup the right on the grip. He took a direct aim at Tom’s face while his own handsome face darkened in fury and threat.
“You even look at my brother,” he said, “I’ll blow your head off.”

Chapter End Notes

As I’ve reached the milestone of 100,000 words I feel a bit like the person in that Frost poem:

'The woods are lovely,
Dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.'

I would really appreciate it if you found a way to let me know you're (still) reading. It's been a long journey and as I'm starting the denouement I find it stretching ahead of me exciting but frankly quite daunting as well. I worry about running out of steam and/or compromising the artistic value of the story, because I won't have the emotional stamina and the energy to keep at it the way I have. So it will really mean a lot to me to hear back from you. Thank you!
John’s grandmother on his mother’s side was a woman who had a whole lot of idiosyncrasies. She never finished a cuppa, she had something sweet before every meal, and she only ever used a trolley in the shop if an item simply couldn’t fit into a basket. The list went on. The way she spoke was memorable, too. There was an artistic flair to the delivery of some of her favourite phrases, making John’s little heart feel like half the time something exciting was secretly going on. Nan would be watching Carol Vorderman or someone would be relating a mundane little story about a neighbour, when with perfect timing she would clasp her hands, lift her eyes upwards and exclaim, “Well, I never!”

Nearly twenty years after Nan had left this world, in a dim warehouse, location unknown, John paid her memory a tribute with his most heartfelt ‘Well, I never!’ to-date. It wasn’t spoken out loud and there was no hands clapping on account of him holding a handgun, but the sentiment was definitely there.

John had known the man in front of him was Dean Winchester as soon as the word ‘Sammy’ had rolled off his tongue. Perhaps on some level he’d deduced it even earlier. Yet that didn’t make Dean’s twelfth hour entrance any less dramatic.

“You watching him?” Dean growled in John’s direction, making him smack his lips shut and turn his gaze to Tom. Unlike John, Dean hadn’t even blinked away, his deadly focus trained on Tom from the moment he’d figured out who the bad guy in the room was.

“Yes,” John said.

“Good. Shoot him if he moves.”

In his peripheral vision John caught the shadow of a body whizzing past him as Dean all but flung himself down next to Sam.

“Sam…” The gentle despair in Dean’s voice could have very well belonged to a whole other person compared to what he sounded like when he’d spoken a few seconds ago. It still hadn’t prepared John for the way Dean’s ‘Oh God’ sounded at what John could only conclude was the discovery that Sam was bleeding out and was on the brink of death.

“No,” Dean whispered. “No, no, no, no. Castiel!” John jumped at the way the name suddenly echoed, the sound mighty as if Dean was the heavenly creature. Even Tom, who’d been standing still with a chilling, blank look on his face, seemed to start.

“No” Dean hollered again, then switched back to his breathless register with dizzying speed. “No, no... Sammy, please. Please, Sammy! Castiel!”

Shivers raced down John’s spine jolting him back into reality, as if hearing the scene without seeing it had become so unbearable that his brain had finally taken charge, pushing all emotion away.
“Come watch him and let me look at Sam,” he told Dean, not letting his gaze move from Tom. “I’m a doctor,” he added, then repeated with the voice he’d been trained to use when he spoke to soldiers in shock. “Let me look at Sam. We must call an ambulance. I need your phone.”

Dean had been reduced to noisy, broken exhalations and a litany that sounded like someone playing two records simultaneously: one with Sam’s name, one with Castiel’s, both to the chorus of ‘please’. He obviously registered John’s words, though, because a mobile phone was shoved against John’s chest straight away. Dean didn’t linger or make eye contact. His gaze had returned on Tom, dark fury back in it—he stormed past John, his gun’s safety clicking released as Dean pointed it between Tom’s eyes.

“Did you do that?” he shouted. “Tell me! Did you do that?”

John didn’t bother correcting him; he was already on his knees by Sam’s side, heart sinking at the sight of all the blood in which he’d landed. It had spread around Sam’s curled form like an inky puddle and John felt the shivers down his spine again, icicles stabbing every nerve. He took off his jacket, bunching it up and pressing it against the wound in Sam’s stomach, while his other hand tried to push some keys on Dean’s phone, fingers bloody and numb.

No signal.

No signal, but more importantly—no ambulance was going to arrive in time anyway. John’s head wasn’t in a great shape, his blood pressure dropping with the clash between adrenaline and the harsh assessment of reality, but the message still found a way to reach him, pouring dispassionate and clear like the beam of a projector onto a big white wall. His mouth went dry; he pressed against the dark hole in Sam’s stomach harder, a distant part of him irrationally seeking the warmth and wetness of something that told him Sam was there, alive, which meant that there was still hope, even if it was for a miracle. Because John knew what it felt like to be touching the dead body of a friend in a puddle of blood, and no one should have had to go through that twice in their life, no one—

A fluttering noise to his left made him lift his swimming eyes. His heart gave a violent, happy lurch at the sight of Castiel who had materialized right next to Tom and was now touching his forehead. Tom didn’t even sway. He dropped on the floor like a cannonball, dead or maybe just unconscious. It was Castiel who swayed, Dean catching him swiftly.

“Where the hell have you been?” he asked, voice booming again, but then it quickly changed to concern. “Cas?”

Castiel lifted his hands to Dean’s chest, grabbing a handful of his shirt and dragging himself upward. Dean kept his arms on both his shoulders, head ducking to peer into his face.

“Cas?” he said, then went on in the same breath, “Come on, I need you with me! Sam’s badly hurt. Cas? Cas!”

John didn’t need to hear the rising panic in Dean’s voice to know that whatever was happening was far from normal for Castiel. His spirits plummeted, the drop all the more terrible for the height they had reached a moment ago.

“Castiel,” he heard himself saying. “He’s dying. Please.”

Dean kept watching Castiel’s face, his hands now trying to steer him in Sam’s direction. John doubted it was of any use—he’d seen the expressions of people who were having an absence seizure
and he was quite certain he was witnessing the angel equivalent of it.

“Cas, come on.” Dean begged, voice beginning to tremble. “Snap out of it, please, I’m begging you.” He shook Castiel by the shoulders with one strong, frantic movement. “Please, come on. Please.”

Castiel slowly turned to Dean. The change in his face was so clear even John could see it in the dark. There was torment there, the kind that accompanied a great mental effort. Dean kept talking, but all he got in response was an angel looking back at him with a deranged expression.

“Come on, man,” Dean whispered, voice thick with tears, his right hand sliding down Castiel’s trench coat as if unconsciously seeking to rest over his heart.

Suddenly Castiel’s forehead was twisted by an enraged frown. His low voice filled the space, loud and clear.

“No!” he said. “I cannot do that!”

Dean’s hands fell away from his body and he took a step back, staring at him, crestfallen. However Castiel’s next words made small hope bloom again on his face and in John’s chest—it looked like the vehement refusal hadn’t been in response to Dean’s pleas after all.

“I can’t let Sam die,” Castiel said. “Don’t ask that of me.”

“I’m not—Cas?” Dean said in dismay. “What the hell?”

Castiel seemed to focus on Dean again. He remained completely motionless, but his eyes were turbulent and wild—a disturbing, awesome sight on his harmless looking features.

“No, Naomi!” he growled. “I will not let Sam Winchester die!”

He pushed Dean out of his way and was crouching next to Sam and John in four steps, hand splaying open against Sam’s chest. John had caught a sight of something dark trickling down Castiel’s nose and up close he was staggered to find it was tears of blood.

John’s left hand was still pressing the jacket against Sam’s wound, while his right had fallen to rest on Sam’s shoulder. It meant that he felt it first—a full body jerk that was followed by a loud gasp, the kind a man starved for oxygen made. For a moment Sam came alive under his hands, eyes straining as if trying to leave their sockets, body uncurling in a powerful burst of energy. John heard Dean’s “Sammy!” just as Sam stilled again, this time stretched out on his back, face sickly pale in the dusk.

“Hey,” Dean said, hands flying to cup his brother’s face. “Hey, hey, hey,” he repeated, urgent and panicked again. John brushed Dean’s right hand away to check Sam’s pulse on his neck, while his own pulse threatened to break through the tender spots at his temples.

It was there: distinctive, rhythmic; miraculous.

“He’s okay,” John said, then took a deep breath, air forever whistling on its way in. “He’s just unconscious. He’s okay.”

He lifted his eyes and at last met Dean Winchester properly, his face wide open mere inches away. Profound relief illuminated it to highlight nature’s successful effort to produce a masterpiece.
“You sure?” Dean asked, a hint of danger in his voice as if John giving him false hope was the worst crime.

“Yes,” John hurried to say. Dean gazed back into Sam’s face and John looked away.

“We must leave at once,” Castiel spoke above their heads. “Crowley is on his way.” He opened his mouth, but instead of continuing to speak, seemed to zone out again.

“Cas, what is wrong with you?” Dean was up, squinting worriedly. “You’re freaking me out. Who’s Naomi?”

There was absolutely no reaction from Castiel.

“He seems to be having some kind of absence seizures,” John offered.

“You think?” Dean snapped without looking away. “What does that even mean?”

“I was hoping you’d know.”

“How would I know? He’s a freaking angel, and even if I was Heaven’s Dr Sexy, he’s no ordinary angel. If something’s scrambling his brain…” Dean’s voice trailed off. “Cas,” he said imploringly.

Castiel took a sharp breath, blinking quickly a few times. His eyes focused on Dean. “Crouch down next to them,” he ordered, voice flat. “We need to go now.”

“Well, I’ve been ready to go,” Dean told him crossly, while he quickly sat on his haunches behind Sam’s head, lifting it and placing it in his lap. “You’re the one doing the freeze frame.” He looked up, a line between his eyebrows. “Take us someplace safe,” he told him, “and then you and I are going to talk.”

Castiel all but keeled over on his way down. He dropped on his knees between Dean and John and tried to speak, then his jaw slowly pushed forward in grim determination. John felt a hand land on his back—

And then he was looking at an unfamiliar living room, so bright that after the prolonged light deprivation his pupils burned at the exposure. He shut his eyes and lifted an arm to hide his face in the crook of his elbow.

“Where are we?” He heard Dean ask.

“Mr and Mrs Fatona’s house,” Castiel replied. “They are a lovely family, currently on vacation visiting relatives in the Dominican Republic.”

There seemed to be a sigh from Dean’s side. “Thanks,” he said drily. “Because we wouldn’t want to be in some jerks’ house. I meant what place is this. Back home? London? A small Welsh village with a name I can’t pronounce?”

John peeked at Castiel to find him looking slightly chastised. “This is Watford, Hertfordshire,” he said. “The town is situated around thirty kilometres North-west from London.”

“Why—” John started, then quickly rephrased. “Can’t you take us straight home?”
Dean turned his head to look at him sharply.

“I don’t trust my judgement at the moment,” Castiel replied enigmatically, then disappeared without any preamble.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me!” Dean carefully extracted himself from underneath Sam’s head, then sprang to his feet, turning around his axis. “Cas!” he called. “Damn it.” After the warehouse his curse sounded much tamer in the small, furnished living room. Dean stopped with his back to John and looked down, his head hanging limply. In a few seconds he sharply looked up then turned around.

“Help me get my gigantor of a little brother on the couch,” he said.

They lifted Sam onto Mr and Mrs Fatona’s sofa, where John did a quick check up again: pulse, pupils’ response, abdominal area. There was no change in Sam’s vitals, but he was definitely stable and his gunshot wound was gone. John was so happy with this state of affairs that he was willing to let Sam take all the time he needed to come back to consciousness.

“How is he?” Dean asked from the window at the far end of the room where he was inspecting the scenery through the net curtains.

“No change.” John chewed on his bottom lip, eyes travelling over Sam’s white, peaceful features. “I suppose there could be some after effects from the blood loss. I don’t know how the angel touch works.” John spared a split second to goggle at himself for the things he now said out loud. “Still, no immediate danger, thank God,” he continued. His doctor’s instinct suddenly cut through his relief. “I’ll feel much better if we took him to a hospital, though,” he added, straightening up and walking over to join Dean by the window.

Dean turned to face him, serving John with the triple impact of his strong features in broad daylight. He was tanned, a bit rugged, and unbelievably good-looking. Even his short brown hair seemed to look cool and sun-kissed. John felt a prickling of irritation at fate’s insistence to fill his life with this sort of men. He’d have endlessly preferred if it was half the women in his acquaintance who looked like models. To add insult to injury, Dean was also quite tall; not as tall as Sam, but probably just as tall as Sherlock.

Sherlock. John’s mind suddenly slammed into the feeling, conquered by it without any warning, or resistance. In the last quarter of an hour he had been seconds away from being shot, Sam had nearly died, Dean Winchester had arrived, Castiel had saved Sam and then taken them all into some strangers’ house, before disappearing again…John had lived in the heart of the action, moment after moment, everything else obliterated entirely. Now that he’d stopped he found a world that was fundamentally changed; a world that now had Sherlock in it, in whatever form. It made reality expand and contract so quickly John wanted to find a physical way of clinging to it, if only to make sure that it never changed back.

“Listen, man,” Dean said, pulling him out of his reverie. His eyes shone greener than Sam’s, pure green, too, with none of the amber in Sam’s eyes. “I want to—” Dean cleared his throat. “Thanks for looking out for Sammy,” he said solemnly.

“That’s um...That’s fine,” John said. Dean nodded, eyes going to Sam then returning to John. An eyebrow lifted in a finely drawn, slightly comical squiggle. “Who are you again?” he asked.
“Oh. I’m John Watson. I’m Sam’s flatmate.”

“His flatmate?” John had thought Sam had a very expressive face, but he was beginning to suspect Sam couldn’t hold a candle to his big brother in that respect. John was about to confirm his status as Sam’s flatmate when Dean spoke again. “Wait a minute. John Watson?”

“Yes?” John frowned in silent enquiry as to why his name was significant. Dean’s gaze turned surprisingly inscrutable and John didn’t like that one bit. It spoke of veiled truths, but these days everyone seemed to know something that John didn’t: Mrs Hudson, Sam, Mycroft, the hunters and the demons. Why shouldn’t Dean Winchester join the club? Maybe John should just start asking everyone as soon as he met them if there was something they needed to tell him. Starting with Dean who’d obviously heard John’s name before.

“Dean.”

They both started, turning sharply at the featherlight sound of Sam’s voice.

Sam was up on his feet staring at his brother, the residual dazedness over his features making the emotions on them even more simple and straightforward to read. Dean just gazed back at him as if Aladdin’s cave had just opened before him, the gold and riches inside hit by the sun and bathing Dean’s face with their reflected light.

“Hey, Sammy,” he said softly.

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Sam held onto Dean, eyes squeezing tightly until stars danced behind their lids. The stars of a whole new universe, because Sam could feel his whole being begin to recalibrate around his brother’s existence. It was staggering how real Dean felt, everything about him: flesh, warmth, smell, hardness, sound, colour—all of it a million times more acute and Dean than Sam had ever remembered. How he could have imagined that he would go on without his brother being near was beyond him. He sagged a bit in Dean’s arms, weak with relief and love, but also testing, always testing. Dean only shifted a little to accommodate the extra weight, then his arms tightened around Sam.

They began letting go in synchrony, until they separated, both taking a step back to look at the other properly.

“You okay, Sammy?” Dean asked, eyes roaming Sam’s face with the kind of bone penetrating care that had served as a blueprint of the feeling for as long as Sam could remember.

“Yeah,” Sam breathed out. “Yeah, I’m fine.” He frowned at the afterthought. “Why?”

“Don’t you remember? You were shot. If it wasn’t for Cas you were a goner.”

Sam had woken up completely disoriented, Dean’s miraculous presence the only thing he’d registered. For a moment Sam had been even more confused about whether he wasn’t just dreaming. He did remember now: the hunters, the dark warehouse, the fight, the loud bang. John shouting for an ambulance.

“John!”
“I’m here,” John said, coming into view as he walked to Sam from the blur that was the background behind Dean. “How are you feeling?”

Sam blinked a few times quickly, left hand reaching out for Dean’s chest, right for John’s shoulder. “Disoriented, I guess. A bit dizzy.” His gaze fell on John and he felt himself tense at the sight of blood all over him. “You okay?”

“Yes, I’m all right.” John cast a look down at himself. “That’s—That was you.”

Sam let go of them and did a quick check of his own body. “Right,” he said in a moment, having assessed his ‘worker in a slaughterhouse’ appearance. “Pretty bad, huh?” His eyes moved from John to Dean. John said nothing, but Dean gave him a curt, “Yeah.”

Sam frowned again, cogs in his brain starting to turn quicker. “Where’s Cas?” He looked around, finally paying proper attention to his surroundings. He couldn’t recognize the place for the life of him. The floral patterns of the curtains were quintessentially British, similar to what Mrs Hudson had in her spare room. There was a picture of a beautiful boy on the fireplace mantel, a typical school photograph: the boy wore a uniform and smiled against some generic blue background. He was still changing his milk teeth and was obviously not of native British descent. The room was an eclectic mix of cultures.

“Where are we?” Sam turned to John, completely stumped. “What happened?”

Dean was the one to answer. “We’re in some people’s house in…” He turned to John lifting his chin in mute question.


“So what is this place?” Sam insisted. The answers he was getting somehow managed to get him even more lost.

“It’s just some random people’s house, dude.” Dean spread his arms eloquently. “You know what Cas is like. He just zapped us out here, then took off. Sammy, there’s something seriously wrong with him.”

“Yeah!” Sam said, distractedly looking around. “I know.”

“You know?” Dean looked at him taken aback. “Were you able to hear us?”

“No, um…No. From before. I spoke to him before.”

Dean’s features grew stern. “And you didn’t think of saying something?”

“I didn’t know what was wrong with him, Dean.” Time for a quick lie, until he could gather his thoughts. “I wasn’t going to call you and freak you out before knowing for sure.”

Dean slowly nodded. “Or you just weren’t going to call me, period.”

Sam tightened his jaw and said nothing. There was still noise in his ears and each time he looked abruptly from one point to another there were white spots in his vision. He’d barely had the joy of Dean’s presence, alive and well, sink in, and they were already edging to dangerous territories. Well, there was solid proof that Dean really was there.
John cleared his throat and pointed to the door. “I'll go and have a look outside,” he told Sam. “Check where we are exactly and how we can get back to London.” He turned to Sam. “Actually, do you have any cash?”

Sam found that he really had no idea. That Tom guy had taken their wallets together with their guns, probably just being thorough. Sam rummaged through his jeans pockets and found some coins. “I've got about…four pounds,” he said. He went through the back pockets just in case, then produced a crumpled five-pound note. “And this.”

“I've got a fiver too,” John said. “Good, we should be able to have enough for—”

“Are you serious?” Dean said, face scrunching in a way that never stopped being funny. “We're counting coins? For what—a bus ride?”

Sam and John looked at each other, then John looked back to Dean. “Well, we need to get back to London,” he said in his most sensible voice.

Dean’s eyebrows shot to his hairline. “We're not taking the bus.” He turned to Sam. “I'm not taking the bus.”

“Do you have enough cash for a cab?” John asked. “It'll be fairly expensive from here.”

“I—” Dean was momentarily thrown off, but was back to glaring in a second. “No, I don’t have cash! But that’s not the point, because we won’t be taking the bus.”

“Erm…” John began, looking between Sam and Dean in mild bewilderment. “What else is there?”

“We'll steal a car like normal people!” Dean erupted. “Crowley’s here, Cas is going off his rocker, Sam just got shot by some crazy people, and…I'm not taking the bus like a freaking old lady pensioner!”

John spread his arms helplessly, then dropped them, looking at Sam. “We're not stealing a car, are we?” he asked.

Sam shook his head, “We're not. Just…” He steered John toward the door, raising his voice to be heard over Dean’s renewed protests. “Just…ignore him. Go and see where we are.”

John tried to say something, gave up and walked out. In a second there was the sound of the front door closing, followed by silence that was comparatively quite serene. Sam turned his eyes to Dean, but Dean was looking at the door, rubbing a hand over his jaw. He made a few distracted steps around the room, shaking his head.

“We're probably safer here than anywhere else anyway,” Sam pointed out.

Dean turned to face him. “I don’t like any of this, Sammy,” he said, looking up at him emphatically. “We're stuck in the middle of nowhere; Crowley’s after us…Who were those people back there?”

“Some local hunters saying hello.”

“By trying to kill you?”
“That wasn’t the plan. They were supposed to hand me over to Crowley, because get this—they struck a deal with him.”

“What kind of a deal?”

“He told them London gets a free pass—no demons—if they delivered me to him.”

Dean started pacing again, demeanour stormy. “I should’ve gotten here earlier. Those douchebags would’ve been all dead.” He stopped, turning to Sam again. “What does Crowley want with you?”

“Apparently, my beating heart.”

Dean stared at him. “This some kind of figure of speech?” he asked.

“I wish,” Sam said, lifting an eyebrow. “It’s literal. First a demon burned my ink trying to posses me, then yesterday another demon tried to get John to agree to get possessed so they could get to me, because Crowley doesn’t want me dead—at least not until he has my heart, still beating. I’ve been reading up on it, but…” Sam lifted his shoulders tiredly. “There’s just too much on that kind of sacrifice.”

Dean was watching him, the corners of his mouth turned downward, making him look like a cross between a little boy that was really upset and an adult who was pissed off beyond any measure. He slowly shook his head. “Okay, Sammy. Start from the beginning.”

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to all new readers!:) Many thanks to everyone who made my week so fantastic with your interest in the story! Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoy! There's a ton of visuals over here at my LJ.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Something important about Sam's characterisation in my story. If you go back over the earlier chapters, all written while SPN's season eight was still in-progress, you'll notice that I was already building Sam up the way we saw him in the finale, long before we got that anguished glimpse into what was actually going on in his headspace. It's not a big deal, but I've had to give up some pretty cool scenes and ideas because the show went that way and I didn't want it to seem as if I was being lazy and just ripping off canon. I can't give up on Sam's characterisation, but it's more than that. I don't know - it's a small thing but it's mine. I was there first as it were, and I'm proud of having such an intimate insight into character, so I guess I just wanted to make a point. Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoy!

Sam tried to be concise in what he told Dean, but the words kept pouring out from that invisible horn in him where they always seemed to accumulate with the sole purpose to be shared with his brother —no one else but him. Dean listened to him carefully, asking the odd question, but altogether letting him talk. They’d both sat on the couch; Sam was still feeling a little off and Dean seemed to have put away his restlessness for the time being. Even his knee was completely still where it was brushing against Sam’s. Sam knew his brother—this was as far from relaxed as possible.

“And then I woke up here,” Sam finished his tale. They both remained quiet for a moment, then Dean leaned forward, propping his forearms on his thighs. He squinted ahead, the lines around his eyes clearly visible. Sam watched him, mind blank for anything other than updating his memory banks on what his brother looked like.

“There’s some serious shit going on here, Sam,” Dean said at last, gaze still fixed forward. “You should’ve seen Cas. He was totally out of it. He was having these episodes, like…That doctor dude said they were seizures. I don’t know if that’s true, but let me tell you, it was scary. I thought he wasn’t going to snap out of it.” Dean paused, turning to look at Sam over his shoulder. “I thought I’d lost you.”

Sam remembered too well hanging upside down in a dark sewer tunnel not so long ago, his only thought that he would leave this world on bad terms with his brother. “You didn’t,” he told Dean with quiet firmness. Dean studied his face for a while, before scrubbing at his own with both hands and getting up. Sam got up, too.

“Was Cas like that when you left or only when you got here?” he asked.

The clouds didn’t leave Dean’s face, but it turned awkward. “We didn’t leave together,” he said, adding after a pause, “I came here by myself.”

“How?” Sam asked stupidly.

“I walked on water, like Jesus! What do you think, genius? I flew in.”
There was a clock somewhere in the room, its ticking suddenly distinctive.

“You flew in?” It wasn’t the most incredulous Sam had ever sounded, but it was pretty close.

“Yes.”

The front door opened. Dean quickly shoved a finger in Sam’s face, hissing, “We’re going to talk about this. London! I had to fly for like—What were you thinking coming all the—”

John walked in briskly then came to a halt, eyes flicking between the two of them. Dean offered a particularly weak attempt at looking nonchalant.

“Right,” John said. After listening to Dean’s expressive voice in its gruff register Sam had the surreal experience that he hadn’t heard John’s soft timbre for a year. For a fleeting moment he wondered whether he was doomed to never have both of them inhabit the same reality in his own head.

“There’s a bus stop five minutes from here,” John reported. “We can get the bus to Watford Underground station and then take the tube to Baker Street.”

“So we’re in London,” Dean said.

“No, we’re in Hertfordshire,” John replied. “Greater London is just very big. The London Underground Metropolitan Line goes all the way to Watford.” He turned to Sam. “It takes us straight home.” He paused. “Do you reckon it’s safe for us to go there?”

“I don’t know.” Sam said apologetically. “We can’t call Mrs Hudson, either. Unless you know her number by heart?”

John was shaking his head when Dean spoke. “I have her number.”

The ticking clock had another few moments of full reign.

“How?” John asked. His tone was deceptively mild, but Sam doubted Dean would be able to tell.

“It’s a long story,” Dean deadpanned.

“I can put the kettle on.”

Dean pulled his head back and regarded John with open scrutiny. John returned the look squarely. Sam would have smiled at how well he understood Dean’s newfound need to reassess the man in front of him if he didn’t sense it was time to intervene. Good thing he was dying to know the answer to John’s question too.

“Dean,” he said in lieu of a request, injecting his tone with pacifying quality. Dean’s eyes moved to him and he rolled them. “You know you can get anyone’s number if you know where to look.”

“Yes, but how did you know to look for her number?”

Dean hesitated, something defensive blooming on his face. “I’ve known you’re here for a while, Sammy.”
Sam’s heart sped up, uncertain what to do with this revelation. Then a thought occurred to him, making it his turn to roll his eyes. “Was it Cas?”

“No, it wasn’t Cas. What, you think I can’t figure out things by myself?”

Sam just scoffed, looking away. Being around Dean was like sitting on a gunpowder keg. You never knew at what random corner there’d be an explosion. Or maybe the corners were not so random; maybe it was Sam who lit the matches so damn often.

“Mrs Hudson called me first,” Dean told him, tone less confrontational. “I missed the call, but when I saw the foreign number, I checked the code, saw it was English, then I got a trace to her name. I remembered her and figured out she had to have called because she needed our help. So I hacked your phone records, saw she’d called you afterwards, did some digging around and found out she was the landlady of someone called Sherlock Holmes.”

Sam’s gaze flitted to John of its own volition. John was looking at Dean with a blank expression, unblinking—a different brand of gunpowder, but no less dangerous.

“I put two and two together,” Dean said, looking at his feet. His right hand ran over his scalp, frisking the hair at the back. “And I knew you’d gone international.” He lifted his eyes to Sam with deliberation. “I asked Cas to watch out for you.” The defensiveness was taking a slow turn to something challenging. “And get me here if…If things got ugly.”

Just like earlier when Sam had wondered at himself for even contemplating life without Dean in it, now he was amazed that it had never occurred to him how extremely unlikely it would have been for his brother to not know where Sam was. If only for the fact that Sam was like an open book to him: Dean had seen a far destination and had concluded straight away Sam would have never missed the opportunity to run away. Because that was what Sam did. And he had to be kept an eye on, too, of course, for when he inevitably screwed things up.

He nodded once, slowly, feeling himself clam up.

Dean was watching him, tension all over his face. “I couldn’t not know where you were,” he said quietly. “Sam…”

Sam pushed his lips forward, nodding a few times quickly again, and looked sideways, careful not to gulp.

As if providing a phantom release to the lump in his throat, John cleared his own. “Sam, we can’t call Mrs Hudson,” he said, moving a step closer. Sam met his gaze, the now familiar grey of John’s eyes serving like soothing blinds in a day where there was too much glare everywhere.

“She might not be back from her spa trip, remember?” John continued. “We’re just going to scare her. And if she’s there alone, that’s even—Mycroft!” he exclaimed out of the blue. “He’s got the house under surveillance. I’ll call him. You know, desperate times…” John’s nose twitched. “He might even send a car.”

Sam found the right corner of his mouth twitch in reciprocation. Their eyes stayed locked for a few seconds, then John shook his head, dropped it and sighed. He stretched out a hand to Dean.

“Can I use your phone, please?” he said.
In the train Dean managed to sit still for exactly fifteen minutes. Sam wasn’t surprised; his brother and a moving vehicle of any sorts got on well only if there was the possibility of him driving it. Neither of them had ever had a metropolitan period of their life, together or separately, but while Sam could take the humdrum way of ordinary living in his stride, use of public transport included, Dean was...Dean. A part of him wanted what everyone did: security, warmth, love, comfort. But the rebellious part, the part that struggled with convention—that was the core of him. Sam had wondered whether this was the result of the damage his brother had suffered as a child. Hell, his entire childhood had been one uninterrupted stretch of damage. Or maybe this had always been an intrinsic characteristic of Dean’s personality, something ferociously independent that thrived on the rootless way in which his life had developed.

There was also a third possibility that kind of looped back into the first—that Dean’s skittishness was founded in a deep sense of inadequacy. It was a thought to be avoided. Dean would have totally kicked his ass if Sam let on what he was thinking, and as for Sam...It made him want to grind the world into dust, starting with pouring oil in Hell’s fires and watching all demons burn to ash. He’d never stopped blaming them for making their family so broken: killing Mom and driving Dad down the crazy path of revenge, but most of all, snatching away four-year-old Dean’s fragile world of peace and happiness in one night and cursing him to grow up too fast into a dark, bloody, isolated life of complete insecurity.

No one would have guessed it if they saw Dean saunter around, confident. He was now exploring the big printout of the London Underground map above the seats opposite theirs to the left with a deep frown of concentration, holding the rail above his head with both hands. With the motion of the train his body swayed minutely, but it looked incredibly sturdy despite the fact that Dean looked out of place. He naturally belonged in big, open spaces, which had some chance of containing his loud voice, and his swagger, and his exuberant energy. His entire personality.

When Sam was seventeen they’d stayed for a month in the suburbs of Boston, actually renting a house. The neighbour next door, Mrs Rollins, had seemed very old to him, so he’d been shocked to find Dean had ‘a thing’ with her. Mrs Rollins was a petite blond who made awesome pie. She was also a soprano in some choir. One night Sam overheard her talking to a friend about someone, who was apparently ‘wild and magnificent’. The tone of her voice alone had made Sam want to put his head in an ice bucket and who the hell even talked like that? Apparently frisky women in their mid-thirties.

But as he watched his brother now he thought yet again that sexual innuendo aside, Mrs Rollins had been spot on. Some of Dean’s shine had diminished over the years as a result of Sam naturally growing out of his unadulterated adoration, but also of Dean himself losing it from within. You didn’t leave Hell and Purgatory with your sparkling personality untainted. Yet when it came to Dean, Sam’s perceptions were omniscient like those of angels. In this case a particular one—both he and Castiel looked at Dean and all at once saw everything he’d ever been and everything he could have been, both the great and the terrifying. They saw who Dean was beyond all that. It made any sacrifice for him an infinitely easier choice.

John shuffled in the seat next to Sam, starting him and making him look away.

“Anything you want to catch me up on?” John’s voice was lowered, almost drowned by the racket the train was making at that particular stretch.

“He doesn’t know anything about the heart thing,” Sam said after a moment of consideration. “He
said Cas had seemed a bit off for a while, but today was different. That he had a breakdown?"

John nodded. Sam thought some more, but found it hard to untangle the bits where John had been there from those when he hadn’t, so he wasn’t sure what to repeat. There wasn’t much anyway.

“That’s all, I think,” he said, turning to meet John’s eyes. He was surprised to find that from this close and under the bright fluorescent light in the carriage John actually looked oddly small.

“You okay, man?” he asked on impulse. John pulled back and frowned. “Yes,” he said immediately. “Um... All things considered.”

“Yeah,” Sam said. He looked at his hands in his lap. The veins were standing out quite scarily; it was an ugly sight.

“Why is he here?” John asked. Sam looked up at him abruptly.

“Who? Dean?”

“Hmm.”

Sam opened his mouth to reply, but took a moment. “I don’t know. To check on me, I guess.”

John’s eyebrows rose. “You didn’t ask him.”

Sam blinked, confused by the discovery. “No,” he said.

John’s eyes flicked a few times back and forth between Sam’s, then he turned them to Dean. Sam kept expecting him to speak, but there was nothing.

For a few seconds Sam watched John watch Dean and just like that there was nothing surreal about the experience anymore. It was the opposite: reality kicked the front door in and invaded the place, every nook and cranny. Dean had come for Sam. They were all here, in London. They were still none the wiser about the big picture. Sherlock was still a ghost, obscure and baffling. Castiel was still off.

And since he’d met Sam John Watson had been tied up and threatened with torture and death twice, and he’d shot to kill to protect Sam, also twice. (On the way to the bus stop John had told him he’d shot Karen, then after a pause added that he’d asked Mycroft to find that warehouse and send an ambulance.) John had held Sam’s frayed body in his arms—twice. He’d invited Sam into his home and in exchange Sam had brought all this on him, topping it up with lying to John about the person who mattered to him more than anyone. All in complete selfishness and grand self-deception.

“Listen,” Sam said in a whisper, then tried again. “John.” John heard him this time, looking back to him.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said, failing to speak loudly. “About everything, okay? I’ll be out of the house as soon as we get there.” Sam felt the tide rise up to his eyes without any warning, so he hurried to get the important bit out. “I’m sorry that I lied to you about Sherlock. Really.”

In the background Dean pivoted and headed toward them, but instead of sitting down he slowly walked past, giving them a quick sideways look. He got to the other end of the carriage and started diligently exploring all the information posters and adverts above the row of seats there.
Sam and John looked back to each other. Sam felt his face grow pinched. “I just wanted—I guess it was just easier not to tell you,” he said. “You would have gotten hurt, and you and I—This job…Things get too messy sometimes. For people, I mean.”

“Well.” John’s expression had a touch of admonishment to it, but there was no austerity. “Things get like that anyway. You don’t need demons or, or ghosts for that.” His voice got higher at the end of the phrase, as if he couldn’t believe that needed to be said out loud. “That’s relationships. People sort things out if they can, or at least they try. But they have to do it together. You can’t just—You stay trapped in your head, and it all starts looking distorted and…wrong.” Two big, anguished balls appeared for a moment on both sides of John’s jaw. “I know how that goes—I’ve done it and I’ve seen it happen. Sherlock…He was the most solitary soul I’ve ever met, you know.” John paused, intensity hanging like a cloud above him. “All I’m saying,” he said in a moment, eyes returning to Sam’s, intent, “all I’m saying is that you should have trusted me more. It wouldn’t have been any messier than I’d seen, I promise you that.” John shook his head with feeling, a bare echo of self-deprecation somewhere in there, but his next sentence arrived dead serious. “I wouldn’t have let it get messy, all right? Or at least we both wouldn’t have.”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “I know. I’m sorry. About everything else as well.”

“That was my choice,” John said, frowning. “It’s the same like what I just said. I mean, I’m in this too. My choice; a whole other person, you know.” John’s gaze moved over all of Sam’s features. “Sam, it’s not all your responsibility. Stop…carrying everything on your shoulders, or you’ll break, sooner or later.” He paused, then licked his lips and tried to smile. “Plus it’s really patronizing for the rest of us.”

Sam huffed his laugh. His body had never felt too small, not since it took to the skies when he was fifteen. But now it did; it was as if huge chunks inside of him were thawing and there was already no space to keep the resulting shifting mass.

The train had stopped. Now the door closed and they started moving again. Dean marched to them, considerably brighter. “Five more stops only,” he said.

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It was strange to return to the sights and sounds of Central London, particularly enhanced as it was by the fact that it was night time. Colourful lights danced around them like a big orchestra of illuminations whose conductor had left his post. Outside the station Dean stopped for a moment, seemingly taken aback. He looked around, quickly cramming the view into his head, then said, “Which way?” Maybe it was Sam’s imagination—or maybe it was an example of wishful thinking, Sam’s mind helpfully supplied—but he had the feeling his brother stuck closer to him as they walked up the road. Of course Dean didn’t know where he was going, but it was still a slightly disturbing, yet endearing reversal of their usual ‘big brother – little brother’ set up.

“We’re just up the street, left,” John told Dean without being asked. He pointed and Dean nodded, squinting at the distance in something akin to child-like mistrust.

They all had a gun each—in the scuffle with the hunters John had retrieved his own and Dean had two, so he gave one to Sam. Mycroft Holmes had told John the house was perfectly safe and had promised he’d call Dean’s number if he was reported anything suspicious. Both Sam and John felt reassured enough to just walk in, but Dean didn’t know Mycroft Holmes and his scary, omnipresent eye, so he insisted on checking around, creeping in as stealthily as they could, guns in hand.
“Do you live here?” Dean asked once they were inside Mrs Hudson’s flat, eyes widening at the ornate cushions and the peacock wallpaper.

“No… No!” Sam pointed quickly up. “Upstairs. Our flat is upstairs.” Behind Dean’s back John bit his lips trying to keep them from stretching into a full grin.

Dean’s phone rang, the sound piercing in the complete quiet of the house. He swore in a murmur and fished it out of his jacket pocket.

“Here,” he said, passing it on to John after he’d looked at the screen. “It’s got to be that guy you called, no one else here has this number.”

John took the phone and glanced at the screen, then caught Sam’s eye, nodding. He lifted the phone to his ear. “Hello?” he said. He stared forward the way people did when they were listening in focus, then gave another nod, this one curt. “Okay, thanks,” he said. Sam expected him to hang up, but evidently Mycroft had something else to say. John’s eyes rounded a bit and made a quick visit to a few random objects. “Mycroft…”

He dragged the phone down his face and looked at the display, then sniffed, eyes lifting to Sam’s.

“He’s coming over,” he said.

Sam frowned at him. “Why?” he asked at the exact same time as Dean.

John shook his head miserably. “He only said that the house was empty and safe, then he said we needed to talk and that he was on his way.”

“Great,” Sam muttered sarcastically.

“He’s—” John and Sam began together, then stopped. Everyone tried to look at everyone else in the next few seconds, then Sam pulled a little wry grimace at John. “You explain Mycroft Holmes,” he said.

“What, to an innocent stranger?” John retorted. Sam gave him a small smile.

“He’s Sherlock’s brother,” John told Dean. “He—He works for the Government and he, ah...He likes to have things under control.”

Dean quirked an eyebrow. “You mean people,” he said, eyes going to Sam, who tilted his head in confirmation. “Why?” Dean asked.

“Um, because he’s a paranoid bastard?” John said in perfect synchronicity with the words in Sam’s head. Sam found himself letting out another soundless laugh.

“Okay,” Dean said slowly. He turned to Sam. “Do you trust him? That the house is safe?”

“Yeah, pretty much. They guy’s douchebag, but he’s like—He’s Big Brother, dude. The Orwell kind.”
Dean digested this, eyes on him. “Well, I’ll be damned,” he said at last. “All right then, lead the way.”

They started on the stairs, Sam thinking fast on his feet that Mycroft’s impending appearance meant John was going to be confronted again with the topic of Sherlock’s ghost. It was such a sore point and Sam needed the mental space to work out what it meant for him, for John, for both of them. More immediately, he felt his discomfort thicken at the prospect of effectively bringing up his deceit into the spotlight, so soon after he and John had reached some fragile understanding about the whole thing, and hopefully forgiveness on John’s part. Sam didn’t relish having to remind John he did lie to him, which was inevitably going to happen when he came face to face with Holmes. If Holmes himself didn’t raise the subject, Sam would—he was done. He wanted the whole Sherlock thing out in the open. But the news that Sam and Mycroft had had clandestine conversations about Sherlock behind John’s back would have reinforced that feeling that he’d been kept in the dark.

God, Mrs Hudson too! Everyone around John had known about Sherlock’s ghost, Sam realized with a sinking feeling. He was such an asshole for not telling him. At the start okay, but later…It was unforgivable. It was all coming down now like a house of cards. John wasn’t stupid; once he had a moment he would have figured out a lot by himself. No, Sam wouldn’t have let him figure it out. He would have sat him down and talked him through it. Maybe he still could, at least about Mrs Hudson’s part.

He wished this was the only fragile thing. Everything felt too fragile at the moment.

“So are these like nice digs?” Dean asked as they rounded the corner and started on the second flight of steps.

“Pretty nice, yeah,” Sam replied without looking back. He heard John add behind him, “It’s a prime spot, one of the best in London.” His voice was muffled, which meant that he had turned to speak to Dean.

Dean didn’t comment back. From the moment they’d walked into the house his head had been in constant motion, eyes trying to scan every detail. Only half of it was the hunter’s watchful eye; the rest was his very private investigation. “You secured the place?” he asked. Sam knew it wasn’t a question to John.

“Yeah, it’s all covered. Against demons and angels—”

“Well, no drawings can save you from human scumbag.”

“Yeah, man, I hear you,” Sam told him as they all walked into the flat. “Especially when they let demons ride…”

The words died on his lips at the sight in front of him.

There was scant light in the room and the leather armchair was even further in the shadows where it was placed between the two windows. But just like Sam had recognized him in the dead of the night all the way across the street, he knew him instantly now: body perfectly still, his features obscured but for the outline of his high cheekbones, Sherlock Holmes was sitting in his old chair looking like a statue of a black Egyptian cat god.

Born of experience, Sam’s reaction was Pavlovian—his gun was in his hand and he was taking aim before he’d even realized it. The click of his safety catch had rung loud in the utter silence, but not as
loud as the same click as it now sounded right next to Sam’s ear. That one was followed instantly by a third click, then the silence resumed.

Sam slowly turned his head and found himself face to muzzle with John’s handgun. On its other end John’s eyes glinted, huge and almost opalescent, as he bore them desperately into Sam’s eyes. Behind John, partially illuminated by the corridor light coming through the open door and holding a gun to John’s head, Dean’s face left no doubt that Sam was perilously close to losing one of the very few friends he’d ever had.

A voice made Sam whip his head forward again—a deep, low voice that would have fitted the clichéd ‘from beyond the grave’ perfectly, if it wasn’t for the very rich, material way in which it inflected.

“Put your guns away,” Sherlock Holmes said, “before I watch John get killed by stupidity, including his own.”
Here you have my Reichenbach theory on how Sherlock did it as well as some of the hardest pieces of ensemblé staging and dialogue I’ve ever written. More navel gazing on working on the chapter can be found in this post. Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Sam.”

Sam had thought he’d heard John’s voice at his most threadbare once or twice when they’d stayed up until the early hours, talking. Turned out he had heard nothing compared to how soft and terse John sounded now—as if he had given his vocal cords the formidable task of holding up a dam of feelings, while in perfect juxtaposition he was asking Sam to let go.

Sam did. After months of winding himself up over Sherlock’s ghost and years of ingrained hostility towards ghosts in general, in the end it was a paradox that made something shift seamlessly in Sam, like a button out of a loose eyelet. It wasn’t Sam’s realization that John had his own first instinct and it had commanded him to raise his gun to protect Sherlock. It was the shock that John would raise his gun at *Sam* where the paradox lay. It really drove home to him that on some fundamental level he had accepted his own importance to John. John cared about him and trusted him. He had thrown in his lot with Sam. The least Sam could do was return the favour.

He was lowering his gun when Sherlock spoke again, spinning anew a situation that was already balanced on the tip of a pin.

“Perhaps I should mention that I’m quite flesh and blood,” he said, tone monotonous this time. Sam couldn’t see his eyes, but still knew the next words were meant for him. “I’m not a ghost.”

Sam waited in vain to experience something stronger than a momentary pricking of surprise. Seconds ticked by and all he felt was this new questionable knowledge solidifying into truth with alarming speed, until in no time it was hard to imagine that Sam had ever believed Sherlock was a ghost.

“Sammy?” Dean spoke, voice firmly kept in a low register.

Sam took a deep breath and lifted his chin, then tucked his gun at the back of his jeans. He stepped aside just as Sherlock unfolded himself from the chair and got up, his motions so fluid and soundless that the hand of doubt about his human nature clenched around Sam’s throat again. He looked over his shoulder, seeking out Dean’s eyes. From what Sam could see his brother was nowhere near understanding what was going on, but he didn’t like it on principle. He hadn’t lowered his gun.

John had. He was now staring at Sherlock, petrification personified. The only light continued to come from the corridor, hitting John’s back. Sam noted distantly that John’s elongated shadow
stretched on the floor right up to Sherlock, but falling just short of reaching him.

Sherlock took a couple of steps to the window on his right and got hold of the curtain nearer to him, drawing it closed while moving with it. Keeping himself hidden, he darted his hand out and swiftly pulled the second curtain closed as well. A click, and the pitch black which had taken over that corner was driven out by the soft light of the lamp there.

Sherlock turned to face them, pale and incredibly striking. His bright eyes were riveted on a spot behind Sam’s right shoulder.

“Hello, John,” he said, sophistication worthy of an entire royal bloodline in his voice. The greeting should have been neutral and yet it really, really wasn’t.

From the same spot behind his right shoulder Sam heard a hiss, like air being messily ushered through a pair of lungs. John launched himself forward and in the next instant was pulling Sherlock down into a bone-crushing hug.

For a split second Sherlock looked startled; then, as his chin dipped to lightly rest on John’s shoulder, his eyes turned even rounder into two stunned, agonizing wells of emotion. It would have been a total waste of time trying to come up with labels and attach them to what Sam was witnessing: John was up on his toes, holding on for dear life and making sounds as if he was trying to breathe underwater, Sherlock’s hands had tentatively come to weave around John’s waist, and all that was left for Sam was the vague wonder if this was what it would have felt like to watch him and Dean hugging.

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John gulped back his tears and clung onto Sherlock. The world consisted of nothing but joy; John himself was nothing but joy: the answer to all his questions about the meaning of life, the reward for all the moments of howling or whimpering protests against the unbearable feeling of being. He grabbed on at Sherlock’s warm, responsive body and hugged harder, tried to make Sherlock burrow himself in John’s chest, right next to his pathetic, bursting little heart. Then he gave up of course, because that was a done deal, long done. So John gave up on gulping back his tears, too.

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Sherlock looked so much like himself it was as if someone had coloured him inside the lines to perfection, then had gone and done it again, then again. It didn’t matter that John’s vision wasn’t clear or that there were some changes such as Sherlock’s longer hair or his somewhat bigger chest—it was him. It was Sherlock, Sherlock. Not a ghost, not a broken skull on the ground, not a demon. Not a dream.

“How?” John said, only the vowels of his question audible. He wiped his eyes and took a step back. “How are you alive? Was it an angel?”

So much like himself. The eye roll didn’t accompany the reply, yet it was thoroughly implied.

“I hope you won’t be resorting to this every time you don’t have an answer to something.” Sherlock paused, eyes not leaving John’s. “It wasn’t an angel,” he said at last. “There’s a simpler explanation that has nothing to do with the supernatural.”

And suddenly it was evident why the eye roll hadn’t appeared in its full glory. It would have never
managed to transform quickly enough into the guarded fortress that looked back at John when Sherlock spoke again.

“I wasn’t dead in the first place.”

The words reached John one by one, then they strung together to form a sentence, but his mind still tripped over their meaning.

“What?”

Sherlock lowered his face, gaze intent. “I wasn’t dead in the first place, John.”

Gaze intent. Like it had been back in that Baskerville laboratory, while Sherlock was telling John his imagination had mislead him. John had thought he’d seen a gigantic beast of a hound, eyes glowing red, only to find that Sherlock had manipulated him. There had been the clever use of sound and light effects and the even cleverer use of suggestibility. After all John had trusted Sherlock explicitly. Other people lied. Sherlock’s honesty was so stark John had sometimes wished Sherlock did lie. He’d told John he’d seen a gigantic beast of a hound, eyes glowing red, and John had believed him, then thought he’d seen it too. Turned out it was an experiment. Sherlock had always loved experiments a little too much.

What John was looking at now far surpassed what he’d seen back then both in enormity and monstrosity, yet part of him was already recoiling in recognition of the common denominator. The rest of him vehemently refused to believe.

“How do you mea—” He tried to begin, then cleared his throat. “Tell me,” he said simply. He couldn’t hear his own voice.

Sherlock didn’t shift, didn’t even blink, his focus on John uncomfortable like it had never been before.

“Moriarty’s plan was to make me commit a public suicide in disgrace,” he said. “It had been all along. He had you marked. You, Lestrade, Mrs Hudson. His men were told to kill you all if I didn’t jump.” He watched John, waiting for a signal that John followed.

“Ohkay,” John said.

“He killed himself before I managed to make him call it off.”

John went over that as best as he could. “Then how did you…”

Sherlock sucked in a tiny bit of his bottom lip by the left corner, then released it leaving it shiny. The floor spun under John’s feet, the briefest vertigo episode making John question whether he wasn’t dreaming after all.

“I’d figured out his plan,” Sherlock said, voice anchoring John back to reality. “And I had made arrangements, in case I had to jump. Molly helped. And Mycroft.”

“Mycroft knew?” A vice began tightening on both sides of John’s temples and a sense of weariness washed over him, or maybe even dread. He was down the slide now, speeding and waiting for the next turn, wanting to know, but also wishing the trip was long over.
Sherlock said nothing. Perhaps John’s was too obvious a comment, but that was John. He needed to be told things.

He needed to be told things.

“I saw you fall,” he said, part of him refusing to let go of that experience, harsh and etched into him like the scar on his left shoulder. “I saw...I touched your wrist, Sherlock. You were dead.” He swallowed hard. “I saw your smashed head.”

Dean’s voice made Sherlock’s gaze jump up. John started, too, momentarily disoriented about who was speaking.

“You let him watch you kill yourself,” Dean said, indignation edging on incredulity, “and then you let him think you were dead? What the hell is wrong with you?!”

“Dean.” Sam. Sam’s subtle voice, so unlike Sherlock’s and Dean’s. Sam.

“Seriously, man!” Dean again, talking to Sam, maybe to Sherlock. “That’s just…”

“Dean, stay out of it.” Sam, quiet. John didn’t need to look at him to know the face that went with that tone of Sam’s. He was too busy failing to interpret Sherlock’s face anyway. It wasn’t just that it had closed off at Dean’s first comment. It was the expression the moment before it had. It made John both want to pull Sherlock down into a hug again and punch him really hard.

There was movement behind John. “Come on,” he heard Sam say. “Dean. Let me show you my bedro—Oh.”

John twisted around to look at him. Sam was standing some ten feet away, looking at Sherlock with his mouth still open. He seemed immense.

“I’ll, ah…” He turned to John, pointing in the vague direction of the hallway. “I’ll go pack my things.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” John said at once. He didn’t mean to sound so threatening, but thankfully Sam didn’t appear threatened. Now John was beginning to struggle to interpret his face, despite that it hadn’t shut down at all. There was just so much on it, and that was Sam all over, but like his voice it was just too subtle. The most certain thing John could distinguish was concern. He couldn’t do subtle now; he needed it all upped to the max.

Sam’s eyes gave John assent on something, then he turned them to his brother. “Come on, Dean.”

Dean took his time to shift his gaze back and forth between John and Sherlock before following Sam, his feet certain and loud, swallowing the barest whisper of Sam’s steps. They both disappeared into the darkness of the kitchen and in a moment there was the sound of the bedroom door closing.

“It had to look convincing,” Sherlock said, commanding John’s attention back to himself. John’s heart leapt in his chest at re-discovering him again, so physical and real that John barely managed to stop his hand from reaching out to touch. His fingers rolled instead and he tucked them into his palm, squeezing.

“They had to believe I was really dead, John.” Sherlock’s voice had dropped in volume but there was something imploring rising in it. “They were going to kill you. And Mrs Hudson, and Lestrade.
The slightest suspicion that I had faked it... It had to look real. I couldn’t take any chances. Do you understand that?” His chin had dipped again, his whole upper body almost at the start of a bow. He was holding John’s eyes as if he was trying to feed his words straight into John’s brain through them.

John pinched the skin on top the bridge of his nose, longing to dig his fingers in until they met. “Okay,” he said. “How did you do it?”

“A strategically placed big vehicle, a small crowd of extras, a costume, a real dead body that resembled me—”

“I know what I saw, Sherlock,” John interrupted, a tremor creeping up. “It was you. I know what I felt.” His voice broke on the last word.

“It’s okay, John,” Sherlock said, hand stretching out.

“No, it’s not!” John shouted, flinging his arms up in the air. “It’s not okay!” The words burned his lungs, purifying them, too. “You were dead! I watched you die! I had to watch you get cremated!” He could feel the damp of his spit on his own face. Eyes, mouth—his fucking soul was leaking out of him for this bastard, just like it had bled for him all along.

“John.” The intensity emanating from Sherlock was scouring; it was as if it was trying to peel off John’s layers one by one. “I’m sorry. I had to.”

John breathed heavily staring at him. Through the mist he was still able to see that Sherlock spoke from the root of the sentiment rather than as a reaction to John’s reaction. Sherlock meant it, without a shadow of a doubt. It did things to John that nothing, no one else could: his entire being surged towards Sherlock, but there were also black, wicked fingers wriggling into the darkest corners of John’s heart and making him sick with how much he wanted to lash out, to hurt back.

“Of all the fucked up things you’ve done,” he said, “this is the cruellest, the most…” His lips moved in a frustrated search for a suitable ending, head shaking.

Sherlock was still leaning forward, an invisible hunch weighing him down. He waited, watching John’s mouth as if it was the one insurmountable mystery, the confounding essence of all human emotion, the tip of a needle. John hated himself for how readily his need to erase that look lurched forward.

He stayed silent for a moment, trying to gather his thoughts. He still needed to know.

“I know what I saw,” he repeated.

Sherlock’s nostrils widened, like he was stoking up on air to make himself say the next lines without a break. “No,” he said. “You think you know what you saw. That cyclist who crashed into you...”

John remembered the collision, the shock of it ridiculously erasing the much bigger shock for an instant. John had been hurled to the ground, pavement swimming closer, before the world had whitened out. Then it whooshed back in again, the horrible reality of it pressing on John like a ton of iron. It was a miracle that he was able to pick himself up and stumble over to Sherlock’s body: glassy, unseeing blue eyes, white face, the crimson on it giving it the surreal air of a horrid work of art.

John shook his head numbly. “What about him?”
“It wasn’t an accident. But he didn’t just collide with you to keep you away.” Sherlock’s voice flattened out. “He injected you with a mild hallucinogenic. Enough to make you look and see what you expected to see. The corpse bore enough familiarity to…to me.”

Locked away and forbidden, the memory ripped out of John under Sherlock’s narration. He remembered how dizzy he’d felt, the world coming through a fog as he’d approached the small group of people gathering around the body. His knees had felt like butter. He’d checked for pulse to find that absolute nothingness, so terrifying in its infinity. He’d started slumping down, vision whitening out again, and arms had propped him up, supporting him as Sherlock—as the body had been wheeled out in a rushed blur, leaving behind only blood on the ground already getting diluted by the rain.

“John?” Sherlock’s voice floated to him now. Concern again—Sherlock, not Sam. John blinked, drawing breath in through his nose and expelling it through his pursed lips, puffing up his cheeks. He nodded briskly, stepping back. “And then?”

Sherlock straightened, hands burying deep into his coat pockets. He wore his coat. It was his coat. It had smelled of him.

For a moment John’s mind flailed blindly, trying to grasp at the invisible enemy pulling it at both ends to the point of snapping. It was nauseating. He fought it with all his might, feeling his chest heave, but he managed to stay firmly on his feet.

Sherlock made to step forward but didn’t. “Do you want to sit down?” he asked.

“No, I don’t want to bloody sit down.” John wanted to hold him again. He kept wanting to do that. “What happened then?” he prompted.

“Then I disappeared,” Sherlock said, his distinctive low voice making the words hypnotic, worthy of the stage. “I hid and started unravelling Moriarty’s network.”

John’s nod felt rubbery. “Right,” he said. “And you couldn’t tell me because…?”

The corners of Sherlock’s mouth turned down unselfconsciously. “The risk was too big,” he said at length. “There was always the chance of someone following Moriarty’s instructions as soon as they found out my death was a hoax. People have their pressure points…Even dead, I couldn’t underestimate him and the plan he might have put in place.” Sherlock paused, face growing even more concentrated. “My initial plan was to get to his closest people, take them out and make sure there was no danger. Then I could—” Sherlock’s eyes darted quickly between a few random points, before returning to John’s. “I was quickly able to see the full scale of Moriarty’s network. I also faced some…unexpected difficulties that made me realize what a big task I had in front of me.”

Suddenly he closed his eyes for a long moment, head shaking and face rippling in dozen small ways, the whole image so reminiscent of the ‘old’ Sherlock that only then did John realize the man in front of him was changed after all.

“John,” he said sharply. “My ‘death’ was a unique opportunity. To dismantle his organization, to end it all for good.” His fingers cut through the air, emphasizing his last words. “All I needed was some time and for the world to believe I was dead. It already did.”

They just watched each other, silent, until John finally found the only response he had to all that.
“Mycroft knew you weren’t dead. Molly knew.”

“Yes,” Sherlock said. “But the world wasn’t looking at them.”

***

Sam was so preoccupied with things demanding his full mental focus—like John going through hell out there or Dean’s loaded gaze on Sam in here—that the doorbell downstairs had him start in utter confusion. Probably Mycroft Holmes, it dawned at him after he actually kicked his brain for the answer. Everything kept happening out of the normal current of time—it felt as if they’d walked in Baker Street the day before yesterday.

He doubted John would be in any state to play host, so he motioned to the door with his head. “I’ll go get that,” he told Dean and left the room, his brother’s, “Be careful,” trailing behind.

Mycroft Holmes looked like he could be sold on eBay under the description ‘packaging in mint condition’. His eyes however betrayed that any imaginary buyer would have found their hands full with what came under the wrapper. The weight of Holmes’s gaze—brilliant, shielded and dismissive—did nothing to mollify Sam. One of Sam’s first thoughts when the reality of Sherlock’s appearance had sunk in was how he’d been taken for a ride like a complete dumbass by the man standing in front of him. Sam felt he was justified in skipping the greeting.

“Your brother’s here,” he informed Holmes. “Nice job, by the way, with… What was it? Sending his ghost up in flames? Must’ve been damn hard.”

If Sam had hoped to get a rise, he was disappointed. The man was stone faced as he walked past him on his way in. “Save me your weak attempts at sarcasm, Mr Winchester,” he said taking on the stairs.

“How?” Sam asked following him. “That all you’ve got after the whole show you put up in the last month?”

Holmes didn’t even bother to answer, the line of his back rigid. Sam felt a small curl of unease crawl up his insides, made worse by wondering whether some floorboards wouldn’t need replacement on account of indentation marks in the shape of an umbrella tip.

They both walked into the living room to find Sherlock and John at the same spots Sam had left them. Sherlock looked even paler and John’s face was blotched.

At their appearance Sherlock’s expression turned staggeringly similar to his brother’s. His voice, however, was thick and cloying like bad maple syrup.

“Oh,” he said. “Look what the cat dragged in.”

Sam expected a reprimand on Sherlock’s sarcastic remark, too—it’d been at least as weak as Sam’s. There was none. From his angle Sam could observe Mycroft Holmes’s profile quite well. At his brother’s words there was a twitch by his long nose, a blink-and-you’d-miss-it kind of thing. The unease stretched and settled in Sam’s gut.

“What are you doing here?” Holmes asked. It didn’t sound like a real question.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “I should be the one asking you that. This is my home.”
“Is it?”

The voice was velvety, but the reply was so immediate and ruthless there had to be phantom marks from the slap on Sherlock’s face. He looked like he’d felt it, too, despite the flatness of his tone: “What do you want, Mycroft?”

“Something impossible, evidently. This is crass stupidity, Sherlock.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“Yes, you do. That’s what’s making it crass.”

Sam’s gaze slid to Sherlock automatically, expecting his retort. Sherlock just held his brother’s eyes, chin poised as if he was standing for a police record photograph, his posture absolutely perfect. Everything about him exuded…otherness. He was unlike anyone Sam had ever met and in a flash he knew that this was Sherlock’s permanent state of existence. It was as if whatever tried to penetrate him, climb him up or wriggle underneath, whatever tried to get him or get to him, was doomed to fail.

John didn’t as much as sniff, but Sam’s eyes still went to him.

At that moment Dean walked in through the kitchen, looking at his feet. He stopped in his tracks when he lifted his gaze, taking in the tableau in front of him. Mycroft Holmes spared him a cursory glance, before returning his attention to his own brother.

“All you had to do was show a little more patience,” he said.

“What’s going on?” John asked, head doing the tennis thing Sam’s head had done a moment ago during Sherlock and Mycroft’s exchange.

“I’ll tell you what’s going on, John,” Mycroft said, not looking at John. “My brother here, in an unprecedented feat of short-sightedness, has thrown caution to the wind risking everything he has accomplished in the last year and a half.” Mycroft gave John a little nod of acknowledgement, then his eyes lifted to Sherlock again. The look in them was withering. “To the detriment of a number of people, I might add.”

John, whose lips had parted during Mycroft’s little display of eloquence, looked at Sherlock in question. Sherlock’s eyelids fluttered closed and he shook his head almost imperceptibly. There was defiance in the line of his pressed lips, despite the eye roll with his next words.

“Spare us the theatrics, Mycroft. Don’t you have a—”

“Shut up, Sherlock.”

Sam hushed inwardly like he used to when he was a little boy standing in front of Dad, rough-looking and imposing, closer to the mythical creatures in some of the books Dean read to Sam. The feelings intensified when Holmes pivoted abruptly in his spot, facing Sam.

“This is all because of you,” he said.

Sam scowled at him, but his reply was very frank. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”
“Yes. That much has been made abundantly clear.” A sleek, poisonous snake could have taken notes from Holmes.

“All right,” Dean spoke, stepping into the room and addressing Holmes’s back. “Lay off my brother.”

Holmes tutted and rolled his eyes. Evidently this constituted the icebreaker for the evening. “Your knight in shining armour has arrived, how nice,” he said, not even turning to look at Dean. “Too little too late, of course.”

The comment really crossed the line, but Sam was suddenly smacked by a discovery that made him let it slide. What he was seeing wasn’t just the asshole he’d met previously. No, this was Mycroft Holmes well and truly pissed off.

Be that as it may, Sam still had something to say. There were many, many things he thought were all because of him, all of them bad. But he sure as hell didn’t think this, whatever it was, was one of them.

“I don’t know what your brother has gotten himself into,” he said, “but it’s not on me.”

“Really?” Holmes allowed himself a small patronizing smile. “Why do you think he’s here?” The ‘why’ had been posh and exaggerated, almost an exhalation.

“Mycroft.” Sherlock said warningly, his gaze spiked up with unnamed anxiousness. There was still admonishment in Holmes’s demeanour when he responded, but at least his tone had mellowed just a tad. Sam was glad he was at least able to pick up on that, since he had no idea what the actual words meant.

“It was only a matter of time, Sherlock,” he said, chin indicating Dean.

“I’m sorry, what?” said Dean, sticking his neck forward as if he hadn’t heard well. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Sherlock?” John spoke softly, taking a couple of steps back to have a better look at both brothers. “What’s only a matter of time?”

Sherlock’s gaze dropped to him, something alarmed and vulnerable flashing through it so quickly that Sam was instantly doubting it’d been there at all. “What’s he talking about?” John asked, eyes up on Sherlock, big in their insistence.

“Nothing, John. Nothing’s going on. My brother is just being melodramatic.”

Mycroft pursed his lips, refusing to rise to the bait. “A week at the most,” he said cryptically. “You would know that if your judgement wasn’t clouded by sentiment.”

“I’ve thought this through.”

“No, you haven’t. You know as well as I do it’s not logic that’s brought you here.”

“And what has brought you here, Mycroft?”

At long last Sam saw that implacable exterior affected. It was all in the hitched breath and in the eyes
—fleeting but unmistakably faltering. Holmes drew himself up to his considerable height, narrowing his eyes at his brother. Now Sherlock’s face was unreadable.

“Don’t push me, Sherlock,” Holmes said. Sam felt the hairs on his neck stand; he was pretty sure the rest of them had temporarily ceased to exist for the Holmes brothers.

“Right,” John spoke, tense and weary. “Mycroft. What the hell is going on?”

Sherlock replied instead, not looking away from Mycroft. “What’s going on, John, is that my brother is incapable of imagining anyone but him could even stand upright, let alone use their brain.” His slanted eyes glinted dangerously. “If you don’t have anything of real importance to say, Mycroft, bugger off.”

“Whoa,” Dean interjected, eyes flicking from Mycroft to Sherlock. “This really is your brother?” His eyebrows knitted as he regarded Sherlock. “Man, you are a piece of work.”

“Yes, thank you for your input, Mr Winchester,” Sherlock told him tartly. “I’m thrilled to add to my list of acquaintances yet another monkey whose only notable skill is to point at a banana and sign ‘banana’.” Sherlock’s face flew into shockingly animated disarray at the last word, his hands drawing the shape of the fruit in the air.

Dean gaped at him for a moment, but next thing he was glaring so hard only powerful angels and demons wouldn’t have started on their exit strategies. Sherlock didn’t bat an eyelid.

“All right, you clown,” Dean told him closing in on him. “I don’t know who you think you are, but if I were you, I’d look around and count the people in the room who don’t want to kick my ass, then I’d shut my pie hole.”

They stood only a meter away from each other and Sherlock still managed to look down his nose at Dean despite their similar height.

“Let me change that balance a bit, then, shall I?” he said. “Perhaps your brother’s attention would divert to you if he knew you’d used his short absence a moment ago to make a call you’d been dying to make, hmm?” Sherlock pouted in pretend curiosity. “My guess is it was to someone he doesn’t approve of.”

Sam felt a hot wave rise and wash over him. Dean’s gaze flew to Sam before jumping away and dropping to the floor from where it lifted to Sherlock. Dean glared daggers at him, baffled suspicion thrown in there, too, but then his eyes returned to Sam, hooded and awkward and asking. Sam tilted his head and felt his bottom jaw push forward, his stupid, naïve eyes unable to leave Dean’s.

Sherlock went on talking, instructing Dean without being asked. “First off, you should have avoided making an appearance with a noticeable delay when the action was obviously in this room. Also, next time you want to be secretive about the conversations you have, I suggest you make sure your phone’s display isn’t still glowing through your shirt pocket and your right ear isn’t burning from how hard you pressed the phone to it. In fact, watch the colour on your entire face. And you know, the guilt.”

Complete silence followed his words then John nodded sharply to himself. “You know what?” he said. “Sod that.”

He walked out of the room, feet clamouring down the stairs. Sam gave Dean one final look and
turned on his heels. He was already down the first flight of steps, when Dean called his name from the landing.

“Where’re you going?” he asked. Sam stopped at the corner, lifting his eyes to him.

“Where do you think, Dean?” he said, spreading his arms. “Don’t come after me,” he added immediately at the sight of Dean’s flushed, determined face, then quickly continued his descent.

“Come on. Sam!” Sam couldn’t see his brother’s face, but he heard the whole speech in those three words: the worry about the danger Sam was in right now, the warning about the perils of being out in the dark with just a gun, the begrudging request to talk. The mess between them. Dean’s need to follow and stay close because.

It was all there, and Dean could take it and shove it up his ass. Sam slammed the front door shut and sped up to catch up with John.

Chapter End Notes

A little visual to the chapter at the end of the entry over at my LJ.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

If you have a moment, please have a look at help_syria. I've signed up for it and will be offering fic. I hope you consider contributing in some way as well as pimping the community. Thank you!

As soon as Sam caught up with him, having called his soft ‘hey’ first, John realized that he hadn’t really thought of anything when he’d left the flat. Well, anything but leaving the flat. Now that Sam fell into step John knew that if he had planned his retreat, he would have wondered whether Sam would follow him. Maybe even expected him to.

As it was now, he wasn’t sure he wanted the company. There were two small thumping fists on both sides of his head, their work dull but effective. John hadn’t been aware of how bad it’d been up there until he’d stepped out into the cool night air and lifted his face to the open skies. His feet had taken him to the left, obviously responding to the emergency procedure running in his head while he was too busy feeling drenched in anger and hurt and weariness. Right meant the hustle and bustle of London. Right meant Oxford Street. Left meant Regent’s Park.

The park was already closed, of course, but that wasn’t how associative thinking worked. Left equalled open space and a chance of solitude, so John took left. Yet a dozen steps after Sam had joined him John had already accepted his unobtrusive presence; so much so that when Sam spoke, he startled him.

“Got any anti-possession protection on you?” he asked.

This kind of thing was so low on John’s current mental list of priorities that it took him a few moments to shake his head.

Without breaking rhythm Sam fished out an amulet from under his clothing and passed it on to John. John had an irrational impulse to smack at it like a petulant child, watch it swing wildly from Sam’s fingers. He acted like the sensible adult he was working so hard to remain and put the thing around his neck, noting in passing that it was much fancier than the other amulets he had seen. He let it hide under his shirt and didn’t do the top button back up again.

They walked in silence until they reached the top of the road. John stopped and eyed another left or right choice of direction. There was a longer stretch to ramble along the park on the right, but there was a dark, hidden spot on the left where they could jump over the fence. Being a delinquent held an odd appeal for John—like scratching ferociously a mosquito bite you knew there wouldn’t be relief from anyway.

They’d stopped under a street lamp. Sam stepped away from under the spotlight and waited for John to decide. John met his gaze, not speaking, not even blinking. Sam’s facial muscles came alive in a dance that was just as inarticulate, but John’s emotions jolted violently again. He could just kiss Sam,
such was the wave of gratitude he felt for his presence. For this quiet stranger, screwed up and fantastic, waiting patiently with John at crossroads; for this new friend who calmly struck out the ‘new’ in the definition, because where he existed, where they both existed, there was no defining through the common markers people resorted to to make their lives orderly. This was Sam, and John was John, and they turned left.

There was a new security camera where John’s secret, law-breaking spot had been. John shot the camera a venomous glance, once again restraining an infantile urge to give its post a kick. He looked around, frustrated. Sam had followed his eyes’ journey step by stop. He tapped John’s upper arm with the back of his fingers.

“Let’s just keep walking,” he said.

They continued their circular journey along the edge of the park, the park fence on their right, iron and ornate as it befitted one of London’s treasures. There was the lush smell of nature, the autumnal humidity making it waft through, unstoppable by any man-made restrictions. John focused on stocking up his lungs with it. After awhile he noticed that his step had slowed down. In another few minutes they got to the little curve where there was a bench on the other side of the tiny lane that ran parallel to the pavement they were on. John dropped on it without a word, Sam following in a more hesitant manner.

Their gazes naturally fixed forward and remained so. Much to his surprise John found that he needed to catch his breath. It had felt good walking and he hadn’t really noticed the punishing pace he’d set for himself. Sam had broken into sweat, but he sweated a lot anyway. He must have changed his soiled clothes while in the bedroom and was now wearing a comfortable looking hoodie that must have had his blood boiling during their impromptu hike. His breathing was completely unaffected, though, so no surprises there.

John exhaled noisily, the end marked by something akin to a giggle. In his peripheral vision he caught the motion of Sam’s head, turning to him, but John was content to keep his eyes rest where they were, mindlessly trying to penetrate the growth of vegetation by the fence. Sam waited for a bit, then drew his gaze away.

“So…” he said. “Sherlock’s not a ghost.”

John honestly wanted to offer a comment to that, but.

Sam looked at him again and this time John did, too. Hair was flopping all over Sam’s face and the light from the nearest street lamp was making his mouth look like its lines were emphasized with finger-thick extra shading.

John spread his hands in his lap, then shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “I just…”

“Yeah.”

There was a short pause during which John tried to formulate a more coherent representation of the mixture in the cauldron he was staring at. Once again simple had to do.

“I can’t believe he was alive all this time,” he said. “I can’t believe he didn’t tell me.”

“What did he say?” Sam asked. “Did he offer any explanation?”
“Yeah.” John frowned. “You were—How much did you hear? It’s all a bit of a blur.”

Sam took his time with his reply. His eyes were trained on the ground, fringe obscuring his face from view. It occurred to John for the first time that while he’d been occupied with stopping his world turning anti-clockwise, something had also passed between Sam and Dean behind closed doors. He couldn’t recall any noise coming from there, but then again his hearing hadn’t been exactly reliable. Anyway, he had the feeling that silence was quite an eloquent method of communication between those two; possibly frequent, too.

Sam looked up. “Um, I heard when he said that there had been people ordered to kill you if he didn’t jump.” He thought for another moment. “I didn’t hear why he kept quiet after that, though.”

It was as if John hadn’t heard it, either. He knew Sherlock had given him an explanation, but right now it was playing a twisted hide and seek with John. Maybe it had been so weak and insufficient John had subconsciously erased it to save himself the anguish of having to live with it. Sam was watching him, expectant, so John forced himself to grasp at elusive strands.

“He said…Something about not wanting to risk it. He said he’d been busy unravelling Moriarty’s network. It looks like being dead came very handy for doing that.”

Sam said nothing. John sighed and leaned forward. “He was obsessed with him, you know,” he said, the words taking on a reversed journey against all logic, falling into him like stones. “Sherlock with Moriarty. Although it was vice versa too. His biggest challenge...Nothing matters more to Sherlock than his work. It must have been bloody amazing for him to have that massive puzzle to solve.”

“You don’t know that,” Sam countered quietly. John couldn’t even quirk his mouth with his reply.

“I know Sherlock.”

Sam seemed to ponder John’s words.

“Maybe it wasn’t just that that drove him,” he said. “Maybe it was revenge.”

John looked at him, feeling his brow knit. “Moriarty was already dead…” His voice trailed off as he shook his head in a silent request to Sam to clarify his strange statement.

Sam leaned forward as well, the wrinkly patch between his eyebrows making an appearance. “It doesn’t mean—I don’t think revenge is always so straightforward. Like, you kill the person or the thing, and it’s over.”

John wanted to cling to his meaningful words, to take them in properly and trust them, but they were oil and he was water.

No, he was fire. His connection with Sherlock was severed and bleeding, hot and red. He was outrage and incredulity. Above all he was raw; a raw mess.

This time Sam sighed. “Look, man, I don’t know Sherlock. What I’ve seen, honestly? He seems a bit of a dick.” Sam made to shrug but stop himself, his body remaining respectfully still. “But I don’t think he meant to hurt you,” he said with tentative conviction. “Sometimes something’s visible only to one person. Maybe there is something in what he says: that he couldn’t risk it. Maybe he had to—”
“Hang on, are you saying he was right lying to me?”

“I’m not saying he was right, I’m just saying—”

“He put me through—”

“I know what he put you through, John—”

“No, you don’t—”

“Yes, I do!” Sam straightened his back, this time his breathing loud. “Believe me, I really do.” He made an odd circular motion with his neck, meeting John’s eyes.

“Look,” he said. “I know you’re pissed at him. I mean, I’d be ready to kill him, man. I get it. But he seems like the kind of guy who can…lose himself, I guess.” Sam dropped against the bench back rest, gaze trailing forward again. “When something big hits, we try to make sense of it, but we don’t always— We’re not always able to. And when we’re scared, really scared, and trying to protect someone, we—”

Sam smoothed his hair with his palms, letting his fingers linger. For all his self-interrupted sentences he didn’t seem frustrated. He was affected, though; John watched him, hushed, suddenly afraid to breathe in case he lost his connection to him as well.

“I just think that Sherlock thought he had a good reason to do what he did,” Sam said. “Maybe he didn’t plan it like that. Maybe he got on that road and there was no going back. Or…he didn’t see it as an option.” He turned his head to John, tucking strands of hair behind his ear. There was honesty in his eyes that told John what he was hearing wasn’t just what Sam thought would bring comfort.

“I don’t know, man,” Sam said slowly when John didn’t offer any input. “When we’re under pressure, we kind of go off the rails sometimes. And sometimes there’s just no easy choice, so you do what you think is right.”

“At the expense of other people,” John retorted, unable to stop himself. Sam seemed to recoil for a moment, but he held John’s eyes, making John remember there were actually two adults on the bench.

“Well, like I said I don’t know Sherlock,” he murmured. “But I’m sure he’s paid his price, too.”

John tried to digest that, the need to believe it filtering through despite his angry protests that he wanted to…well, stay angry. He shook his head and slid his gaze to the ground, then felt his head lull forward tiredly.

A couple walked past them briskly, arms clasped around each other’s bodies. It was close to eleven and John wondered whether this was just the case of the early stage in the relationship or the instinctive need to keep close in a dark, deserted place. The girl, very blond and wearing eccentric make-up, had scanned Sam and John curiously. Maybe the early stage after all. Or maybe they just looked harmless.

The rush to correct her mentally startled him. He suddenly wondered: if he and Sam did look harmless while they really weren’t—John could testify for Sam and was too close to his own core to need evidence for himself—what did that make Sherlock and Dean?
“You and Dean going to be all right?” he asked.

The left corner of Sam’s mouth curled slowly upward in what John wanted to encapsulate and use for future instances when faced with the futility of even the best of words. How did you put in vowels and syllables the complexity that was a man’s inner conflict about something—or someone—immensely important?

“I don’t know,” said Sam.

Ah yes. There was that.

Sam stared ahead, mouth stretching back to a straight line; a straight, defensive line. His next exhalation of laughter was unexpected.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he said. “I’m freaking ecstatic to know that he’s safe, that he’s all right, but…” He seemed to try to get his thoughts into a one-liner. His gaze was clear when he did. “It’s just that I kind of wish I could rewind things to a week ago.”

John was finally able to smile, bitter-sweet for all he’s worth. “A week ago you were still lying to me.”

“Yeah...Sorry.”

John waved Sam off. “That’s okay. You can say that recent events have put your deception in perspective. I know you were trying to protect me.”

“Sounds like so was Sherlock.”

John opened his mouth to argue, but nothing came out. He didn’t know if that were true, and he still fought tooth and claw to cling to his righteous sense of betrayal, let it transform to resentment, let what he felt live. It would have been a betrayal of himself if he didn’t, of everything that his life had constituted since that moment he watched Sherlock fall, arms waving like the wings of a large bird plummeting down after a soundless gunshot.

It hadn’t been real. It hadn’t been real.

John bit on the insides of his cheeks and nodded. “I know what you mean,” he told Sam. “About wanting to—About wishing it was a week ago. I mean I’d still probably kill for Sherlock, but I don’t know if I could even be in the same room with him.”

Sam huffed another laugh, this one suggesting quite profound understanding of the experience. He squinted upward for a long while, then elbowed John lightly. “Let’s go and find out,” he said and got up.

“I’m serious,” John told him.

Sam looked down at him, earnest. “Yeah. I know.”

John rose to his own feet reluctantly. Despite voicing a plan of action, Sam didn’t move, hands in his hoodie’s front pocket, expecting John’s lead.

“I need another ten minutes to clear my head,” John said. He knew he couldn’t stay out forever, but
he wasn’t ready to go back.

Sam nodded, then pulled an uncomfortable face. “Look, I know I’m acting like a stupid chaperone, but it’s too dangerous to let you on your—”

“It’s fine,” John interrupted him. “You’re not…”

It had begun to drizzle. It felt like the finest mist on John’s skin that gave a light shivery edge to the cool night air. Even without it John would have still wished for the furnace that was Sam’s presence by his side. There were times when he needed to ramble on on his own to burn off something. There were other times when he needed to be around people, the prospect of being solely with himself disturbing for the unknown it promised. Finally, there were those occasions when John would have been happiest if he were somehow able to be by himself while not being alone. That, however, was like having your cake and eating it, and if John had learnt anything in life it was that the Universe did not make exceptions for John Watson.

Then again Sherlock was back at 221B and the Universe had produced someone like Sam Winchester, then put him in John’s life.

Sam was still towering over him, brow increasingly crinkled under John’s long, silent gaze. John shifted from one foot to the other.

“I just realized,” he said. “If Dean had answered his phone when Mrs Hudson called him, he, um… He’d have been the one to come here. He would’ve, right?”

Sam’s face had started unfurling at John’s words. He now nodded quickly a few times. “Yeah. Yeah, he would’ve.”

They watched each other for a moment, then Sam added, “Huh.”

“Hmm.”

John saw that Sam was battling with himself over saying something as an extension, just in case; spelling out the obvious. The real battle being with his mistrust that it was, indeed, obvious; with the insecurity that came from an existence where everything had been so fragile—everything good—only the loss and the subtraction permanent. Sam probably needed to carve good things in stone, give them some material form like voice them out, in order to bind them to himself for just a moment longer.

John cleared his throat. “I suppose I have to be careful using expressions such as ‘divine intervention’ now,” he said, lips twitching, “because they might be literally true.”

“Guess so.”

“I’ll just put it down to good old luck, then.”

Sam bunched up his shoulders, chin falling closer to his chest, but his eyes shone. John used his thumb to point behind his shoulder. “Let’s just…”

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There was dead silence in the house when they walked in and John felt an instant prickling of panic, then absurd guilt at the thought that something had gone wrong. He’d all but wished Sherlock had never come back. What if there was a divine power attuned to the messed up transmissions of John Watson’s head? What if some demons had swooped in, too many for Dean to take care of? What if Moriarty’s men had turned up? Mycroft had been very grim in his cryptic warnings. Much could be said about the man’s power complex and control issues, but he was still rarely wrong.

Before he knew it John was taking the second flight of steps two at a time. Sam was right on his heels, chest pushing at John’s back with urgency that mirrored his own.

The light was still on in the living room. They rushed in, not even attempting to hide their panic.

Dean and Sherlock looked up at them simultaneously from their respective seats. Dean was on the sofa, closer to the right end, which now also meant closer to the leather chair. It had been moved from between the two windows and was now on the right side of the coffee table, directly opposite John’s armchair. It made for a picture perfect arrangement of cosiness. A comfortable worn leather sofa; a coffee table, two armchairs on its both sides; the entire ensemble facing the beautiful fireplace and the flat TV screen. The pang of yearning John felt was for the briefest instance, but it managed to make itself known down to John’s joints.

His relief to see everything was okay allowed him to start noticing details. Such as—

“Are you…drinking whiskey?” Sam finished out loud his thought for him. He sounded bemused.

Dean twisted further in his seat to frown at his brother. A quick flick of his eyes pulled John in into the frowning perimeter.

“Well, you two pitched a fit and took off,” he said, “then his brother left, his panties in a bunch.” He turned around to look at Sherlock, who averted his eyes from John and Sam to give Dean his most blank look yet. Dean shook his head, twisting again just in time for Sam and John to catch his eye roll. “So that left me with little miss sunshine here.”

“And you decided to have a drink?” Sam said, dry amusement shaping his lips like Keira Knightley’s. John had seen ‘Love Actually’ three times, because of people’s insistence that one of the characters was the spitting image of him. He didn’t see such a staggering resemblance, but Keira’s mouth had been nice to look at. Claudia Schiffer’s wasn’t bad, either.

Dean rose. “We both needed a drink. He said he didn’t, but he did.”

“Right,” Sam said slowly, eyes still twinkling despite the new tension that had seized his body when his brother had stood up and faced him squarely.

Dean motioned towards the table with his head. “You want one?”

Sam hesitated while Dean managed the feat of having a gaze that was both hawk-like and coaxing.

“No, thanks,” Sam answered in a beat. Dean’s own ridiculously shaped lips plumped up even further, forming into something resembling the beginning of a kiss, but there was nothing sweet in the way he slowly nodded.

John rubbed a spot on his forehead and looked up from under his hand. “I could do with a drink,” he told the room at large, then looked at Sam. “Come on,” he pressed.
Sam whipped his head to look at him, surprised and maybe a little accusing. John begged his apology, wordlessly making a good case why they could both do with a drink. Everyone could do with lots of drinks, John felt. 221B Baker Street had suddenly become their own, private reality TV show, dysfunctional people and relationships in spades. He and Sam were the only two individuals who were both close and on good terms. John had no illusion this made their friendship in any way protected or normal, but he did feel they had the advantage of being able to lean on each other. He would have done anything to be the one Sherlock could lean on, too, but it wasn’t a switch he could flip.

It was bizarre to see Sherlock’s glass of scotch almost empty. Dean didn’t look the type to pour half-hearted dosages, so Sherlock must have drunk at least half a glass in the forty-forty-five minutes Sam and John had been absent. He was probably immune against the effects of alcohol, no matter that he hardly ever consumed it. Apart from a slight flush to his cheeks there was no other visible change in him. He was the way he’d been when John left: watchful, inscrutable, focused on John.

Alive.

Some sleep would be nice too at some point, John decided. He wondered whether he’d be happier when he woke up tomorrow.

He took Dean’s proffered drink and walked to his armchair, lowering himself in. He watched the silent exchange between the Winchester brothers that ended with Sam cradling a glass to his chest and sitting down on the left side of the sofa, his feet knocking against John’s crossed ones. Sam apologized with a murmur.

Dean lifted his glass and the three of them took a sip. John met Sherlock’s eyes, then looked away immediately.

Next to John Sam stretched to pull in a coaster from the other end of the table, setting down his whiskey on it. A random question nibbled at John: had Dean asked Sherlock where they kept the drinks? Or had he gone around looking for them himself? He hadn’t gotten ice from the fridge. For some reason the thought eased something in John’s chest.

Dean coughed quickly, signalling the opening of the show. “So, he’s crazy,” he told Sam conversationally, while his drink holding hand indicated Sherlock.

Sam looked at Sherlock then back to his brother. Dean went on, nodding at him with an odd gleam in his eyes. “He’s got this plan that’s just suicidal, to put it mildly,” he said.

“What plan?” John asked, suddenly aware that he’d been scowling at Dean. He tried to school his features into something friendlier, at the very least for the fact that if there was a chance of anyone in the room being straightforward about what was going on, John’s short acquaintance with Dean Winchester would have made him put his money on him.

Dean however decided to pass. “You tell him,” he said to Sherlock, who finally dragged his eyes away from John, meeting Dean’s.

“Go on,” Dean said, arms spreading. “I want you to hear it from other people, although something tells me it’ll be a waste of time to try and talk you out of it.”

Sherlock suddenly addressed Sam. “I need your help,” he said.
Sam seemed taken aback, but before he could say anything John leaned forward, placing his glass on the table louder than necessary and getting hold of the edge of the table. He needed the promise of a grip.

“All right,” he said. “Enough. Sherlock…”

Sherlock’s eyes flew to John instantly. His expression was still hard to read, but this time it was the kind where John only needed to dust off his Sherlock dictionary.

Sherlock took a breath. “Have you ever heard of Sebastian Moran?” he asked.
Chapter 26

John focused on the name—Sebastian Moran—but it didn’t ring even a faint bell. He shook his head. “No, never heard of him.”

“Moriarty’s right hand,” Sherlock said. “Ex-army. Intelligent, patient. Ruthless. Body count of no less than fifty, and that’s after he left the military. He has no qualms about getting his hands dirty.”

John was reminded about that peculiarity of James Moriarty. ‘I don’t like getting my hands dirty.’ Said in a voice that had sounded oddly…pampered. There’d been something delicate about his hands as well; they’d come close enough to him for John to observe them during their snug time together by the pool. But none of those moments had been to touch John in a violent manner. Moriarty hadn’t been the one to knock John off, he hadn’t been the one to drape the explosives across John’s chest, and he hadn’t been the one to slap him to shut him up.

Sam spoke, snapping John’s attention back from James Moriarty. “Sounds like a real charmer,” Sam said. Sherlock’s eyes met his for a moment, before returning to John’s.

“He’s the only big fish left,” he said. John took a big gulp of his whiskey to warm down the abrupt rise of goosebumps at the sound of Sherlock’s rumbling voice.

“I’d call him the second most dangerous man in London,” Sherlock continued, “but I’ve not followed the local criminal scene closely for some time.” He paused. John had the suspicion it was for his benefit, to allow him to appreciate the significance of Sherlock’s last words. Sherlock, distracted enough to abandon ‘The Work’. Sherlock, not caring about the crimes and criminals in this bottomless metropolitan pit of vice and human triggers. It was flummoxing to think of him so driven by something else, to think that there could be anything else more important.

“He’s been…elusive,” Sherlock said, uncrossing his legs and reaching for his glass. “I’ve spent more time trying to tie him to a crime than I’ve spent on half of Moriarty’s minions. There’s nothing to pin on him, John. Clean record, clean work, not even an indiscretion. No matter how deep I’ve dug there’s been zero evidence to connect him to a crime.”

Sherlock finished the last of his whiskey, then shook his head at Dean, declining a refill. Dean shrugged and leaned back.

“So,” Sherlock said, eyes lifting to the ceiling as the fingertips of his hands touched in his lap. “At some point I arrived at the conclusion that if there was no past crime he could be connected to, then I simply had to provide one in the present.”

As soon as Sherlock had finished talking, John felt himself begin to gape. He knew where this was going; he didn’t know the details, but he was sure they wouldn’t make any difference to how insane he’d find Sherlock’s plan. Mycroft’s warnings, Dean’s comment—they all fitted right into the big picture, but were mere ornamentation to John’s understanding of how Sherlock worked.

“Oh God,” he heard himself say. “What did you do?”
“It’s what he wants to do that you should worry about,” Dean quipped from his corner. John just frowned and looked back at Sherlock, mouth still ajar.

“I wasn’t prepared to wait more until Moran was lulled into a false sense of security and was ready to fall into a trap,” Sherlock said. “He had noticed that the network he’d inherited was falling apart. He is smart, but he isn’t Jim Moriarty—he would have done a poor job at keeping it working anyway, but the speed with which everything started disintegrating…He sensed something was off five-six months ago and he became extra careful. I estimate it would have taken at least a year for him to let his guard down.”

Sherlock took a breath and wriggled in his chair. “I wasn’t willing to wait and ‘bide my time’.” The childishness of the delivery accompanied with the air quotes left no doubt Sherlock was still retaliating at Mycroft in his head; a continuation of a conversation that John was sure had actually been had.

“When I considered ways to have Moran caught red-handed,” Sherlock continued, “the obvious one presented itself first. What crime had the best chance to draw him out against his better judgement than revenge against the man he held responsible for Jim Moriarty’s death? However, I wasn't ready to reveal that I was alive.” Sherlock paused. “Then several months ago I was made aware of the existence of the supernatural.”

He suddenly rolled his eyes, his somewhat robotic demeanour disappearing in a flash. “It’s depressing, John,” he said. “It’s entirely impossible to have exhaustive knowledge of it, you can’t rely on deductions, it’s all…” His fingers danced in the air, as if he was trying to roll together a messy ball of string. “Illogical. Supernatural creatures and angels and demons, all with powers that defy order?! Now when we find a corpse in a locked room, it’s no longer a brilliant mystery waiting to be solved! No, instead I have to hope it’s not a celestial being that did it or an evil spirit.” He hissed his letter ‘s’, his childishness upgraded. “Like I said, depressing.” He slumped in his chair, doleful.

John was torn between fighting his sudden surge of affection and his own mind, stupidly stuck in the plural of the personal pronoun in ‘we find a corpse’.

Dean gave Sam the gleaming eyes. “Huh?” he said. “Sunshine and rainbows, isn’t he?”

Sam ignored him, frowning at Sherlock. “What do you need our help for?”

Sherlock seemed to hesitate. Now that it had been set free, his face was a canopy of subtle mimics. “I’ve set up a trap for Moran,” he said slowly. “I’ve been setting it up for a while.” His eyes fixed on Sam’s. “You’re part of it.”

“In what way?” Sam asked. His tone hadn’t changed, still softly casual, but John could feel the wariness rising off Sam like steam.

Sherlock tugged at the cuffs of his shirt, straightening them out as they peered from under his suit jacket. It was only now that John noticed he’d taken his coat off. His impression of Sherlock’s chest being bulkier, or at least less thin, hadn’t been false.

“When Mrs Hudson caught a glimpse of me here,” Sherlock said, “I had an idea. I could turn that unfortunate incident into my advantage and also make use of the sad existence of the supernatural. I could return as a ‘ghost’.” His mouth quirked, not smug, not harmless, either. “Then all I’d have to
do was work Moran up to a point where he’d forget caution and come after me. It would have kept
things very much between him and me, no one else involved, no one else to have to worry about.
After all, who’d want to go around telling people he was chasing a ghost?”

Sherlock’s chin dipped lightly. He looked up at Sam through the curls hanging over his forehead. “I
didn’t account for you,” he said. “But again, when life gives you lemons…” The quirk returned to
his mouth. “No offence,” he added, tone only half-ironic.

“So you just played me in order to catch that guy,” Sam said, warning in his voice. John squashed
his petty sense of vindication at the sight of Sam feeling way less charitable to Sherlock. He himself
was reeling a bit, too many shady implications in Sherlock’s words for him to be able to keep a tab
on all of them.

“It was necessary,” Sherlock said, calm. “Moran is not easy to fool. He is Colonel Sebastian Moran.
He has the organized mind and the stamina of an army man, and I knew he’d need a lot of proof of
my ghostly existence to take any action. He’s been keeping an eye on the house and the two of you
all this time. We’ve taken care of it tonight,” he added. “Obviously.”

“Marvellous,” John said quietly. He found himself damning his British propriety and wishing he’d
had some really loud, disturbing sex in the last few months. The kind that would scar any
eavesdroppers for life.

Sherlock was still trying to hypnotize Sam. “Moran’s been lying in wait ever since Mrs Hudson
made that phone call to you,” he said. “It was really rather convenient for me to have you arrive.
Your presence gave credibility to something that could have easily been laughed off as the
preposterous flight of fancy of an old woman.”

Sam’s nostrils were trembling wide at each exhale. He gave a tight nod, eyes meeting Dean’s
fleetingly.

“Sure,” he told Sherlock. “That show you put across the street in the middle of the night—nice job.
Real sense of atmosphere.” Sam didn’t wait for Sherlock to speak, clearly re-visiting the experience.
“I remember, the lights flickered. I rushed there with the EMF meter and there was a definite
reading.” He was pinning Sherlock with his gaze, evidently torn between anger and some very
reluctant respect.

“You know better than most that these things don’t always indicate anything supernatural,” Sherlock
said, tone non-confrontational.

The curl of Sam’s lips was dry like a papyrus. “Your brother must be so proud,” he said.

A line appeared between Sherlock’s eyebrows and he slowly straightened his back.

“You got us all good,” Sam continued. “Mrs Hudson, Katie, even me. Really impressive. You
should have gotten John into the game, too—that would have given real credibility to your ghost
story.”

Sherlock’s face smoothed out as he stared at Sam, caught off-guard. John held his breath; he felt
pried wide open, never mind that no one was even looking at him.

“It wasn’t a game,” Sherlock said in a beat, flatly. “I didn’t want to cause John distress.” Sherlock
frowned at Sam again. “You seemed very intent on keeping the real reason for your presence here a
secret from him. I assumed it was out of the same concern?” He was watching Sam as if Sam had suddenly produced a coded three-dimensional version of himself.

“All this time I was…” Sam suddenly waved his arms about, making Dean reach out with a jerky motion as if to grab hold of him. Sam took his hoodie off and threw it bunched up behind the sofa. He glared at Sherlock through his dishevelled hair. “I’ve been here for months, for months—”

“You didn’t seem in a hurry to leave.”

There was a momentary silence that made the tail end of Sherlock’s sentence chime loudly in John’s head. He found his gaze on Dean who was staring ahead, body tense and expression surly.

Sam gathered himself quickly, jaw tightening for what seemed like a tenth time that night. “That’s not the point,” he told Sherlock. “You could have told me. Did that ever occur to you?”

“Oh, and what? Have you give it all away?” The unspoken comment on Sam’s idiocy rang loud in Sherlock’s words. “The moment I’d told you I was alive, it would have been over. You’d have mopped around the house, conflicted about keeping this a secret from John, until you told him; or worse, bugged me into telling him.”

“And why is that a bad thing?”

John’s question had everyone’s attention on him. He felt his throat strangely soothed after he’d spoken.

“John,” Sherlock said simply. John waited for him to continue, but Sherlock didn’t, the pause stretching between them interminable. John could feel the strain that came with any really prolonged eye contact, that inexorable dip toward the momentous, the discomfiting, the subliminal. He was beginning to shift out of time; he was tossed into a battle between the need to keep holding Sherlock’s gaze and the need to let go, lest a nameless crack opened in him for good, one he would never be able to close again.

Sherlock’s gaze shifted first, making John’s shoulders sag.

“You know why; I just told you why.” Sherlock was looking back to him, this time imploringly. “You wear your heart on your sleeve.” He turned to Sam. “So do you. You’re not as terrible as your brother, but it’s still all there for those who know how to look. No, it was too risky. It has played out much better when you both believed I was still dead.”

John snorted at the exact same time that Sam scoffed. Sherlock eyed them one by one quickly, then sniffed, chin lifted.

“I was right,” he said. “Moran has been reading up on ghosts. I tested how hooked he was by fiddling with his equipment: 24 hours after he had nothing from the house he took a stupid risk that proved he was getting eager. Did you know that you met him?” The question was addressed to Sam.

The constipated look on Sam’s face cleared to give way to genuine amazement.

“Where?” he asked.

“Downstairs. In Speedy’s. When you had that little chat with my brother.” Sherlock seemed to wait for something to dawn on Sam’s face and when there was nothing, he went on, tone pressing. “The
“new waiter, you remember?”

John could see the moment the bulb lit in Sam’s head. Sherlock nodded, understanding passing swiftly between him and Sam.

“What waiter?” John asked. “Sam?”

“Um, there was a new guy that day,” Sam replied. “Kind of grumpy. In his late thirties, maybe even early forties. Thick eyebrows, medium height. I remember thinking he was miserable because he had to work as a waiter at his age.” Sam had turned his eyes to Sherlock again, but now spoke to John. “I, um… I tipped him,” he said. “You know, to kind of cheer him up.”

“He gave you the coffees in mugs,” Sherlock said.

“Yeah… Yeah, he did.” Sam was clearly transported back to the scene. “Something about not having takeaway cups.”

“Microphone in a hollow cavity at the bottom of one of the cups. He needed to listen. You’d just seen my ‘ghost’ the night before so he had all the confirmation he needed.”

“You staged that?” Dean asked, looking wide-eyed at Sherlock. “What are you, some puppet-master?”

“Not worse than his brother,” Sam said, back to seething. “He was in on that, too, right?”

“No.”

Sherlock appeared torn for a moment, before letting out a sullen huff. “Mycroft and I don’t… see eye to eye on some things,” he said. John fought an urge to snort again.

“Well, that’s family,” Dean muttered, then looked around, self-conscious.

This time John cleared his throat before speaking. The thumping little fists at his temples had returned with vengeance.

“Right,” he said. “Moran thinks you’re a ghost. What’s your plan?”

There was a flicker of something bewildered on Sherlock’s face; hopeful too, maybe. John wasn’t sure. He didn’t even know why he stayed on or kept asking questions. Two days ago he would have given half of what was left of his life to have Sherlock where he was now. It would have been a pointless sacrifice, because the table between them might as well have been a grave.

“I need Moran captured and locked up for good,” Sherlock replied. “Despite the fuss my brother kicked up earlier, I have thought this through. I’ll have Moran shoot me squarely in the chest, thinking I’m a ghost, and he’ll do it in front of witnesses. An attempted murder charge will buy me plenty of time to finally find something that will keep him away for good. No one commits a crime without a single trace.”

“Hang on,” John said, mouth gone dry. “How will he shoot you in the chest?”

“This is the good part,” Dean said. “Astral projection,” he told Sam, eyebrows wriggling. He was going for sarcasm but the tired sigh with which he took a sip ruined the effect.
“What?” Sam said, making John grateful he wasn’t the only one in the dark.

“I won’t be corporeal.” Sherlock deigned to clarify the obvious. “It’ll be my astral projection.”

Sam turned his eyes to him, their look somewhat unfocused.

“I know it’s possible to have the spirit in a visible form.” Sherlock spoke to him quietly.

“No, you’ve heard it’s possible,” Dean said, shifting forward and placing himself in the invisible line of eye contact between Sherlock and Sam. “It’s some seriously fucked up mojo. We’ve only heard rumours about it and I told you—it sounded like sure death, dude. For all we know it’s one of those myths, like—”

“It’s real,” Sam said.

On its way to Sam’s face, John’s gaze still managed to catch the shimmer of excitement in Sherlock’s eyes.

“Sam?” John said. “What—Is it really that dangerous?”

“Sammy,” Dean said, small warning in his voice.

“It’s possible, Dean. It’s much more complicated than the thing we did with Pamela, but I’ve seen it in one of Bobby’s books. I’m sure of it.”

Dean suddenly smacked his right knee with an open palm. “Man, I knew you’d say something like that. That’s stupid, Sam. You should be talking him out of it, not encouraging him. Hell, you shouldn’t even be speaking. This is none of our business.”

Sam had already gotten his mulish face on. “There’s a brutal killer out there who’s impossible to catch. How is this none of our business?”

Dean flailed a little. “Because he’s not a ghost! He’s not a demon! We don’t go around hunting people. We hunt monsters.”

“That’s exactly what we’re talking about here.”

Dean drew himself back to look at Sam better. His right eyebrow rose. “Wow, you’re going to try to pull that one off? Seriously?”

Sam jutted his chin to the side. “Yeah, I’m going to try to pull that one off. Why are you really against it, Dean? You’re in too much hurry to go back home?”

Dean’s face transformed into hurt offence that lingered for just a moment too long for it to go unnoticed. John had to agree with Sherlock—not much went undeciphered on that face.

Sherlock’s voice rose, cutting through the palpable tension between the two brothers. “If you two could—” he began.

“Shut up,” Sam and Dean barked at him at the same time, but then returned to staring at each other with less laser focus.
“Can I talk to you for a sec?” Dean told Sam gravely. “Alone?”

Sam blinked at him, looking as if he was about to get up, before he appeared to shake himself mentally. He turned to John, mouth open. John waited; he was grateful there were others to do and say things now, because he was really done for the night.

Sam, however, just went on blinking. Eventually he shut his mouth and turned to Sherlock, then took a breath, lips parting again. The same thing happened. Sherlock regarded him with some cautious puzzlement. Sam turned to Dean; at least he didn’t bother to close his mouth this time, but still no words came out.

“Er, Sam?” John said.

Sam turned to him, lips pursed, producing the most bizarre resemblance to Mrs Hudson. “Who’s going to sleep where?” he asked.

“That’s what—” John started but then repeated Sam’s fly catching performance. Sam’s was actually a very legitimate question.

Sam’s nod at John’s expression reminded John of the nod his mother used to give to his old man when she’d told him something over and over again and she’d just been proven right. “We all need some rest,” he added in a moment, his eyes sliding to Sherlock. “Then we’ll talk about…things.”

“Well, I’m beat,” Dean muttered under his nose, more to himself than to Sam. “And jetlagged,” he added ruefully, voice dropping even further.

“There’s the basement flat,” John told Sam, suppressing the urge to whisper and flash the whites of his eyes in Dean’s direction. Judging by the scowl that flourished on Dean’s face, John’s effort was for naught.

“I’m not staying away from my brother,” Dean declared as if he was giving a war enemy an ultimatum. John caught himself, annoyed, just before he was about to cower into his own armchair. He pressed the backs of his fingers against his eyelids.

“We can both go downstairs,” he heard Sam say. For a moment he was unsure whether Sam was suggesting he and John slept in the basement flat. “There’s a bed and a couch.” Okay, definitely talking to Dean.

Then the implication of Sam’s words reached John and he looked up abruptly. “There’s a bed and a couch here,” he pointed out. Part of him was cursing him for his cruelty; at least it wasn’t deliberate like the way he wasn’t looking at Sherlock. Part of him was repeating coldly that Sherlock no longer had any claim over this house, let alone over the bedroom where Sam already lived. The rest of John was a chaotic mix of voices, deafening him to the point where he had to stand up to shush them.

He turned to Sam. “Just…” He shook his head. “You decide who sleeps where. I’m going upstairs.”

He numbly extracted himself from the space between his chair and the table. He’d just turned to go to the bathroom, when a thought came to him out of nowhere.

“Are you hungry?” he asked over his shoulder without looking up. When no one answered, he lifted his gaze and found three pairs of eyes on him, the same question in all of them.
“There’s lasagne left in the fridge.” John answered a different one, then continued on his journey.

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Sam was glad to hear the click of the bedroom door closing behind him and Dean. The sound signified merely a different shade of awkwardness, but at this point he was willing to count that as a small blessing. He’d just had the kind of dinner that had made him want to stab himself with his fork so he could have the excuse to leave with an ambulance. Sam had viewed the prospect of food with some gusto, his stomach suddenly roaring, indignant at being neglected for so long. By the time he’d as much as taken the lasagne out of the fridge and put the cooker on, hunger had wilted under the force of three individual silences mixing into a singularly oppressing one. Ten bites in and he’d thought no food was worth this: the staring ahead, carefully avoiding each other’s eyes or the sparkling conversation which consisted of one, one single comment—Dean’s muttered, “Jesus, still can’t keep it down.” Dean had pushed away his plate with his right hand, left one pressing at his stomach. Sam’s chest had momentarily turned to embarrassing mush at the thought of his big brother, butch and ruthless when he had to be, yet whimpering as he puked his way through a transatlantic flight, his stomach still tender hours later despite that he’d pointed his gun at people during those hours, perfectly ready to kill them. Dean had looked pasty under the fluorescent kitchen light. At least they all felt the awkwardness together and the decision not to stretch the agony by setting the table in the living room had been taken unanimously and silently.

Sherlock had had the outward appearance of an android. Or seeing that he did eat, of a man who was for all intents and purposes in a world of his own. There was some solemnity to the mechanical way he’d eaten his food, like consuming it would give him benediction.

Maybe that was what he’d hoped for.

They’d salted the place more or less, with the exception of John’s bedroom window. Dean had been ready to argue, but Sam had just switched off all lamps and brought out the black light, wordlessly making the whole space glow again like he had for John. It was the second time he’d got good marks for his work. John’s praise had been entirely unexpected in how lyrical it was; Dean’s equally unexpected for the tension between them, but not in its actual form: “Good job.” Dean hadn’t mentioned John’s bedroom again, but still went around the rest of the flat with the salt. Sherlock had only looked up at Dean once from his leather chair to which he’d returned after the Most Awkward Dinner in history. Sam wondered whether Sherlock knew the salt lines along the doors and the windows were for protection against demons; he wondered how much Sherlock knew about the supernatural. He’d seemed really frustrated with the sheer volume of data out there. Probably with the lack of reliability of some of it. Sherlock had been Sam’s study subject for a while—he’d learned a thing or two about the guy, and he could imagine his brain trying to organize the chaos into some new system.

The other look Sherlock had spared them was when Sam brought him a blanket and one of his t-shirts that he’d actually picked up and put down three times, before finally growing exasperated with himself and taking it to Sherlock. “Thank you,” Sherlock had said and Sam had nodded, wondering if the man who allegedly didn’t do emotions was jealous of him.

Any thought of Sherlock or John evaporated from Sam’s mind when Dean turned to face him from the far bedroom window. As far as Sam was concerned they could continue with the silent communication—Dean’s expression told him enough already. His brother was equally uncomfortable but more determined to have a conversation. He’d asked for it anyway, so Sam wasn’t going to open his mouth first.
Dean’s eyelids trembled in some half-tired, half-irritated resignation. “I’m not going to fight with you,” he told Sam.

Sam frowned at him, taken by surprise. It hadn’t been the opening he expected. This was too close to the heart of things, sweeping away all prickly little details or weighty big issues that covered it.

“I don’t want to, Sammy,” Dean clarified, a sigh in his throat. “I just want to know you’re okay.”

“I’m okay,” Sam said quietly. Dean’s lips danced in their typical expressiveness, as he nodded. Sam expected him to continue but he didn’t.

They hadn’t said much the previous time they’d been alone, while Sherlock and John were having their messed up reunion out in the lounge. Sam realized he still didn’t know why Dean was here, but he kind of had the feeling he’d just heard the essence of the answer. He’d heard it as soon as Dean told him he’d flown to here, for God’s sake. He felt like a bit of a jerk, standing there silently, not a kind word on his lips. All the baggage of the last few months, hell, all the baggage since Dean’s return from Purgatory seemed to pile up on Sam, burying him underneath. He felt tired to the bone. It was how they lived, both out in the world and with each other, but it didn’t mean he ever got used to it.

“I was really angry with you,” he said, because it was the truth.

“I know.”

“What you did, Dean, with Amelia—”

“I know. Sammy. I’m sorry.”

The relief was huge and burning with how easy it felt. Part of him was still thrashing, though, resisting letting it all fizzle out so simply. It took him a moment to give it its correct name.

“Did you talk to Benny earlier?” He knew Sherlock had been right, but he still asked.

Dean watched him, eyes brimming with feeling. Sam was sure Dean would rather have his nails pulled out than see himself in the mirror right now. “I did,” he said. “I had to.”

Sam nodded, not hiding what he thought about that.

“He’s been struggling, Sam. Cold turkey ain’t all that easy, no matter if it’s drink or blood.”

“Well, my heart goes out to him.”

“Will you quit being a bitch?” The comeback lacked most of its typical vigour, but it still reminded Sam of hundreds of similar lines, all the way back from when they were young. They weren’t young anymore. It hadn’t felt like they were young for a long while, but now it was finally true. Chronological time had caught up with experience at last.

“Is this what we’re doing, Dean?” Sam asked, taking a step away from the door and into the room. “You’re going to tell me about your pal’s troubles and I’m supposed to sympathize with him? You’re willing to pretend that—”
“I’m not willing to pretend anything.” Dean’s voice rose. “I’m just trying to tell you that he’s in a bad place and I ditched him to go chase after my little brother. Who has done a damn good job pretending I don’t exist. I owed Benny a phone call. He’s been a good friend and he’s watched my back, from the moment I met him. I won’t take that back, Sam.”

Sam just shook his head, looking away. There was a definite sting in Dean’s words, but Sam had an odd feeling it was sharp at both ends.

“Look, man,” Dean said, tone dropping again, jaded and making Sam guilty. “I mean it. I don’t want to fight. I just wanted to say goodbye properly, okay?”

A big, brick-like palm hit Sam’s chest, then fixed there. He blinked at Dean, noting his pleading eyes. Pleading forgiveness, sure. Sure. Now Sam got it.

“Is that why you’re here?” he asked, his stupid voice trying to break.

Dean frowned at him for a second, then a whole rainbow of emotions coloured his face. “What? No.” He managed to look both pissed at Sam and wanting to crush him into a hug, like when Sam was fourteen and sold all his books to buy Dean his first flask.

“I was saying goodbye to Benny,” Dean said.

For a long moment Sam didn’t seem to find words, but again it looked like Dean didn’t need them, either.

They both shifted from their places at the same time. Sam tugged at the bed covers absent-mindedly, smoothing their top left corner out. Dean walked around the bed eyeing the floor next to it then the bathroom door.

“You’re going to have to watch where you step during the night, Big Foot,” he said. “I don’t want you squishing me like a bug when you get up to go to the can.”

For a moment Sam remained silent, bringing Dean’s eyes to him. Small tension flickered in them.

“Um, sure,” Sam said. “Um, no,” he added, shaking his head, irritated at how tongue-tied he was. “You’re not sleeping on the floor.”

Dean’s face scrunched up, making Sam’s head swim with fondness. He’d never realized how inexpressive British people’s faces were…at least in comparison. Good thing Dean wasn’t a woman. He was self-conscious about his appearance, for all that he hid it well; if he were a woman, he’d have started a secret ‘plastic surgery’ fund at thirty. He already had squinty lines, and laugh lines, and ‘You’re talking out of your ass’ lines and ‘I’m so cool’ lines—a whole crisscrossing network on his face that Sam could always find his bearings on.

“Well, I’m not sharing with you,” Dean said, going to the cupboard and peering in, still talking. “You kick in your sleep. It took years for the bruises to disappear. It was like child abuse, never mind that you were younger.” He took the spare blanket out, turning around. “All I’m saying is watch where you step when you get up during the night. I’d take the other side, but you know...”

Sam knew. Closer to the door. Dean was placing himself right between that and the bed.

“Dean.” Sam shook his head, fighting an impulse to say Dean’s name again, for no reason. Dean
looked at him, expectant, the big, heavy woollen blanket cradled against his chest like some
unimaginatively shaped teddy bear.

“I won’t kick,” Sam said.

***

Later, when Sam was on the brink of warm, blissful sleep Dean spoke in the dark. “We’re going to
have a talk about that astral projection crap tomorrow; you know that, right?”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “I know.”

Chapter End Notes

If you have a moment, please have a look at this post—it's a little discussion on
Sherlock's characterisation in my story and I'd really like to hear your take on it.

I also want to apologize in advance that the next update might be after more than a
week. My family is going through some sad times, somewhat unexpectedly, and I've not
been able to focus on writing. It's not a break from the story - I just need a moment to go
through some things and I'll be back soon. Thanks for your understanding.
Chapter 27

John’s head sank into the pillow. He barely had the chance to be thankful for the human instinct for self-preservation before he could already feel himself drifting off. Ultimately, it didn’t matter whether the world was coming down in heartbreak or in fire—as long as there wasn’t immediate danger sleep equated survival, and it was on.

He woke up an indefinite amount of time later feeling heavy and still tired but pleasantly warm. More importantly, his head was no longer a miniature volcano crater ready to erupt. Despite the pitch black there was no sense of disorientation, aside from the question how long John had slept. A quick look at his mobile’s display told him it’d been four hours. No dreams, nothing. Complete switch off. Evidently enough to recharge his brain to the point where it was ready to staunchly re-address reality.

Sherlock was alive. There was no changing that, no waking up from it. It was as if during those four hours John’s psyche had gone through some final stage of acceptance and now the process was completed. The world had straightened its lines. It was a real and dense world, indisputable. John’s. Sherlock was in it, alive.

Had been all this time.

That was it, John knew. This fact was the crux, central to any hope for John to not just feel authentic in his own world, but to inhabit it in peace. The acceptance of Sherlock’s return to the living wasn’t the issue; the fact that he’d never left was.

All throughout John’s grieving, his harrowing journey to find his bearings again, Sherlock had been out there. Yet John’s experience was real, too, despite the fact that it had stemmed from a lie. He just couldn’t get his head around it.

No, he couldn’t get his heart around it, because while this was the single happiest turn of events, John still felt that by coming back Sherlock had robbed him of something that had become integral to who John was. John’s bereavement had hooked into his soul and tried to pull it out; he’d barely managed to clamp it right under his tongue for the longest time, each moment of holding it there an interminable stretch of pain yet one more step toward the promise to breathe freely again one day. Somewhere along the line that day had come. Now Sherlock was back, sweeping away the most difficult year of John’s life, without lessening any of the hardship it had carried. John was struggling to part with the greatest anguish he’d ever experienced, because it had become an indelible part of who Sherlock was to him. For a long while to grieve for Sherlock and to drown in how much he missed him had been the only way to cope with his loss. Sherlock had been gone; not there, not anywhere John was.

At that thought his feet met the chilly floor. John stood up, breathing evenly and noisily, overcome with a vestigial sense of dread. He was thickly aware that the antidote to all the blackness that used to consume him was literally feet away. More than that, it was within reach.

He made his way to the flat in the dark, steps quiet down the stairs. At the landing he stopped, sense returning to his motions. It wasn’t to question where John was going, but rather where exactly he was going. Had Sherlock returned to his bedroom after all, Dean and Sam moving to the basement flat? Or had Sherlock gone downstairs? John peered into the living room, uncertain.
He found the answer in the outline of an unruly mop of dark hair resting on the sofa’s armrest, illuminated only by the scant streetlight coming from the far window. Its curtains had been drawn open. John wondered whether Sherlock had made an unprecedented choice to discard sound reason in favour of fighting an irrational, newfound fear of the dark.

He could only see the top of Sherlock’s head. John couldn’t even distinguish whether it was the back or the side, or whether Sherlock had turned to face the sofa’s backrest, tucking himself into it. There was no movement at all. Perhaps it was imperceptible from where John was standing at the door. Sherlock could be deeply asleep or just thinking. Pouring over his ingenious, insane plans of capturing Moran, probably. Or over his reunion with John? What had Sherlock found when he had returned to his own life? In the sobering pre-dawn it was hard for John to abscond from a sense of perspective—he was well aware that Sherlock had also been affected by the events of the night.

John was frozen to his spot, a hope rising in him, hope that Sherlock was just sleeping.

“I’m not sleeping,” Sherlock said, voice barely above whisper.

John hesitated then padded softly into the room, stopping close enough to the back of the sofa to be able to see the glow of Sherlock’s forehead—he was lying on his back. His eyes glinted as they met John’s.

Neither said a word. John sighed deeply and let his head loll forward.

“I don’t…” he began, knowing he was going nowhere with the sentence. It still felt good to say it.

Sherlock remained silent. John could feel his gaze and shook his head slowly under it, the gesture just as unclear as his unfinished sentence. He wasn’t just failing to make sense to Sherlock; he had no idea what he was trying to say or why he was doing any of it. He’d drawn to a blank, but it wasn’t oppressive. On the contrary—there was something weightless about it, a complete lack of pressure coming from floating in some strange realm of the sublime where there was no time and therefore all the time in the world.

John breathed in and out, this time evenly and quietly, then without much thought turned on his heels and headed back to the door.

“John.”

He stopped, head lifting. Walking back was inevitable, but it was as if in knowing that John could postpone it for a while. He could almost visualize himself there, by the sofa, as a next stop in the future. He was rooted to the spot in the now, waiting.

There was a soft rustle behind him and he finally looked over his shoulder to find Sherlock had propped himself up and was gazing at him over the edge of the sofa backrest.

John turned around to face him, but still didn’t walk back.

“I know you’re upset,” Sherlock said, his voice more a vibration rather than sound. “But I can’t keep apologizing for what I still think I was right to do.”

“Did you even hesitate?”
It took a moment for Sherlock to reply. “If you’re asking me whether I was fine with it,” he said, “you should know the answer to that. But no, I didn’t hesitate. I could see no other way.”

Once or twice in his life John had really managed to surprise himself, but now, in the way his feet carried him out and up to his room, there was more than surprise. There was actual opposition to his own desires. It was an honest to God case of his feet carrying him out, because the rest of him wanted to stay and shout and shake Sherlock until the bits in that head of his began clattering and something clicked in there. Something essential to assure John he hadn’t spent the best years of his life with someone who was false in a way that was million times more wrong and damaged than what Sherlock had claimed he was when he’d parted with John from that rooftop.

Jesus, even their goodbye had been a lie. There’d been tears, and now John wanted to claw at his own eyes when they throbbed with the notion that after all, Sherlock might have told him the truth when he’d called himself a fraud.

John sat on the edge of his bed, leaning on his thighs and staring ahead. There was virtually no light in his bedroom and now John was the one with the sudden fear of the dark. His eyes could find no definition in anything around him. He could find no definition in anything to help him separate the truth from the lies. A gimlet of doubt was going through his entire being, indiscriminate, getting closer and closer to John’s center and producing tiny splinters of terror with each turn—questions about even the simplest notions that John had always taken for granted, including about himself. He grappled with the rising panic, needing to find something real, before he fell apart.

Sherlock was real. He had to be. He was.

John moved down the stairs quicker this time, but just as quiet. He walked in and made a beeline for the sofa, stopping when his thighs brushed against its back.

Sherlock looked up to him. After the blackness of John’s bedroom, the light here seemed abundant; John imagined he could see the lagoon blue-green of Sherlock’s irises.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” Sherlock said, deadpan.

John felt himself burst open in wonder. For a split, hysterical second he really got it, why people thought he and Sherlock were together. They were simply responding to a depth of connection they perceived and wanted for themselves. Sex was one of the fundamental characteristics of the kind of intimacy people instinctively equated to closeness; one of the most intense, traceable aspects of something that bound one person to another. No one had to be gay, no one even needed such narrow definitions when there was soul-shredding going on, the kind that made you want to glue your shards to the other person’s, because it was them.

It was him.

“I—I…” John stammered, then swallowed and considered what he wanted to say. “I was devastated, Sherlock,” he said plainly.

Sherlock didn’t rise this time, but nonetheless John felt his focus did, hovering inches away from John, barely contained from slamming into him.

“I’m sorry.”

John shook his head. “You…” I need to understand.
Sherlock sighed, eyes lifting to the ceiling. “I don’t know if I can make you understand, John. I’m not you, and I’m not what you think I am. I keep telling you that. I’m not a hero, I’m not a great man. You keep wanting me to be someone else, someone…better. I might not be a fraud, but my brain is all I’ve got. I’m not…”

John felt protest at Sherlock trying to take himself away from him again. He knew who Sherlock was better than he knew himself. He only got confused when he stopped to think about it.

“You cried,” he told Sherlock. “When we…On the phone, back then. You cried.”

Sherlock’s eyes returned to him.

“Was it part of the act?” John asked.

Sherlock’s face remained impassive. “It was,” he said. “But it didn’t require much effort.”

John just watched him, waves of bright, shining marvel crashing against the waves of traumatic, bleak memories.

“You wonder whether I am indeed heartless,” Sherlock stated evenly. He looked away, face drawing longer in concentration. “You told me then that friends protected people, remember? It won’t be a complete lie if I said that I was trying to protect you, but it’ll still be a lie. I am selfish, John. Trying to protect you, and Mrs Hudson, and Lestrade was not the only thing I was doing. I was too scared for myself, for what it would mean to me if you got killed. I don’t know whether that makes me heartless, but it’s who I am.”

John was faced with the memory of crying at Sherlock’s grave and telling him that he was the most human human being John had ever known. God, did he know Sherlock…

Before he had a chance to respond, Sherlock spoke again, tension in his neck as if he’d lifted his head from the pillow but was keeping it hovering an inch above it.

“I told you then that alone protected me. People…Sentiment means vulnerability, John. I was never more aware of it than on that rooftop.” Sherlock’s eyes roamed the room, purposeless, his neck straining further. His cheekbones swam into view like the profiles of a pair of hands, palms open as if they’d just released a bird into the skies.

“My life, my work,” Sherlock said, his ‘k’ popping out in a hollow sound, “everything was in the hands of a maniac, who had the means to destroy me. I had never been in such position before and I knew then that I did not wish to repeat the experience.” Sherlock finally met John’s gaze, the coldness that so many people thought they saw emitting from him. But John’s chills weren’t because of it. He distinguished it for what it was—an extraordinary personality trying his best to make sense of himself and find a place. Protectiveness rose in John, so fierce it made ‘temporary insanity’ plausible, because he didn’t think there was anything he wouldn’t do to shroud Sherlock in a world that allowed him to live and just be.

John wasn’t surprised to hear Sherlock meet him from the other end.

“While I was alive, I was in their hands,” he said flatly, looking up the ceiling. “If you knew I was alive, they’d have known it, too. That’s all there is to it. I resented the thought of living in fear of my own shadow and I wasn’t going to spend my life looking over my shoulder, or over yours. You
asked me if I had hesitated. You know how I work, John. You know how I see things. I looked at all
the data objectively and then I allowed for sentiment as one of the variables.” Sherlock stilled, the
pause the longest one yet. “I saw what I had to do for the best odds to have my life back and I did it.
It came at a price, but it was the lesser evil.” Their eyes met. “Besides,” Sherlock murmured, “I could
have never worked with you around. I would have been distracted, slowed down. There was no
place for mistakes or wasting time.”

John caught himself a split second before blurting out, ‘I could have helped.’ He knew, not even
deep down, that he would have hindered more. When it had come to the great game, there’d always
been two people on the board: Sherlock Holmes and James Moriarty. John had been caught between
them twice, both times used against Sherlock. The only ally who could have helped Sherlock in this
case was the one Sherlock had found anyway.

As if reading his mind Sherlock spoke quietly, emotion almost making it to his voice. “No one can
read Mycroft. But you…” The silence was very brief this time, but the change in Sherlock’s tone
was as if they hadn’t spoken in over a year. “I wanted…John. I just wanted things to be like they
used to,” he said. “I wanted my life back, can you understand that?”

“Yes,” John said, chest floating with his exhalation of laughter. “Oh yes. I can understand that.”

Sherlock regarded him for a moment, then hummed.

There were bullets ready with Sherlock’s name on it, ready to be shot and to rupture, because while
Sherlock and John had mirrored themselves in wanting their lives back, Sherlock had had one
advantage that John could bet had made a pretty big difference on some mornings: he’d known John
was alive. But it looked like John could never raise any gun at Sherlock, real or metaphorical.

His eyes travelled along the lean, stretched out form on the sofa, breathing and familiar in ways that
hadn’t even had a real chance to fade, thank God. Sherlock’s long legs, hidden under a blanket; his
chest, his shirt still perfectly fitted, regardless of the elegantly increased definition of muscle and
mass; Sherlock’s face, the subdued play of meagre light making it just as startling and enthralling as
the first time John had lain eyes on it. Sherlock belonged to the night—John knew that with the part
of his heart that had written poetry when he was seventeen and a blog about the adventures of a mad,
brilliant man when he was thirty-seven. But John had also been there on many a morning when the
sun had adorned Sherlock’s unusual face, creating a bizarre suture to join features that could look
both very beautiful and quite unattractive. There was nothing obscure or mendacious in Sherlock’s
sleepy, sulky, pliant face at breakfast. It was a sight very few had seen and fewer still had
understood.

John cleared his throat. “I missed you, you know,” he said.

Sherlock blinked once. “So did I.”

***

Sam woke up in alarm with his right foot digging hard into Dean’s shin. Dean himself was snoring
lightly, head under the pillow, which explained why he hadn’t heard the muffled, high-pitched
sounds of distress coming from somewhere outside the room. Sam launched himself out of bed,
startling Dean who tried to kick in three different directions at once before managing to turn himself
on his back locking panicked eyes with Sam. Sam lifted his finger and pressed it to his lips. They
both kept dead quiet as Sam crept to the bedroom door and pressed his ear to it. Nothing much
clearer than the fact that the sounds were coming from a woman. Dean reached under the bed and
passed Sam the small shotgun, fumbled under his pillow to grip Ruby’s knife and slide across the room to get one of the iron fireplace tools. Their eyes met again. Dean nodded.

They stormed through the kitchen into the living room to find Mrs Hudson sobbing and trying to talk against Sherlock’s chest, while he held her in a loose embrace and patted her on her shoulder.

***

It was a good thing the buildings in Central London were designed with some grandeur, because if this had been a smaller flat it would have been overflowing. There were seven people currently in 221B on this fine October morning, and Sam experienced a classic conflict of emotions. There was something in him basking in the feeling of a house full of people who were all friends and not foes. (That was by a great stretch of the imagination, of course, seeing that one of these people was Mycroft Holmes.) But he also wanted them all to go away so he could have a quiet moment with his brother, or with John, or possibly with both, but separately.

He definitely needed more coffee.

He’d had one cup straight after bearing witness to the tearful reunion of Mrs Hudson and her former tenant. John had rushed into the living room a few moments after Sam and Dean, eyes wide, then his jaw had slacked as he’d watched the scene in front of him, gaze meeting Sherlock’s above Mrs Hudson’s cradled head. Their eye contact had held effortlessly and Sam had found himself reviewing the term ‘former’ as far as Sherlock’s tenancy at 221B was concerned.

Mrs Hudson had blown her nose and wiped her eyes repeatedly, then for a short period of time she’d chattered, telling Sherlock off and feeling up his midriff with both surprise and satisfaction—apparently Sherlock had kept himself fed. John had been drawn in quickly after showing up, both to the conversation and in wrapping his arm over Mrs Hudson’s small form for comfort after Sherlock had detached himself. Dean had returned from the bathroom, to where he’d retreated as soon as it’d become obvious no one was dying, and his re-appearance on the scene had drawn Mrs Hudson’s attention to him. She’d hugged him as well, getting tearful again and commenting on her nerves.

“Good thing I just had that spa weekend,” she told the room at large, shaking her head with feeling. “All of this is too much, it’s too much really. I’ll need some of my soothers, I just know it.” It was when Mrs Hudson had extended her commentary to the tune of approval for Dean’s arrival on account of Sam ‘pinning’ for him that Sam had turned on his heels and headed straight for the coffee maker.

Fifteen minutes later Mycroft Holmes showed up with DI Lestrade. The latter halted at the door and stared at Sherlock, his verbal contribution consisting of a breathed out, “Fucking hell.” Sherlock didn’t show a great deal of emotion, but Sam seemed to be learning to get a better read on him and was able to distinguish something lighter and almost mellow in his face and posture. His frequency of shared eye contact with John was on a different plane compared to the previous day. John talked to Sherlock, Sherlock reciprocating, their exchanges fluid yet bashful.

For a short while everyone tried speaking at the same time. Most of it was catching up, which of course also included Sherlock’s plans about that Moran guy. Dean still expressed his opposition, although it sounded a bit half-hearted, which was just as well because no one seemed to pay him much attention. John was curious. The shifts that must have occurred overnight between him and Sherlock evidently encompassed Mycroft Holmes as well, because it sounded like he was on-board. It was the one time Sam engaged in the conversation.
“What happened to you?” he asked Holmes, coming off less sarcastic than he intended. “I thought you were against the whole idea.”

Holmes was standing by the fireplace, his back to his brother who was occupying the leather armchair. Mycroft’s eyes shot to Sam immediately at Sam’s question. The curtains were drawn again so the light in the room was dim, but Sam could clearly see that those weren’t the eyes of a man who’d had a good night’s rest. Sam wondered whether any communication had passed between the Holmes brothers during the night. (His money was definitely on some passing between Sherlock and John. Either that or John Watson was a saint.)

“I don’t believe in wasting effort to try and change things once I realize they can’t be changed, Mr Winchester,” Mycroft Holmes said calmly. “I was able to give these new developments some thought and everything suggested that Sherlock would attempt to put his plan in place, with your aid. I was convinced none of you would manage to dissuade him.” Mycroft looked at the tip of his umbrella, frowning lightly, then spoke to it. “It is wise of one to accept a situation for what it is, don’t you think?” His gaze returned to Sam, inscrutable as ever, but his tone had been soft. When Sam didn’t respond Mycroft returned his attention to his umbrella’s tip. “I have resources at my disposal and the chances of Sherlock pulling off his idiotic charade are much higher with me on board.”

Sam expected a comment from Sherlock, but there was none. Sam himself didn’t say anything, either; Holmes was right, but Sam wasn’t going to fawn over him. He continued to drink his coffee from under the kitchen portal, listening, feeling oddly detached without being disconnected. He noticed all kinds of little details: Sherlock had slept in his own shirt, yet it still had hardly any creases, the dust on the fireplace mantel had gotten to the point where it was visible with the naked eye, Dean had either a small bruise or a hickey on the tendons of his left shoulder. Lestrade was sitting on the sofa with his legs slightly sprawled, expression dazed and kind of heart-warmingly human—he was clearly still trying to get his head around everything. It took some time for Sam to notice that Lestrade was ignoring Mycroft Holmes, who was aware of it but did nothing, and persistently didn’t ignore him back.

Mrs Hudson did look rested. She made hot beverages and tried talking about sleeping arrangements, mostly to herself.

Dean joined Sam in the kitchen after he’d gone there to wash his cup.

“He really is going to try and do it,” Dean said.

“I could’ve told you that last night.”

Dean looked like he wanted to butt heads, but then scratched his flank, yawning with a cracking sound. “What do you do for breakfast around here?” he asked, adding, “All my stuff is in the car back where that warehouse was.”

Sam stopped the tap and frowned at the non sequitur. Dean’s shoulders moved in a peculiar, small shrug.

“So... Do you want to go get them?” Sam asked, unsure. He could feel his speech filling fast with ‘wanna’s and ‘gonna’s. Not that it had cleared, but Dean did curve the way Sam talked just like he’d shaped so many of Sam’s ways.

“I wouldn’t mind going for a ride.”
“Okay.” Sam could do with a ride, too. The moment he thought it, the need to be in a car riding shotgun next to Dean for hours magnified to alarming proportions. He did a full-body shake like a horse. “I’ll make some calls to hire a car,” he said.

“Right. Because you don’t have one.” Dean stood barefoot in the middle of the kitchen, resigned and disapproving in his rumpled clothing and his beard reaching the point of shagginess.

“It’s London,” Sam said and left it at that. Dean spread his arms in a ‘Dude!’ gesture, but Sam was still feeling a bit subdued to elaborate on or defend his choices. His stomach was growling again and this time he was sure even a candlelit brunch with Mycroft Holmes wasn’t going to put him off his meal.

“You want to get some food or what?” he called behind his shoulder.

***

It was so good to see Katie that Sam had to bite his tongue to stop himself from telling her that. She had a shimmer about her this morning, the darkness of her skin set off by the bright, orange feminine top she was wearing, and Sam was sure she’d done something to her face, like different make-up or something, which made it look nice. Katie’s eyes had flashed when she’d looked up to the door and seen him, but then she seemed to kind of hush. Sam realized that ever since their date he hadn’t talked to her. He also realized that he had no clue how long ago that was.

His third realization needed to be put away and examined carefully another time perhaps. Amelia’s email was not just still in his inbox, unanswered, but Sam hadn’t really thought about it—or her—until he’d just laid eyes on Katie.

He must have stood at the counter like a complete moron after he’d greeted the girl, because he felt Dean press into his side to make space for himself.

“Hi,” Dean said.

It was super strange to be able to all but see Dean’s actual expression just by the way Katie’s changed.

“Hi,” she said, gaze doing some loops as it moved between both of their faces.

“We’d like some breakfast,” Dean said, infusing his words with the perfect balance between making a reasonable request at such an establishment and suggesting that he was a man whose appetite for things was usually to the great benefit of everyone involved. The punch line, of course, being that Dean always managed to strike the ideal dose of respect for the individual in front of him. Sam had seen him find what that dose was with anyone between nuns and hookers. It was a gift.

The colour was rising up furiously on Katie's neck and face. Sam couldn’t imagine what mortifying shade she’d be if she was Caucasian. His heart always went out to her and to all shy people who were cursed to be able to keep their feelings to themselves with the same success as a naked man could keep his erection a secret. Be that as it may, he thought Katie looked prettier when she blushed.

“Katie, this is my brother, Dean,” Sam said.

“Oh.” Katie’s eyes flicked between their faces again, smile losing some of its tremble. “Oh. Nice to
meet you. You—Yes, I can see the resemblance.”

“Now you’re just being mean,” Dean said with an easy smile, actually putting his goddamn chin on the high glass counter. Katie’s eyebrows drew in for a second then flew up.

“Oh, you mean…” She looked up to Sam, then her gaze jumped to the wall behind his shoulder. “No, I meant that you—You both look—”

Sam cut in, hand reaching and hanging in the air halfway to her shoulder. “Just…” He shook his head, giving Dean a reproachful look. “I should’ve introduced him with, ‘This is my brother Dean. He thinks he’s funny.’”

Dean lifted his chin and tilted it, face displaying a modest admission that he actually did think he was funny. Sam rolled his eyes and smacked Dean on the part of his arm that was below Katie’s line of vision.

“So what do you got here?” Dean asked. He was on his toes looking behind Katie as if she was hiding some particularly delicious pastries from him. Katie’s lips had parted. It wasn’t just Dean’s face that usually had this effect on women or even his demeanour—he really kind of stood out. His question had come out as more of a ‘So watchagot here?’

Katie seemed to be in a bit of a haze, but not the unpleasant kind. Her eyes made a speed of light tour over Dean’s face and neck, repeated it with Sam’s, then shot to the door.

“Er…What would you like?” she asked, voice slightly unsteady. She looked back to Sam, face smoothing out into a polite, warm expression. “We’ve got some fresh cherry bakewell tarts. But if you’re after cooked breakfast…”

“Mmm,” Dean responded, wriggling his eyebrows in assent. “Do you have any pie?” he asked.

“No, no pie. Sorry.” Katie did look sorry.

“That’s okay,” Sam said quickly. “Um, full English for both of us. Thanks, Katie.”

“No problem. Coffee for both?”

“What?” Sam said. He felt like a parent who was trying to have a conversation while keeping an eye on his child. Dean was ogling the contents of the window display in a manner that suggested he’d spent the last three months eating sand.

“Does your brother take his coffee like you do?” Katie asked.

“Nah,” Dean said, quickly glancing between Katie and Sam. “More sugar for me. Thanks.” He gave her another smile, dazzling in a way that was more appropriate for after ten o’clock at night.

“We’ll be over there,” Sam said, indicating a table with his head, while he shoved at Dean’s back.

They had their breakfast mostly in silence, both of them too hungry to do anything but eat. There was some quick sharing on the extent of Sam’s relationship with Katie.

“She’s nice,” Dean remarked.
“Yeah.”

Sam hesitated for a long moment before telling him about the email from Amelia. It didn’t feel like something he should be quiet about, regardless of the fact that compared to most things he had chosen to keep to himself in the past, this one he would have been entitled to. As expected, Dean didn’t offer any insights. What was surprising though was that he somehow managed to make his lack of input supportive. Sam didn’t know whether it was body language or he’d just sensed a shift in Dean, but it was there and he asked him about it.

“I don’t know, man,” Dean said, taking an enormous bite of his second slice of toast and chewing it quickly. His gaze was down on his plate. He swallowed. “I told you I don’t want to fight. You do what you’ve got to do. If you think you and Amelia have a chance, go for it.”

“Really?” Sam couldn’t help himself.

Dean finally lifted his eyes. What was in them told Sam that for all the glory of the food on his plate Dean hadn’t really been all that interested in it.

“You want to be with Amelia?” Dean said. “I won’t try and talk you out of it. Hell, I don’t want to. The last three months…Let’s just say I had some time to think about some things.” Sam waited, eggs forgotten on his fork. Dean’s upper body made a motion forward, but instead of leaning in he dropped against the chair’s backrest.

“If you want out,” he said seriously, “if you want to come back home and be with Amelia, do it. But it has to be the real deal this time. It won’t be a life if you keep dipping in and out. You know that.”

“Yes,” Sam said quietly. “I do.” Trouble was, he’d already tried severing all ties to hunting once, all those years ago. It still hadn’t meant he didn’t end up watching Jessica burn and bleed. More than that, this time cutting Dean out of his life was out of the question. But keeping him in, while having a go at normalcy…

“I know you’re thinking if you can ever get out, if there’s ever such a thing,” Dean said. His fingers reached out and wrapped around Sam’s cup absent-mindedly. “But you can do it, Sammy. If that’s what you want to do, you’ll just hide somewhere with Amelia and lie low…I’ll take care of the rest.”

Sam cleared his throat, the sound drawn out and coarse. “I don’t know, Dean,” he said, hesitant how to continue. He appreciated the sentiment more than he could express, but it didn’t mean he found Dean’s promise possible.

“Why?” Dean asked. “You’re not sure about Amelia?”

Sam opened his mouth to say that of course he was sure about Amelia, but something blocked the words. Dean was watching him, everything about him showing that he honestly wanted to get what Sam thought.

Sam sighed, played with some chips by using them to smear ketchup over his plate. His chest was feeling too tight, the inconvenience of it a reminder that it was always only a matter of time before the reality of his miserable existence caught up with him.

“It’s like—” he began, then stopped quickly glancing up to Dean. “I mean I do love Amelia. I was happy with her. I think.” He picked one very small chip with his thumb and index finger and put it in his mouth, swallowing hard without chewing it. He met Dean’s unwavering eyes again and tried for
a shrug. “Sometimes I don’t even know what I’m feeling. Like, whether I could be happy.”

“Sammy—”

“No, listen. What we’ve been through? How can I just put that behind me? What, having a place, like home… Is that for me?” He tried not to gulp, tried for a small smile, instead. “I mean, that’s not how it goes for me, you know.” He could see the green in Dean’s eyes turn violent with the surge of emotion, so he hurried on. “Amelia made me happy, but it feels like a dream. Like I was there for a moment only, until…”

“Until what, Sam?” There was an edge to Dean’s voice, pressure mingling with anxiousness; Sam struggled to know what either meant, for him or for Dean.

He shrugged again. “I guess I—After you disappeared, I just wanted to stop for a while, I was so…” His throat suddenly closed and Sam was grateful it didn’t let him spill his next thought, because he hadn’t even had the chance to appreciate how epic an epiphany it was. He took a sip of his coffee and sighed. “I don’t know, Dean. I think we should figure out what Crowley wants first, then… We’ll see.”

Dean looked at him for the longest moment, evidently full of things to say, but he only nodded at the end choosing not to speak. Sam wondered whether it was because he wasn’t sure what those things were or because he didn’t know how to say them to Sam.

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They drove to pick up Dean’s car courtesy of Katie’s cute Vauxhall. Dean didn’t stop huffing and shuffling behind the wheel all the way to the spot where he’d left another Vauxhall, this one much larger. They knew the exact coordinates after Mycroft Holmes had provided them for them. Much to Sam’s surprise, he had also extended an offer to have the car brought back to Baker Street. There was nothing friendlier in Mycroft’s attitude, but nonetheless Sam felt he wasn’t being unkind, which was probably the closest to an olive branch Sam was ever going to get. Sam kept his tone neutral when he declined, but ventured to explain he and Dean wanted to go for a drive. After a moment of scrutiny Holmes had only nodded and turned his back on him.

When Sam and Dean had gone upstairs after Speedy’s they found the atmosphere in the living room calmer; there was something about it that had made Sam hover by the door to the flat, while waiting for Dean and trying to fold himself down into someone twenty inches shorter. He’d caught himself observing the scene in front of him again. Mrs Hudson was perched on John’s chair’s armrest, engaged in a conversation with Lestrade who was still on the couch in his raincoat but with a cup of tea in his lap and a biscuit in his hand. Mycroft Holmes was sitting at the other end of the couch, legs folded, head bowed as he perused his Blackberry. John was talking to Sherlock in the kitchen, their voices quiet and profoundly different, taking turns smoothly.

Dean had already been a few steps down the stairs, Sam taking off after him, when Mycroft Holmes had spoken from the landing.

“Mr Winchester.”

Sam stopped and lifted his head.

“I’ll have some books waiting for you when you return. If there are any you’d like delivered from here or from the US, let me know.”
Sam had offered a nod and an ‘okay’ in response, because sometimes he was allowed to go for what was easiest.
If a week ago Sam had known he would be able to lay his hands on the kind of books he was perusing currently, it would have made the idea of London as his permanent place of residence a far more alluring one.

He had already spent a couple of hours with his nose buried between various pages, trying hard to focus on the research at hand rather than take notes on everything he came across that he didn’t know, but could come useful. Dean was reading next to him, his dedication to the topic of astral projection more tenuous. He was constantly distracting Sam by flicking at his wrist to draw his attention to a drawing or by shoving a book in Sam’s face, his “Check this out!” accompanying both actions. Sam had to hiss at him at some point; a reminder that Mycroft Holmes had told them that if they managed to ‘bring this dubious endeavour to success’ they were welcome to a wealth of extremely rare books any time they needed them in the future. Sam was sure some of them weren’t even rare, but were a single, handwritten edition. His concerns about the state of Dean’s hands when Dean handled the really old books apparently made Sam not cool.

Mycroft had left 221B as soon as Sam and Dean had returned from their trip, but he’d already looked miles away, making Sam wonder briefly to what reality that formidable man was about to return. Ten minutes later DI Lestrade had followed, rubbing his forehead repeatedly and looking ill at ease. As far as Sam gathered, he had his own part to play in Sherlock’s plan of capturing Sebastian Moran.

Mrs Hudson had already gone downstairs to her flat when Sam and Dean got back. John had gone to work, amazingly; or rather, gone to his workplace to have his arrangements with it ended. Sam could see how British employers wouldn’t take any more gladly to their workers’ absence without notice than employers back home.

That had left them with only Sherlock for company. The three of them had barely exchanged more than a few sentences since Sam and Dean had sat down and started on their research. Sherlock had moved about quietly, somewhat randomly—making Sam wonder whether he was just trying to ‘tame’ his old home again—but most of the time he’d sat in the kitchen in front of a laptop. Once or twice Sam caught a sight of him just standing still somewhere, hands lifted in front of his face, their fingers touching and tapping lightly against each other. His gaze had been both scintillating and unseeing; the very picture of a man thinking a hundred miles per hour.

He could hear Sherlock moving about in the kitchen now and made sure to address him loud enough to be heard.

“How did your brother even manage to get hold of these?” Sam was awed by the eighth-century manuscript he was going through; trying to not even breathe close to it.

Silence met his question. Sam lifted his eyes from the pages and waited.

In a few seconds Sherlock appeared under the kitchen portal.

“You’ve met him,” was his only response.

Sam huffed a laugh. “Yeah.” He didn’t really need to press; his question was more of an expression
of amazement rather than one of bafflement. It seemed rude to turn his back on Sherlock now, though, so he asked another question. Thankfully, he had a few at his disposal.

“You two seem like pretty smart guys,” he said wryly. Sherlock’s right eyebrow rose. “You can’t figure this out by yourselves?” Sam went on. “Why do you need our help?” In his peripheral vision he saw Dean look up from Sam’s laptop.

The eyebrow continued to be the only thing that had moved on Sherlock. “There is too much data to go through,” he said, “and I’m not familiar enough with the subject to do it efficiently. You’re an expert. You’ve done this all your life.”

Sam could see his point. There was something sobering in the way the explanation was offered. There was simplicity and truth, and no ego.

“Besides,” Sherlock added, “there’s no time. Moran won’t stay away for long enough without growing suspicious about the lack of feed from here. The last time he lasted almost forty-eight hours, before he pulled that Speedy’s stunt. It’s already been twelve hours.”

“Is that your way of telling us to hurry the hell up?” Dean asked.

“I’m used to people being slow. But no; I know this could be very dangerous and I’d rather the margin of error was as narrow as possible. Take your time. But don’t dawdle.”

“Well, aren’t you sweet?” Dean told him, lips stretching for a purposefully fake smile. Sam continued to watch Sherlock, whose eyes returned to him, no retort to Dean given.

“We’ll need days,” Sam said quietly. “To make sure we’ve got everything right, and even then it might go wrong.”

“We don’t have days.”

“It might be worth going for plan B, then, because—”

“There isn’t a plan B.” The interruption was smooth, Sherlock’s deep voice asserting itself despite its volume being low. “This has gone on for too long. It needs to be over. I need it to be over.”

Sam sighed. “Look, man, I know you want to catch that guy, but this isn’t the kind of thing where you can bounce back. If it goes to hell, it’ll really go to hell. Like, ‘not being able to get back to your body’ kind of hell, or worse—literally going to hell.”

Sherlock made a step into the room, forehead furrowing. “Are you trying to talk me out of it now?”

Sam hesitated. He wasn’t really sure what he was trying to do. He’d read about astral projection before and had always been curious. It was something that could come in handy when the time came to shut the gates of Hell. The more they knew and the more tricks they had in their bag, the more it increased their hair-breadth slim chances of doing the whole thing and coming out alive, both of them. Moreover, he had the feeling that Sherlock would try and do it with or without their help. Having them on-board increased his hair-breadth slim chances of coming out alive.

Still, there was no harm in trying to knock some sense into him. “I’m just saying you need to know what you’re getting yourself into.”
“Fine,” Sherlock said. “Don’t you think it’d be easier for me to make an informed choice if you actually told me what I was getting myself into?” He looked pointedly over Sam’s shoulders to the table where all the books and notes were spread out.

“All right, we’ve got it,” Dean said, then gave Sam’s foot a light kick with his own. “Let’s do this.”

Sam kept his gaze on Sherlock for another moment then returned to work. He heard Sherlock walk back into the kitchen.

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It was late evening when they had a pretty decent overview on astral projections and a set of requirements as to how they could make it happen. Sam wanted to keep reading, not liking at all what he saw, but Dean shut a heavy book with unnecessary force and told Sam the time had come for all of them to have a chat.

John had come back during the day so the four of them gathered around the big table in the living room.

“First off,” Sam began, “we’re still not sure whether this will work.” When there was nothing but expectant silence to this overture, he continued. “The concept of astral projection is present in pretty much every religion and in a number of philosophical schools. There are variations of it, but everyone means pretty much the same: an out of body experience.”

“Can we get to the part where you don’t treat us like idiots?” Sherlock asked.

John was quick. “This must be so novel for you,” he said. “You should try and learn from the experience.” Sherlock turned rounded eyes to him, probably surprised by the sass. John looked back serenely.

Sam pressed on. There was a lot to cover and no time for pointless exchanges. “One of the major differences of the phenomenon is whether the projection is visible to the naked eye,” he said. “In general that kind of experience is associated with the person’s soul leaving their body and moving through another plane of reality.” Sam consulted his notes. “In the Western philosophies there’s the idea of the realm between Heaven and Earth.” His eyes went to Dean of their own accord, their quiet earlier discussion of whether there was such realm still playing on his mind with what possible implications it could have. “In the far East there’s more talk about the actual visualisation of the soul. Taoists in particular seem to have practised it.”

“So it’s real?” John asked. “It’s been done?”

Sam hesitated. “It looks like it…but it’s not that simple. All across the board this kind of thing goes hand in hand with spirituality. We’re talking meditation, years of practice, monk-like existence, you know the drill. It varies from teaching to teaching, but the basics are the same: you have to be some sort of evolved spiritual human being to be able to pull it off at will.”

“Well,” Sherlock said, the word containing more sass than all of John’s sentences earlier, “since I’ve only recently discovered I may have a soul I don’t think that’ll quite work for me.”

“Too bad, sunshine,” Dean said, “because it looks like that was your best bet.”

“Okay then, I’ll just go somewhere on top of a mountain and start meditating, shall I?”
“Oh, ha-ha!” Dean bore his eyes in Sherlock’s. “What we’re trying to tell you is that your best bet is
off, and what’s left is no good news at all.”

“What is it?” John asked quickly.

“Near death experience,” Sam told him plainly. John’s eyes seemed to freeze open. He moved them
to Sherlock. “You can’t do that,” he said.

“Can it be done?” Sherlock asked Sam.

“Of course it can be done,” Dean replied, irritated. “Doesn’t mean you should do it.”

“Have you done something like that?” Sherlock shot back. Dean drew himself up in his chair.

“Yeah,” he said reluctantly, then seemed to shake himself to engage in some courageous eye-contact
with Sherlock. “Yeah, I’ve done it. But it was because—It was for something pretty fucking
serious.”

“So is this.”

Dean’s smile made him look old. “Trust me, it isn’t.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” said Sherlock.

“No, you won’t!” Dean’s eyes crinkled with how ridiculous he found the idea that Sherlock could
make a sound judgement about any of this—or possibly much at all. “When I did it, it was to get
Sam’s soul back from Lucifer’s Cage, because Sam was walking around like a freaking robot, not
getting the difference between right and wrong and being a danger to himself, and everyone else.
This is nothing like that. This is about you going all macho on some dude you have a bone to pick
with.”

“That’s…not how it is,” Sherlock said, making Sam finally look up. There’d been a pained twang in
Sherlock’s tone, now visible in the line of his neck.

“I came across something that might be safer,” Sam interjected quickly. His solar plexus throbbed
after Dean’s comment as if a walnut was digging in it. Dean shot him a glance, then shook his head,
but said nothing. “It’s in the Japanese mythology,” Sam continued, busying himself with his notes.

“They talk about *ikisudama*. It’s basically the spirit of a person leaving their body to appear in front
of someone they hold grudge against.” Sam paused, arranging his thoughts. “But it sounds like it’s
the other way round here,” he added regretfully. “It’s got to be a pretty powerful grudge and I don’t
know your history with that guy, but it sounds like your main issue was with his boss. I can dig some
more into it, find how you could do it…”Sam trailed off, waiting for Sherlock’s input.

Sherlock considered him, unblinking, then his curls trembled with the shake of his head. “What
else?” he asked.

Sam rolled his neck slowly, feeling the words dig their heels in his throat. “We’re back to near death
experience,” he said. “From what I’ve found there’s a ritual that goes as far back as the fifteenth
century, but thankfully theosophists kept adding notes to it throughout the subsequent centuries,
including the twentieth. By the way we shouldn’t call it ‘astral projection’ but ‘etheric travel’—it’s
the correct term. It makes the distinction between the spirit moving through a different realm or even
showing up at a different point of time and the spirit leaving the body and appearing at a different
place. Looks like theosophists have practised etheric travel for centuries. Not sure why, didn’t have the time to read up on it, but I get the impression it’s a spiritual thing again; like a journey of exploration of some kind. It’s not surprising, really, seeing that the Jewish system of Kabbalah stems from theosophy and it’s one of the most—”

“All right, professor.” Dean knocked his knuckles on the table. “Cut to the chase.”

Sam shut his mouth, then opened it again, hurrying to the practical aspects of things. “Ideally, we’d get someone with experience to do it, but I don’t think even your brother will be able to help. You’ll have to be part of their community, or society, or whatever, for them to agree to do it for you, and I don’t think it’ll work quite as well if you brought someone against their will.” Sam took a breath. “Anyways, if you can wait, we can try to track down someone who knows more about it, see if we can persuade him to help.”

“Yeah, Sammy could give him the puppy eyes,” Dean said. Sam was still frowning, uncertain whether Dean was taking the piss, when John suddenly grinned, nodding, too. Sherlock frowned, too, looking from Sam to John to Dean. His eyes returned to Sam.

“Can you do it?” Sherlock asked him. Sam knew he wasn’t asking about him giving anyone his alleged puppy eyes. He ventured to respond, as non-committal as he could. “We’ll just have to make sure we get the ritual right and we’ve got a doctor here…” He looked at John questioningly.

John returned the look, but didn’t hurry with his reply. His face had lost any trace of mirth and his fingers were flexing lightly on top of the table. He followed Sam’s gaze to them and moved them to his lap.

“I’m not thrilled at the prospect of trying to kill you,” he told Sherlock at last.

“I should have asked you yesterday,” Sherlock murmured.

“Don’t even…” John shook his head. “Do you realize what you’re asking, what you’re doing? Is it that important? Is it worth it, Sherlock?”

Sam wanted to get up and leave the table despite his awareness how much the conversation concerned him and Dean as well. It didn’t make his staying feel any less like an intrusion on something private.

“I won’t go back in hiding and I’m done waiting,” Sherlock said. “And I won’t risk getting Moran arrested on some technicality that won’t hold in court. We’ll likely be dead within twenty-four hours after he’s free. Do you want me to wait for him to kill someone else so I can catch him? Because he will, John; sooner or later.”

Sam didn’t know if this was Sherlock manipulating John or being honest, but the argument seemed pretty sound if it were true. John studied Sherlock’s face, his own drawn tight. “Of course I don’t want that.”

“Neither do I,” Sherlock said. “That leaves me. Can you think of a way to get him to shoot to kill without actually killing me?”

For a moment it appeared as if John was actually going over some options, but his reply told Sam different.
“You know very well that if you couldn’t think of one, then I don’t even have a chance.”

Sherlock seemed as unprepared for John’s answer as Sam. John continued, head bowed but gaze still on Sherlock’s face. It made his upturned, widened eyes even more serious. “I want to know that you really can’t think of anything else.”

For a moment Sherlock seemed to move to peer at John from closer, then his eyes blazed. “You don’t trust me,” he stated.

John’s chin jutted to the left. “I’m not saying that. I just don’t want to find myself surprised again.”

Impatience rippled across Sherlock’s features. “You know how I work. I don’t like sharing in advance.”

“Okay, I know that. But this isn’t just a case. This isn’t some fancy robbery that you solve and have a big reveal about it later. This is your life, Sherlock.”

John’s eyes fell closed and he lifted his face heavenward. Sam didn’t need to be an expert in psychology to figure out how intertwined the whole thing was with John’s own life.

John exhaled slowly, then looked back to Sherlock. “I don’t want to know all the details, all right? I want you to tell me there isn’t any other way. That you’re not doing this to get a kick out of it or…or for some other reason that makes sense to your brain, but it’s actually completely mad and stupid.”

Sherlock sniffled; the corners of his lips tugged downward briefly. Sam still couldn’t even look at his mouth without feeling vaguely uncomfortable; it was one of the fullest, most sensual mouths he’d ever seen, Dean’s included. Just like with Dean it was disturbingly revealing about its owner’s mood, no matter what general attitude he exuded.

“John,” Sherlock said. “There is no other way.” He took a breath as if to continue, but remained silent, opting for an indefinite movement with his head instead. It seemed to communicate something to John, though, because the simple verbal reassurance was accepted. John looked at Sam.

“Okay,” he said. “What else do you need?”

“I need to make sure I’ve got the incantation right,” Sam said. Dean took over smoothly. “Then there’s the whole business with the binding object,” he said.

John frowned at Sam. “The binding object?”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “It’s a…It’s like something that kind of pulls back the soul to the body.” Sam shuffled in discomfort. They were getting to the part that had given the whole thing the reputation of being so dangerous, potentially deadly. He found himself echoing Dean’s initial assessment of it, in all its eloquence. “This is some seriously fucked up mojo. It’s your soul. It’s not supposed to leave your body, no matter what all those spiritual schools believe.” Sam hesitated, the urge to go on a tangent in conflict with wanting to avoid being chastised again for getting carried away.

“In everything I’ve ever read about the human soul, there’s always the suggestion that it’s dangerous for it to leave the body, because we’ve not…evolved to a world where evil doesn’t exist. To be honest, I don’t know whether we ever will, the human kind.” He added the last more quietly, looking at the edge of the table. “We need our morals and they’re tied to our soul. But it’s not even that; it’s how fragile the spirit is. It could be captured and tortured and used for evil, by evil. It’s kind of…lost
on its own.”

Sam lifted his eyes to find everyone’s gaze at him. He shuffled, embarrassed, feeling Dean’s focus particularly burning. He took a breath and rounded off, focusing on John again. “Basically when the soul, or the spirit, or whatever you want to call it leaves the body, chances are it won’t go back. Some folk do practice in meditation for years before they have control over the process.”

The paling lines around John’s mouth told Sam his words were really getting through to him. Sam hurried to give him the rest. “That’s why there’s the binding ritual. There are two incantations: one that kind of opens the portal to the…ether, and makes the projection happen, the other binds the soul to an object so it can return safely.”

“It’s the way it works with all spirits and ghosts,” Dean said. “They can’t just go around like free agents, they need to be bound to something.” He shook his head to himself. “Makes them damn hard to get rid of sometimes,” he muttered.

Sam saw John was about to speak, but cut in first, having found an opening in Dean’s words. There were a couple of questions he had for Sherlock.

“How do you know that this Moran guy will want to shoot you?” he asked. “If he’s read about it, he knows it won’t do any good until he finds the object your ‘ghost’ is bound to and salt and burn it.”

Sherlock took a moment to reply, his glinting eyes giving Sam the odd impression that he was measuring him up as deserving full disclosure.

“He doesn’t want to dispose of my ‘ghost’, he said. “He wants to capture it. We believe he’s found a spell of sorts that will turn the salt he’ll shoot into a trap. You can say it’s another form of binding. I suppose you know about this more than I do.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of it,” Sam said at the same time with Dean’s, “He wants to control you? Why?”

“In part because it could be very useful to have someone invisible and for all intents and purposes impossible to kill by anyone but him.” Sherlock moved his eyes to Sam. “And I imagine he probably wants to make my ‘ghost’ hurt John. It’s Moran’s idea of revenge. I must say it’s got its merits.”

Silence settled in the room for a long moment. Sherlock was the first to break it by taking a breath accompanied with an upper body stretch. “What kind of an object will I need?” he asked.

“It works best with something important to you,” Dean said.

“Oh, obviously.”

Dean gave Sherlock a quick glare, then continued. “Something you’ve kept on you a lot or something that has sentimental value.” Dean looked at Sam; Sam knew Dean was thinking about Bobby and his flask, because so was Sam.

Sherlock caught John’s surreptitious glance. He rolled his eyes and slowly pushed himself up on his feet. “I know you’re thinking it,” he told John. “You might as well say it.”

John got up, too, spreading his arms. “Well, it’s true.”

“I know it’s true, that’s why I don’t see why you need to tiptoe around it.”
Dean was on his feet as well, turning to Sherlock. “What’s true? What are you talking about?”

“I don’t form sentimental attachments to objects,” he told Dean, tone bored.

“Wow, I’m shocked,” Dean retorted.

“I don’t see the point. It’s objects.” Sherlock made a grimace of dismissal.

Dean shook his head. “It’s not about the object, you get that, right? It’s about what the object represents. A happy memory, or a special person, or a gift from someone—”

His voice broke at the last word, the implications of what he was saying hitting him mid-flight. His eyes jumped to Sam, then away. Sam moved his own to Sherlock, his heart clenched in his chest the same way it had done three years ago, when he’d watched Dean put into a trashcan the amulet Sam had given him when they were children, the amulet Dean hadn’t taken off once for decades. Three years. Sam definitely understood the power of objects, manifested even in their absence on someone’s chest.

Sherlock had noticed something was off, but didn’t comment, turning to John. “What do you think?” he asked. “Anything you care to nominate?”

“It’s not my place to do it, Sherlock,” John said with some mild confusion. “You’re the one who should know best.”

Sherlock looked uncomfortable as he took a step closer to John. “I should,” he told him quietly, gaze trailing downward, before meeting John’s again. “But maybe I don’t. You’re better at…this.”

John shuffled closer, too, shaking his head in lack of understanding. Sherlock pursed his lips for a second in a gesture that betrayed frustration and awkwardness. “There might be something important to me,” he said. “But maybe I don’t realize it.”

It was impossible to describe John’s face when the words sank in. Okay, there was definitely fondness, of epic proportions. Sam himself filed the episode away for later inspection; it was more revelatory about the brilliant Sherlock Holmes than half the press reports he’d read.

“Oh, John,” John said. “Okay.” He gave Sherlock a small, reassuring smile. “We’ll think of something.”

***

The hours kept rolling on, all players making preparations for the big ‘event’ in plain sight or behind the scenes. It brought home to Sam how often he and Dean worked in isolation, with little to no support at all. The support they did get was great, of course, or at least had been while most of their friends were still around. (They needed new friends badly, but that was like asking people to sign their own death warrants.) But no matter what Bobby had been able to conjure up for them, his help was insufficient by default, simply because their enemies were really strong. Then there was the kind of help that was tricky, their ally powerful and trusted but also unpredictable—Castiel fitted in with Sam and Dean like a third Winchester, if only for how he screwed up because of his poor judgement, often making the wrong call while thinking he was doing the right thing.

And sometimes the help they got wasn’t help at all; it was doom, literally. But that wasn’t on them. That was all on Sam. Ruby was all on Sam.
Sam went on with his research, the world around him fading into oddly comforting white noise. Some food appeared by his elbow and he had a cold beer, then later he made himself a coffee, entirely oblivious about what time it was. It was night time; that was all he knew. Sam suspected he should be more wound-up, more tuned in to reality, what with the last few days being a rollercoaster of crazy events with little break. But he wasn’t—there was some numbness in him and he felt as if he’d found the shimmering silver cord that held his own soul tied to his body, so he stuck to his books and notes and laptop. There was safety and focus in the texts and drawings, familiarity offered in a cocoon.

Dean showed up by his side at some point, tapping him on the arm. “Sammy, I want to catch some shut-eye.”

Sam hummed, head bowing back to the book, but Dean spoke again.

“Listen…I think we should move to that place in the basement or wherever it is.” Sam lifted his head, the numbness hitting harder. Dean pulled out a chair and sat down, shifting closer to Sam across the table.

“I’m not feeling comfortable sleeping there another night,” he said, eyes going to Sherlock, “with him here on the couch.” He’d given a tiny nod to Sherlock’s figure in the leather chair, before returning his gaze to Sam in hesitant exploration. “I mean it used to be his bedroom, right?”

“Yeah, um.” Sam cleared his throat. “Yeah, it was,” he said quietly. “You’re right.”

Dean nodded, then slowly got up. “I’ll go talk to John, see if I can get him to open downstairs and help me move your—our stuff.”

“Sure.”

Sam went back to his books. He was aware of John appearing near-by, hovering maybe, but Sam kept his eyes trained on the pages, already engrossed in the minute differences between the two binding rituals they’d found. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but next thing he knew Sherlock had stopped by the table, his presence silent and impossible to ignore, but not impatient or intrusive. Sam tore himself away from his notes and looked up in question.

“Do you have any concerns about the ritual?” Sherlock asked, keeping his voice low.

Sam was thrown off for a moment, before shaking his head. “No,” he said. “At least not more than usual,” he corrected himself. “It’s—I like being prepared, that’s all. If I’ve got the chance I just go over the same thing time and time again, just in case.”

“In case of what?”

Sam shrugged, realizing how much of a nerd he was going to sound again. “I don’t know. Anything I might have missed, I guess. A detail…Details are important.”

“I agree.”

Their eyes met. “Any details you aren’t sure about?” Sherlock asked in a beat.

Sam hesitated. He couldn’t see Dean or John, and he didn’t know why that mattered, but he still
found himself keeping his own voice down when he replied. “The object,” he said without elaborating. Evidently, it wasn’t necessary—Sherlock put his hands in his trousers pockets and nodded. “It should do the job fine,” he said.

“There’s no place for should here, you know,” Sam told him. “If it doesn’t work, you probably won’t be able to get back in your body.”

“What then?”

Sam spread his palms over the table. “I don’t know. It won’t be anything good, though.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Yeah, I can. How does turning into an angry evil spirit sound?”

Sherlock eyed him and suddenly sighed. “You’ll just have to find a way for that not to happen,” he said.

Sam gave out a small snort. “You seem to be placing a lot of trust in us. We’re not geniuses, and this isn’t as simple as...” Sam’s hand made a circular motion in the air to encompass their surroundings. “The material world. Sometimes you’re just helpless.”

“You underestimate yourself, Mr Winchester.”

“Sam.”


Sam found his jaw dropping metaphorically at the discovery that there was more than a grain of truth in how much trust Sherlock did put in them.

He roamed Sherlock’s features quickly, but couldn’t get a read on the guy. Was he nervous? Was he being at least a bit sarcastic? Was he really crazy reckless? Since he’d met him Sam had been struck over and over again with how vivid Sherlock’s face was, how boldly, immodestly drawn; from time to time it transmitted messages that left no doubt about Sherlock’s thoughts on something, but more often than not, especially around Sam, his expression was just blank. Yet the last thing Sam would have called him was disengaged. It was a startling paradox, fuelling Sam’s conviction that he was in the presence of a truly unique individual.

“Look, Sherlock,” he began, then heard the name ring in his voice. “Is that all right?” he asked. “Can I call you Sherlock?”

“Please.”

“Okay, thanks. Look, I’d rather we didn’t have to think of something.” Sam let an eyebrow rise dryly. “You should try and be more invested in your own survival, man.”

“I am,” Sherlock said. When Sam didn’t offer a reply Sherlock shuffled, taking his hands out of his pockets.

“The watch was a gift from someone from my University days,” he said. “I didn’t finish my studies
and we haven’t really kept in touch lately, but it’s not a…” Sherlock ran his fingers through his hair; on the way out his hand hovered in the air for a second, the wrist loose. It flicked awkwardly.
“Victor, the person who gave me the watch, was a friend. You’ve probably realized that I don’t have many of those.”

Sam couldn’t help himself, knowing full well he was going into the deep end. “Honestly? I thought you’d choose a gift from John,” he said. “If you’ll be going for something from a friend…”

Sherlock looked down to him, his eyes sharp but the gesture not. He didn’t reply for a few seconds, making Sam squirm in anticipation and in anxiety that he’d given away something of his unbeknownst to himself. He couldn’t imagine how John lived a normal life with this guy; how he wasn’t clasped in the claws of constant tension from being too self-conscious too often.

“I’ve never really treasured a particular gift from John,” Sherlock said. Sam was taken aback by the harshness of the statement. It must have shown, because Sherlock shook his head lightly, for once concern passing through his features. “John is here,” he said in what was evidently an attempt to explain himself. He then ran his hand through his hair again, repeating the dancing wrist performance. “He is in my life now.”

“What about before? While you were gone this last year?”

“I was always coming back.” Sherlock had two small lines between his eyebrows, his puzzlement about what was there that Sam didn’t understand clear. “John is part of my life now,” he repeated. “Why would I treasure gifts from someone who is my friend now?” The frustration was back in his voice; or was it irritation? It didn’t sound like a real question, except…

Except for how it sounded like something Sherlock might be asking himself, not in search of an actual answer but rather in expression of his anxiety that he was missing something important.

Sam thought about himself and Dean spending all their time together, thought about the amulet that Dean had nevertheless treasured, but had still thrown away when he’d felt betrayed by Sam, resigned about his life in general.

Sam nodded at Sherlock, sensing for the first time the other man’s discomfort as the recipient of scrutiny. “Yeah,” Sam said. “I see your point.”

Surprise shone in Sherlock’s eyes, then he drew himself up to his full height and nodded back.

***

Maybe it was a noise that startled Sam or maybe it was something in his head, but he realized he’d dozed off. He looked around an empty room engulfed in silence. He straightened up sluggishly and closed the laptop lid carefully, then got up and dragged his feet in the direction of his bedroom.

He stopped at the door, hand on the handle, when he noticed a thin sliver of light along the edge of the door at the bottom. Sam’s eyes moved over it a few times, left to right, as if they were trying to continue reading like they’d done for endless hours. He felt something sag over him, making him lean forward and almost press his forehead to the door.

He let go of the handle, swallowed hard and left as quietly as he could for the basement flat.
Time to suspend your disbelief! I hope this works.

Also, heads up about a ‘magic fingers’ reference.;) You can find an awesome visual of Dean & the magic fingers here.

To say that John was feeling uneasy would be a terrible understatement.

Sherlock’s plan was being surely put in place and at every turn John could spot potential points of failure. Starting with the bloody watch, of course, about which John had the sort of bad feeling that backed him into a wretched corner. He couldn’t trust his instincts and he had the nagging suspicion that his judgement was compromised by simple, petty jealousy.

John had had a suggestion for a binding object as soon as he’d stopped to actually ponder the matter. He’d hesitated sharing it with Sherlock for one moment, one moment only, but it was enough for Sherlock to put forward his own suggestion. John had had Sherlock’s violin in mind. The moment of hesitation was because John had wondered whether the violin actually meant something personal to Sherlock or he merely appreciated it as an exquisite instrument with an excellent sound. In fact, John was just about to simply ask, when Sherlock opened his mouth and said that if a gift from someone close, like a friend, was what worked, then he supposed he had something like that. For a moment John was rendered speechless, touched that Sherlock would choose a gift from him…

And then Sherlock produced the watch from Victor. Whoever the hell Victor was, because what kind of a friend of Sherlock’s was one John had never heard of? Then again, it looked like Sherlock didn’t quite confide in John so wholly, so just because John hadn’t heard about the man didn’t mean he wasn’t someone special for Sherlock. Sherlock was suggesting a gift from that person after all. True, he was gazing down at John with that expression of his that made John want to hold his hand and look both ways next time they crossed the street, but what was John supposed to actually do? There was no way to ask the question, “Are you sure this is special enough for you?” without exposing himself as an insecure, possessive friend who couldn’t accept Sherlock could value a gift from another friend more. Sherlock had kept looking at him with a lingering echo of his earlier endearing admission about his difficulties with his own emotional experiences. He’d taken a step towards facing those emotional experiences; he’d made a choice that John had to respect. Any other object John might have found it his place to question but not this. So he nodded his approval, adding, “Good choice,” which was followed by a cough, because apparently his throat hated him for lying.

But now the ritual was looming, so was John’s guilt that he’d lost his sense of perspective. If this object didn’t hold strong importance for Sherlock it could cost him his soul. It wasn’t the time for John to be skittish, but he was still unable to address the issue with Sherlock. He resolved to talk to Sam. The thought immediately made him feel a bit better—something he needed, because the other aspects of the plan were making him feel bad enough.

First, there was luring Moran into believing his time had come. Mycroft took care of that by having a
semi-scripted conversation with Sam over the phone, during which Sam told him he’d finally seen Sherlock’s ghost in the house over the last couple of nights. Sam added that the ghost had appeared in front of the fireplace for only a number of seconds, flickering in and out of existence and looking disoriented. (Apparently, leaving Moran uncertain and on edge was a good move, because it was more likely to make him shoot first, ask questions later.) Mycroft still insisted he didn’t know what Sam was talking about, upon which they proceeded to have a completely improvised row on truths and lies and manipulations. Initially Sam had seemed a touch uncomfortable ‘acting’, but John thought he’d quite gotten into his performance during his heated exchange with Mycroft.

John had some serious doubts about whether Moran would actually buy it and show up, ready to shoot. Sherlock waved off John’s concerns by literally waving him off, but at least Mycroft was very confident on that part of the plan. There was some small reassurance in what Sam and Sherlock talked about, too: that this scenario had the bonus of providing an explanation for the prolonged lack of feed from the flat—apparently it wasn’t unheard of that ghosts could affect electronic devices—so hopefully it loaned further credibility to the story.

Even if Moran did come, there was still the question about the witnesses to his supposed murder attempt on Sherlock—the whole point of the exercise. Apparently Moran had rented a flat in the building right across the street from 221B. He’d been using it as his home from home in his growing obsession with Sherlock Holmes’s ghost. This was where Greg Lestrade came in: camped there with another officer on what could turn out to be six-hour-long stake out, depending on when Moran showed up. (In their fake conversation Sam told Mycroft Sherlock had made an appearance both times close to midnight.) Naturally the other officer wasn’t aware that he was about to witness a guy trying to kill a ghost; he was only given the explicit instruction to wait until after their target had shot.

John could see a great danger of discovery for Greg and couldn’t understand why Sherlock wasn’t at least a bit on the alert about it, too. He asked him only to be told to use his brain; when John finally snapped at that Sherlock deigned to explain that if someone intended to shoot at anyone from across the street, they didn’t go in and light up their lair like a Christmas tree for all the world to see. ‘Obviously’ Moran was going to employ great stealth in his actions, not taking random strolls around his pitch black living room, peeping behind the furniture, but settling by the window, taking aim and waiting for his prey, like the experienced hunter he apparently was.

At the word, John gave a start, eyes instantly trying to locate Sam.

“Not that kind of hunter,” Sherlock told him with what John felt was poorly restrained bitchiness. “The word still has its traditional meaning for the rest of us.”

At least John wasn’t the only one uncomfortable with this part of the plan, although in this case the consolation was rather dubious. One had a different cause for anxiety when Mycroft Holmes wasn’t sure about something. There’d been an argument between Greg and Mycroft, with Mycroft reminding Greg that Moran was very skilled at hand combat and generally a dangerous adversary. From what John gathered there’d been a prior conversation about the necessity of Greg to make the arrest in person. Greg responded to Mycroft’s reminder by telling him that he was going to have some solid back up in his colleague, that he would also be in possession of a handgun and last but not least that he was perfectly competent in making risk assessments and acting accordingly. He didn’t say it in so many words—or so politely for that matter—but that was the zest. He told Mycroft to stick to his part of the plan, adding that he hoped Mycroft had been good enough to share the plan with everybody at least this time. It was more than obvious that Greg was cross with Mycroft, but John really had other things to occupy his mind than to unravel his friends’ relationships.

Such as what use it would be to arrest a guy who’d fired a round of rock salt at someone.
When John asked that question everyone finally stopped whatever they were doing and looked at Sherlock.

Sherlock exchanged the briefest of glances with his brother, then turned to John.

“One cartridge of rock salt, one of good old-fashioned gunpowder,” he said. “There’ll be traces of it all over our living room courtesy of Moran ‘missing his target’.”

“Why would he load gunpowder?” Dean asked. “Nothing but rock salt works on a ghost.”

Sherlock’s pause went on for so long that John began getting anxious that he simply wouldn’t answer. When Sherlock finally did, it was to offer nothing in a manner of new information, while providing a perfect example about his typical, currently infuriating habit of keeping his cards close to his chest.

“He’ll have his reasons,” Sherlock said.

Sam frowned at him, concern plainly written over his features for the first time since they’d agreed to do the astral projection thing.

“What reasons?” Dean insisted. Sherlock’s audible ‘tsk’ sound accompanying his eye roll demonstrated his displeasure at the harassment to his person. Dean just watched him, then his chin sharply jutted to the left.

“It’s your party,” he said. His finger almost poked Sherlock in the chest, making Sherlock look down at it with a comical mixture of alarm and confusion. “Just make sure you get your ass back,” Dean told him, “because you’re not dying on us for what turns out to be some stupid joke.” By the end of the sentence the finger had migrated north right under Sherlock’s nose.

John wasn’t ready to let it go so easily and pressed Sherlock when he caught him on his own in the kitchen. Sherlock began giving him the same vague answer, but John wasn’t having any of it.

“No, Sherlock…There’s something you’re not telling me. What is it?”

At least he wasn’t treated like nuisance. Sherlock stepped closer, reminding John that their lack of personal space had been a subject to a comment or two in the past.

“John, I know it’s bad timing, but I need you to trust me.”

“Trust you?” Both of John’s eyebrows crawled up. “You’re right about the timing. It’s really, really bad.”

Sherlock’s lips pursed in fleeting regret, but his face was resolute. “I know. I still think it’s better to go through this step by step. Once we get Moran, we’ll talk.”

“If we get Moran,” John said. “I don’t like this, Sherlock,” he continued in urgent whisper, tugging Sherlock deeper into the kitchen. “There are too many things that could go wrong and——”

“Nothing will go wrong,” Sherlock interrupted him. John shook his head. Sherlock huffed, impatient, but eyes began to turn pleading. “As long as the ritual works, everything will go according to plan.”
The ritual. The wobbliest point, of course. John couldn’t tell how Sherlock felt about it. On one hand he seemed as unaffected as he usually did; on the other, he was out of his depth so maybe he was simply clueless about the actual level of danger. Or refusing to acknowledge Sam and Dean’s warnings? While John had put it down to vanity when he thought he’d sensed some insecurity in Sherlock about Sam—more precisely about Sam’s status as John’s friend and flatmate—it was still plausible that Sherlock wouldn’t be all too keen to bask in having to rely on Sam’s expertise. As for John, despite his recent close acquaintance with the supernatural, he was also totally out of his depth; so much so that he didn’t even know what things he should worry about when it came to the ritual, so he worried about everything.

Well, a burden shared was a burden halved.

Sam was leaning on his shoulder against the wall by the window, gazing out. Dean mirrored his posture across from him, his eyes on Sam. It looked like they had stopped talking more than a mere moment ago. Sam cut a surprisingly desolate figure despite his brother’s close presence and the hustle and bustle in the flat—Mrs Hudson had joined their ranks with some food that smelled delicious.

“So, erm…you all set?” John asked. It was already close to eight o’clock.

Sam looked away from the riveting sight of urban street traffic, considering his answer.

“As much as we could be under the circumstances,” he said at last.

John could feel the pellets of tension hit his body again. “That doesn’t sound very reassuring.”

Sam pulled a complicated little face. “I don’t know what to tell you, man,” he said. “This isn’t like that.” He pointed at the portable medical equipment that was set by the dining room table, ready for John to use it when the time came. Funny enough, it’d been one of the very few things about which John hadn’t felt uncertain. It spoke volumes about the new levels of insanity his life had reached that stopping Sherlock’s heart seemed like one of the less risky things to do in life.

John looked back to Sam to find Sam’s eyes searching and somewhat plaintive.

“It’s going to be okay,” Sam said. “I’m sure about the symbols and the incantations for both rituals, and that’s the bit you want to get right.”

John nodded, his thoughts going to the watch. “Listen, about that binding object…”

“What about it?” Dean asked quickly, face growing stern. “Because he’s got to be sure. There’s no place for ifs and buts here.”

John opened his mouth, but found himself stranded in his own concerns.

“He was right, you know,” he said after a beat. “Sherlock. When he said he didn’t form sentimental attachments to objects, at least not with that kind of strength.” John scratched his forehead with his index finger, squinting up at Sam. “His sentimental attachments to humans have been even…I don’t know. They’re rare, it’s true. So if he says this watch is a gift from an actual friend and if he’s chosen it as his object, then we just have to trust him.”

Sam’s response was delayed so much that John was beginning to wonder whether he shouldn’t walk
away, feeling a prick of discomfort at the prospect of doing it but even a bigger one at staying. He made a motion to turn when Sam spoke. “What would you have chosen?”

“Um…His violin, I think,” John said, nodding. He suddenly grinned at a particularly visual memory: warm and terribly confusing in how the sting of loss appeared, then instantly melted away as the realization that Sherlock was here, alive, hit again. “He used to caress it a lot,” John told Sam.

“Well, that’s not creepy at all,” Dean said.

“Said the man with the ‘magic fingers’ addiction,” Sam threw back.

“I don’t have an addiction.” Dean looked indignant. Sam’s eyebrows raised a bit. “It’s not the same thing,” Dean added. Sam still didn’t reply, a comfortable and slightly patronizing small grin on his lips. “Shut up,” Dean muttered, scowling.

Sam shook his head at him, then turned to John. His face grew serious. “Get the violin. Better safe than sorry.”

John nodded, already wondering whether he should come clean to Sherlock about his watch-related doubts or sneak in the violin behind his back. He was sure Mycroft could accomplish some exemplary sneaking in.

“John.”

John’s eyes re-focused on Sam, expectant. Sam shifted his weight forward, towering over him. It was comforting; Sam was like a sturdy, high pole to which John could mentally tie himself for a bit, because he felt like he might disintegrate with his worries tugging at him from all directions.

“It’s going to be okay,” Sam repeated, face earnest and determined. His lips gave a small twitch. “I’m not having a real freaking ghost on my hands after all the months of chasing a fake one.”

***

Sherlock was lying on his back on the floor in the living room and if it wasn’t for the fact that he was wearing his coat it would have looked like he’d just been overtaken by the need to think and dropped horizontal to do it in peace at the first available flat surface. The room was lit only by the landing light streaming through the open door and the small lamp behind John’s armchair by the kitchen portal. The lamp provided just about enough light to illuminate the stage awaiting Sherlock’s apparition—right in front of the fireplace. The spot was perfectly aligned with Moran’s flat’s window across the street. It was lucky that October had been exceptionally nice and balmy—it meant that Moran shouldn’t have found anything suspicious in discovering the view into 221B’s living room was even better, courtesy to the open window. The other window, the one in the second part of the room, was closed, the curtains drawn. This was their ‘backstage’; this was where Sherlock, John, Sam and Dean were gathered now, ready to start the ritual. They’d just gotten a message telling them Moran was waiting, shotgun in hand. John was torn between the relief of having some of his fears put at ease—obviously Moran had taken the bait and at least so far he hadn’t discovered Lestrade—with the chill of awareness that he was about to empty a syringe in Sherlock’s bloodstream; the content of which would effectively shut down his vital signs.

There were some papers and books on the floor around Sam who was sitting back on his haunches at Sherlock’s feet. An elliptically shaped large bowl made of strangely scented wood was placed at Sherlock’s other end, right above his head; there were many unrecognizable symbols etched on its
bottom. The violin was lying in its box innocuously on the dining room table behind John, who was crouching on the ground near Sherlock’s head. Mycroft had sent the instrument in a plain square box, together with a few other personal items for Sherlock. (Evidently it was important that should Sherlock die, he was to do it in a clean shirt.) Sherlock had raised an eyebrow at the sight of the violin, fingers tracing the box’s contour as he murmured, “Mycroft is getting sentimental.”

Sam cleared his throat, drawing John’s eyes to him. “Okay,” he said. “Ready when you are.”

John looked at his lost and found best friend and the thought caught up with him after all, despite the tremendous effort he’d put to keep it at bay for exactly this moment. Had he barely just found Sherlock only to lose him again?

“John.” Sherlock had turned his head to him. From the angle John could see the fans of his long, thin, delicate eyelashes; beneath them a pair of cool, unafraid eyes met his. There was no bravery in them, either. There was focus and clarity, but underneath them there was trust and something akin to invitation. John thought, stupidly, that he still hadn’t seen the real, staggering blue-green of Sherlock’s irises—even since he’d come back, bright broad daylight hadn’t touched Sherlock’s eyes.

“Are you ready?” John asked.

“Yes.”

John looked at Sam, stupidly telling him for the third time tonight, “Three minutes, at the most.”

Sam nodded repeatedly and seriously like he had done the previous two times.

John got on with it, Sherlock’s eyes not leaving his face the whole time, until they closed. The frantic beep declaring the fight of Sherlock’s heart cut out abruptly, the silence signalling defeat and making John’s heart skip a long beat in horrible imitation of the real thing.

Then there was only Sam’s quiet voice and Dean’s loud breathing.

***

It was Dean who saw it first, touching Sam’s shoulder to draw his attention to it. Sam’s eyes were on the words, examining each of them again as if they’d tell him whether he’d served them right. John’s eyes were on Sherlock’s face, but Dean…Dean had watched the space in front of the fireplace. Now the three of them were staring at the silent apparition of Sherlock Holmes’s spirit.

Sam hadn’t shared one particular fear of his with anyone, mostly because it’d been completely irrational. He’d worried about Sherlock’s soul snapping and going mad on the spot. Turning wild or evil, unable to bear being separated from its vessel by force and thrown into God knew what boundless, terrifying world. Maybe that might happen eventually, but at least it wasn’t happening straight away. Sherlock’s apparition just floated in the air, coloured in a bluish hue; there was a light but unmistakeable transparency to him. He’d appeared with his back to them and was now rotating counter-clockwise. Sam realized he was holding his breath, which maybe explained why Sherlock’s motions seemed much slower than what they would have been if he was corporeal. There was great fluidity in the motions, too; together with his eerily blank gaze that seemed to go right through them, it rounded off an image that was the very epitome of a spectrum not of this world as the cinema industry would depict it.

There was nothing film-like in the loud shot that thundered in the living room.
For a second no one moved, then the smell of gun powder hit Sam. He grabbed the sheet of paper that had waited by his right leg all along. Moran had been very quick which earned them most of Sherlock’s three minutes back. Dean and John melted into the background as Sam began reading the incantation that was supposed to bring Sherlock back to his body. It was short and extremely difficult, most of the words Latin but for some Sam wasn’t sure about their origin. If he hadn’t repeated it out loud close to thirty times a mere hour ago, his tongue would have definitely tripped over a syllable. As it was he finished quickly, his reading smooth, then looked at Sherlock’s body.

It didn’t stir. Sam waited, time passing and curving to the point of utter uncertainty about whether the wait was unreasonably brief or frighteningly long.

“What’s going on?” John whispered harshly. His eyes were on Sherlock’s apparition that had stopped and was now facing them, gaze fixed straight ahead on the wall, expression still blank.

Sam’s throat was drying up rapidly. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Sammy?” Dean breathed right behind him next to his left ear. Sam looked over the text in his lap, fingers gripping the page to lift it closer to his eyes. “I don’t know,” he repeated, eyes quickly skimming over the words. “That’s the incantation.”

“You sure you read it right?” Dean asked. He’d stood up and was now watching Sherlock’s apparition.

“Yeah,” Sam replied immediately, looking up to him, helpless. “I’m sure.”

“Well, read it again!”

“No, it’s got to be once.” Sam’s hands were beginning to tremble; he dragged his fingers upward on his thighs, focusing on the friction. He knew it had to be once, something about the object being fixed in time and space.

“Sam,” John said, voice terse. “He doesn’t have much time. Two minutes, ten seconds.” His gaze on Sam felt like gravity quadrupled. Sam took a deep breath, hands running through his hair and bunching into fists. He breathed out, mind ablaze. He knew it wasn’t the ritual. He knew it wasn’t the incantation. It was what his damn gut feeling had been whispering about all along.

“Get the violin,” he told John. It was as if John had waited for an order—he sprang to his feet and in a few seconds was back in his previous position, the instrument in hand.

“Take out the watch and place the violin over the bowl,” Sam said quickly, heart beginning to hammer in his chest. This was where their lack of time to prepare struck back with a vengeance—he didn’t have a clue whether it was even possible to repeat the incantation with another object.

“Sam, you’d better hurry!” Dean said, warning enough in his voice to make Sam look up to him then to Sherlock.

He was able to see it immediately. Like a piece of paper that had been licked by fire, Sherlock’s outline was beginning to turn dark.

“What’s happening to him?” John asked. Sam met his frightened eyes in a flash, then fumbled for the piece of paper that had fallen from his fingers.
“I don’t know, man,” Dean replied, voice going low. “But it can’t be good, it’s spreading, too. Sam, come on, do it.”

Sam began reading, voice rising to counteract the approaching sound of police sirens. By the time he finished, the cars had arrived, the street filling with voices and general noises of commotion. Sam caught the coattail of the thought that they didn’t even know whether the police was here to arrest Sebastian Moran or because of something else, something bad that had happened on the other end, too.

He didn’t dare blinking as he watched Sherlock’s apparition, his eyes immediately beginning to burn, but he had to be sure…

He was! It was real! Sam felt like he was the one floating—the darkening had stopped invading, retreating quickly back to the edges of Sherlock’s outline, where it stopped. For a couple of seconds it didn’t spread, but didn’t clear, either. Sam’s heart begun to sink again, mind a whirlwind of questions. Then he had to blink again.

“It’s not working,” John uttered. “Jesus, it’s not working!”

Sherlock’s apparition remained still, almost like an actual projection of a giant picture; a picture whose edges resumed turning black by invisible flames that ate more and more territory.

“Sam!” Dean growled, taking a step forward. “Damn it,” he hissed and reached to his back, hand diving under his shirt and pulling out a handgun.

“What’re you doing?” John asked. Dean’s jaw twitched; his eyes weren’t leaving Sherlock’s apparition.

“I can’t let him roam around,” he said, voice gruff but unsteady. “Silver bullet, another incantation.”

“You searched for ways to kill him?” John sounded shocked with a hint of disgusted.

“Of course I searched for ways to kill him!” Dean glared down at John over his shoulder. “That’s what I do. I’m sorry!” The apology was delivered more like a curse, but the words rang genuine, albeit not opening space for negotiations.

“You can’t—” John began, when Dean interrupted him, squinting at Sherlock’s apparition, gun rising. “Yes, I can,” he said. “But I won’t, not just yet. Sam, tell me you’ve got something, man, because I’d much rather punch this son of a bitch in the face for real when he wakes up.”

Sam had nothing. It was the object—he was so sure of it he could bet his life on it. The violin wasn’t strong enough and there was nothing stronger. Most of Sherlock’s possessions weren’t here anyway, but Sam seriously doubted there was anything among them that would do the trick. Sherlock had said it himself—he didn’t form this kind of attachments. He didn’t form attachments, full stop. ‘The most solitary man,’ John had called him. Ironic, coming from the only man to whom Sherlock had formed an attachment; one into which he seemed to have poured all—

Sam’s vision literally swam; his jaw snapped open.

“You have to do it,” he shot at John.
“What?” Dean asked, high-pitched, while John was busy staring back at Sam, face drawn, fierce and ashen.

“Will it work?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

Their eye contact was stretching between reality’s vicious hands, but they still held it, refusing to have it snapped until they had finished their silent exchange.

John licked his lips. “What do I have to do?”

“Take the violin away.” Sam was improvising completely at this point. He shook his hair out of his face resolutely. “Sit behind his head and put your hands in the bowl. Keep them there whatever happens. Tell me if something doesn’t feel right, and I don’t know, just…focus.”

By the time Sam had finished his instructions John had already followed the first part of them. His eyes rested for a moment on Sherlock’s statue like face, then he lifted them to Sam and nodded.

Sam nodded, too, held his breath and John’s eyes for another two seconds, then started reading.

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John managed to tune out the noises that were pouring in through the open window, managed to drown his fear of losing Sherlock again. The hardest thing was to stomp on his powerful instinct to try and revive Sherlock the only way he knew how. He didn’t understand what had to happen, nor did he know what to expect. He had no idea how he was supposed to focus, on what. He took a breath and closed his eyes, tuning in to the one thing he knew and had to trust: Sam’s voice.

The incantation was short and still sounded utterly foreign, despite the fact that John was hearing it for the third time now. As soon as Sam said the last word John opened his eyes and looked around, desperately hoping for anything different, any change to show him that something had worked. Somehow he imagined that once he was bound to Sherlock’s soul, whatever that meant, Sherlock would be there, too, so he’d figure out what needed to be done. John just had to get to him. Please, God, let me get to him, please…

Nothing was happening.

“Sam?” John asked, voice torn. He didn’t even have to check his watch anymore. Sherlock had less than thirty seconds left, more like twenty.

Sam was looking at him from Sherlock’s other end, eyes like a whirlwind of thought, fear and barely blossoming regret. A motion from Dean drew John’s attention to him. Dean had lifted his gun, pointed it at Sherlock’s spirit, and Jesus Christ, Sherlock was barely recognizable now, most of him consumed by the thick charcoal blackness that had started from his edges.

“I have to do it, Sam.” Dean’s voice was throaty, quarrelsome. John felt his face tingling and for a split second there was the giddiness of hope that the ritual was working, before he realized that real panic was catching up with him at last. His gaze shot to Sam. Sam was biting his bottom and upper lips in turns, breathing hard, but his eyes…His eyes were sharp, on their own. Hooked on something.

Sam looked at the bowl for a split second—John’s hands were still there, he hadn’t even thought of
moving them—then lifted the paper again. He whipped his head up to Dean. “Dean, don’t shoot,” then looked back to John, eyes frantic. “You’re alive,” he said.

John gawked at him, failing to grasp his meaning, but Sam was already off again, reading.

Only this time he didn’t stop. He was repeating the incantation, voice growing louder as if to compensate for the fact that he couldn’t read more quickly—one mispronounced word and they were back to square one. John listened to him, overcome with a rush of awareness: how much Sam had shouldered, how absurd their chances had been from the start, how a handful of seconds separated Sherlock from death, real death this time, his spirit killed by Dean, his body by John himself, no miracles, the end.

Emotion rose in John with such vehemence that he keeled forward, bowing over Sherlock’s head. He didn’t even know whether he should keep his hands in the bowl anymore; in a daze he was swept by the urge to take them out and place them on both sides of Sherlock’s stupid, extraordinary head, keep them there for those last few seconds. Sherlock, so pale but so peaceful, an empty white shell to contrast with the blackness that must have conquered his essence entirely by now. John couldn’t look up; he couldn’t keep looking down at Sherlock, either. He closed his eyes.

“It’s not working,” he told Sam through the spasm in his throat. Sam must have known it already, because his voice was growing weaker and weaker. The noise from the street had disappeared as well, although maybe that was because now all John could hear was his own heart, loud and symphonic…

Like he’d never, ever heard it before.

He lifted his head sharply, eyes flying open and his heart’s lurch echoing like a bell toll in his ears. For a second he strained to open his eyes again, because there was nothing around him but the vaguest shapes. Then he knew he was actually looking—this was what he saw. The shapes trembled and rippled. They were darker, the only thing that made them distinguishable. Everything was bathed in muted pale orange. It was as if John was looking at the world through his closed eyelids, only with their flesh slightly more transparent. How was he supposed to find Sherlock like that? He didn’t even dare to move for fear he’d lose his precarious sense of bearings.

He turned his head to the right, in the direction where Sherlock’s apparition had been, and again heard his heart roar when he found a tall shape there in the distance. He could still hear Sam’s voice, but now it was inside his head, on a separate track.

It had worked. Sam had made the binding ritual work against all odds and John would be damned if he failed Sherlock now.

He got up quickly, swayed and turned in the direction of what he prayed was Sherlock. He tried to speak but encountered the supremely bizarre sensation of having no mouth at all. He couldn’t call Sherlock, he couldn’t ask questions, he couldn’t see. John realized he couldn’t even move anymore, the sensation of his body disappearing as soon as he tried to think of it, like ice touched by a coal.

How was he supposed to not just reach Sherlock’s soul but bring it back? What would it look like? It was Sherlock. Numbers and facts? Straight symmetrical lines? Chemical formulas? Abstract patterns with innate logic that only a genius would comprehend? It was Sherlock…

... music, breathless in its rush to play catch with itself. Melancholic, now solemn, now uplifting, now shivery and sweet, like a burst of lemon and honey. It's summer clouds at sunset, frolicking in a
sea of the softest pinks and lilacs and oranges, then puffing up and turning to opaque grey, their edges glowing, smudged in mother of pearl. It’s hard like a diamond and it’s the diamond ground to dust, it’s perpetually re-established harmony in unique cacophony, and there is one clear, single, stunning note running through it all, over and over and over again. John catches it, lets everything else fall back into hum and shimmer, holds onto that note and listens.

Then he chimes with it.

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Sam could feel the words die like a sob in his parched throat at the sight of John’s shoulders jumping simultaneously with Sherlock’s intake of breath. John was still hunched over Sherlock, their newly opened eyes locking in a peculiar upside down meeting.

“You okay?” John tried to ask, the question coming out as a wheeze. Sherlock didn’t try to speak, just nodded.

For his part Sam was very glad he was sitting. He’d lost all feeling in his legs, but at least his knees couldn’t buckle now that the post-adrenaline crash was catching up with him. He breathed heavily, letting himself get lost for just one moment in the feeling of immense relief that it was over, over —John was okay, and Sherlock seemed all right, too.

The dazed, relative quiet in the room was suddenly terminated by the explosion of Dean’s voice from above. “You son of a bitch! You get up here so I can kick your ass, you crazy mother—”

“What happened?” Sherlock asked over him, raising his head tentatively to look at Sam. Sam could feel pins and needles in most parts of his body. He looked over to John and numbly noticed John’s hands were still in the bowl.

“I’ll tell you what happened!” Sam was glad Dean took it upon himself to enlighten Sherlock. “You were going to die and I was going to have to gank your ugly-ass spirit. If it wasn’t for my brother you’d have kissed my silver bullet and your life goodbye, you stupid jackass!”

Sam met John’s eyes. Their familiar blue was filtered through the darkest grey Sam had seen them turn, but they shone at him, steady and lucid. John’s entire face shone as if he was smiling at Sam with everything but his actual mouth. Sam’s lips tried to twitch tiredly.

His eyes dropped to Sherlock feeling the insistence of his gaze.

“How did you do it?” Sherlock asked. Sam could swear that if mind-blowingly expensive cologne had sound, this would have been it.

He cleared his throat, took a moment, then shrugged. “I thought of something,” he said, the right corner of his mouth finally liberated from its stupor.

Something flashed in Sherlock’s eyes, but then they widened, his face suddenly animating. Sherlock’s upper body sprang up vertical like he was a deck chair. His head turned sharply to the open window on the right then he twisted further, searching for John.

“Did Moran shoot?” he asked, urgent. “John, do they have him?”
Still dazed, Sam watched John transform into the nice, salt-of-the-earth guy who’d been Sam’s roommate for months. Sherlock was blasting forth questions about Moran’s capture, but John’s slightly agape look had nothing in it to suggest he’d spent the night in any way other than sitting around—not even on the floor!—and drinking a cup of tea while watching ‘telly’.

“Have they got Moran?” Sherlock pressed again, trying to get up.

“I don’t know,” John said. He finally took his hands of the bowl and produced his cell from his jeans pocket. “I’ve got missed calls from Greg.”

Sherlock managed to push himself upward on his palms, unfolding into a standing position, from which he immediately swayed. He took a step in the direction of the window, but swayed again, violently this time. He might have face planted if it wasn’t for Dean quickly steadying him with a hand. When that didn’t work, he awkwardly shouldered Sherlock’s chest.

“All right, stop moving,” he ordered. Sherlock made an aborted attempt to reply, then stretched his facial muscles vertically, eyelids fluttering shut, only opening with effort. By then John was already by Sherlock’s side, checking for his pulse and pupil reaction.

“You need to sit down,” he told him.

“I need to find out whether they’ve got Moran.”

“Which you can do from a sitting position.”

“Listen to the doctor, sunshine,” Dean grumbled, successfully manoeuvring Sherlock in the direction of the couch. Sherlock’s fingers found purchase on the couch backrest and dug in there. He moved his head in what looked like an attempt to shake off any dizziness.

The sound of the doorbell downstairs made everyone look up. Sherlock swivelled on his spot and made to go, then swayed yet again.

“I’ll go,” John said, but before he’d even made two steps, Sherlock stopped him, fingers clasping around his arm. “No!”

There were now fists banging on the door and a voice that Sam recognized as Lestrade’s.

“Then what?” John had to raise his voice over the banging.

Sherlock hesitated, eyes jumping between John’s face and different points in the room. John waited for a couple of seconds, his expression turning exasperated. “Oh, for the love of God,” he said. He detached himself from Sherlock’s grip and strode to the door. Sam was ready to follow, when Sherlock called John’s name in alarm then turned to Dean. “Go with him,” he said. “Please.” The word fell from his lips with a reluctant first letter, but the sentiment was genuine. Dean shook his head, pointing at Sherlock. “We’re back here and then you’re talking, because I’ve had it with you.” He made for the door with big steps.

“There might be demons,” Sherlock said in a rush. Dean halted, gazing at Sherlock, half-turned and scary-eyed. “What?”

“No now; go, please.”

Dean bounded out the door and down the stairs just as Sam dove for the kitchen, feverishly hoping there was at least one bottle of holy water there. John had gotten a weird kick out of knowing that all those times when they’d gone jogging together in the early days Sam had had ulterior motives to keep hydrating John. He’d cracked a joke about not minding Sam still turning all their bottled water into holy water, something about John undergoing a slow process of purification to increase his chances of going to heaven. Now Sam was very grateful to find a nearly full two-litre bottle.

The banging had stopped and there were male voices getting louder on the way up; soon enough John and Lestrade showed up. Lestrade stopped right under the door frame, staring at Sherlock, who’d propped himself against the dining room table almost sitting on it.

“Where’s Dean?” Sam asked.

“Basement flat,” John told him behind Lestrade’s back, then flicked his gaze upward to the ceiling. Sam met his eyes with understanding, took a step closer and watched Lestrade. The water would only slow down any demon, but the devil’s trap was still there and Dean should be up in a few seconds with Ruby’s knife. Sam really hoped they wouldn’t have to spill Lestrade’s blood. He also hoped they wouldn’t have to spill Sherlock’s blood for reasons that had nothing to do with possession—if there had been a real danger of demons and Sherlock had kept quiet, Sam was going to find it very hard not to punch him in the face.

Lestrade took a couple of steps into the room, looking dishevelled and wild around the eyes but other than that unharmed. “What on earth was that?” he asked Sherlock, pointing at the space in front of the fireplace.

“Moran, have you got him?” Sherlock said around the same time, then frowned. “What?” he asked, looking at Lestrade as if he was a child talking gibberish, but then his face cleared. “Oh.” Impatience flickered over his features. “My spirit or something of sorts. It’s fine now.” He bore his eyes into Lestrade’s when he saw another question coming. “Have you got Moran,” Sherlock insisted.

Lestrade’s mouth remained open and he continued to goggle, but in a couple of seconds his answer came out. “Yes,” he said, tired. “He’s downstairs in the police car. Everything went the way you said.”
Sherlock rose. “You did the rest as we spoke?” he asked, attempting a step towards Lestrade. Sam tensed up—Lestrade still hadn’t moved from under the trap. The bottle was already open; Sam lifted it, prepared for a splash, when he heard the sound of Dean’s steps coming up.

“Yes,” Lestrade replied to Sherlock meanwhile. “The officers with him are wearing those things.” He fumbled at something around his neck and pulled out a small amulet hanging on a leather cord. “God knows what I’ll put in the report,” he muttered to himself.

Sherlock was already moving; he collided with Dean at the landing, apologized, and tried to go around him.

“Whoa, hold on,” Dean said. “You’re not going anywhere. If there are demons out there, Sam and I need to know all about it, then we’ll plan how to deal with them.”

“I need to speak to Moran,” Sherlock told him, managing to sound both pleading and bossy. “He’s got no anti-possession protection,” he added after a beat. Dean didn’t move, their eye contact somehow intensified by their equal height.

“Son of a…” Dean gritted his teeth, glaring at Sherlock, but Sam could see his brother was already in his hunter’s mode. He caught Sam’s gaze; Sam nodded and silently followed Dean and Sherlock down the stairs. He didn’t need to look back to know John and Lestrade were right behind. He could hear Lestrade asking John questions about what had happened and John trying to answer briefly in a few sentences, but Sam didn’t really listen. His skin was prickling, that unique kind of 360 degrees, innate alertness taking over his mind and body.

The street had been closed off for traffic by the police, but there were a few small groups of curious people loitering around, reminding Sam that London truly was one of those cities that never slept. He scanned the onlookers quickly then tried to catch any movement in the shadows, anything to give away that demons were watching, ready to pounce. Dean’s back was like a taut canvas, his gaze taking in the scene and breaking it down to pieces, searching for the same as Sam. They were both aware they wouldn’t stand a chance against a higher number of demons. Five would do the trick, because no matter how competent the local police force was, they weren’t trained to fight creatures who were faster, stronger and more vicious than the biggest monster of a human any officer here had ever encountered. Ruby’s demon killing knife was an advantage, of course, but again, how many demons could Dean kill if they attacked in droves? The one thing on their side was that the exposure would be unwelcome—it didn’t matter that it was past midnight, this was Central London so Sam had some small reassurance in knowing demons didn’t like to make their existence publicised. The emphasis on ‘small’.

His eyes fell on John who was walking briskly behind Sherlock in the direction of one of the police cars. Mycroft Holmes’s warning shimmered into existence, a spiteful reminder: Sam’s very nearness meant danger, could mean death to John.

He stumbled in his train of thought, realizing it had swiftly become derailed into emotion, deviating from its designated tracks. If there were demons here it wasn’t Sam who’d brought them over. This was Sherlock’s business, no matter that Sam was clueless what exactly that entailed. He squashed the disturbing discovery that he seemed to automatically equate the presence of demons to something that was his responsibility. Or, to use a word that reflected the sentiment more accurately, his fault. Another thought came to him, just as uncomfortable as the previous one: was he as self-centred as to think that everything evolved around him, around the Winchesters?
He forced himself to focus on the scene in front of him, discarding thoughts about whose responsibility it was. Danger was thick in the air, invisible but close like humidity; they needed to know what was happening and Sam hoped that Sherlock’s conversation with Sebastian Moran would provide some answers.

Sherlock had paused for a quick exchange with Lestrade and was now sliding into the passenger’s seat of the police car where Moran was held. Sherlock sat sideways, the door open and his feet out, while his upper body twisted to face the man at the back seat. Sam couldn’t distinguish his features very well so he bent down to peer through the car window. He caught Moran’s attention, making him look back. Their eyes met; Moran averted his gaze straight away, but there was no haste in the gesture. No emotion on his face, either. Sam recognized him as the guy from Speedy’s, only in an ironic twist he now looked less of a grumpy asshole. He had strong features, most notably a big pair of eyes overshadowed by thick, dark, neatly shaped eyebrows that somehow gave him a palpable air of physicality. That was strengthened by his broad, muscular shoulders and his wide neck, yet there was something in the way Moran held himself, in the set of his heavy jaw and the fixation of his gaze, that told Sam the man was far from being merely the brawn.

Sherlock was taking his time, watching Moran with open intent, probably cataloguing every little detail. Sam remembered Sherlock’s brainchild of a system. There’d been some outrageous claims there about the kind of stuff a person could figure out about another person based on thorough observation. But it had made sense to Sam back then and his acquaintance with Sherlock did nothing to change that. Sam bent down and looked again, really looked, driven to see the world the way Sherlock saw it; see whether he could catch a detail of significance himself. But Moran presented a front that wouldn’t offer anything of use even for the inventor of The Science of Deduction.

Closed cropped hair and as far as Sam could see, clean, recent shave. Dark trousers, a plain grey flannel top, long sleeves, no labels, not a single distinctive thing. No visible piercings, no visible tattoos, no fresh scars, not even a watch; just his military tags hidden under his top, judging by the beady metal string showing around his neck. The only question Sam had from that was whether army people in the UK had dog tags. He should ask John later. For now he lifted his eyes to cast another searching look around, taking over from Dean and giving him a chance to examine the tableau in front of them.

Sam was seriously beginning to feel the itch of exposure himself and was about to suggest they took this somewhere private, taking Moran with them if necessary, when Sherlock spoke at last.

“I know it’s him,” he told Moran without any preamble. “I just don’t know how.” He sounded almost friendly, as if he was confiding a secret.

Sam’s eyes were on Sherlock so he missed Moran’s first reaction, but maybe it was still what was on display now: face blank in a way that didn’t look forced, but the eyes had lost their smooth quality. Something in Sherlock’s words had cracked him, only there was no telling in what way.

John was standing right next to Sherlock, arms crossed over his chest. A thin line had appeared between his eyebrows.

Moran said nothing. Sherlock leaned forward a little and spoke again, voice dragging in a sigh.

“You know he set you up, don’t you?” Sherlock didn’t wait long for a reply this time. “I just spoke to Lestrade and he told me about the phone call you’d made. There was something fishy, you should have trusted your instinct. He should have trusted your instinct. He did, but he didn’t care. He used you to get me out in the open. Just stop and think: how little danger would there have been for him to
be here with you?” Sherlock’s tone was unusually melodious, but his eyes were hard, drilling into Moran with the last sentence.

“Sherlock…” John began, but Sherlock ignored him.

“A win-win situation, you could say,” he addressed Moran again. The corner of Sherlock’s mouth twitched; it reached his eyes, but it didn’t warm them particularly. “For him. I’m a ghost—you trap me with the rock salt. I’m flesh and blood, the gunpowder does the trick.” Something undeniably smug passed over Sherlock’s features and he pulled back a bit. “Of course he knew it wouldn’t be that simple, I wouldn’t be that simple. So he used you. He settled for letting it play out my way until I came out. You were sacrificed in the process.”

John shifted from foot to foot. “Who are you talking about?” he said quietly.

“Yes, and can you do it quicker maybe?” Dean groused. “We’re sitting ducks here.”

“You seem to know everything.” Moran’s voice was barely audible from inside the iron shell of the car, but Sam heard it, remembered that, too.

“Not everything,” Sherlock confessed flatly. “I don’t know how he’s doing it. I’ve been putting things together and the more I look at it, the more—”

“He’s a demon,” Moran said quickly. Sam looked at him and found him clenching his teeth, as if there was some metaphorical biting of his traitorous tongue going on.

Sherlock’s features had straightened into taken aback consideration.

“Who’s a demon?” John asked, arms dropping by his sides. “Sherlock?”

This time he was rewarded with Sherlock’s upturned face, only his eyes were far too glazed to offer a communication channel. When they returned their focus, it was directed at Dean.

“How does a man become a demon?” Sherlock asked.

It was Dean’s turn to look taken aback, but his frown was back in place in no time.

“Possession.”

Sherlock was already shaking his head. “No, a dead man.”

Dean’s face steeled, his frown turning darker. “Hell.” He paused. “Sooner or later every soul turns demonic in hell.”

“How sooner is soon?”

“I don’t know,” Dean snapped. “What’s with the demon questionnaire? How about you tell us what’s going on.”

Sherlock regarded him for a moment, then said, “I will.” He turned to Moran, evidently on the precipice of making a comment or asking more questions, but seemed to reconsider. He closed his mouth and slid out of the car, eyes stopping somewhere behind Sam’s shoulder. A quick look revealed that Lestrade had joined them after talking to an officer near-by; he was standing with his
hands in his trousers pockets, feet slightly apart.

“... need to see his flat,” Sherlock told him. Lestrade just started walking towards the entrance of the building. Sherlock rotated on his spot, the motion making his coat flare up, and followed. It took all of two seconds for John to go after them. Dean looked at Sam, rolled his neck with some cross frustration, then made a beeline for the building. Sam did a final quick scan of the street and joined the expedition.

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As far as Sam was concerned Moran’s flat hadn’t told them much about the man. There was just nothing personal there. Moran had occupied only one of the rooms, the large one that faced 221B’s windows. A generic couch, one wooden chair and a coffee table were the only pieces of furniture. There were a few blankets in a mess on the couch—Moran must have caught some sleep there—and there was an electric heater, but that was about it. Sherlock had first taken in the room in its entirety from the door, standing there completely immobile, everyone else piling up behind him on the landing. Then he’d gone in and done the same thing, this time from the center of the room, slowly rotating, until eventually he had begun his close-up examination. The fireplace seemed to hold a particular interest for him. As far as Sam could see there was nothing unusual about it—it had obviously been used, but he couldn’t spot anything in the ashes to suggest the use was to get rid of objects or papers. Actually, Sherlock had barely given the ashes a closer look, which puzzled Sam—he thought that if anything about the fireplace deserved attention it would be the contents of what was burned in it.

Once or twice he had to stop himself from making comments about obvious things, tempted to try and get a drift of Sherlock’s thoughts. Maybe it was more than that. Sam found himself drawn in, once again wanting to discover something the others would miss, something revealing. He was good at paying attention to detail, at spotting inconsistencies and making obscure connections—there wasn’t much point in fake modesty. But beyond Sam’s need to perform well, there was just an aura of thrill and mystery around Sherlock, an aura that made even Dean stand silent on the sidelines, watching. This feeling was strengthened by the way both Lestrade and John kept quiet and followed Sherlock with their gazes, in John’s case once or twice physically, too, checking out for himself what Sherlock had just given his attention to. But overall they had left him glide through the space, their patience proof that they’d witnessed this act before and had their reasons to trust it.

Sherlock had finished his search by drawing out his pocket magnifier to examine both an empty glass and a half-empty bottle of whiskey on the coffee table—Sam had never even heard the name of the whiskey brand. Sherlock had straightened up, looked around one last time and headed for the door, stopping in front of Lestrade. “I’ll need to see his electricity bill.”

Sam didn’t know what to think of the fact that no one had even asked Sherlock why.

Now they were sitting in Baker Street’s living room, having Indian. It was half past one at night, but Sam was sure he wasn’t alone in feeling far from ready to go to bed, despite feeling tired to the bone. (He’d lost count on how little sleep he’d caught in how many days.) Sam couldn’t put his finger on it, but there was something warm in his stomach that wasn’t the korma. Maybe it was the well-earned spell of quiet that often came after a successful job. He and Dean still had some of those, although not quite like they used to. They’d drive around without a destination, going and going, until a place just clicked right, called to them. They’d park the car, eat and drink beer; look at the scenery or at the sky for a while, for a short, precious while, the silent night around them an ally, a secluded, starlit womb for them to curl inside and be…
Or maybe it was being here, now, in this place that Sam still bashfully wanted to claim as having some belonging to, in the company of people he trusted and cared about. Whatever it was, he didn’t poke it, just kept to his side of the couch and dug into his plate.

Sherlock wasn’t eating. He’d had a few pieces of naan bread and a cup of tea after John had put his foot down. In Sam’s opinion this was next to nothing for what Sherlock had been through, but John seemed content, almost victorious, so Sam figured it could be way worse. Sherlock didn’t look close to fainting anyway. There were no traces of the initial dizzy spell he’d experienced after he’d jumped to his feet post-ritual. He was still far from full-blooded, but Sam was beginning to get this was the norm. John wasn’t throwing him concerned glances and nor was Lestrade, who looked at home with both his trench coat and his suit jacket off, his shirt sleeves folded up to bare his lower arms. He was sitting on one of the dining table chairs placed between John’s armchair and Sam’s corner of the couch, and was evidently enjoying his food. (Sam used the word ‘food’ under advisement for the infernally hot thing Lestrade was consuming.)

Surprisingly, it was Dean who pushed to talk about Moran and demons. The surprise being only in the fact that Dean was giving a good impression of someone intent to eat them all out of house and home. “This is delicious,” he’d muttered twice, the second time dipping his bread in Sam’s plate again, his own cleaned up. He’d honest to God moaned when he’d tucked into Sherlock’s dish, having first received the most absent-minded permission ever.

“Okay, the demons,” Dean told Sherlock. They’d salted all the windows and thresholds before settling down to eat. “Why did you expect them?”

Sherlock’s eyes went to Lestrade, who’d put his fork on his plate and stilled. Sam had the peculiar sensation that Riot was sitting on his left, wet nose twitching.

“Those mysterious deaths you’ve had,” Sherlock told Lestrade. “All of them people who worked as part of Moriarty’s network. You caught them, you put them under lock and key, but they were still found dead.”

“Yeah?” Lestrade dragged out the word. “What about them?” It was clear it hadn’t even occurred to him to ask how Sherlock knew.

“Doors locked, windows closed,” Sherlock continued. “The cameras showing no one going in or out.”

“Yeah, all right. And?”

Sherlock lifted an eyebrow. “Now that you know about…this—the supernatural, I mean—are you telling me the deaths are still mysterious, inspector?”

“You…You think it’s something like that?” Lestrade put his plate on the coffee table. “What, a spirit? What would do something like that?”

“The more important question is why anyone would do something like that.”

“Okay, why?” John asked. He hadn’t put his plate away but had stopped eating. His tone told Sam his patience was rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

Sherlock looked at John intently, then moved his gaze back to Lestrade. When neither man replied, he suddenly heaved an exaggerated sigh.
“All right, enough with the drama queen act,” Dean told him. “Just talk.” He shoved a massive heap of Sam’s rice in his mouth. Sherlock shot him a look, but Dean just made a motion with his empty fork, prompting.

“I can’t believe I have to spell it out,” Sherlock said. “You have all the data, it’s obvious—”

“Moriarty is a demon,” Sam blurted out. He hadn’t intended to interrupt—he was pretty sure everyone had figured out Moriarty was behind the deaths and that Sherlock was talking about him when he’d questioned Moran. John’s face didn’t show surprise, but it was grave. Lestrade was throwing glances between Sam and Sherlock.

“Who’s Moriarty?” Dean asked.

Sam looked at Sherlock expecting him to be the one to respond, but Sherlock was looking back at him, tight-lipped. Sam turned to John in a silent request for permission to speak—it wasn’t his story to tell. John’s eyes moved to Sherlock.

“Is it true?” he said. “Is he back?”

“Yes.”

John remained still for a moment, then carefully put his plate on the table, the epitome of a man who’d lost his appetite from now ‘til next spring.

“What does he want?” John asked.

Dean smacked Sam’s chest lightly with the backs of his fingers. “Who’s Moriarty?”

“He’s a…” Sam quickly looked at Sherlock again. Sherlock just raised his eyebrows, his expression much like that of a professor who wanted to hear a student’s answer to the first question of their oral exam.

Sam turned to Dean. “Moriarty’s a criminal. A dangerous criminal, um, very dangerous.” Sam nodded. “Kind of like a criminal mastermind, I gather. He was like…like a local Crowley, I guess, but dude, way more clever! I mean, he didn’t have any of Crowley’s supernatural powers and he still made King of sorts.” Sam was growing animated. “He was obsessed with Sherlock,” he continued, catching himself tipping his chin furtively in Sherlock’s direction. As if Dean didn’t know who Sherlock was or everyone couldn’t see Sam. He groaned internally, feeling even more out of place to speak.

Well, it wasn’t his fault that neither John nor Sherlock had ventured to answer. Sam was going to call a spade a spade.

“The dude was behind…He and Sherlock engaged in some sort of battle of wits.” Sam looked at Sherlock quickly. “Right?” He didn’t wait for Sherlock’s reply, ploughing on. “It ended on the roof top of a hospital from where Sherlock took that fake swan dive. But not before Moriarty blew his own brains out. I think? I’m still not sure how that came about.” Sam threw Sherlock another surreptitious glance and took another breath, this one post-speech. He looked at Dean, spreading his hands lightly and pulling a face to indicate that was all he had to offer.

Dean continued watching him for another three seconds, a listener caught in a tale, then sucked in his
bottom lip. He released it slowly, then turned to Sherlock.

“Wow,” he said. Sherlock tilted his head, some expectancy escaping over his features.

“You sure know how to pick ‘em.” Dean reached forward for his beer, his eyes widening briefly and privately.

Sam turned to his left and his gut clenched at the sight of John’s face. There was something crushed there together with a mixture of resignation and controlled anger. Sherlock met his gaze from the other end of the table, chin dipping and eyes turning bigger.

“What does he want?” John repeated, voice deceptively soft.

Sherlock’s chest moved up and down, the muscles under his shirt coming alive. He had finally taken off his coat and suit jacket as well.

“What has he always wanted?” was his equally soft response to John. Their eye contact extended, then John nodded.

“When were you planning on telling us?” he asked.

“I’m telling you now. There wasn’t much of a point in saying anything before. It was only going to cause unnecessary distraction with the ritual at hand. If I’d died, he wouldn’t have come after you. Now Moran is out of the equation…”

John’s eyelids closed, the gesture both pained and self-soothing. “You can’t keep doing this, Sherlock.”

“I wasn’t lying to you.”

“No, you were just economical with the truth.”

Sherlock spread his arms. “If that’s what you want to call it. It wasn’t because…It’s not about trust. You know how I work, the way I always have, even before.” His tone had turned placating, but there was no submission in it.

“Yeah, but the difference is,” Lestrade interjected, “that in this case your plans meant putting others in danger.”

“What danger?” Sherlock asked, something inherently dignified in the tilt of his head as he looked away from John to Lestrade. “I gave you precise instructions and everything worked out, didn’t it? My brother helped you take care of the rest.” Finally a trace of some fragility rippled through Sherlock’s voice. “I don’t understand why everyone’s—Why is it so important? No one has been hurt. I was the only one in real danger. Now that’s over, we can talk about Moriarty, rather than wring our wrists like Mrs Hudson. Actually, I’m being unfair to Mrs Hudson—”

“Hold on a minute,” Dean cut in. Sam had noticed he was listening half-heartedly, and not only because in his books the conversation was probably too touchy feely—funny enough something he and Sherlock would see eye to eye on. “What that Moran dude said. Was that why you asked me about how soon someone can become a demon?” Sherlock met Dean’s eyes as means of confirmation. “Well, I can tell you that he was lying,” Dean said. “No one can become a demon in what, a year?”
“Yeah, a bit more,” Sam replied instead of Sherlock. “But I don’t know, Dean…”

“Well, I do.” Dean spoke with authority, but he averted his eyes from Sam, jaw tensing. He hardly ever even mentioned Hell, let alone what he’d ended up doing there or what he’d seen. But Sam had gathered every single word Dean had ever shared like pearly drops of water in an arid palm, trying to understand and maybe take away some of the pain. Sam had read about it, too, so much. He’d asked Ruby and he knew Ruby hadn’t lied about that. Hell was agony and endless screaming, your own but also that of those under your hands. Hell was souls turning black, even the brightest, most resilient ones. Sam suspected that he himself was in denial about Dean’s time in Hell. The thought that his brother had ever come close to being anyone but himself, had ever felt his humanity slip through his fingers like the finest silk, the singe of darkness promising an irreversible flip…It was insurmountable for Sam. His mind whited out, refused to go over that hill. Not his brother, ever.

He wasn’t going to push Dean, of course, the audience making it entirely out of the question anyway. Besides, they had a practical matter on their hands.

“Yes, but Moriarty’s not your average Joe,” Sam said, hurrying to go on, to distract and convince. “A soul might need decades, even centuries to turn demonic in Hell, but not if the person was already half-way there.”

“Oh come on!” Dean exclaimed. Sam just gave him a pointed look in lieu of reply.

Dean’s eyebrows made for his hairline. “So what, this guy was that bad?”

“Looks like.”

Dean still shook his head, lips turning downward in an unspoken ‘nah’. He glanced at Sherlock. “Congrats on your enemies, by the way,” he said, nodding rapidly, eyes flying big and open with his teasing, dry grin. “You’re almost putting me and Sammy to shame, and we’ve had some real dicks against us.”

Sam tuned them out. He was torn between wanting to verify his conclusions about Moriarty with John, by a look or a just a nod, and wanting to avoid forcing John’s mind further into what was probably the worst kind of gutter for him.

He turned to Sherlock, instead. “What’s your plan?”

Sherlock leaned forward, pressing the tips of his fingers together the way it seemed was his habit, his gaze skittering over to Lestrade again.

“To draw Jim Moriarty out and finish this,” he said. “For good.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?” Lestrade asked, old-school wariness about him.

“There are ways, but I’m sure they’ll be all deemed too dangerous.”


“Well, what do you want me to do?” Sherlock said, leaning back with the kind of exuberance that created the impression he’d flung himself back into his chair. “Wait until he kills the rest of the people under arrest? Wait until he comes after me or—”
Sherlock might have edited the ending of his sentence abruptly, but all it did was make it hang in there, unfinished in a way that was more than conspicuous.

“Or what?” John said. Sherlock averted his gaze to him, an unspoken, ‘Please’ in it, a mixture of begging John not to push it and asking him not to be stupid.

“He’ll come after me,” John said on cue, eyes not leaving Sherlock’s. The silence he got in reply was enough of an affirmative. “Right.” John nodded once. He puffed up his cheeks slowly, then stood up. For a moment he seemed uncertain about what to do, then he bent over and started collecting the dishes from the table. Sam hesitated, reached out and began helping him.

Amidst the clatter, Lestrade spoke again. “I don’t want anyone to get hurt, least of all John, but I’m not prepared for that kind of thing. We’re not prepared. Our officers are trained to deal with people, not demons. They don’t know the first thing about them. Jesus.” Lestrade ran a hand through his hair, leaving its silver strands spiked up. “I didn’t know about any of that until twenty four hours ago and I’m still finding it hard to believe, to be quite honest. How am I supposed to even explain to an officer what he’s up against, let alone send him against it? They wouldn’t have a clue what to do.”

“Not much difference than usual, then,” Sherlock said.

“Sherlock!” Lestrade’s voice rang loud. He breathed in heavily, then pointed a finger to Sherlock. “I can’t risk people’s lives.”

“I don’t expect you to,” Sherlock told him calmly. “Not when there are experts at hand.”

Sam was trailing after John on the way to the kitchen, but stopped in his tracks at Sherlock’s words. He turned around to complete silence. He met Sherlock’s steady gaze, then sought out Dean, who was squinting at Sherlock.

“Come again?” Dean said. Sherlock shifted his eyes to him, then shrugged in a manner that was both casual and a touch dainty.

“Are you completely off your rocker?” Dean said, actual amusement filtering through the rough tone of his voice.

“I’m serious,” Sherlock said.

“Yeah, no kidding!” There was nothing careful in the way Dean put his beer bottle on the table. “What makes you think that Sam and I will want to have anything to do with this? You’re reckless, you’re crazier than a stadium of screaming fangirls and you’re not even a hunter! I’m not going to play pawn in your plans which, by the way, you feed to us in chunks like we’re all a bunch of five-year-olds. I value my life and I value my brother’s life, and I need you to give me one good reason to put them at risk. Especially when you’re talking about some scumbags in prison, who had it coming anyway and—”

“They didn’t deserve to die, Dean,” Sam cut in. He knew where Dean was coming from. He knew that Dean didn’t really mean it, but it had to be said.

Dean twisted to look up to him. “What are you, judge Judy now? You don’t know what they did, okay? Maybe they did deserve to die. You said yourself they were working for this…” Dean floundered a bit, “this evil overlord, so don’t tell me they were some innocent civilians who got
confused.”

“It’s not about that, Dean, and you know it.”

Dean stood up abruptly, turning his back to Sherlock to face Sam. Sam could feel his shoulders square.

“Are you actually considering getting involved?” Dean asked, his incredulity only half-ironic. “Because this is crazy, Sam. If that guy Moriarty, or whatever his name is, is as dangerous as you say, I mean if he made demon in less than a year, then that’s not the kind of demon I’m prepared to face with no back up.”

Sam grinded his teeth against the rush of hurt. “Right,” he said. “What, I don’t count?”

Dean’s expression stuttered for a moment, then all his features mashed up together. “Of course you count! How can you even ask me that? I’m just saying that I don’t want to see you hurt—to see us both hurt, facing some super villain in demon form.”

“We’ve got the knife,” Sam pointed out.

“Yeah, we’ve got the knife! So what? What good that knife is against an army of demons, Sam? Answer me that. What, you think this guy is on his own? From what I’m hearing he’s got a knack of making networks, getting people to hold hands in circles and do his bidding. Who knows what friends he’s made!”

Sam wanted to put forward a counterargument, but he had to concede Dean’s point. Hell, he knew Dean was right. Trouble was, Dean had the luxury to view this objectively. This wasn’t personal to him in any way. He’d shown up here a few days ago, already wanting to leave. He wanted to keep them safe. It was what Dean did, and it was very easy for him to do it now. But it wasn’t that simple for Sam.

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John was watching the Winchester brothers fight or rather, he was listening to them from his spot in the kitchen. He could see most of Sam’s face and now shifted so he could see Dean as well. The motion drew Sherlock’s eyes away from Sam; he caught John’s gaze across the room, lingering, before looking up to Dean’s back. Sherlock was sitting in his chair, composed with his legs crossed, and for a moment John wondered whether he’d say anything. But for now Sherlock seemed content to let the brothers hash it out. Lestrade was silent, too, although John had the feeling he was in the kind of stupor that took one over when one had recently faced something impossible and rather explosive.

Dean’s last remark was left without a response for a few seconds, Sam obviously caught unprepared. John had to admit Dean’s position made a lot of sense. He had gotten through to Sam, too, probably, after the initial resistance Sam had put up. John wasn’t entirely sure why Sam resisted at all. It was either some unresolved issues between him and Dean that made sparks fly every time there was the opportunity for it, or just Sam’s nature—he was exactly the kind of person who would find out that there was a danger to someone and he could do something about it, then decide he had to do something about it. It made him one of the most decent blokes John had ever met, but it didn’t speak highly of Sam’s survival instinct.

In light of that, Sam’s next words weren’t that much of a surprise for John after all.
“We need to stay here,” Sam said. “That kind of demon, so powerful? If something like that’s going down, we can’t just leave.”

Dean narrowed his eyes at him, then pulled his head back, face turning unreadable. “Who said anything about leaving?”

Sam rolled his neck. “I know that’s what you’re thinking. That it’s not our place to get involved and we should just go.”

“Well, what if that’s the case?” Dean sounded close to belligerent. John hardly knew him, but he didn’t think even Dean believed himself. “Have you forgotten you’ve got Crowley on your ass?” Dean continued, glaring at Sam. “Or that we need to protect Kevin?”

“You said yourself Crowley’s got his hands full with me now,” Sam said, “and I’m here. Kevin will be fine.”

Dean’s eyebrows rose. “Oh, he will?” he said.

Sam nodded, his whole demeanour challenging in a way that made the hairs on John’s neck stand. Dean’s reciprocating expression didn’t help with that. “Is that what you kept telling yourself, Sam?” Dean asked. “When you ignored his messages for six months while I was gone?”

Sam’s face turned to stone; no, to something carved of stone, because while nothing moved on it, it was a human face through and through. His fingers whitened on the empty dishes he was still holding. John shot a glance to Dean to check whether he realized what was happening, but it was hard to tell. Dean’s eyes were hooded, the opposite of the soulful pits his brother’s eyes so often turned into—the comparison reverberating in John from all those months ago when Sam was a stranger who’d offered John the grace of his compassion for John’s loss.

Now Sam was a friend, Sherlock was no longer lost and Dean was the reminder that sometimes we got so close and used to looking at something, we completely failed to see it.

On cue Dean continued, oblivious to the effect his words were having. “We must protect Kevin, Sam. I know you’ve lost track of things lately, but he’s our number one priority.” Dean didn’t sound accusing now, just grave and focused. “We need to make sure he translates the tablets, then do whatever it’s necessary to shut the gates of Hell. That’s our job.”

Sam looked like he’d forgotten he and his brother weren’t alone. “Why?” he asked. “Why is it always our job?” There was something incredibly touching in seeing Sam speak to Dean like that, his eyes waiting for his big brother’s response like Dean had the power to swap the places of celestial bodies.

“Because it is.” Dean’s voice was deep, warm in a way John suspected was hardly ever directed at anyone else than Sam. Regretful, tired, but also unyielding.

“We have friends here,” Sam insisted, the soft pleading in his voice pairing up with the warmth in Dean’s. “Why can’t we stay and protect them?”

“No, Sam, that’s not how it is,” Dean said. “You have friends here.”

The pause stretched this time, both Sam and Dean continuing their communication silently, every
shade of emotion in their eyes and every tense twitch of a dimple speaking of things no one but them would ever know or understand, would ever be able to articulate, because they belonged to them only.

Sam’s voice pulled John out of his reverie. “Yes, I do,” Sam said, voice not raising one bit. “And I’m not going to leave them. I can’t make you stay, Dean. But I’m staying.”

“Mr Winchester,” Mycroft’s dulcet tones floated from the direction of the flat door, making everyone start. “I’m beginning to think you are even more obstinate than my brother.”
John had always found that Mycroft served as good litmus for Sherlock’s mood at any given moment. Of course, in typical fashion Sherlock defied the norm: it was when he was snarky or downright rude to his brother, even when the latter wasn’t present, that John knew Sherlock was more or less fine. After Sherlock’s ‘death’ John had berated himself for not paying closer attention to the fact that just before that fateful day on Bart’s rooftop there’d been suspicious absence of childishness or sarcasm whenever Mycroft was mentioned.

He wasn’t going to make the same mistake twice, so now he duly noted the quiet after Mycroft had spoken from the door. The somewhat dramatic announcement of his presence was the ideal opportunity for Sherlock to greet him with a jibe. The Holmes brothers exchanged a long look that was assessing—at least on Mycroft’s part—in which there was much seriousness but no hostility. While that was pretty much on par with Mycroft’s general ‘mature older brother’ attitude, from Sherlock it could only mean two things: one, that there was much John needed to learn about how the year Sherlock spent ‘dead’ had affected him and two, that recent events had taken their toll on his friend after all. First his revelation to John and to his intimate circle; then the swift, pressured way in which they’d put together the plan for Moran’s capture; then the execution of that plan, which had been such hit and miss, the ‘miss’ bit promising dreadful consequences…All in such short time, all so meaningful.

Sherlock was already two steps ahead naturally, so maybe his uncharacteristically generous attitude towards Mycroft was a sign of that. Perhaps John should not worry about what Sherlock had been through, but about what he intended to put himself through.

It was no use. If John was to lose brain cells to the red hot anxiety flaring up every time Sherlock demonstrated that he was allergic to peaceful, risk-free existence, he would have been brain dead by the first three months of their acquaintance. Actually, he wouldn’t have stuck around for three months in the first place. Regardless of the disturbing things it said about John, he acknowledged the fact that for all its thorns Sherlock’s insanity also had a flower that blossomed bright and beautiful, exuding a metaphorical scent that never failed to draw John in. This was no different than anything they’d seen together, done together. Yes, he was smarting from all the secrecy, but it was more like a kink John needed to work out of his back rather than a permanent injury. The part of him that still clung onto the thin thread of righteous hurt and anger didn’t stand a chance against John’s resolution to do whatever it took to both help get rid of Moriarty once and for all and help Sherlock reclaim his old life back. (If the second coincided with what John wished for himself, that was a bonus.)

Sherlock sharing that wish of his with John, trying to communicate from the great mysterious planet of Sherlock was what had gone a long way towards thinning that thread of hurt and anger until it was barely holding together. Then there was the soul binding ritual and John wasn’t an expert, but he imagined that sort of thing had to strengthen a bond between two blokes quite a bit.

Shame that he had no actual memory of it. He had come back to consciousness without realizing that he’d slipped out of it, some random musical tones in a jumble in his head, but no coherent thought. Plenty of feelings and sensations, though. He’d felt simultaneously light like a feather and heavy like a meteorite. Or heavy, like he’d towed along another person’s soul to bring it back to their body. Sherlock’s upside down fluttering eyelashes had lifted and all the heaviness had lifted with them, too. But no real memory, nothing. The only thing John had had was a deep sense of connection to
Sherlock, but it was more like something old had finally gotten a voice. It wasn’t a discovery; it was the official announcement about one.

He wondered what it must have felt like for Sherlock to have his spirit separated from his body. Sherlock’s apparition had ended up looking like a steak left on the grill for too long, which John doubted could be put down under the ‘stroll in the park’ header. Nothing suggested Sherlock remembered, either, but it didn’t mean there weren’t effects—here he was, letting Mycroft make his entrance and scan the room curiously without so much as a peep from Sherlock.

Mycroft also surprised John by turning to Sam again after he’d completed his survey. “You were pushed to improvise, Mr Winchester,” he said.

Sam looked at him, bewildered, obviously still caught in the aftershocks of his exchange with Dean. “I mean the ritual,” Mycroft clarified. “Your presence here seems to have been of use after all.”

“Yeah,” Sam said, eyes going to the part of the room where the ritual had taken place. His face transformed and John could see the upcoming sass from a mile. “Well, the whole thing wasn’t the rousing success we all hoped to be.”

“The violin was the better choice, of course,” Mycroft continued as if they were discussing tie pins in the Burlington Arcade. “Really, Sherlock, the watch from Victor?” Mycroft lowered his chin, eyes rounding at his brother in faint amusement.

Sherlock’s response erased all worry that he wasn’t being himself. “At least I had something to suggest fitting the bill. What would you have gone for? A portrait of the Queen?” Sherlock’s features were animated by the kind of juvenile liveliness that made John bite on his stretching lips. Mycroft’s offended twitchy nose didn’t help.

“Don’t presume, Sherlock,” he retorted. “There are enough objects of great value to me I could have chosen.”

“Yes, and each of them has its own hanger in your wardrobe. Your tailor would be so happy.”

Mycroft gave him a withering look and took a few steps towards the sofa, leaning his umbrella against its back, careful to avoid touching Greg’s foot with the tip.

“Speaking of which,” he told Sherlock, “you have an appointment with Timothy tomorrow at ten. I’ve arranged for your belongings to be delivered here in the afternoon.”

It was John’s turn to be the bug under the microscope as Mycroft abruptly addressed him. “I believe the previous living arrangements have been restored?”

At least he formulated it as a question, but that didn’t lessen the awkwardness John felt. He still hadn’t spoken to Sam about him and Dean migrating to the basement flat. When Dean had asked John to give him a hand with taking their stuff downstairs John had hovered in Sam’s vicinity, unsure what to say, but being pulled there nonetheless. Sam had looked really absorbed in his research and they’d never talked.

John realized he couldn’t remember when was the last time they’d talked about anything, just the two of them.
He also realized Mycroft was expecting him to answer, so he cleared his throat. “Um, yes.”

Sherlock darted a look at him. The words that followed were well within the spectrum of what Sherlock might have said, but John still wondered if part of their intent wasn’t to change the subject.

“I don’t want to go to Timothy Everest,” Sherlock told his brother with some indignation. “Where’s Blake?”

“He’s away. You don’t expect me to cut the poor man’s holiday short for your benefit, do you?”

Sherlock snorted. “Don’t play innocent in front of the new kids. You would do it for yours. In fact, I distinctly remember the summer of 2001 when you arranged for that excuse of a hairdresser of yours to be arrested at the Mexico border, where he was on his honeymoon I might add,”—the last was directed at Dean for some reason, who didn’t look an ounce brighter at the clarification—“only because you’d got it into your head that you were going to attend the wedding of—”

“Sherlock,” Mycroft interrupted with what John suspected wasn’t accidental timing. There were no signs of discomfort in the elder Holmes, but the whites of his eyes glinted. “Now who’s taking centre stage in front of the ‘new kids’? Stop being fussy and just go to Timothy.”

“Okay,” Dean said. “Someone’s got to do it. Who the hell is this dude you’re talking about?”

Sherlock’s face turned sour. “It’s his tailor. My brother has booked an appointment for me with his tailor.”

John could swear there was a battle fought in Dean between the overwhelming desire to bang Sherlock’s and Mycroft’s heads together and the tiny trickle of curiosity that—

“So?” Dean asked, and John privately welcomed him to the club of people who found themselves inexplicably spinning with the off kilter waltz of the Holmes world. In retrospect, finding Dean and Sherlock sipping whiskey was probably really when Dean’s admittance to the club had occurred.

Meanwhile Sherlock stood up, replying to Dean while keeping his eyes directed at Mycroft. “Isn’t it obvious? I can’t go to his tailor. Aside from the issue of aesthetics, I expect a degree of comfort from my clothes. I don’t wish to walk around constrained in something that looks like a torture device.”

Mycroft’s clucking sound was audible, as was the sigh that followed. “Fine,” he told Sherlock. “Wait for a week, then. It’s hard to believe your stance on some of the finest bespoke tailoring in this country, seeing that you insist on walking around literally constrained in your old suits. You’ve bulked up, dear brother. You’ll be bursting out of your shirts any day now and while that kind of spectacle is welcome on what passes for television these days, in real life it’s really unbecoming.” The word was pronounced with the emphasis deserved for an accusation in the worst of sins.

John’s eyes had strayed to Sherlock’s chest of their own volition, just like he suspected everyone else’s had. For a fleeting moment Sherlock shifted awkwardly from foot to foot, hands moving to hide behind his back, but the motion only provided a visual aid in support of Mycroft’s words. Realization must have hit, because Sherlock stilled abruptly, arms hanging limp by his body, while he gave Mycroft a particularly rebellious squint.

“Jealous, are we?” he said. “Just because I always add mass in muscle, while you—”

This time it was Greg’s turn to cut in; he did it by physically lifting his hand in a ‘stop’ gesture.
“Sherlock, enough,” he said tiredly. “We don’t want to be here ‘til dawn.” He turned to Mycroft, pointing at the paper folder in his hands. “Is this for us?”

Mycroft handed out the folder to Sherlock, while speaking to Greg. “This is all Moran, in the year and four months since James Moriarty’s death. Every single trip and action we’ve been able to keep a track on. It’s fairly comprehensive.” Mycroft turned to Sherlock. “You have the other folders at my place. I’ll arrange them to be delivered first thing tomorrow. I imagine you’ll be looking them over with a fresh eye.” Sherlock nodded.

Greg cocked his head. “What’s in them?”

“Background intel,” Mycroft replied. He smoothed away what John was sure were imaginary creases on his left sleeve. When he looked up and found everyone’s gaze on him, he rolled his eyes. “Moran’s background intel, obviously,” he said. “And everything we’ve got on James Moriarty, too. His personal files as opposed to those related to his…professional activities. The ratio between the former and the latter serves as a good demonstration why he was the criminal mastermind of the century.”

“Oh, let’s hope not,” Sherlock said. “What’s life without something to look forward to?” He continued, ignoring Dean’s and Greg’s disapproving looks. “It’s unfortunate we’ve got so little in his personal files, but it’ll do.”

“For what?” John asked. The familiar mixture of dread, curiosity and nervous excitement was landing in his belly in dollops, like dough. The left corner of Sherlock’s mouth lifted as his eyes met John’s; the dough began rising.

Sherlock looked away to Sam. Standing so close, John could see the barely perceptible twitch that ran over Sam’s body at the sudden attention.

“Mr Win—Sam,” Sherlock said. Mycroft’s eyes glinted again. “What is the first thing you do after you find out what supernatural creature you’re dealing with?”

Sam shrugged. “Find out its weaknesses and figure out how to kill it,” he said in an echo of the conversation he’d had with John before the firebird.

God, the brother and sister firebirds. The slimy monster in the sewers that kidnapped that infant and tried to kill Sam. Demons circling their home, maybe even now. Castiel bleeding from the eyes. Sherlock’s spirit floating in the air like a hologram projection from a horror film…

John took a very quiet deep breath and tried to focus on the feel of the amulet tucked under his shirt, while his gaze found metaphorical purchase on Sherlock’s face.

“Exactly,” Sherlock said in response to Sam’s words. He left it there, eyes meeting John’s with a pointed look. He turned to his brother next. “I’ll go to Moran’s house tomorrow. I’ll also need access to Jim Moriarty’s homes, all of them, including the one on the Duke’s grounds.”

Mycroft opened his mouth to reply, but Dean beat him to it. “Finally you’re talking sense. We’re coming with you.”

The Holmes brothers both fixed their discomfiting gazes on him, but it was the gaze of his own brother that Dean avoided. It took a moment for John to realize the use of plural in Dean’s sentence.
“That won’t be necessary,” Mycroft told Dean with a hint of dismissal.

“Why?” Sam asked immediately. “Our clothes not good enough?”

Mycroft turned to him, lips thinning. “I wasn’t employing a turn of phrase,” he said. “It is literally unnecessary for you to examine those places. My brother will be your eyes there. He was your research subject for quite a while, Mr Winchester. You ought to have realized that Sherlock’s ability to observe is second to none.” Mycroft lowered his eyelashes demurely. “That was a figure of speech, but the sentiment remains. Sherlock will be able to describe everything to you to the last detail. He’ll notice more than you’ll ever be able to.”

“It’s not about what he’ll see,” Dean told Mycroft. “It’s about whether he’ll be able to tell it’s important. He’s not a hunter, so stop being cocky. That’s the same guy whose ass we had to save earlier and that went down just swell!”

“He has a point,” Sherlock said. John couldn’t tell who was more surprised by his input, Mycroft or Dean.

Mycroft gave out a heavy sigh. “I don’t care if you all go,” he told the room at large. “Invite Mrs Hudson if you want.” His next words were directed at the Winchesters, more to Sam. “Contrary to the opinion you might hold, my only purpose in life is not to play the villain in yours.”

John’s eyes went to Sherlock on cue, to find him perusing the front of the folder with great deliberation.

Mycroft sighed again, this one not for show. His fingers travelled to what was left of his hair at the front, still ridiculously neatly combed for going to two o’clock in the morning. Merely an inch away from the hair, the fingers stilled and he lowered his hand, deliberately unhurried. “Sherlock,” he said. “I need to speak to you in private.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now. Sorry to inconvenience you,” Mycroft said, the movement of his chin suggesting the opposite, “but you’re about to come back to the living in public tomorrow. There are a couple of details we need to discuss, including tonight’s affair with Moran’s failed attempt to kill you. We don’t want you ruining everything in the last moment by saying something unfortunate to the press.”

In relative terms, this was trivial, yet Mycroft’s words were the spark that set the fireworks off in John’s head: tomorrow his life was going to change, massively. Some of it to what it used to be a year and a half ago, some of it to what it’d never been before. And at the centre of it was going to be Sherlock—again. Tomorrow was a box of fireworks itself, exuberant or dangerous, or both; most days with Sherlock were like that, and you didn’t know exactly what the box contained, but it was never empty.

Not just tomorrow but today already. Yesterday, too. Sherlock was back, filling up the sky from the word go as if he didn’t have any other way of existence.

Oblivious to John’s tremulous insights, Sherlock voiced his objections in a familiar put upon tone. “I don’t intend to make a speech in the Parliament, Mycroft. I want to keep things quiet. Besides, oughtn’t you to speak to Lestrade about the murder attempt? Meddle with Scotland Yard’s finest for a change.”
John could swear that whatever was happening between Mycroft and Greg at present, there was a momentary truce during which long-suffering gazes were exchanged. Mycroft’s fingers ghosted over his umbrella’s handle as if he was just getting the feel of it, then he clasped them around it and looked at Sherlock. “Kitchen, Sherlock. Now.”

He eyed Sam and John who were both standing by the kitchen portal. Sam shifted, looking around awkwardly and for once making John not envy his huge form. He walked over to Dean who had moved to stand in front of the fireplace and murmured something to him. John didn’t hear what, busy with trying to find himself an empty spot in a space that suddenly seemed chock full of people and furniture strategically placed to obstruct John’s movements. He nearly collided with Sherlock; both stepped away to let the other pass, which would have worked if they hadn’t mirrored each other. They did it again, to the other side, then John grabbed Sherlock’s upper arm to stop him from moving while he took a step to the left clearing a path for him. Their eyes met briefly then Sherlock straightened up and followed Mycroft to the kitchen, closing the doors.

John could still feel the phantom muscle of Sherlock’s arm in his palm, accentuated by the feel of just the shirt’s thin layer of cotton. There’d been some definite working out going on, boxing probably—it was one of the few physical activities Sherlock enjoyed. John could live with that. It could have been cocaine.

Ten minutes later Mycroft and Sherlock reappeared from the kitchen, faces smooth. John got up automatically, cutting short his on-going chat with Greg about the events in the last couple of days. Sam and Dean were in the other part of the room, doing something with the ritualistic bowl and the incantations, while talking quietly between themselves.

“I’m off,” Mycroft said, left hand pushing away his coat and suit jacket to insinuate itself into his trousers pocket. He walked over to the front door, then looked back to Greg. “Would you like a lift?”

“Ah…no. Thanks,” Greg said. “There’s a car waiting downstairs for me.” He had pivoted in his seat to look back to Mycroft. The two of them appeared as if they’d been captured in an illustration to an old Greek myth—one where people weren’t allowed to look back yet they did.

Mycroft just nodded his acknowledgement of Greg’s words and was almost over the flat’s threshold when Sherlock spoke.

“The violin didn’t work,” he said. John shot him a glance, wondering whether Sherlock hadn’t saved this for his farewell salvo on purpose. Sure enough the words stopped Mycroft in his tracks. He turned, a fine line between his eyebrows. His eyes roamed the now cleared up scene of the ritual again, then lifted to Sam.

“What did?”

Sam’s nod in John’s direction was jerky. “John.”

It was a sight to behold, seeing Mycroft Holmes truly taken by surprise. Maybe it was John’s overactive imagination, fuelled by exhaustion and the peculiar atmosphere of the hour, but he had the feeling Mycroft didn’t seem unhappy with the experience. He thought not for the first time that the same rules that applied to Sherlock applied to Mycroft, too, if not more. Mycroft might have his Machiavellian plans of world domination to counteract boredom, or maybe his dispassionate nature prevented him from suffering from it as acutely as Sherlock did, but John doubted that Mycroft always revelled in going through life permanently two steps ahead of everyone.
Now something sparked in his cool blue eyes; John could almost believe he was impressed. “That was rather…inspired of you, Mr Winchester,” he said.

If John had expected Sam to gloat he was wrong. Sam tucked in his own hands in his jeans pockets, shoulders bunching forward in typical fashion. “I guess,” he said. “It was very lucky for sure.”

“Well, it was certainly lucky for Sherlock to have you do it,” Mycroft said. “In my experience luck has little to do with decision making in crisis.” He turned to look Sam squarely in the face. “Thank you,” he said, flat but sincere.

Sam was silent for a long moment. “That’s okay,” he said at last. His left eyebrow lifted. “Does that mean Dean and I are allowed to go to the Duke’s house?”

Mycroft rolled his eyes in a manner that reminded John of the way he used to exit their home on regular basis, then rotated on his feet and disappeared down the stairs.

***

Sam woke up feeling thirsty, groggy and kind of bloated, but most of all forlorn. Over the years he’d heard many a comment on his temperament, ranging from ‘emo kid’ to ‘existentially chagrined’. The last had come from a writer who’d travelled America *a la* Kerouac. Sam had known Amelia for a week, when Chad arrived. He kept trying to strike up conversations with Sam, making him wonder what an aspiring author would want with the handyman who didn’t say much and hardly ever smiled—Sam was under no illusion that all those comments on his temperament were off the mark, and the way he’d been back then, disjointed and lost, had worsened things to no end. Sam had kept himself to himself, but he darted out of his shell from time to time, tempted by the guy’s interesting conversation openers. Chad was flaky and kind of whimsical, with an inexhaustible encyclopaedia of a brain and a keen eye for the human condition. It was his ability to point out random details, somehow joining them into something wholesome which spoke to Sam on a deeper, subliminal level, that had been the real draw.

Chad was the only person apart from Amelia and Amelia’s father to whom Sam had told about Dean’s absence. That conversation had taken place a couple of days before Chad had finally moved on, having outstayed all his initial plans for the small, drab place in Texas. It was the same conversation that prompted his inspired characterisation of Sam as existentially chagrined. Sam had huffed a surprised laugh at it, eyes burning with a completely unexpected sting of emotion and Chad, who’d had a few shots of tequila in him, just sat under the dusky sky and drank in Sam’s face, a fitting chagrined smile on his lips.

The heaviness that seemed to have settled in Sam’s gut didn’t abate at the memory. It was the first time he’d thought of Chad in ages and he wondered where life had taken him. Chad hadn’t wanted to tell him his penname. Maybe he was finished with his book. Maybe one day soon it would be published and Sam wouldn’t know. He sometimes felt like his life was one long, winding tunnel in a massive, intricate maze of them. He moved forward all the time, only catching a glimpse of the openings of other tunnels in passing; once in a while taking a step into one before he was pulled back into his own, as if all other places repelled him like a foreign body.

He dragged a hand over his face, letting the calluses catch at the skin. His watch told him it was barely half past seven. Dean was asleep on the sofa, or so Sam thought—he could only see the back of his head. Maybe his brother had his own thoughts to nurse upon waking up; as different as they were in that respect, Dean himself had told him that worrying was part of who he was. God knew they had plenty on their plate. Sam felt a momentary pang of envy at the thought of what kind of
things Dean might be mulling over. He was sure that they were tangible and very much goal oriented; straightforward things like keeping Sam safe, killing one more demon, getting back to Kevin to ensure his protection.

Then again, maybe Dean worried about abandoning Benny cold turkey. Or about Cas. Sam had heard him pray to Cas last night, just a few clipped words showing Dean’s resignation that his prayer would remain unanswered.

But Sam…Sam couldn’t even put what he felt under ‘worries’. His experiences had no names, and he didn’t feel up to giving them any.

He sighed, gently pushing his comforter away, then sat on his old, uncomfortable bed. His elbows dug in his thighs and his head hung between his shoulders. He stared at the floor for a moment, eyes tracing the scratches on the hardwood, while he battled emotional disorientation and persistent sadness closing in. He had to get up, do something. The metaphor of the tunnel and the maze returned again, uninvited. He didn’t move.

A delicate knock came from the flat door, making Sam lift his head sharply. He got up, eyes going to Dean, but his brother’s breathing hadn’t changed. Sam padded softly to the door and opened it.

John looked up at him, eyes big and cloudy grey in the dim light of the corridor.

“Hey,” Sam said quietly. “What’s up?”

John shifted from foot to foot and quickly looked sideways to the landing, before returning his gaze to Sam.

“I made some coffee.” The coffee machine Sam had bought was still upstairs. “Do you want a cup?”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “I really do. Thanks.”

“Oh if you’re up we could go out?” John added quickly, thumb indicating. “See if Speedy’s opened and go for a stroll?”

Sam tucked some errand strands of hair behind his ears and nodded.

“Let me just put something on,” he said and opened the door wider. He heard John step in behind him.

***

It was Sunday. Both John and Sam had lost track on the days of the week, which found them disappointed at close to eight in front of Speedy’s closed doors. The guy who cooked—another John—saw them from inside and took pity on them. They picked up a coffee each and a couple of apple tarts before taking off to the park. On their way out they bumped into Katie, arriving at work looking fresh despite her sleepy eyes. She asked Sam how long Dean was staying and Sam found himself honestly to God failing to find any response to that, truthful or false. John had looked at him distractedly at first, but then his concerned gaze joined Katie’s expectant one. Eventually John was the one to break the silence, telling Katie that there were so many things they were all planning to do that their heads were spinning. “Right?” he added, looking at Sam intently with a smile, and Sam nodded vigorously, parroting John’s ‘right’ a couple of times.
In the park they walked straight to the rose gardens, sipping their coffees and braving the first proper morning chills in days. With every step they took Sam could feel his mind straighten its bent lines, until there was some semblance of peace in him. It didn’t equate lightness, but it was a major improvement.

They picked a bench facing the weak October sun. All around them there were plenty of roses still in bloom, but the air was nowhere close to as scented as it’d been in the summer. For ten minutes they ate and drank and chatted about random stuff. John told Sam that there used to be only black swans in the lakes, Sam told him that he’d never worn All Stars trainers, and they both commented on Mrs Hudson’s excellent housekeeping skills, which led to agreeing on her glowing complexion post-spa trip.

Silence reined for a few moments after the last comment, then Sam spoke again.

“She was very happy to see Sherlock,” he said. “A little shaken, but…” He shrugged ineloquently.

John’s smile was self-deprecating. “Took it better than me, is what you’re saying.” Sam opened his mouth to protest. “But yeah,” John added, squinting ahead. “She was. She’s always been very fond of Sherlock. He’s fond of her, too, in his own way. Really fond.”

Sam waited for him to continue, but John just bowed his head, studying the ground between his feet. Sam hesitated.

“How are you two doing?” he asked.

John didn’t look up, just pushed his bottom lip upward and scratched at his chin. “We’re okay. It’s just…” He suddenly laughed, head jolting up with the sound. He looked up at Sam over his shoulder. “I went to his bedroom at half past five this morning,” he confessed. “I woke up and it hit me again, and for a moment I just…I had to go and check, you know.” His smile made the tips of the light hairs on his unshaven face gleam under the white rays of sunshine. “I had an excuse and everything, in case he was awake.”

“Was he?”

“Surprisingly, no.” John looked ahead again, face pale and small against the burst of pink of the rose bushes in the background. He remained silent and Sam wondered whether he was taken back to the moment he’d peered into Sherlock’s bedroom to find him there, alive and asleep. As if hearing Sam’s thoughts John said, “That made me sound like a proper creep, didn’t it?”

“Dude, I’m not judging.”

Sam was no stranger to checking on people while they slept, just to make sure they were there, warm and breathing. He’d done his fair share of creepy stuff; half of them would probably send John run away screaming. Then again they’d been through a thing or two together and John had still come knocking on his door this morning.

“How did I—” John began, then rephrased. “What happened during the ritual? I don’t remember anything.”

Sam pulled an apologetic face. “Sorry, man, no idea.” He tried to recall anything unusual, but it had all been too quick, too narrow, too…
“Shit, I was scared,” Sam breathed out.

John straightened up and looked at him, waiting. Sam didn’t look back, just kept shaking his head, repeating, “I was so scared.”

John hummed and took a sip of coffee. His free hand was splayed open on his leg, palm up. “Sam,” he started, then paused. Sam’s eyebrows rose quizzically.

John gave a solemn nod. “Thanks, for doing all that. Sorry you got mixed up, but…For what it’s worth, I really appreciate it.”

Sam fidgeted, John’s gratitude warming him up more than the sun and his black coffee combined. “Don’t mention it,” he said. He waited for the momentum to shift, then told John in all seriousness, “I’m kind of dreading what’s coming next, though. Having had a taste of Sherlock’s…crazy schemes.”

John seemed genuinely torn. “I really don’t—I mean, it’s bad to even think what might happen, because if there was ever an evil demon, Moriarty’s got to be it. If you decide to keep out I’ll definitely understand, and it looks like Dean’s not too keen on getting involved.” Once again Sam was about to protest, but John drove right forward. “And in a way it’ll put my mind at rest. God knows I worry enough about Sherlock to have to worry about you, too. But.” John’s shoulders lifted and dropped abruptly, his face betraying some inner self-flagellation. “I won’t lie to you,” he said. “I’ll feel much better knowing that Sherlock’s facing Moriarty with your help. And Dean’s.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Sam told him quickly, afraid he wouldn’t have his say. “You don’t have to worry.”

John’s smile was so bitter-sweet, if it was a bruise it’d been all colours. His face quickly grew serious and his eyes met Sam’s. “Are you sure?”

“John, you don’t even have to ask me that.”


They lapsed into silence again. Sam had a lot more to say on the topic, such as enquiring about James Moriarty’s personality again or about what John thought Sherlock had found in Moran’s lair across the street. Or asking John for his word that he’d try to get Sherlock to be as forthcoming as possible. Or making John promise that if they came to crossroads he would follow Sam’s lead, not Sherlock’s, no matter how brilliant Sherlock was or how deep a bond he shared with John. It wasn’t jealousy. Okay, maybe some of it was coming from competitiveness—Sam was the younger child after all—but it was really about their chance to do this right and escape unscathed. It was about John being caught between a rock and a supernatural place, and Sam was realistic—he and Dean might have been the stuff of nightmares, but on the flip side, they were pros.

Yet he said nothing. Suddenly he felt an irrational wave of possessiveness of his time with John. They could talk about all that back in the flat. Here, it was as if they’d escaped into a bubble for just a moment; for just a moment Sam could pretend his life wasn’t once again about being a demon hunter; a good, oiled up tool in the fight against monsters.

John shuffled next to him. “You look,” he started, searching the word with evident care for its accuracy. “Subdued. I don’t know, sort of…sad.” He paused. “Is everything all right?”
Sam wanted to tell John the truth so he took his time trying to get to it. “I don’t know,” he said at last to John’s patient face. “I don’t think so.”

“Is it your brother? You can tell me it’s none of my—”

“It might be about Dean,” Sam said, the words leaving space for air as they left him. “But it’s not just…I don’t know, man.” Sam squeezed the carton cup in his hand so tightly it caved in in his grip. With small alarm he felt words bubble up in him out of nowhere. He had an impulse to stop them but they pushed on, unassailable.

Maybe he wanted to hear them, too; not just share with John but hear himself. He sure as hell could use a sympathetic ear and how often was there one around? How long was this one going to be around?

Sam took a sip of his coffee, cursing the cold for taking away the scorching burn of the liquid—his throat was aching for it.

“It’s like,” he began in a murmur. John was perfectly still next to him. “Sometimes it’s like…it’s like I don’t even know why I’m unhappy. I mean I do know; there’s a freaking mile long list of reasons. But it’s more than the collective sum of shit that had hit the fan at one point or another. And I don’t want to complain, man, I really don’t. I mean it’s been rough, but it could have been worse. Other people have it worse, I know that.” Sam gave a reasonable nod. John looked on the verge of speaking, but he let Sam carry on.

“I mean right now, I can’t even tell you why I can’t just suck it up.” Sam was feeling both bitter with himself about that, but oddly angry, too; angry with the constant pressure to suck it up that had always come from everywhere, all the time: Dad, Dean, other hunters, fucking life. Himself as well, of course, he wasn’t stupid.

“The truth is that it feels like I constantly have to watch it. Like I can’t just be. Like I’m inevitably going to screw up or end in a very bad place, because there’s so much I need to watch, John, all the time, and I feel like it’ll all crush me like a bug.”

Sam was running out of breath and was shocked to find his eyes had begun stinging. He took a hasty sip of coffee, teeth biting into the cardboard rim, denting it with ease.

John shifted on the bench, turning to him more. He looked wary, but kind.

“Are you just talking about demons and Hell and that sort of thing?” he asked. “When you say you need to keep watch all the time? Or do you mean something…I don’t know.” John caught Sam with his gaze, eyes sinking into Sam’s as if seeking their bottom. He licked his lips.

“I sometimes scare myself,” he said flatly. “With how I think, you know. About some things, and how far my boundaries can stretch. My perceptions and reactions, sometimes they’re…not the healthiest kind.” John’s empty hand flexed convulsively and he looked at it. “I mean we all have things deep inside and watching them, watching ourselves all the time, to add to everything else…It’s got to be exhausting.”

Sam searched for words to respond, but contented himself with just a nod. Truth was a simple thing and it was such a relief to take it simply, too.

He let his mind wander back to the past, just skim over moments of it, and something began taking
shape. He cleared his throat, watching the indentation marks his teeth had left on the cup. “I don’t think I ever managed to move past some things,” he confessed, then stopped, unplanned, realizing with a painful pang that he’d hit upon the one thing he’d never told John. He’d never confessed that he had demon blood in him. He’d told John about his later addiction to it and about Ruby, but he’d never told him that a powerful yellow-eyed demon had put it in Sam’s blood when Sam had been just six months old, on the same night that same demon had killed their mother and turned their family’s story into the kind of story where everyone cried after the last page.

His mind veered off to something also painful and private, but safer nonetheless. It was no surprise that whatever scary well Sam was looking down into, he always reached out for Dean blindly, even if it was only in his mind.

“I wonder,” he began again, “if I ever moved past not being able to save Dean from his deal—back when he’d sold his soul for me, when he had one year. I don’t know if I told you—No, I’m pretty sure I didn’t. There was this moment when…It’s hard to explain but we were stuck in this reality where I had to re-live the same day, hundreds of times. Each time Dean died. I had to watch him die over and over and over again.” Sam’s neck was beginning to turn into an iron rod, but he kept going. “Turned out it was a lesson someone wanted me to learn. That I could never save Dean. I had to live without my brother for six months in that world, John. What I became…How bad it got…” Sam stopped, trying to hush the throbbing in his stomach. He hated thinking about that year so much, few things compared to it.

“But then I had him back,” he said. “And every day there was something to remind me he was living on borrowed time. Everything we did, I’d forget about the deal for just a moment and we’d laugh, and then it would hit me again that soon….” Sam shook his head, eyes welling up again. He looked around; they were alone and he let his breaths grow shallower. “I was so helpless and he was there, within reach, but it was like it made it worse.” Sam gulped, felt the spill. “Until he did die, and went to Hell, and there was nothing I could do about it.” He was surprised his gaze didn’t make John flinch.

He hid his face in the crook of his elbow for a few long moments, just floating in the space between pain and release. John was quiet next to him, his chest lifting and falling visibly but steadily.

Sam took a breath. “That was when I started drinking the demon blood,” he said. He made sure it wasn’t muffled. “And last time when Dean disappeared, when he was in Purgatory, but I didn’t know, and I didn’t look for him…You heard him yesterday, right? He’d never get it, you know, and why should he? He’s a doer, he’d have gone and turned the world on its head until he’d found me. But I’m not—I just drove around and it was like everything had finally caught up with me, dragging me down until I thought I’d…I don’t know, grind to a halt and never be able to move again.” Sam wiped his face quickly. “I was in a…kind of a vacuum, I guess. I wonder if maybe I didn’t try looking for Dean, because I was afraid that I would screw up again, but also because on some level I wanted to try and be without him, independent, because…”

It’s like I can’t be on my own. It’s like I can never find a place.

He didn’t say it; he knew he was rambling and he probably wasn’t making sense, because he didn’t even know where he was going with this. It was as if the words were born directly on his lips, skipping the womb of his mind.

But there was still patience in John’s gaze, and something even more precious than understanding—the wish to understand. His eyes were getting bluer by the minute with the advancement of the day.
“Sam, whatever you think you’ve done,” he said, “whatever bad things, you’ve also…You saved the world, for God’s sake. You’re nothing short of a hero and it’s too bad there’s no one to celebrate that. You.”

Sam smiled at John through the blur in his eyes, then tried for wry. “You told me once…Um, you said Sherlock accused you that you wanted to make him into a hero, when he wasn’t one. Looks like it’s a personality trait of yours.”

John humoured him with a genuine small smile, but the tilt of his head was stubborn. “You’re both wrong.”

A few moments of silence passed during which they both let their eyes roam the splendour of colour in front of them.

“I’ve been thinking these last few days,” Sam said, voice quieter, “and I can’t believe it’s only hit me now. I’m so lost without my brother. I can no longer trust myself when he’s not around; I don’t even know who I am anymore or what I really want. I loved Amelia, but I came here and stayed here, and sure, I was pissed at Dean, but then the more time went on, the more I didn’t really think about her. Doesn’t mean I don’t love her. I’d do anything to protect her. But it’s like she and I, it was a dream, this distant, lovely dream. But Dean…”

Sam was reeling with the exertion of his impromptu monologues, but John’s unswerving attention was like cool mist spraying on overheated skin. He gave a light shiver, something crumbling in him to leave simplicity in its wake once again.

“I can’t be without my brother, John,” he said, his own voice scaring him. “I don’t even want to think about what would happen if he’s really gone one day, not coming back. What would become of me, what might become of me, it’s—”

“No,” Sam said, shaking his head with fervour. “No, you don’t know that. There’s this…I’ve done so much wrong, and I’ve failed Dean so many—”

“What wrong?” John was scowling at him now. “We’ve all done wrong, Sam. None of us is a saint. And okay, fine. Fine.” John took a visible turn to an agreeable demeanour. “Maybe I don’t know everything about you, you’re right. Maybe we’ve not known each other for long. But I’d like to think that—I think that I do know you, and whatever you are, you’re not a bad man, all right?”

John’s whole body seemed to hum with his conviction. “You’re a thinker,” he went on. “You think, far too much sometimes. You might get muddled up, but you try so hard; you really do, you know. That counts for something. You’re strong and you’re one of the smartest people I know, and God help me, I know a lot of very smart people. It’s actually depressing.”

They exchanged thin smiles, loaded with the weight of the moment, then John continued, sounding heart-warmingly matter-of-fact. “I believe that your heart is in the right place and that you won’t turn evil. Or…turn into a lesser man than the man I know.”

He took a breath, eyes flicking over Sam’s face, while he was clearly considering his next words.

“As for Dean, I don’t know what you two have,” he said finally. “I can’t pretend I fully comprehend the ins and outs of your relationship. I mean there are things you and I have been through that I think
I’ll need months to have them sink in.” John pursed his lips forward, tight, thumb and forefinger running a few times on either side of his mouth. His eyes turned introspective. “But I do have some understanding on how someone can make us better, make us the best version of us; make everything better. And how they can take it away.”

Sam felt a moment of profound security realizing that while he was navel-gazing he’d missed that if anyone should understand, intimately, it would be John. Perhaps that was a key reason why he’d become Sam’s friend and why Sam was sitting here with him.

“I don’t know how I feel about it now,” John went on. “I mean if you’d asked me straight after Sherlock jumped from that rooftop…” He stared at the distance, then shook his head resolutely. “But no, you know what? I have never, ever regretted meeting him. Not even when it got really fucking appalling, that’s how bad it felt.” His gaze returned to Sam. “If that’s what you and Dean are for each other, then that’s your life. Yes, there’s a lot of baggage, but it also means…I don’t know. Connection? I don’t need to tell you. Some things, just—” John shook his head with slow deliberation, lips trembling in preparation of his words. “Don’t fight it, is all I’m saying. It doesn’t matter whether it’s ‘normal’, or ‘healthy’—whatever that means. It’s your life. It’s what it is. There’s something to be said about acceptance, you know.”

It’d been years since the last time Sam had had the urge to just throw his arm around someone other than his brother and hold them there. He slowly lowered his hand to John’s shoulder, ending on a light clap and lingering squeeze. He let go when John nodded in almost military fashion.

They finished their coffee in silence, watching people begin to populate the park, then headed back.
As soon as Sam and John walked back through the front door Dean’s urgent voice filled the air. “Sam, is that you?”

Sam looked momentarily disoriented until John caught up with the reason why: they could hear Dean from upstairs, while Sam had clearly expected him to still be in the basement flat. John on the other hand hadn’t thought twice about it. Curious that on some level he was still used to sharing close quarters with many people, all of whom migrated into each other’s space fluidly. Another example that you left the Army, but that didn’t mean the Army left you.

Sam called back in confirmation as they made their way up the stairs. At the landing outside the flat they were faced with a grumpy-looking Dean Winchester, clad in one of Sam’s more hideous blue and yellow plaid shirts. His arms were crossed over his chest.

“Where the hell have you been?” he demanded.

“The park,” Sam said. “I left you a note.”

Dean drove right over that reasonable bit of communication. “What were you doing in the park at ass o’clock at dawn?” The effect of his scalding was somewhat ruined by the way he had to actually look up to Sam now that Sam was standing close to him.

“Picking flowers for daisy chains,” was Sam’s retort. “We had coffee and kind of just sat around,” he added, shrugging.

“Just because you’ve got that weirdo demon…repellent now,” Dean began, but Sam didn’t let him finish. “I had the knife, Dean,” he said as he walked past him into the sitting room.

Dean was left scowling at his brother’s back. He half-turned to John, expression going from blame to something like solicitation for back up. John gave him a nod that probably made him look like he was suffering from neck pains, then scurried into the sitting room.

Sherlock looked up to him from his chair, alert and obscenely colourful.

John’s heart stuttered to a split-second halt. It took him a moment to realize that the room was filled with light: all windows finally thrown wide open, the doors to the kitchen, too, from where more light was streaming in. Like a character from an ancient fable Sherlock had returned from the underground world of the dead and had fittingly done it in the midnight hour. Since then he hadn’t left the flat and it had been a place of shadows, curtains always drawn in. Until this moment.

John took a couple of steps towards him without thinking, then stopped again. Sherlock’s eyebrows rose lightly. His expression of innocent inquisitiveness teamed up with the chestnut tint of his curls, set off by the rays of sunshine coming from behind, to make happy wonderment bubble up in John’s chest.
“Enjoyed the walk?” Sherlock asked.

“Ah…yes.” John nodded, straightened up. “Yes, it was good.”

“Good.”

Their eye contact held for a beat, then John cleared his throat and cast his gaze around for distraction. It was easily provided by the sight of the numerous printouts spread across the coffee table. From what John could tell they were all of women who looked like fashion models. His eyes fell on his laptop, open on the floor next to Sherlock. On the screen there was a video running without sound. It was from a website and it looked like a fashion show.

John pointed at it and then at the table. “What’s all this, then?”

“Dude,” Dean whispered loudly right behind him. Sam, who’d disappeared into the kitchen, showed up with a glass of water and leaned against the kitchen portal. John, not sure who Dean was talking to, turned around to find Dean’s eyes shift back and forth between him and Sam.

“Thank God you came back,” Dean continued in a conspiratorial voice as if Sherlock couldn’t hear him. Sherlock shot him a look, lips thinning without real spite. John frowned, confused.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“He was watching fashion shows for like half an hour,” Dean said, eyes shifting comically in their sockets. “Then he hit the internet for…I don’t know, make-up? Hair?” Dean waved a hand above his head to illustrate his last point. John thought that any hairdo like that would have been a complicated affair.

He looked over to Sam to find his incomprehension shared.

“I was working,” Sherlock said, then stretched up, prolonged and self-indulgent, his grey, luxurious-looking gown falling open to reveal he was still in his t-shirt and pyjama bottoms. John spared a thought about the Holmes brothers’ priorities if a dressing gown had made its way from Mycroft to Sherlock via the ‘first aid’ package of belongings with which the violin had been sent.

“Yes, that’s what you say,” Dean told Sherlock. Sherlock’s tsk suggested the exchange had already taken place in some form.

“I was waiting for J—for them to come back,” Sherlock replied to Dean crossly. “Before I explain. Repetition is boring, even when I’m the one repeating myself.”


“The what now?” Dean asked.

“It was in the papers a few days ago,” John told both him and Sam. “A young model was found dead at the backstage of a fashion show here in London.” He turned to Sherlock. “How did you even get around to that?”

“I woke up. You were gone.” Sherlock paused. “I had questions, but no one was here to answer them.” He directed his second sentence at Dean, thinly veiled accusation in his tone. Dean seemed
startled by these sudden developments, then glared at Sherlock. For some reason the effect continued to be more comical than anything else. “I was bored,” Sherlock finished, ”so I solved the case.”

“You did not solve a murder case just sitting there.” Dean's incredulity was doing a poor job of hiding his disparagement. “I was watching you.” He turned to Sam. “I was watching him,” he reinstated. “And he was watching those chicks on the laptop, frowning at them. And then he got all smarmy, and he was kind of salivating, dude. He was on his phone, too, I don’t want to think why.”

“I wasn’t salivating,” Sherlock said with indignation.

Dean took a few steps toward him, lifting a hand in a friendly gesture. “Look, I thought you were batting for the other team…”

“Dean,” Sam said warningly.

“But if you want to get your rocks off by watching some skinny chicks,” Dean continued over him, “you don’t have to hide and come up with piss poor excuses.”

Two thin lines appeared between Sherlock’s eyebrows. Dean smiled at him, arms opening as he tilted his head. He wriggled his own eyebrows suggestively. Sherlock rolled his eyes.

Dean’s smile suddenly dimmed, gaze turning child-like, his brain obviously busy computing. John watched with stupid fascination Dean’s face transform again, something sheepish yet naughty taking over it. His smile was back, although uncertain, his still lined up forehead complimenting it.

He hunched a bit. “Is it the make-up?” he asked, pitching his voice low. “Like a drag thing?”

“Dean,” Sam said again, louder.

“You’re really into guys, aren’t you?” Dean said, his inappropriate curiosity making him likable against all odds. Or maybe it was his entire obliviousness of the concept of personal boundaries.

“Dean, cut it out!” Sam was moving from his spot in his brother’s direction, giving the impression that he was going to drag him aside or smack a hand over his mouth. Dean looked at him, defiant. “What? You weren’t the one stuck in here with him in Bizarroland!”

Sherlock got up with a sigh so audible, Moran would have heard it from across the street. “Pick your mind up from the gutter, Mr Winchester,” he said.

“Hey, I wasn’t judging,” Dean told him, offended. “And you can call me Dean,” he added, shaking his head when Sherlock looked at him as if Dean had suggested he called him the Pope.

“Did you really solve it?” John asked. “The case.”

Sherlock stood with his back to the fireplace, fingers playing with the loosened belt of the gown. “I did.”

Without realizing John had reached his armchair and was lowering himself into it, his eagerness piroetting with the joy that this was really happening. Sherlock held his eyes all the way down, then looked at Dean; some silent dialogue took place, at the end of which Dean squinted at him with suspicion but walked around the sofa to take a seat. Sam sank down next to him.
“Waris Ayoko,” Sherlock began with aplomb when he had three pairs of eyes on him. “Twenty years old. Originally from Sudan, parents came over here when she was ten. Found dead four days ago after the fashion show of a new African designer, part of some African culture week—not important. Her body was in one of the bathroom stalls of Merripit House where the show took place. The coroner’s verdict was overdose; a real cocktail apparently, injected. No signs of struggle. However, there were enough statements saying that Miss Ayoko wasn’t using to quickly dismiss an accidental overdose. There was one suspect only, the girl’s ex-boyfriend. A catwalk photographer, Turner ‘Turn’ Right—no, I’m not joking—but there were at least a dozen witnesses to confirm his whereabouts from the moment Waris was last seen until the moment her body was discovered.”

Sherlock’s eyes flicked from John to Dean, whose lips John noticed were beginning to part. John himself felt like he was being carried downstream along a river, the waters smooth and familiar yet the thrill of descent still making his stomach swoop down.

Sherlock took a breath for his second round. “The show was well attended, but not particularly well covered in terms of security. There were some cameras, all of them were pointed at the models. It was a pandemonium backstage, which apparently is typical for this sort of event. So, with witnesses accounts unreliable as a rule, in this case they were laughably so. The only thing that everyone could confirm with certainty was that Waris Ayoko had made her final appearance on stage for the night. All clothes are put on racks in sets of outfits and each outfit is assigned to a model in advance. Four people helped Waris into and out of her last outfit and checked up her hair and make-up. The video footage shows her clearly both on the stage and exiting. Once it was confirmed that Mr Right couldn’t have killed her, all further enquiries about possible motive hit a dead end. The reason he was suspected in the first place was that he and Waris had been on bad terms for some time, with speculations about the cause ranging from jealousy to an illegitimate child—apparently Waris disappeared from the spotlight for five months earlier this year.”

Sherlock paused and John jumped in. “Had she given birth?”

“No.”

“Right. No motive, and the one person who might have one, also has an alibi.” John could feel his scalp tingle with the intensity with which he was looking up at Sherlock. “So who was it? Who killed her?”

Sherlock skipped a second before replying, silk in his voice. “The ex-boyfriend did.”

“Then how…? You said there were lots of eyewitnesses.”

“It still doesn’t mean they can’t all be wrong.”

“Hold on.” Dean abruptly leaned forward. “Is this our kind of thing? How can a guy be at two places at the same time? Is it a shifter?”

Sherlock stared at him pityingly. “Good God, how you still manage to form full sentences is beyond me.”

“Hey!” Dean said, index finger at the ready to be shoved up in Sherlock’s face.

“I suppose your experiences have brainwashed you,” Sherlock went on, “but do try to exert yourself once in a while and find a logical explanation for any baffling phenomenon, before going for the easy one.”
Everyone started talking at the same time: John saying Sherlock’s name, Sam saying Dean’s, while Dean was talking to Sherlock, angry. “The easy one?” he was saying. “All right, how about we swap for one day and see how easy you find—”

“Dean, drop it.” Sam’s voice was even softer on the heels of his brother’s. John was struck for a hundredth time by how incredibly well Sam managed to blend into still quietness for someone of his size and looks.

Then it hit him, so hard that his head spun: Sherlock was the same. Sherlock was capable of becoming a fixture of the background, then flip a switch and suddenly it was as if he was the only person in the room.

Now both men were impossible to miss.

“We do check for other explanations first,” Sam told Sherlock, attitude light years away from that of the sensitive bloke whose emotions had gotten the better of him back in the park. “It might seem strange to you, but we’re not exactly keen on driving five thousand miles across the country for nothing.”

There was no response from Sherlock; he and Sam engaged in a brief staring contest that John found himself breaking.

“Okay, Sherlock? How could all the witnesses be wrong?”

Sherlock took a second longer to avert his eyes to John. “I wasn’t talking about the witnesses who provided the ex-boyfriend’s alibi.”

“Then what…” John blinked under Sherlock’s expectant gaze, the answer shifting into sight. “The girl,” he said slowly. “But that’s even more people. You said there were cameras.”

“Yes, but cameras lie, too.” Sherlock suddenly bent over, rummaging through the printouts on the table. He picked up a couple of pages and handed them to John.

John had never been too keen on the kind of fashion that was considered hot designer stuff and made it to the ludicrously expensive shops on New Bond Street. The pictures in front of him now solidified his opinion: clothes impossible to wear anywhere in public without attracting everyone’s attention and possibly that of birds collecting shiny objects.

“What am I looking at?” he asked.

Sherlock pressed his lips, a spark of pleading in his eyes. “The make-up, John. Look at their faces.”

Now that he knew where to focus John noticed that the women weren’t merely wearing lipstick and some colour on their eyelids. Their faces were really heavily made-up, the overall effect of something vaguely ethnic. African ethnic—continental Africa, if he had to guess. John wasn’t sure whether that was of any significance, but it was the only specific thing he could notice.

Dean was almost sprawled across his brother’s lap in his attempt to look at the pictures, too. Sam hadn’t even scooted over; he was trying to feign disinterest, while squirming and looking down at Dean in embarrassed annoyance.
“Okay, they can give Sammy nightmares with those faces,” Dean said, dragging himself back to sitting position. “They look like clowns,” he clarified at Sherlock’s puzzled brow. “My brother has this thing about clowns…”

Sam shot Dean the thin-lipped look of censorship and Dean appeared duly chastised. “Never mind,” he mumbled. “What’s the big deal with the make-up?”

“Is it the African motif?” John asked. “It looks, I don’t know—continental?”

Sherlock shook his head. “No. It’s simpler than that. Think about it, John. With that kind of coverage on their faces, who can tell with absolute certainty it was Waris who had stepped out with her final outfit?”

“Oh, come on, man, that’s ridiculous.” Dean scrunched up his face in disbelief. “How can anyone think one chick is a whole other chick?”

“Ah!” Sherlock said with small triumph. “This is where political correctness comes into the picture.” His hands began dancing with his words. “All models were black, all had their faces made-up. What white person in twenty-first century London would risk saying anything that could be even remotely interpreted as, ‘They all look the same to me,’ hmm?”

Sherlock waited for his words to gather the inward gasps of the auditorium as they were all hit by the truthfulness of his statement. “The police didn’t even think to use their facial recognition software,” he said, quieter. “They had the signed accounts of four people saying it had been Waris up there on the catwalk.”

John was the first to speak. “How did you first think it was someone else in her place?”

“As usual. I observed, John.”

“All right, show off,” Dean told him. “Cut the song and dance and spit it out.”

John felt as if a small marshmallow was melting in his belly at the thought that no one was better audience to Sherlock than him. It wasn’t just wishful thinking on his part. It was a fact that he was able to state to himself with uncommon certainty, not only because of the deflated look Sherlock had just given Dean in response or because of the way he had pointedly avoided Sam ever since they came back from the park. It was in the way Sherlock just seemed to vibrate to a different frequency when he turned to John, to which John tuned in without any conscious effort.

“I had examined Waris’s face thoroughly on a few close-ups,” Sherlock told Dean, searching through the photos on the table again to pass one over to John. “You can see two indentation marks on her right cheekbone: one horizontal, one vertical. It’s an African tradition, a tribal mark—in this case from Eastern Sudan, which of course was Waris’s family origin. This here,” Sherlock handed John a second page, but it was snatched by Dean from under John’s fingers, “is a close up of the
model who wore the last outfit Waris was supposed to have worn.” Sherlock bent over, finger dragging over a specific spot on the model’s cheek. “It took me a while to find a good, clear shot from the videos, but you can see clearly on this one that the marks aren’t there.”

The girl on the photo was different from the dead girl, but in his heart John couldn’t swear he would have distinguished them without scrutiny or prior familiarity with at least one of them—not with the similar hairdos and the heavy make-up.

Sherlock straightened up and rolled his shoulders. “From there it was easy. All I had to do was find out what girls in the show were of the same height and weight as Waris. Turns out they all share similar measurements, but there were only three that were close to a perfect match. I was ready to tell which one it was just by looking at her shots on her agency’s website, but they’re models: their job is to be chameleons. A quick background inspection revealed that the same girl I had singled out—a Miss Olivia M’Bow—is Mr Right’s current girlfriend.” Sherlock’s lips pulled into a musing bow. “I guess he has a type.”

Dean made a quick, gurgling sound in his throat. He was looking up at Sherlock with undisguised interest, exactly as if Sherlock was the star of a one-man show.

“Waris was likely gone to rehab earlier this year,” Sherlock continued. “My money is on Mr Right using his access as a fashion photographer to act as a dealer. He’s been working during the New York Fashion week in the last three years and the internet says there was some big scandal two years ago when two models were caught coked up to their eyeballs just before one of the shows. It’s too much guesswork for my liking, but I haven’t even left the house. I say Waris broke up with him, got clean, probably threatened to expose him.” Sherlock looked up to the ceiling, eyes moving left to right as if they were following a metronome. “Or it could be something equally dull as a love triangle. Either way, it doesn’t matter.”

John observed Dean’s and Sam’s faces begin to acquire a matching appalled look. Perhaps at some point he should pull them aside and emphasize that there was no real callousness in Sherlock, regardless of the fact that half the things he said or did looked exactly like that. For now he chose to speak quickly.

“Have you spoken to the police? Lestrade?”

Sherlock hummed. “I’m sure he’ll be more than compensated for my ruining his Sunday morning,” he said. “Now that he’ll be the one to successfully close an investigation with some publicity. Speaking of Lestrade!” Sherlock exclaimed when his mobile chimed to indicate a new text message had arrived. He read it quickly, then quicker still his fingers flew over the keys for a brief reply.

“Miss M’Bow broke down and confessed as soon as the officers showed up at her hotel,” he said, dropping the phone in his right pocket. “Perhaps the four days the stupidity of the police gave her were useful after all.” His eyes met John’s, the content, intimate glow in them tugging at John’s lips until they stretched. Sherlock smiled back, slow.

Dean’s voice interrupted the moment, making John suddenly too self-conscious and grateful that at least they hadn’t embarrassed themselves by giggling.

“So you’re telling me you did all that in here,” Dean asked. “In what, forty-five minutes?”

“I would’ve done it in five,” Sherlock told him in all sincerity. “The extra forty minutes were getting the data sent to me and trying to find that close up of Miss M’Bow.”
Dean narrowed his eyes at Sherlock. “And you got it all worked out only from those two tiny cuts on her face?”

“It wasn’t difficult.” Sherlock looked from Dean to John in bewilderment.

“It was amazing,” John told him, then turned to Dean. “And he’s not saying that out of fake modesty. For him that really wasn’t difficult.”

Dean licked his lips, eyes returning to Sherlock.

“All right,” he said at last, lifting his hands in a gesture of capitulation. “You’ve got your moments.” John was convinced the reluctance was more for show.

Sam cleared his throat subtly. “Can we get ready to go now?” he told no one in particular. “We’ve got work to do.”

John felt as if someone had suddenly pulled a plug in his belly, draining the small basin of joy and comfort that had accumulated in him. This time his eye contact with Sherlock lacked any luminosity. Maybe it was John’s imagination, but he and Sherlock seemed to lock into some loop of reciprocity, at the centre of it the need for the Moriarty era in their lives to be over, once and for all. At least he prayed from the bottom of his heart this was what Sherlock wanted, too. Whatever changes had happened to Sherlock during their time apart, John could see his friend still thrived on mental challenge—not that he’d expected any different—and if there had ever been one person with power to seduce Sherlock in that respect, that person was James Moriarty.

Sherlock had stilled after Sam’s comment, it seemed inwardly as well. His eyes on Sam were dead serious.

“I had a call from my brother, while you were out,” he said quietly. “Our trip is cancelled. All of Jim Moriarty’s homes have been emptied out to the last item at some point in the last seven days. I’m no longer sure I’ll find anything useful in Moran’s flat.” Sherlock inclined his head to the left, the gesture inoffensive, but pointed. “We’re now relying a lot more on your and your brother’s expertise.”

There was a moment of silence after Sherlock’s words, then Dean took a loud breath. “Okay,” he said. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

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When John first set foot at Baker Street, Sherlock had already brought in all his belongings. Over the years John had asked himself how Sherlock would have proceeded if John hadn’t moved in. Robbed a bank? Moved out again? Taken money from Mycroft? Accepted a ridiculous rent reduction from Mrs Hudson? Funny enough in John’s fantasies there was never another person living there with Sherlock. In theory John knew there were some suitable individuals out there who could have even become Sherlock’s friends, let alone been successful in the venture of the flatshare. But in practice, his imagination drew a blank when trying to produce even the image of what such an individual might look like.

Now that Sherlock was moving in to 221B for the second time, John was able to witness from the front row the parade of stuff that flooded the flat. There were boxes in all shapes and sizes, very few of them with writing on the top, most revealing their content only after opening—something that
Sherlock became bored with after the third box. There were also backpacks and suitcases, a clothes rack with what John assumed were suits and shirts swinging on it, each one in its own cover. An ancient lamp, a small marble bust and a brand new printer were only a few of the items from the ‘Miscellany’ section, the list beginning with an empty aquarium. For a man with no strong attachments to objects, as proven by their recent ritualistic adventures, Sherlock certainly accumulated a whole lot of them. It was almost as if he was a big celestial body and stuff got pulled in by his gravity, then remained in his orbit.

For a short while the living room appeared to impersonate a fortress, then John and Mrs Hudson helped Sherlock move some things to his bedroom. Sherlock seemed absent-minded but obliging. It reminded John again of the first time they’d met in the flat. John had commented on the clutter, not realizing it was thanks to Sherlock. In response Sherlock had rushed around, busyng himself with what he probably believed constituted tidying up. (He’d fixed some envelopes to the fireplace mantel by stabbing them with a knife he produced out of thin air.) It had lasted for all of five seconds, but Sherlock’s eagerness to present himself as an agreeable potential flatmate had been there in earnest.

The stream of belongings through the front door had provided a much necessary distraction from the crash course on demonology that had been taking place around the dining table. At least it was necessary from John’s perspective. They’d reached a heated moment, but beyond that the topic hadn’t been the lightest to wade through. Plus between two of the foremost experts on it and someone whose brain was like a super computer John had had to summon his entire mental prowess to keep up.

Sam’s fake background from when they’d first met had been chosen cleverly, it transpired. The way his mind organized his delivery showcased years of experience in research, but John also suspected that his friend wanted to make sure John was on board. It had reminded him of some of their conversations as flatmates, the feeling melancholic, hinting dimly at something irretrievable.

Whatever differences the Winchester brothers had their shared subject—Or was it life purpose?—made them listen to each other with nothing but utmost respect. They didn't do it in a flashy or solemn way. They played off each other, finished each other’s sentences and added to what the other was saying with casual ease, but underneath there was frightening harmony to the point where they almost blended into one person. Still, John could spot the differences. For instance, he registered again the thickness of Dean’s American accent compared to Sam’s, his speech interspersed with a throaty I’mma here or swingin’ there. Ironically, for all his air of the more sophisticated one Sam's speech was blunter, stripped down. Dean decorated his with funny twists or cultural references (most of which John didn’t get) that he adjusted to fit the need of his sentence. John could tell this was all Dean, for real. None of the colourful turns of phrase or facial expressions were there for him to ‘exhibit his plumage’; well, maybe just one or two.

Both brothers were attentive listeners when they were on the job. John had noted that about Sam before, but more as a general skill. He concluded again that this was the sort of thing which probably made the difference between life and death in their line of work.

Sherlock had hardly spoken at first. John would have been more impressed with how unfazed Sam and Dean were under his wide, unblinking gaze if he didn’t keep in mind that those two had come face to face with creatures formidable and unimaginable. Sherlock had given the odd nod when he wanted to indicate that they should move on; he also asked a question or two about how demonic possession occurred and whether demons could be taken over or overpowered by other creatures. John would have probably had some questions himself, but only after he’d had the chance to ruminate over what he’d heard.
Some of which boiled down to something John already knew, sadly from firsthand experience: demons were pure evil. Dean had been particularly invested in putting that point across—he’d used his foulest mouth in reference to them and he’d given examples that had made John’s blood curdle. (John had been stuck for a long, raw moment on the story of the demon who’d made a hunter drink acid in front of his wife, while possessing the poor sod.)

There was no telling what kind of demon Moriarty was, but Dean was adamant that even if he’d managed to turn into one within only a year, it would have been impossible for him to climb up the ladder to the top of their hierarchy. It was a weak point in the brothers’ knowledge of that particular enemy. While they had met a few ‘high rank’ demons, all of which had exhibited special powers that made them almost invulnerable, they still didn’t know how exactly the hierarchy worked. There were a few surreptitious glances from Sam to Dean while Dean was elaborating on the topic, his sentences basic and short. It was obvious he’d gained some intimate knowledge about Hell while there. John remembered Karen’s words to that effect.

Since the rest of them really had no experience in the matter, they accepted Dean’s opinion that Moriarty, as insane and brilliant as he might have been alive, was still going be an ordinary rank demon. Knowing how strong and vicious those were did nothing to reassure John. Sherlock for his part had seemed vaguely apathetic on the subject, but his focus had turned laser again when they moved to the means of killing demons.

“So holy water and a...a sort of a spell in Latin may slow them down,” John repeated to make sure. “But it doesn’t kill them.”

“No, it’s not exactly...” Sam gave it another try. “Both don’t kill them as such, but if done right make them leave the person they’re possessing. If you keep a demon’s head in a bucket of holy water long enough, he or she will flee their meatsuit.”

“And will go back to Hell.” Sherlock sought confirmation flatly.

“That’s right.”

“They don’t stay present at all?” Sherlock’s tone was almost...hopeful? “You can’t talk to them after they’ve left the body?”

John had felt himself grow cold at the implications of why Sherlock would ask that. He was never going to confront him outright with ‘Do you not want him dead?’, but it was hard not to think it. Sherlock’s eyes had been fixed on Dean, but Sam had cast John a quick look, before replying. “They’re just black smoke. They need a meatsuit to do anything.”

“And why would you want them to linger?” Dean asked. “All the effort’s going into getting them out of the person, you don’t want them sticking around.”

Sherlock nodded. He’d leaned forward during his question, but then sank back into his chair.


“Not Karen the human evil bitch,” Sam teased dryly. “Yeah,” he continued in a low, serious voice. “I exorcised her. You have to get the words right and the demon needs to be trapped until you finish the exorcism for it to work. If the demon is very powerful, like Azazel, and is free, even if you start throwing the Latin at them they won’t be affected.” He turned to Dean. “Remember when he was
possessing Dad and the holy water didn’t even make him flinch.” Dean nodded grimly. Sam turned back to John. “Azazel was the yellow-eyed demon who killed…”

“Your mother,” John finished. “Yeah.” He’d recognized this was Sam trying to distance himself emotionally and be ‘professional’, not assuming that just because the name was carved into his mind John would have remembered it, too.

Sam had remained silent for a few moments before addressing Sherlock. “What do you plan on doing with Moriarty? Exorcise or kill him.”

Sherlock hadn’t responded at once. “What would you suggest?” he asked eventually.

Sam and Dean exchanged a look, wordlessly trying to wait each other out. In the end it was Dean who broke down.

“If you kill him, he’s gone. But you also kill the man he's possessing. For all you know the guy’s already dead. We said it, demons ride their meatsuits hard. But if that son of a bitch Moriarty is as much of a psycho as you all tell me he is, then I won’t put it past him to have kept the guy alive.”

Dean got up, frisking his head with both hands. He continued talking while criss-crossing the empty area in the middle of the room.

“Remember what we said about possession? That if the body still works, the person's trapped inside, squashed in there. I’m thinking your sicko might enjoy the company of having some poor soul go slowly crazy, while watching himself do unspeakable things.”

Dean had stopped, hooded eyes fixed at some point on the far wall. No one said anything for a moment, then Sherlock spoke. “He’s not that kind of psychopath. But I see your point. Is there a way to find out whether the person is still alive?”

“Not unless you know their history,” Sam said.

“Yeah,” Dean picked up. “Like if you saw them take a dive from the seventh floor, you can be pretty sure the demon's riding a dead person’s body after that.” He looked at Sam and made some kind of concession with a roll of his neck. “Or they’re about to die as soon as the demon fucks off out of them.”

Sherlock had steepled his fingers, contemplative. Dean kept standing in the middle of the room for a few seconds, then returned to the table taking off his shirt in the process. (Or rather Sam’s shirt; unless they each had one, and even John’s average fashion sense would have been offended by that.) At least he was wearing a plain black t-shirt underneath, tight but looking a comfortable fit, the colour still full. He flung the yellow and blue monstrosity over the back of his chair and sat down placing his arms on the table, fingers entwined.

“What’re you thinking?” he asked Sherlock.

“That you still haven’t answered my question about what you would do.”

“That's 'cos it ain't that easy to tell. I’d say there’s something right and wrong with both,” Dean hedged, dropping back into his seat. “You exorcise him, he’s still out there. He might be in Hell, but those monsters find their way out.” Dean suddenly knocked on the table in front of Sherlock. “You won’t stop looking over your shoulder, you should know that.”
“But it might save the man he’s possessing,” John said. He recognized the moral thing here, but it didn’t mean he accepted it gladly. Perhaps his need to reinstate the fact had spoken about his uncertainty of whether the right choice was the one he’d make.

“Or you might end up with the corpse of the man he’s possessing,” Dean told him. “While you also fail to finish off the demon for good.” A memory clearly accosted Dean, making him go on. “Or he may turn out to be alive, only we met someone once and he’d formed this crazy…attachment to the demon who had possessed him.”


“Kinda. Turned out the guy had been a total nutjob to begin with, so the demon only jigged his juices. It was still freaking disturbing to see him weep tears of joy when he and his demon buddy were reunited.” Dean took a breath, looking graver. “What I’m saying is, you exorcise the demon out of the person, you end up with a box of firecrackers. You’re thinking you’re saving some poor girl, but you end up with someone so broken and screwed up she makes the patients in the nut house look like the picture of mental health.”

John had held his breath at that, finding it hard to swallow around the sticky, dark lump in his throat. “How do you decide?” he asked both brothers. “How do you make that kind of call?”

Sam was the one to reply. “Most of the time we don’t have time to think about it. It’s us or them, so we do whatever we can to fight them.” His eyes travelled over his brother’s face and chest. “I’ve killed demons without stopping to think twice about who else was in there.” His shoulders moved in a shrug, but there was nothing flippant about it. “I guess in a way it’s not much different from any self-defence.”

“Yeah,” Dean said. "Only that kind of vermin can’t be put behind bars. So you don’t give warning shots.”

“All right,” Sherlock spoke suddenly. He straightened up and looked around the table. “If you’re done with the subject of moral ambiguity, I suggest we do something useful and talk about the actual methods of killing a demon.”

“You know what,” Dean began, voice raised, but Sam stopped him with a quick touch. “Dean.”

“He’s pissing me off, Sammy!” Dean threw Sherlock a threatening look. The sunlight had shifted in the room and was falling slanted, giving everything a dreamy, pale hue. It did not help Dean’s case one bit for the second time this morning, emphasising his freckles and pink lips that his manly countenance managed to make go largely unnoticed. Not that John suspected it would matter to Sherlock if Dean looked like a cannibal with a penchant for meat that was done rare.

Indeed, Sherlock had lifted his eyebrows at Dean and blinked once, disarmingly. “Methods of killing?”

Dean glared at him for another couple of seconds. “So far we know of several. First, a special knife.”

Sam produced the knife and laid it on the table. John had seen it before: it was actually quite beautiful with the engravings of unfamiliar symbols along its silver blade and the unevenly cut ‘teeth’ along the edge of the blade. Sam had mentioned the knife the first night they’d stayed up until the small hours, when he’d tried to catch up John on some of the supernatural world and his own
fantastical part in it.

John remembered the knife had to come to the Winchesters from Ruby, the demon who’d hooked up Sam on demon blood, while she herself had hooked up with Sam. Sam hadn’t given him too much context, but John had put two and two together and figured out at the time Sam had been out of his mind with grief for his brother. Eventually Ruby had manipulated him to do something that had set Lucifer free and had started the Apocalypse. It was a real mess of severe addiction and misplaced trust, topped up with pain and need for revenge. Meanwhile Dean had come back from Hell, so John could put his money on some poor communication between him and Sam, too. It was again conjecture, but it looked like that period marked one of the times when the brothers had experienced the biggest strain on their relationship.

After hearing Sam tell him about it at the time, John had thought that no magical knife was worth keeping if it came from that source. But he was beginning to see that once again beggars couldn’t be choosers. He had a bad feeling their options to deal with Moriarty or even defend themselves against demons were not abundant.

Dean’s next words had strengthened John’s concerns. “There’s also the Colt,” he said, but this time no object appeared on the table. “It’s a gun with special bullets that can kill any supernatural creature. Unfortunately, it’s been lost.”

"Next," Sherlock said.

Dean pulled an unreadable face. “Death.”

Sherlock looked at him, bemused. “Well, of course…”

“Death, the Horseman, you moron. You know…” Dean didn’t finish, but made a swishing sound as his hands sliced through air, pretend gripping an invisible scythe.

“Oh,” said Sherlock. "I take it he’s not available? Or is it a she?"

John could understand Dean’s evident confusion about whether Sherlock was joking. It occurred to him that in terms of use of body language Sherlock and Dean could serve quite well as antipodes.

“We know how to get him,” Dean said, “but no, he’s not available.” His lips formed a trembling smile; his eyes flicked over all the faces around the table before dropping to his hands on the table. “He and I go way back,” he offered with something akin to pride. His head bowed and his gaze jumped around from under his long eyelashes, giving him an abashed air.

“You and Death,” Sherlock repeated. The clear, breathy pronunciation of the word betrayed he was impressed.

Dean shrugged in an attempted indifference, then suddenly looked up at Sherlock. “I’m not trying to summon him,” he said quickly, adding after a shaky pause. “He, um…He said he’d kill us before we even tried.” He rolled his eyes awkwardly, turning them to Sam. Only then had John noticed that Sam was nodding rapidly in concurrence with his brother’s last words.


“No,” Sam said. “Angel blades can kill demons, too. And angels can, with a touch.”
“Castiel?” John had asked, hope rising.

“He’s not available either,” Dean replied, eyes fixed ahead of him. His rigid, forbidding air was suggesting an instant end to that line of enquiry. Even Sherlock respected that, turning to Sam: “Anything else?”

“No. Well, yeah, but…Um…”

John had never seen Sam so ill at ease.

“Well, that's very informative,” Sherlock said coolly, making John decide to reintroduce kicking in the shin as means of communication between them.

The withdrawn, shattered look in Sam’s eyes had been quite disproportionate to Sherlock’s remark. John had wriggled in his seat, sweat beading on his palms, shoulders tensing up even more.

Sam had spoken then, quiet and clear. “When I was drinking demon blood I was powerful enough to exorcise demons or kill them with my mind.”

His words infinitely upped Dean's turbulent headspace; John could sense it echoed in Sam, too, only Sam was the passenger to Dean’s turbulence.

After a moment of perusal of Sam's features, Sherlock nodded slowly. “I take it you’re unavailable, too?”

“Okay,” Dean had growled, pushing his chair back, the drag of its feet producing a screech. “We all need a break.” He’d stormed out of the flat, steps thudding rhythmically down the stairs.

It was two minutes later that the procession of Sherlock’s belongings had begun, much to John’s relief.

Chapter End Notes

A whole lot of awesome visuals at the end of my LJ entry.
Sam didn’t think that having the traditional British Sunday roast with Mrs Hudson would clear the virtual clouds that made the basement flat ceiling hang even lower, but he was wrong. For one thing, they actually left the place following the invitation to her flat. Food also tended to improve Dean’s mood and Mrs Hudson chatting about their life as hunters did that for Sam, mostly by taking away the pressure of having to hold up his end of the conversation. Both he and Dean were very appreciative of her having them over and showed it, in the case of Dean accompanied by the odd ‘Ma’am’ or two. Maybe the spirits were further lifted by Mrs Hudson’s blend of admiration and matter-of-factness. It managed to gently peel off the sense of heavy importance their life choices carried, zooming in on the narrow picture instead: that there were people out there alive because of them, single individuals who still merited all the effort.

The topic moved to local hunters with Mrs Hudson’s comment that she didn’t think there were some of Sam and Dean’s ‘lot’ around here.

“Or I wouldn’t have bothered you to come all the way from America,” she told Sam. “But oh, then again those horrible people were…You know, the ones who kidnapped you and John, and tried to sell you to that man, what was it, Crow-something?”

“Crowley,” Sam supplied helpfully.

“Well, I can’t say that was very nice.” Mrs Hudson’s face was pinched in disapproving distress. “I wouldn’t have wanted them staying upstairs with John. You two have become such good friends, Sam, and it’s so sweet of you to stay and help him sort it all out. Fancy that Moriarty turning into a demon? I suppose it’s not a surprise, but you just don’t want to think about all those psychopaths still running around after they die.” Sam was saved the need to offer his input by Mrs Hudson carrying on in full speed. “Well, it’s Sherlock’s mess, really, not John’s, but you know what I mean. Anyway, if one of those nasty local hunters had come here instead of you, who knows what would have happened to John. They could have tried to sell him, too. Or disembowel him…” Mrs Hudson added musingly, still disapproving of John’s imaginary evil-doers.

“Um…Why would they disembowel him?” Sam asked after a quick exchange of befuddled glances with Dean.
“Ritualistic killing,” Mrs Hudson told him. “I’ve seen documentaries about that sort of thing and it wasn’t even related to the supernatural. Although how would we know? The papers don’t tell you about it.”

“Mrs H,” Sam said, eager to defend the general reputation of the local hunters. “Those were some bad people who took me and John.” He’d had one brush with them so he didn’t want to believe a few bad apples spoiled the whole bunch. “I’m sure John would’ve been safe in another hunter’s hands.”

“If you say so,” she replied politely. “But they would have harmed Sherlock and I just can’t bear the thought of that.”

“Um…” Sam began, unsure how to break it to her delicately. “That was why you called me…right?” He bore his eyes into hers calling on her memory. “You knew I’d have had to kill his ghost. Ah...Back when we still thought he was a ghost.”

“Yes, funny how that turned out, isn’t it?” Mrs Hudson gave out a small, distracted giggle. “But it’s not the same, Sam. You would have taken care of it differently.”

Sam’s eyes sought Dean’s again to find him looking stranded in the conversation. His plate was catching light on its shiny, empty surface, so Sam wondered whether Dean had followed the conversation too closely. Or maybe he was just less used to Mrs Hudson’s ways. Sam had had months to do so, being her tenant in one capacity or another.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” he told her honestly.

“Hmm.” Her cheek rested on her little fist, elbow propped on the table. “Neither am I but I know I’m right. You’re a nice young man, Sam.” She patted his shoulder. “That’s all I need to know.” She got up from the table with some difficulty, changing the subject to her problems with her hip.

When they returned to 221C half an hour later, Dean had questions.

“Why’d she call it dinner?” He bowed to open the laptop on the table. “When she came a-knocking and said she was inviting us for dinner, I thought I’d starve ’til the evening.”

“Tell me about it!” Sam was folding some laundry Mrs Hudson had done for them. His lips danced, mellow. “When John first told me we should go out for Sunday dinner, I thought he meant an actual dinner. So he turned up downstairs at like one o’clock, all…wearing a cardigan and stuff, and dude, I’d just had a workout and was sitting there, all sweaty, eating a sandwich.”

A sound from Dean snapped Sam out of the memory; he whipped his head to his brother to find him staring at the laptop display.

“We’ve got a message from Kevin,” Dean said. “It’s a video.”

Sam was looking down over his shoulder in two seconds. Dean clicked on the ‘play’ symbol on the video showing Kevin’s sickly pale face—the sight alone was quick to add to Sam’s private depository of guilt.

“Hey,” Kevin spoke from the speakers. His voice carried the trembling edge of prolonged self-neglect. “I’m doing this, because my phone’s not working. I don’t know what’s wrong with it and
Garth’s not around. He left yesterday morning. I think. I hope he’s not dead.” Kevin looked abruptly to the right, his dirty, unkempt black hair giving him the air of a frightened young bird. The image was a harsh reminder that Kevin wasn’t even twenty. “I hope you two aren’t dead. If you are… screw you.” There was a slight touch of hysteria in the last couple of words, then Kevin took a sharp breath. “I’m sorry. I’m not…Um, I’ve been getting bad headaches and nosebleeds, and I think maybe I had a small stroke.” Kevin’s dark eyes had a slightly demented gleam about them. “But it was worth it. I figured out how to close the Gates of Hell.”

The tightness that overtook Dean’s back muscles complimented Sam’s heart rate.

“It's a spell,” Kevin’s tinny voice continued. “I’m working on it now; I’ll crack it by tonight but I wanted to let you know, guys. It's only a few words. Um, in Enochian. They have to be spoken after you finish each of the three trials.” Kevin shot another nervous glance, this time in the direction of the clutter behind his back.

“Trials?” Dean repeated.

“What, like in court?” Sam wondered aloud.

On the screen Kevin seemed to hear them. “The tablet says, ‘Whosoever chooses to undertake these tasks should fear not danger, nor death, nor...A word I think means getting your spine ripped out through your mouth for all eternity.’”

“Awesome,” Dean murmured.

“Basically, God built a series of tests,” Kevin went on, “and when you’ve done all three, you can slam the gates. I’ve only been able to crack one of the tests so far, and it’s gross. You’ve got to kill a hound of Hell and bathe in its blood. That’s it, that’s all I’ve got. For now.” He rubbed at both his eyes ferociously, their already reddened rims re-emerging scarlet. “I’m going back to the spell now and...Um. You get your asses here as fast as you can. If you’re alive. If you’re dead and if Garth’s dead, that leaves me talking to my mom, and all she does is cry, and I can’t take it anymore.” The hysterical lilt was back, and once again Kevin seemed to have caught it, because his next sentence came out with forced composure. “Bring meds,” he said, ending the video abruptly.

Dean and Sam stared at the black screen, then Dean straightened up bumping into Sam’s chest. Sam took a step back just as his brother turned to face him, expression determined and excited.

“That son of a bitch did it,” he said. “Nice job, Kev.”

“Yeah. Looked like crap, though. You think he’s okay?”

“Oh yeah, he’s peachy. He’ll be fine. We’ll stuff him with some of your healthy crap, get him to shower, catch some shuteye. We’ll buy him some pills. He’ll be as good as new.”

Sam shifted in discomfort. “I don’t know, Dean.”

“Sam, we’re on the one-yard-line.” Dean was looking at him intently. “We’ve got a long way to go and we all need to suck it up and do whatever it takes to finish this. We finally have something solid; we just have to keep going no matter what and that includes our wonder boy.”

Sam didn’t have a reply to that, stuck in an inner conflict; he focused on something tangible instead.
“So Hellhounds, huh?”

Unexpectedly, Dean’s face lit up. “Yeah! Finally some luck.”

That was not how Sam would have put it. “Luck?” he echoed, unable to hide the ironic ring in his voice.

“That was not how Sam would have put it. “Luck?” he echoed, unable to hide the ironic ring in his voice.

“Yeah.” Dean nodded, still kind of elated. It occurred to Sam that this was the first time his brother had looked completely at ease with himself since his arrival.

Hey,” Dean went on. “If this means icing all demons, I got no problem gutting some devil dog and letting Calgon take me away.”

They regarded each other in silence, then Dean ran a hand over his nose and mouth, eyes roaming the mess on his bed. “We’ve got to start moving.”

It took Sam a moment to respond, Dean’s words reaching him through the chaotic churning in his head. His mouth opened, no filter to it. “Where?” he asked stupidly.


Right. Of course. There was no arguing about it; not anymore. There were no longer grounds on which Sam could insist they stayed like he had before, when there’d been nothing definitive from Kevin, nothing they should have actually been doing instead of staying here helping Sherlock and John. Shutting the gates of Hell took priority over one single demon, no matter how powerful he was, no matter how personal his threat was to this household. Shutting the gates of Hell came topside to pretty much anything, full stop. Sam understood that, he really did.

Then his mouth opened. “I know we should leave, but I want to stay.” He could hardly hear himself, overcome by his own anxious boldness. “Help Sherlock and John first.”

Dean had moved in the direction of his bed but now paused with his mouth open. “You’re not serious?” he said, watching Sam as if expecting him to squeeze the tip of Dean’s nose and go, ‘Boop! Kidding!’

Sam swallowed and felt himself hunch.

“I am.” He hurried to mollify Dean. “Just for a couple of days, okay? We’ll figure it out quickly, take care of things here—then we go home. It’ll give Kevin a head start on the spell.”

“I don’t—” Dean’s body suddenly animated from head to toe. “I can’t believe we’re having this conversation!”

He made a few aimless steps in all directions, before rounding on Sam again. His voice was rough, appealing to Sam under the accusation.

“What’s going on with you? I thought we were back on the same page: this blows everything else out of the water!”

Before Sam had a chance to put his whooshing thoughts into some order allowing him to respond,
Dean went on. “Have you…Have you changed your mind?” His eyes flicked between Sam’s quickly, invasive and pleading. “Do you want out? Because I thought you said you and Amelia were done, and—”

“It’s not that,” Sam said quickly. “We are.”

“Then what the hell are we even arguing about? It’s actually ridding the world of demons for good, Sam.” Dean underlined the word ‘actually’ with his fingers, gathered as if they were holding a piece of chalk. “You’re the last person I thought I’d need to pitch this to.”

“Dean, I get it.” Sam’s hands opened, extending to Dean as his chin moved left to right to emphasize he really did get it: how monumental this task was, what it meant in the big picture.

“Then why’re you digging your heels in?” Dean asked. “Explain it to me, man, because I don’t get it.”

“Because…” Sam started then stopped, the truth of his reasons slamming into him, widening that depository of guilt by a mile. “Because it’s John.”

Dean blinked at him, eyebrows curving into one perplexed wave. “And?”

Sam would have laughed if he could.

“And he’s my friend.” The sentence rang weak in his own ears, but it wasn’t, not to his mind—there was nothing inferior about the place his choice was coming from. “My friend, Dean. Not another hunter or an angel, or…or an old friend of dad’s. He’s not pretending to be my friend, either. You know what Lucifer said to me, Dean?” Sam tilted his head, feeling his jaw clamp. “He showed me these people, the few people I’d thought were my friends when I was growing up. Like Rachel. Remember Rachel? She was my prom date. All demons. Lucifer called them Azazel’s little gang. All of them watching me. All my life…” Sam fought the tightening of his throat, took a breath.

“John’s not like that. And he knows the truth about me, about what we do. He knows me. He’s a normal guy, who has nothing to do with our world, and he’s still my friend. My friend.”

Dean was watching him with the kind of undiluted feeling that Sam felt he’d put on his brother’s face singlehanded after ripping his chest open. All Sam’s muscles began thrumming sickeningly, but he pushed on, trying to keep it together. “I know I’m not going to have the kind of life that most people have. With a wife, friends. A dog.” The last word was a bitter gust of resignation. “Having a place to call home. It’s never going to happen, Dean, not for me. And I’ve got to come to terms with that, I know. It’s taken me long enough. And I’m not complaining, okay?” Sam lifted a hand to stop what looked like protest from Dean. “It’s fine,” he told him. “It doesn’t look bleak; I don’t see darkness ahead. This is my life and we’re doing a lot of good, so I’m going to take that and it’ll be enough. I don’t want any of the big stuff, but this…” Like a twig in a deep forest his voice broke. “I want to stay and make sure my friend’s safe, okay? I want this for myself, Dean. Okay?” Sam’s chest felt like a boat in a stormy sea.

Dean stepped forward. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “Yeah, okay, Sammy.”

“Oh kay?” Sam repeated through clenched teeth.

“Okay.” Dean took another step to him. “Come here.”
He wrapped his arms around Sam, bringing him in like a safe harbour. Sam clung to Dean’s back and lost himself in the moment, until Dean pulled away, voice gentle and assured. “We’ll get this done quickly first, all right? Hey, we’re the freaking Winchesters.” The curve of his smile was tiny but confident, his eyes coaxing. “We’ve got this.”

Sam put the bulk of his emotions in his nod.

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As soon as Sam and Dean walked into the sitting room John could tell something pretty serious was happening on their front. It was in the eye contact they shared, skittish in length but docile in character. The paradox was reflected in their bodies, too: loosened up with the odd moment of stiffness. It spelt drama to John and he knew a thing or two about that. Earlier, after he and Sherlock had finished having their Sunday dinner (courtesy of their wonderful landlady) John had thought that they themselves made for quite the dramatic pair. Dramatic things did happen to Sherlock which meant by proxy to John. Besides, Sherlock was the kind of individual who gave the word ‘unique’ a run for its money. People like him did not slog through life in humdrum fashion. Sherlock was starkly simple in some ways and confounding in his complexity in others. There was bound to be drama.

Their shared lunch time had provoked these thoughts in John with good reason. He’d found himself floundering inwardly at the mere prospect of sitting with his freshly back from the dead best friend and doing something as mundane as eating. They didn’t even set the table, just pushed whatever objects and papers covered it to one end and sat next to each other at the other. John wasn’t foolish enough to think it was about eating together; it was about what the ritual represented. He wasn’t sure his outward appearance betrayed the floundering, but at least Sherlock’s slanted looks and somewhat wooden posture told John he was not alone in his predicament.

But then they seemed to ease into it. They were like a body whose bones made movement awkward and painful at first, but then it went on to become pliable and strong by the hour, the Synovial fluid still intact between the bones; only the prolonged lack of exercise to blame.

Of course John wasn’t going to do something so silly as to embrace his metaphor at face value. What was happening in their relationship was far more complicated than the requisition for mere practice. Some things would have had to be nurtured, others grown anew, and some maybe grown brand new. He wasn’t even sure what plains there were to discover and re-discover. Sherlock didn’t help—he wasn’t too keen to elaborate on his life as a dead man.

“I know you’ve got questions,” he told John when their eyes had met after an interminable initial pause. “But I hope to have a lot of time at our disposal to answer them later. The winter’s coming. The criminal classes tend to lose their entrepreneurial spirit with the drop of temperatures. I expect some long winter evenings with not much to do. I can’t promise my tales will be as entertaining as all that, but I wasn’t idle in the last eighteen months. Perhaps something might even make it to your blog."

John contemplated his words then nodded, going back to his food.

Some time later the topic of John’s writing activities returned.

“Do you plan to blog again?” Sherlock asked, tone quite interested for something that wasn’t a mysterious death by self-decapitation.
“If I have something to blog about,” John told him after swallowing his bite. “I mean it’s not as if much is happening when you’re not around.”

“Hmm...” Sherlock propped his elbows on the table, entwining his fingers. “I beg to differ.”

It took a moment for John to feel his face clear. “Oh, Sam? Yes, okay. I see your point.” He paused. “I was actually thinking of writing a book. After Sam told me all about Heaven and Hell, and things like...” He waved about his empty fork. “The Apocalypse.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

John’s attention was diverted to a spot of gravy on his striped jumper, the treacherous condiment landing on one of the white lines and not the black. When he lifted his head he found Sherlock’s gaze still trained on him, waiting. John made a vague circular motion with his hand, this time with the one holding the knife. “I found out someone had already told that story. A prophet. Um, another one, not Kevin.”

Did Sherlock know that Kevin was a prophet? It was all becoming a blur: what they’d talked about with Sam and Dean, what they’d talked about between themselves, what Sherlock had already known about the Winchesters...Then John’s words caught up with him and made his eyebrows climb up his forehead. The Apocalypse. Prophets as literary competition. He shook his head in never-ending disbelief about the things his mouth spouted these days.

“Not much could stop you before,” Sherlock murmured. John was still perusing the sights the ceiling offered, but looked back to Sherlock at the comment to find his eyes twinkling dryly.

“You tried.”

“That’s what I mean. I’m surprised that a prophet succeeded where I failed.”

At that John had to chuckle. “Good to see your modesty’s intact.”

He chewed on a big piece of carrot, pondering. “To be honest, it wasn’t just the prophet,” he admitted. “The more I got to know Sam, the more the idea of writing about his life seemed...I don’t know. Not my story to tell.”

“Again, that didn’t stop you before.”

“’s true. But it’d be different to write about someone beheading vampires, when you actually know it’s real. When I was blogging about you it wasn’t a lie. And it was sort of harmless. You know, the moderately dangerous adventures of a clever genius.”

“What other kinds of geniuses are there?”

“Um, right now insufferable comes to mind.”


“That’s it. Oh, by the way—don’t take what I said about your adventures as a challenge, please. I was speaking in relative terms.”
“Fine, I’ll do my best to stay *moderately* dull.”

This time the corner of John’s mouth lifted on cue. “You can never be dull.”

His smile diminished as he kept thinking out loud. “I’m not saying that the cases you solved…I mean, there was darkness there, the worst of humanity. But what Sam’s faced, and will keep facing if I’ve learnt anything about him…I don’t know, Sherlock. It’s changed my perspective, I suppose. It’s a different kind of darkness and I think maybe writing about it would have felt like…cashing in on Sam’s pain?” John nodded to himself, glad for his apt comparison. “Anyway, it was just a passing thought early on, when I first found out what Sam did.” He met Sherlock’s shrewd gaze. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this,” he said.

Sherlock made a slow show of shaking his head. “Just chatting. Isn’t that what friends do? Catch up.”

“IT is,” John readily agreed. “Yet you insist on keeping your stories for the long winter nights.”

“Call it forward thinking.”

John decided not to pursue the subject further. For one thing, he found the image quite appealing: the cold outside, the flickering flames of the fireplace, Sherlock relating his undoubtedly exciting pursuits; for another, it felt like a joint investment in the future and John wanted to hold on to that.

Their plates were almost empty—well, John’s was, but at least Sherlock’s food had been touched—when John decided to broach the topic of that investment after all.

“What are you going to do with Moriarty?” he asked. “Exorcise or…”

Sherlock didn’t avoid John’s eyes, but there was still the feeling of restricted access. “I don’t know,” he said. John hesitated, then put his knife and fork carefully on his plate.

“Sherlock…You’re not going to let him draw you into playing one of your games, are you? Because twice so far he’s done that and you lost. Both times.”

“We’re still playing.”

“Yeah.” John felt himself come to a standstill, like a musical box. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Sherlock didn’t react other than to look at the far end of the table.

“John,” he said at last. “I meant what I said the other night. I want my life back. Whatever game might still be in play, it is to that end.”

John looked at Sherlock patiently, until Sherlock met his gaze.

“Your old life,” John told him. “Moriarty was also part of it. He’s been…Do you remember when we first met? You heard his name for the first time that night with the cabbie, and you were…bloody glowing.”

“I didn’t know then.”
“You did know when you went to meet him by the pool.”

“That was…misguided of me.”

“Misguided? No one guides Sherlock Holmes. For someone as brilliant as you that was an asinine thing to do.”

“‘Asinine’? Have you been spending time with Mycroft?”

John held the breath for which he’d stopped a few seconds longer—his equivalent of counting to ten. “It’s good to see you’re taking this seriously,” he said.

This time it was Sherlock’s gaze that beckoned contact.

“I’ve learned my lesson, John.”

The statement was sincere, albeit underlined with irritation. It dawned at John that this couldn’t have been Sherlock’s first conversation on the topic. He and Mycroft, trapped in the inexorable necessity to communicate, just the two of them; scintillating minds on a par and the unrivalled ability to penetrate each other’s layers. John felt his attitude take a hundred and eighty degree turn at the mental comparison between how Sherlock must have reacted to Mycroft and how he was reacting to John now; especially under the weight of nagging repetition.

Fuck it, John thought. He had to say it. Whatever he and Sherlock had between them now, it was fragile, but it also had the potential to be stronger than ever, and John had a duty to that. His fingers ghosted over the wood towards Sherlock’s wrist then John spoke, certain of Sherlock’s utmost attention.

“I don’t think I can stay around if you keep doing this. Risking your life to prove you’re better than him. Or worse, Sherlock—playing with him at our expense. I won’t just sit around to watch it happen again. I can’t, I—” John shrugged. “I can’t. Do you understand me?”

There was no delay in Sherlock’s response this time, yet the dramatic effect was still like the hammer of some God.

“Perfectly.”

Sherlock rolled the fork between his nimble fingers then did it again, eyes following its silver line. “You’ve got nothing to worry about in that respect,” he added, and only then did John realize how important it was for him to hear any ambiguity dispersed behind the meaning of Sherlock’s one word answer.

He found he was able to finish his last few bites and after a suitable extension of silence, the conversation resumed. They talked about neutral topics such as the few interesting cases John had seen in the papers over the last year or the impending shopping for clothes for Sherlock. John got the impression clothing himself appropriately hadn’t been of much interest to Sherlock, not only on account of his being mentally preoccupied with Moriarty, Moran and the whole network, but also because he hadn’t been out and about all that much, at least not without a good disguise. He had been practicing his boxing and he said he’d been swimming, too, so apparently his going out wardrobe was now limited to just a couple of shirts and one suit—all of which had been a touch loose in fit before. In honour of Sunday dinner Sherlock had kept the gown but swapped his pyjamas for a pair of jeans, affecting the inner flounder further—John didn’t think he’d seen Sherlock in jeans
more than once in the few years they’d known each other. Sherlock also wore the hot pink shirt that John remembered well; there was just something about pink that brought out the blue in people’s eyes like nobody’s business. The shirt struck a nice combination with the rich grey of the gown, John had noted in some daze—probably still smarting from the plaid earlier in the morning.

After dinner they drank tea and John told Sherlock about the firebirds, accepting his “Good work,” for the genuine praise it was. All in all, there’d been no more drama, thankfully.

Then Sam and Dean had shown up with that palpable vibe of *something* around them, and John realized that thinking he and Sherlock were the dramatic duo might have been a bit of a misapprehension on his part.

Chapter End Notes

I'm planning next week's update early in the week. This chapter and the next were originally one chapter. I split it in two because of its length, but I'd like to keep its integrity in some small way.

The hot pink shirt reference is for frozen_delight as a thank you for the enjoyment I've had reading her comments on 'The Poster Girl'.
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

A link to a funny comic that hoppytoad79 kindly sent me; I think it's quite relevant to this chapter.:)
A fleeting, guilty expression on Dean’s face was followed by a light frown as his fingers froze on their way to his forehead, then hastily dropped. John noticed that the short golden brown strands at his front were smoothed in a deliberately casual way.

“They’re soldiers, John,” Sherlock said, still looking at Dean’s hair. “You should be able to appreciate that fact and its implications. In an emergency, soldiers can take a shower in under three minutes and certainly don’t linger in front of the mirror to beautify themselves.”

“All right, creepy,” Dean grumbled at Sherlock, stepping right into his personal space. “You’re officially making me uncomfortable.”

Sherlock stepped back with some uncharacteristic clumsiness.

“I was merely proving to John that you weren’t in such a hurry to leave,” he said. “In addition to the time you both took in the bathroom, there’s the telling fact that you have taken only your wallet and your phone with you: you’re planning to go out. No car keys, which means within walking distance. Judging by your posture you’re only carrying that knife, but more importantly you don’t have your warrior’s face on. So, not a business trip. Pleasure, then. The lack of car keys further suggests a bar and so does your effort with your hair. Then again from my limited scope of observation on your person it seems that this level of personal grooming is your standard, so that’s neither here nor there. There is of course your relationship with alcohol.”

John tried to catch Sherlock’s eye in warning, but failed. Well, maybe today was the day when somebody was actually going to punch Sherlock in the face as a ‘thank you for your intrusive deductions’ note. Dean would have always looked like a good candidate—he now had the countenance of a wary hedgehog—but the sentence about his relationship with alcohol elevated his odds, just like the start of the one that followed.

“Your brother and you…” Sherlock paused in aid of everyone’s mounting tension. “Let’s just say he is not the best ‘drinking buddy’ for you, in general and now in particular. But your nomadic lifestyle has made you used to drinking in strange places without a partner. In addition, you consider yourself charming and funny, and you obviously need to process the latest developments. I mean the news you got; not even taking into account whatever mess of sentiment took place between you and your brother earlier. So the bar it is, and what person in a hurry to depart from a place goes to drown his sorrows in alcohol first?”

Dean was watching Sherlock open-mouthed and sort of peripherally offended, probably not even certain why. His eyebrows formed a rather alarming ‘V’, but there were no flying fists so John counted that as small mercies. Dean went on to act against John’s predictions; his come back to Sherlock reminded John that he was in the presence of not just two but three rare individuals.

“I’m this close to asking you to a bar with me,” Dean told Sherlock. “Just so I could erase that shit-eating grin you have on the inside, you smug son of a bitch.”

“I don’t drink in bars,” Sherlock deadpanned after a beat.

“Well, good thing I’m going to the store to buy some liquor, then.” The spontaneous grumpy sarcasm in Dean’s voice told John this wasn’t something he’d made up now just to spite Sherlock.

“The shop,” Sherlock repeated to himself, lips pursed in self-criticism for what he evidently perceived as a glaring omission on his part. It was quickly gone as Sherlock turned a lively face to John, immediately putting him on guard.

John had something to say to that. “Are you telling me you’re actually planning on eating?”

“It’s insurance against your temper when you discover there’s nothing in the fridge.”

John was in half-mind to argue, but just sighed. “Fine, I’ll get my wallet.”

On second thought he looked at Dean. “Erm…Is it okay to come with you?” His eyes moved to Sam who was leaning against the wall by the front door with his hands in his pockets, looking subdued, but present. “I mean, is that thing still on? Where you wouldn’t let me go out much on my own.”

Sam’s smile was barely there, but John was glad for it. “No, that was when I was worried Sherlock’s ghost might harm you,” he said. A cloud passed over his features. “Although I think you should be careful now that Moriarty can use you to get to him.” Sam tilted his head to ‘him’, who waved a hand dismissively, causing the gown’s sleeve to flap like a mini-flag. “John will be fine.”

“How can you be so sure?” Sam asked. He didn’t sound confronting, but was giving ‘friendly’ a wide berth, too.

Sherlock lost his flippancy in a blink. “Because I know Jim Moriarty,” he said. “He likes to play with his mind and now that the ball is in his court after my successful move with Moran he’ll take his time with his one. Besides, he’s used John twice now to get to me. He is many things, but dull isn’t one of them. He’ll find something…novel next. It’s his style. I wouldn’t undermine the danger to John,” Sherlock told Sam levelly, John’s name enunciated to perfection, “but he’s safe for now. Moriarty isn’t crude; he won’t just snatch him off the street.” Meeting John’s grim eyes, Sherlock rolled his, but at least had the decency to look more humble. “Not this time.”

“Wow, you writing a book on him?” Dean was far from admiring. “What’s his next move?” he asked.

“I don’t know yet. But I will, in a day or two.”

“Well, make it a day, ‘cos we don’t have two. While we're out, you and Sam are going to sit down and put your brainy heads together, because we’re not waiting him out, you got that? I’ve got a prophet on the edge of exhaustion back home and I’ve got some blood bath to take, so if you still want our help, I suggest we shake up the rules a bit; take that game of yours and shove it up his ass.” Dean gave Sherlock a wide, quick smile that stayed strictly confined to his lips. “We’re making the next move.”

He didn’t wait for any answer from Sherlock—who was watching him with an inscrutable expression anyway—but turned to John.

“You can come with me. Know-it-all here is right: you’re safe, but not for the reasons he thinks. Demons are not human.” Dean snapped his gaze back to Sherlock. “They’re vicious and cunning and pure evil, and they don’t wait. They don’t sit around getting off on intellectual challenges!” he said, indignant irritation deforming his features. ”But good news is, they try to stay under the radar. They don’t attack people in busy places in broad daylight, not unless something big’s going down.” Dean looked back to John. “And whatever ‘good genius – bad genius’ vendetta those two have going on, it’s not that kind of big.”
It was time for John to put in his two pennies’ worth. “Yeah, I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

Sam pushed himself away from the wall, the wrinkles on his forehead apprehensive. “Why? Maybe you shouldn’t go out,” he added. Sherlock looked at him sharply but said nothing. John chose not to reply to that, either. He couldn’t say whether it wasn’t just his fear talking. He loathed Moriarty and maybe he wasn’t the best person to be asked about an objective perspective on him—or his relationship with Sherlock. Especially his relationship with Sherlock. The truth was that Sherlock did know him better, arguably the best, for reasons that pained John with their simplicity.

He did have something to say about himself, though. “I’m going with Dean. I can’t be stuck in here. It’s bad enough I need a chaperone.”

Dean clapped him on the shoulder. “Lucky for you, you got a handsome devil like me. Must feel great after ugly mug over there.” His eyes turned to Sam, playful. Sam let out a small exasperated huff, continuing to look unconvinced.

Dean seemed to shake himself like a horse coming out of water, then tapped what John guessed was his wallet in his jeans back pocket. “Go grab your cash and I’ll wait for you downstairs,” he told John.

As John walked past Sam on his way out their gazes caught with deliberation, then John was climbing up the stairs to his bedroom. He managed to hear Dean’s next words, but wasn’t sure whether he was reassuring Sam or Sherlock, or both.

“We won’t stay out long.”

Or maybe himself.

***

John wondered whether he was supposed to lead the way. Dean’s gait was confident, even if there was some tension in his body. It took John a moment to realize that Dean was giving a great impression that he knew where he was going, while subtly following John’s body language for indications of their direction.

It was Dean’s luck that their journey was short and more or less in a straight line. They walked mostly in silence; John had expected some off-hand remarks from Dean, but he found his companion economical with his words, striding next to him with his hands fisted in his weathered jacket pockets, collar up, looking cool and sort of surly. Perhaps Sherlock was right that this was Dean’s time to digest the last few hours, news and emotions both. (John hadn’t forgotten the earlier incident when the topic of Sam’s demon blood addiction had landed on the table.)

In the shop John hastily grabbed a few things before it hit him he was doing it because he was feeling intimidated by Dean and didn’t want to make him wait. He needn’t have worried. Dean was picking up various items from the shelves, turning them around in his hands—a typical foreigner visiting London for the first time. John used Dean’s tactics from their journey to the shop: he busied himself while secretly keeping an eye on Dean for his agenda.

They were done in about ten minutes and left Tesco’s with three carrier bags between them: two heavy ones for John and one for Dean, filled with unhealthy food in cellophane wrapping, a bottle of Jack Daniels, two bananas and a sad looking salad in a box. John had been irresistibly reminded of his first couple of shopping trips with Sam, when there’d been some surreptitious examination of
each other’s baskets; that was before they started doing a joint shopping list. In the shop it had crossed John’s mind to tell Dean that Speedy’s would still be open. Pretty much everything that Dean had bought for himself except for the whiskey could be found there, but a much healthier version or at the very least fresher. Kitchen would have closed, but the baked goods would have been available. It was nearing five, which was Speedy’s closing time on Sunday, but John was sure that at the end of her shift Katie would have extended the same courtesy to John plus a Winchester that her co-worker had at the start of the day. However, despite Dean’s more relaxed shoulders, there was still something forbidding about him, so John kept his mouth shut.

Walking back home they still had to occasionally weave their way around people. One of the rare comments John had made on their way to the shop was to clarify for Dean that the area was really quite central and close to a few popular attractions, Madam Tussauds wax museum amongst them. Now they crossed one of the lanes of Marylebone Road and stopped on the island in the middle, waiting for the green light to let them cross the other lane. They were huddled up with a bunch of tourists carrying the obligatory maps and cameras. Dean checked them out, two thirds curiosity, a third suspicion.

The sun had set behind the tall buildings while they were in Tesco’s, the absence of its quiet orange veil leaving John strangely bereft. He suddenly wished he could stay out; go out like a normal bloke: to a pub, for a stroll, to a bar then to another. Sunday was a very quiet night in drinking establishments, even in the heart of London, but he really didn’t want to go back. He’d known, rationally, that this was the extent of their trip, but as he waited on that island to reach home in four minutes his spirits felt as if they'd sunk down with the sun. He cast a look at the tall stranger next to him and passionately wished it was Sam instead, no matter if he was just as silent.

Something in the thought made him broach the subject of Sam and Dean’s plans.

“I thought you’d be on the first plane back home,” he told Dean. “After the kind of news you just had from there.”

Dean threw him a sideways glance that didn’t have any pretence of being furtive. “That was what I wanted to do. Sam wanted to stay and finish this Moriarty business. So we’re staying.”

John had much to say about that but as usual opted for “Right.”

Dean kept walking, seemingly done with that line of enquiry. Almost half a minute later he spoke again without taking off his eyes from a point ahead of him.

“Sam doesn’t make friends easily, you should know that. Not anymore anyway, not for a long time. And every time he does, it’s like ‘Monsters Are Us’. I don’t know what that says about him, but man, he’s got the worst taste.” Dean paused, the low sound of his voice in the last sentence lingering in the air for a moment. Their part of Baker Street was much quieter; a minute away in distance only, but it felt like they were in a different part of town.

John ducked his head against the chilly autumnal wind. He kept in step and looked at Dean, waiting to see whether there was more chimey to encourage it. Dean’s squint ahead suggested he was working overtime on his speech. “And listen, I don’t know what that says about me, but I’m kind of hoping you’re the exception. Sammy’s really…” Dean seemed to struggle for a moment. “He’s gone all BFF on you,” he said. “Enough for him to want to stay here and make sure you and that ten flavours of crazy up there are safe.”

“I appreciate that.” John was glad he sounded as firm and invested in his words as Sam deserved.
They’d gotten close; Dean slowed down then stopped when they arrived outside their building. He turned to face John who was struck to find his air far more accessible. Maybe it was in the eyes or maybe in the lines around his mouth, visible in the grey early evening.

“Just…don’t hurt my little brother,” Dean said simply, voice rough. “He’s not very good with—” His lids fluttered closed, pained, and stayed like that for a couple of seconds. When he looked at John again, his green eyes finally had that bottomless quality Sam’s often had. “You can’t often get one over on Sam; the kid’s too smart for his own good. But he’s got his blind spots and his wires get crossed sometimes, and—and then it’s too easy to take advantage of him.”

“Never,” John said clearly. “I would never do that.”

“Good. I’d hate to have to hunt you down and rip your limbs out.”

John grinned to one side, not particularly worried, but only because he would have rather ripped out his own arm than hurt Sam. (He suspected that all graphic threats made by Dean, especially in his protective mode, could actually be followed up to the letter. It was fine. Well, aside from impressing upon John once again that his choices of people whose…idiosyncrasies he accepted with ease could do with some examination.)

Dean nodded and turned to cross the few steps to the front door when he stopped again, noticing Katie come out of Speedy’s.

“Speaking of friends,” he murmured. “Hey, sweetheart,” he called, managing to sound both big brotherly and flirty.

Katie’s chin immediately dipped and she looked up and down the street in evident embarrassment, before letting her gaze return to Dean. Dean gave her an easy smile that made only the tips of his white teeth glisten. “You all right?” he asked.

“Oh, um…” Katie hid her hands under her apron. “I’m, yeah.”

Dean’s smile grew wider. John was happy to see it was more on the side of warm than predatory. He didn’t think Katie would survive the full force of Dean Winchester’s flirting, especially now that she’d gotten used to Sam and his…not flirting. John wasn’t sure how Sam flirted, actually. He had to have his own ways. Probably there were dimples involved. Maybe it was good that Katie hadn’t experienced those in full force either. And what did John know anyway? Judging by the intensifying darting glances Katie was throwing Dean, maybe she wouldn’t have minded to be hit on by him, full force or not. Despite her long-standing crush on Sam or maybe together with it. Obscure thoughts of threesomes fleeted through John’s mind, clearly gone down the road of depravity as a result of John’s recent invisibility to womankind, demon possessed ladies notwithstanding.

Katie’s eyes finally fell on John and seemed to lose some of their deer in the headlights quality. Great. Good to know he exuded harmlessness. John smiled at her nonetheless. Katie barely smiled back, chewing on her small, plump bottom lip.

“You all right?” John echoed Dean’s question.

“Oh, ah…Yeah,” Katie said again. “Um, no, it’s just that John left and forgot to do the lock of the door at the back, and I can’t do it.”
“Do you need a hand?” Dean asked.

Katie’s eyes went automatically to John’s and Dean’s shopping bags. “No, no. I’ll manage. You go up, you’ve got your shopping and I was going to, er…” She rubbed her hands up and down her naked upper arms, the words in the end of her sentence barely distinguishable. “Ring and see if Sam was in.”

John half expected a lewd joke from Dean, possibly along the lines of big brothers being bigger and better in every respect, but Dean shamed him by containing himself to a friendly wink.

“Nah, we can multi-task,” he told her. “Let’s go and look at that door, you can give us some of those cherry things and we’ll call it even. Or you can come bring them upstairs after you lock up, what do you say?” He gave her a surprisingly bashful smile that turned to knowing in zero point five seconds right in front of John’s eyes.

Katie should have been grateful for not suffering from asthma, John thought, because now would have been the time to take out the inhaler. She managed to mumble something about whether they were sure and if it wasn’t too much trouble. Dean stopped to fish out his phone from his pocket, while waving off her concerns, and John followed her into Speedy’s thinking gratefully that they could really pick up something nicer for Dean to eat. He felt like some odd role reversal had occurred, with Sam leaving Dean in John’s hands, and now John had to answer to Sam on account of letting his brother buy rubbish food.

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Sam lifted his head from some files on Moriarty when he heard the noise of the front door opening. His relief that John and Dean were back was short-lived at the unmistakeable sound of panicked feet running up the stairs. He got up from the couch, pivoting quickly to face the door and catching sight of Sherlock who showed up from the kitchen.

Dean burst into the flat with Ruby’s knife poised up in his right hand and Sam reluctantly awarded points to Sherlock for his accurately labelling that face of Dean’s his ‘warrior’s face’. It slackened when his eyes fell on Sam, then he looked around briskly.

“Dean, what…?” Sam was torn between stepping towards his brother and grabbing the holy water flask from the coffee table.

“What the hell was that?” Dean all but shouted.

“Where’s John?” Sherlock said.

“What the hell was what?” Sam asked, stumped. “What are you doing?”

“You called me just now,” Dean told him, eyes running over Sam in their habitual check-up mode. His glower was diminishing. “You sounded like—you just yelled at me to get up here.”

“Where’s John?” Sherlock repeated.

Cold hands gripped Sam’s shoulders. “I didn’t call you,” he told Dean.

“Where’s John?” Sherlock’s voice sliced through the air, hard with warning. Sam watched realization hit Dean as his own reached full, terrifying blossom. His eyes turned to Sherlock to find
him staring at Dean in undisguised fear.

“Son of a bitch,” Dean spat out, then he was running out the flat and down the stairs. Sam followed him, overcome with dread and adrenaline, Sherlock on his heels.

They all flew out to the pavement just in time to see a car pull away from the curb with a screeching sound. Sam caught a flash of a greying blond head at the back seat, then he and Sherlock were sprinting after the car as it accelerated down the empty road. Sam’s lungs burnt in unison with his feet, but he was gaining speed and closing the distance, Sherlock a blur right next to him. The car was slowing down as it came closer to the crossroad, more screeching. Sam’s head swam, *getting within reach, almost, just a bit more*—

Sherlock caught up with it first as it was taking a right turn. He cut the corner with it, body contorted with velocity and speed, his hand on the door handle. Sam was closing in, everything dancing in front of his eyes. He watched the car and Sherlock move like one, watched Sherlock tug frantically at the handle, then Sam was there, reaching out and brushing the back window.

For a long, suspended moment the car was almost still; Sherlock’s eyes bore into the window to the back seat and suddenly he smacked his open palm against it, a desperate, impotent snarl on his face.

Time unfroze and the car lurched forward with renewed force of escape. They kept running after it until it became a black smudge in the distance.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

A reminder about the adult rating - this chapter is one of those who call for it as well as the remaining ones until the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Running back to the flat was just as frantic as running after the car. Sherlock and Sam had stared at its rapidly disappearing back, gasping for air; and in the case of Sam, empty of all else but churning panic. His gaze had locked with Sherlock’s matching one kick-starting Sam’s brain: Dean! Where was Dean?

He sprinted back up Baker Street, Sherlock once again by his side.

The door to their building was still open from when they’d all but toppled out of it onto the pavement. Sherlock rushed past it and dove straight into Speedy’s, Sam following right behind and praying Dean was there, in one piece. He hoped that Katie had already gone home but failing that, next on his desperate agenda was finding her in one piece, too. Hopefully she might even have something for them that could offer a lead, any lead to where John had been taken.

There was no one in the customer area, but there were noises at the far back where the door to the kitchen gaped open.

“Dean!” Sam shouted, grabbing at Sherlock to prevent him from rushing in.

“Over here!” Dean called back immediately making Sam’s fingers release the material of Sherlock’s gown together with the breath he was holding. He had to stop Sherlock again, this time with a hand to his chest, before sliding to the door. He opened the flask—it wouldn’t have done much but it would have stung, allowing him a precious break to assess the situation—then counted to five and stormed through, Sherlock on his heels. Both come to an instant halt at the scene in front of them.

Dean was on the floor, half-cradling a trembling Katie, the sight of whom made Sam’s temples pulse. Her face was a mess of grotesquely streaked make-up and smeared blood. It took a couple of long seconds for Sam to realize she wasn’t badly wounded. The blood was from her arms: all over the tender skin on their insides there were little lacerations and it looked like she’d touched them over and over again.

Sam was kneeling next to her before he knew it, sick with doubt about calling 999. They couldn’t let Katie be seen by any paramedics while in this state. It would have been impossible for her to explain what had happened without an impending psychiatric examination. They all needed to straighten their stories first but the poor girl was in shock—it was out of the question to pressure her to think about lies now. Helpless, Sam tried to meet Dean’s eyes, his brain smoking with the effort to think about how to proceed in all directions. Dean had pressed something like napkins to most of Katie’s cuts. He was rocking her gently and trying to get her to drink some water from a cup, murmuring soothing nonsense.
Suddenly a memory tripped Sam’s mind in small hope. He whipped his head up to Sherlock to find him staring ahead with an utterly glazed expression.

“That doctor in the hospital, Molly,” Sam told him. “Sherlock!” Sherlock blinked and looked down to the little group in his feet.

“Can you get Molly to send an ambulance here?” Sam asked urgently. “Or your brother?” he exclaimed as an after-thought. “Can he send someone here for Katie to check her up, no questions asked?”

Sherlock was already pressing his mobile to his ear, talking to Molly. He ordered her to shut up and told her where they needed the ambulance, repeating the ‘no questions asked’ condition and explaining Katie’s state in a few words. Sam joined Dean in trying to calm the girl. It seemed to be working: her breathing was evening out and her tears were now rolling without the accompaniment of sobbing, although somehow that made Sam tense up even more. She seemed to be talking to herself and had no eye contact with anyone.

Sherlock spoke above their heads. “They’ll be here in ten minutes, perhaps less. Keep doing what you’re doing, pressure on the cuts.”

“What happened?” Sam asked Dean. This time Katie seemed to respond to his voice by a pause in the unintelligible string of distressed half-words. “Hey,” Sam said, as tender as he could. “Hey, Katie, it’s going to be okay. Help is on the way, you’ll be fine.” He lifted eyes to Dean, waiting for something to explain this goddamn mess.

Dean’s breath whistled out of him, his face menacing. “I came in,” he said. “Smelled the sulphur and started shouting the Latin from the door, didn’t want to have to use the knife in case…I found her here, standing, blood dripping all over, man; but before I even got half the words out, the demon checked out. Left her the way you see her.” Dean let go of one of Katie’s arms to stroke her hair. Sam replaced his hand immediately, feeling the warm, damp blood through the cloth against his palm.

“What about John?” Dean asked.

“They took him.” Sam swallowed, told himself to cram it. “We lost them. Sherlock sent texts with the car’s plate, but you know we’re never going to get them like that.”

Dean swore, shaking his head.

“Did she say anything?” Sam asked.

“No. I tried to get her to tell me what happened, but she…she was in no state to say her name, Sammy.” Dean’s jaw clenched. “What kind of a sick thing is that, tell me? Why cut her up? They made her dig her fingers in…I swear to God, I’ll find that bastard and—”

“It was for that,” Sherlock said. Sam had momentarily forgotten he was there; he’d also forgotten Sherlock’s stupefied gaze ahead, but now he stood up to follow its invisible trajectory.

On the far wall, stark against the white background, there were what appeared to be words written in red. Sam held his breath, mind reeling at the implication.
“What is it, what?” Dean spoke from the ground, unable to see and trying not to twist too much and disturb Katie.

“It’s a message,” Sam said. “With her blood. Um…She wrote it with her blood.”

Dean swore again in a harsh whisper. “What’s it say?” he asked.

It was Sherlock who answered, voice moderate in volume, but deep like a moonless night.

“Begin - to begin is half the work, let half still remain; again begin this, and thou wilt have finished.”

Katie began trembling again, the litany from her lips getting more frantic. For the first time Sam could hear something of a pattern to it. He dropped back on his knees next to her, his “Shh, shh, it’s okay, it’s okay,” calming her down, but she still didn’t lift her eyes. Sam focused on the sounds coming from her, tried to break them down to something tangible, to catch any meaning.

Definitely a pattern.

“Katie,” he said softly. “Katie, what is that you’re saying?”

She made a high-pitched hiccup as she came to an abrupt stop, then her lips went on to move soundlessly. Sam stared at them, straining to read them.

Sherlock crouched down and spoke, levelled but not unkind. “Katie, I’m Sherlock.” He paused. “Do you have a message for me?”

Katie’s lips seemed to stammer around a syllable, then she took a shaking breath.


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Before he met Sherlock, following his research on him and especially John’s tales, Sam had come up with this mental picture, an exaggerated comical version of a mad genius at work: papers everywhere, hair wild, eyes wilder. Communication with the outside world—none, communication with self—some, such as random words and sentences muttered as Sherlock paced up and down, stopping only on occasion to stare into nothingness or go through his notes in frenzy.

Turned out there hadn’t been anything exaggerated or comical about what Sam had imagined. He was looking at the very thing now, to the last detail apart from the hair, the scene going on for ten minutes. Sam made a few attempts to speak to Sherlock that went either completely unnoticed or ignored. Dean tried it just once, then brought in three glasses with whiskey, left one on the mantle for Sherlock, pushed one in Sam’s hand and downed his one, then poured himself another. The dining table had become the unofficial Winchester camp with Sherlock taking the other half of the room. Dean lowered himself in the chair that allowed him to keep an eye on both the door and the rest of the space.

“Okay, let’s give him some time,” he said in a low voice, chin tipping towards Sherlock who was staring at his own reflection in the mirror above the fireplace. “He needs to work out whatever that message means,” Dean continued. He lifted his glass, nothing celebratory in the gesture. “And meanwhile we need figure out what we’re going to do about that evil son of a bitch when we get our
“Yeah.” Sam was grateful for the focus. “All right.” His lips remained parted, no suggestion or sound coming out of them. Dean waited, then just said, “Sam.”

Sam reined himself in with a sharp intake of breath. “Okay. What’s our first step, if this was any other job?”

Dean gave him a funny look. “Does that feel like any other job to you?”

In one suffocating moment the reality of John’s abduction caught up with Sam, slamming into him with the force of a hundred bad case scenarios. Everything they’d discussed, everything they’d feared—no, everything Sam had feared, while the other three had been careless, arrogant, stupid—it was real. It had happened. Real, not a figment of Sam’s over-productive anxiety.

“No,” he answered Dean, steeling himself up. “It doesn’t. But if we’re going to help John, we need to think quick and we’ve got to keep our heads clear. So. We’ve got a demon on our hands and he’s taken a hostage.”

“What does he want in exchange?”

They both looked at Sherlock in unison, then Dean nodded. “So how do we stop him? Use Sherlock as bait?”

Sam was surprised by Dean’s readiness to suggest that. “Do you think he’ll go for it?” he asked.

Dean watched Sherlock for a moment, eyes hooded. “Yeah,” he said. “I think he will.”

“Or we can wait for Moriarty to make his move.” Sam was really only thinking out loud, trying against all odds to keep the distance they would have had if the job had no personal connection to them. By the end of his sentence Dean was already shaking his head. “Nah-ah. I’m not waiting. No more moves, or games, okay? I’m fucking—I’m not playing. We’re not playing. We’re hunting down the black-eyed son of a bitch and then it’s ‘Elvis has left the building’. ”

Dean had omitted the ‘g’ at the end of ‘waiting’, ‘playing’ and ‘hunting’ so Sam chose not to argue. In a couple of seconds his brother nodded, face still warning. “All right. Other options.” His expression cleared a bit. “We can burn his bones. He’s not an old demon, so we won’t have to trace down what his real name was or where he was buried.”

“He was buried, not cremated,” Sam began. Dean cut in. “There you go. We just need—”

“But his body was moved,” Sam hurried to finish. “No trace to where,”

“Oh, for fuck…” Dean fumed for a moment. “No trace? At all? What about that paranoid dude, Big Brother? Can’t he help track him down?” Dean was already opening his mouth to address Sherlock, but Sam stopped him.

“There’s nothing, Dean. I already talked to Sherlock about it while you and John were out. It was the first thing I checked.”

Dean’s face refused to crumple, just clamped in frustration. He kept his eyes on Sherlock. Sherlock had pushed the couch further and further away from the fireplace until he left it slap bang in the
middle of the room, closer to the dining table. The coffee table had followed, but was abandoned half-way through. As a result there was an empty square in front of the fireplace for Sherlock to move around in it, with the two armchairs remaining as boundaries on left and right, exactly where they’d been when Sam had first set foot in the room. Sherlock now stepped on the coffee table instead of walking around it, taking a shortcut to the couch and bending over to rummage through some papers on the seats.

Dean returned his attention to Sam. “Okay, so torching his bones is out.”

“It would’ve been torching his decomposing corpse. The guy died a year and a half ago.”

“That wouldn’t have stopped me from enjoying it.”

Sam didn’t have it in him to correct Dean on his morbid feelings. Katie was the last straw; the thought of John in that sadistic maniac’s hands made Sam want to separate Moriarty’s head from his body with a wire, like he had Gordon Walker’s. Too bad Moriarty wasn’t a vampire.

“You know what we should do?” Dean said, determined gleam in his eyes. “We should just summon him.”

“Dean, come on.”

“I mean it, Sam.”

“No.”

“No? What, because you said so?”

“Yes. First of all, you know you can’t just summon every demon.”

“We can summon him.”

“That doesn’t mean we should. I’m not letting you do it.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s too dangerous, the guy’s too dangerous.”

“No, he’s not.” Dean was sounding more and more casually dismissive. Sam knew why, but playing down the danger to justify reckless moves was not on, no matter how much it helped against Dean’s guilt.

“Yes, he is!” Sam let his voice rise. “You’re not thinking straight, Dean. Your suggestions are erratic and just…no.”

“I’m not erratic! It’s an option, Sam.”

“Yeah, a crazy, dangerous option. Not to mention that if he finds a way to check out we might lose our only chance of finding out where John is.”

“We can make him talk first.”
Sam stared at Dean’s withdrawn, grim eyes.

“No,” he said, quiet. “I’m not going to let this spin out of control, all right?”

He expected Dean to continue pushing, but he changed the tactic. “Sammy, we can summon him, trap him and keep him here. Buy ourselves some time and find John. He can’t be far. We’ll get him back and then we’ll exorcise that son of a bitch.”

“So he could just come back.”

“Not if we shut the door under his nose first, he won’t.”

“There’s too much risk and you know it.”

“Do you have any better ideas?” Dean spread his arms, glowering at Sam. “Because all I’m hearing from you is ‘no, no, no’, so stop slapping my hands and tell me: what are we supposed to do?” Dean sounded frayed under his bitchy tone and Sam had to look away. He felt the panic again, threatening to pour in like a deluge of rain down the mainland of Sam’s strength and common sense. He had to keep it together. He’d always been good in emergencies. John would benefit from that.

“Look,” he told Dean. “Let’s think this through, all right? We’ve got other options. We’ve got the knife.”

“To use the knife, we need to get him first, Sam. And if we use it, what about…” Dean left his thought unfinished, looking at the whiskey glass between his hands as if it’d done him a personal wrong. Sam had inkling what Dean had stopped himself from saying.

“If push shove, we’ll have to,” he said. “Use it, I mean.”

Dean regarded him for the longest instant, making Sam squirm inwardly. He should have felt really bad for deciding some poor guy’s fate for him, and maybe he did; only it was more of an abstract understanding that this was what he was supposed to feel. Sam hoped that if it came to killing someone, it would really hit him. But if he was stomping on his guilt in advance, if he was distancing himself so he could avoid hesitation when the time came, then that was—It wasn’t fine, but it could mean the difference between life and death for John.

He met his brother’s eyes and just like that, he knew they were both circling around in the same murky waters; they had both once again accosted on the exact same messed up island in an ocean filled with them.

“Do you remember when we used to struggle with these things?” Sam asked, his voice floating only in the small space between them. “When it was tough to make some choices, like it’s supposed to be?”

The two small dimples on both corners of Dean’s mouth made a mirthless appearance, but he dropped his gaze to his glass again and said nothing. Sam let his eyes glide over the whiskey’s placid surface, feeling numb.

Dean cleared his throat. “You’re still struggling. You’ve been spit-roasting me, man, you’re not making it easy. And we’re not some yahoos who’re just going in for the kill. None of this is what we want to do.” Dean ducked his head to re-capture Sam’s gaze. “But the guy’s your friend. A very good friend. How many of those do we have left, huh?” Dean stopped there, letting Sam get his head
around the words.

John. John’s destiny was decided in this room here and another one, somewhere out there, which
Sam prayed to God they found quickly. John was like a snowflake, carried by a whimsical, vicious
gust of wind, and in one fickle instant he could be melted into oblivion. The man who Moriarty
possessed might turn out to be collateral damage, but in the big picture how was John any different?
This wasn’t his world; this wasn’t even his game. Sam couldn’t let that happen, not on his watch, not
to John of all people. There wasn’t going to be an easy choice here, but Sam already knew which
one he’d make.

Sherlock’s voice suddenly rang in the silence: “Quiet!”

Sam stared at him, thrown by the inconsequential request but Dean went directly for the sarcasm.
“Oh, it speaks!” he said. “Don’t ‘quiet’ me, sunshine because we’re not singing lullabies over here;
we’re trying to figure out how to save your friend’s bacon.”

“John wouldn’t have needed saving if you hadn’t fallen for the oldest trick in the book.”

Dean pushed himself up on his feet abruptly. “Hey! They’re demons, you moron, there’s nothing old
in their tricks. That didn’t just sound like Sam on the phone—it was Sam’s freaking voice. And what
happened with your ‘game’ anyway? I thought there was no danger for John?”

Sherlock did the walking on furniture again, arriving at the front of the couch. “You agreed with me
and you’re supposed to be the expert.”

Dean’s legs were quickly pressing against the couch’s back. “Oh yeah? Just like you are supposed to
be an expert on that Moriarty guy. I warned you that he wasn’t human anymore, but you were too
busy preening on your superiority tree. That’s right, I know big words, too…”

Sherlock was looking at Dean as if he had suddenly switched to Mandarin.

“…only I use my brain to keep myself safe,” Dean went on. “And I don’t play with psychopaths—”

“Oh, please! You couldn’t keep John safe for twenty minutes.”

Sam saw Dean’s fingers fold into a fist and came out of his stupor. “Enough,” he said, shoving
lightly at Dean’s chest and glaring at Sherlock. “Quit bickering whose fault it is. It’s not helping
John.” Sherlock took a deep breath, his expression sobering up. Dean looked sideways to the door,
chin protruding.

“All right,” Sam told them both, then turned to Sherlock. “What do you got?”

There was a flicker of reticence in Sherlock that Sam attributed to the fact that he was the one asking
the question.

“Not enough,” was Sherlock’s reply. “What about you?”

“What we always got,” Dean said. “Guts and guns, no glory. We left the brains to you,” he finished,
still fractious.

Sherlock’s face remained neutral for a second, before shifting to capitulating regret.
“I apologize if I’ve offended you,” he said, his eyes at odds with the formality of his statement. “I need your help to—with everything.” Not waiting for a response, he rotated on his feet and walked around the coffee table, then stood in front of the fireplace with his back to them. He’d stuck some papers and pictures to the mirror but most of its surface was clear. In the reflection Sherlock looked between Sam and Dean.

“Is there any way to find where Moriarty’s body was moved to?” he asked. “Any supernatural way?” There was the kind of hope in his voice that tolled like a funeral bell. Sam let Dean answer, too busy squashing the fear at the realization that Sherlock really didn’t have much.

“Not unless someone tells us,” Dean said, moving to the centre of the room. “Like a spirit with a grudge against him, who has to know in the first place, of course. Or maybe a psychic, but that’s a very slim maybe. And a real psychic is harder to find than the Jethro Tull ’77 Live.”

“Somebody moved his body,” Sam pointed out.

Sherlock nodded. “It was Moran. He’ll never talk.”

“Great, he’s loyal to the son of a bitch,” Dean said. “Don’t you just love it when the bad guys have integrity?”

“Not just loyal,” Sherlock said distractedly, eyes fixed to one of the papers on the mirror. “Sebastian Moran is probably the only person with whom James Moriarty has established what is called ‘a meaningful relationship’.”

Dean’s cough was too theatrical not to draw Sherlock’s attention back. In the mirror Sam saw Dean’s eyebrow lift, the gesture even more loaded with the reversed perspective.

“Except for me, you mean,” Sherlock said with an eye roll.

“If the shoe fits,” Dean told him. “Except Moran’s not Mr Smarty Pants. You are. If you can’t work out where his body is then no one else can.”

Sherlock shook his head. “Our relationship wasn’t…like that. Everything I know about Moriarty’s personal history I know from his files, not from him. I know the data in there by heart, but that’s not the point.”

Sherlock suddenly turned around, coming face to face with Dean at much closer proximity than Sam expected. “It doesn’t matter how well I know him,” he spoke, almost pleadingly. “Wherever he chose to have his body moved, I’ll never be able to work it out. The connection would be too obscure for me to make. I’m brilliant, not a magician. I can’t deduce everything. If I were him, I’d choose a random place without any personal meaning. Which was probably what he has done. I just...can’t...do it.” It was obvious the failure was turning Sherlock inside out, in both frustration and fright.

“All right,” Dean said. “All right.” He half-turned to Sam. “Looks like we’re back to the knife. But we need to find him first.”

“That’s not a problem.” Sherlock said.

Dean looked back to him, quick and suspicious. “I thought you said you didn’t know where he was.”
“No, I said I didn’t have much.”

Adrenaline and anger propelled Sam forward to the other two. “You mean you know where John is? You’ve known?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said. “He’s in Barts, in one of their laboratories next to the morgue.” He turned to Dean. “The message—it was an invitation. Jim wants to finish this where we first met.”

“Jim?” This time both of Dean’s eyebrows made it to his hairline.

“It’s his real name. He used it when we first met, despite being ‘in character’ at the time. Molly introduced us. He was her boyfriend, ‘Jim from IT’.” Sherlock sounded unmoved by the memory, but Sam didn’t let that fool him. He was beginning to wonder whether it was his imagination or Sherlock’s sharpness did ratchet up every time he spoke about Moriarty.

“I knew immediately he wanted us to meet back at the same place,” Sherlock finished.

“Then what the hell, man?” Dean shook his head, face slack as if it’d got tired to twist so frequently.

“I knew you’d want to just…barge in.” Sherlock’s hands became hyper-active with his words. “What’s the point of going in there unprepared? What, we’ll just show up, the three of us, with a knife and some Latin? This is James Moriarty. That’s the last time I’ve underestimated him. It would be the height of stupidity to follow his invitation blindly. I need to work out the entire game first.” Sherlock’s demeanour was getting less frantic, but darker. “I need to know every move ahead. Every single one, until the end of the game.” His teeth flashed with the word ‘end’ similarly to when he’d hit the car earlier. “This ends tonight. I’ll finish it, but I need to have all moves planned ahead, his and mine.”

He abruptly came to a halt in front of Sam. “What do you remember about Moriarty?”

Sam started. “Nothing,” he said, confused. “I’ve never met the guy.”

“Of course you haven’t.” Sherlock said, shoulders slumping in evident despair at the constant need of lesser humans for elaboration. “You’ve read his files. What comes to mind, quickly; anything that struck you.”

“Why?” Dean asked. “Hey.” He snapped his fingers in front of Sherlock’s face with the same lack of result for his effort. “Why?”

“Answer the question,” Sherlock told Sam. It was a request, not a demand, despite the brusque form. Sam had no doubt it was all in an effort to save John, so he postponed his questions in favour of racking his brain.

“All right,” he said. “Um, I’ll just tell you the things that kind of stuck with me.”

“Good,” Sherlock nodded briskly.

“All right,” Sam repeated to himself. “Irish. Younger than I expected. He spent a year in his late twenties back home. America, I mean…so I guess it’s no surprise why I remembered that.”

“It’s where he met Moran,” Sherlock said. “Between them, they executed the perfect double murder:
two American soldiers, whistleblowers. There weren’t even suspects; the whole thing was swept under the rug, much to the benefit of those who had ordered the job. I imagine Moriarty had been looking for someone to be his ‘hands-on’ partner and Moran fitted like the second glove of a pair. They never parted after that.” Sherlock’s face was a riddle. He was by the window and now turned his head to look out.

The rain, starting strong just as Katie was taken to the hospital, seemed to have slowed down. Molly had looked like a wet mouse, but a quietly efficient one. Sherlock made arrangements for the ambulance to go to another hospital, typing the address on his phone and showing it to the driver and to Molly, then to Sam and Dean. He’d not said it out loud and deleted it after Sam nodded that he’d memorized it. Sam approved of this paranoid approach. Something in Sherlock’s treatment of Molly gave him extra points in Sam’s eyes. Sam couldn’t tell for sure what it was: maybe the way Sherlock had met Molly’s big, upturned eyes from close proximity, his eye contact with her open and calm, or maybe the way he’d shown her the address, saying, “I think it’d be best if you did this.” Even through the buzz of his worry for John and Katie, Sam had wondered whether for Sherlock this was means of ensuring Molly was safe, too.

“What else?” Sherlock suddenly spoke in the present, shaking Sam out his own reverie. It took him a moment to remember what they were talking about. Oh, yeah. Moriarty. What else?

“The PhDs?” Sam said, ironic. “I don’t know, I guess you don’t expect a criminal to be highly academic.”

“He’s not your common criminal,” Sherlock said, eyes flashing. “What else?” he insisted.

Sam shrugged. “Then it was your history,” he said bluntly. “The guy told you that you were both made for each other. He was—is—obviously crazy. And you still stuck around.” Sam had read the transcripts of all of Sherlock’s conversations with Moriarty and he remembered the line, long etched in his memory. The one time he had heard those exact words, they’d come from the Devil himself.

“Made for each other, really?” Dean looked Sherlock squarely in the face. “Wow. Was he—And I’m only asking because now it’s not the time for secrets. No one here’s a virgin, so come on: was there anything going on between you two?” Sherlock seemed to freeze infinitesimally, then shook his head. Dean blithely carried on. “Was he into you, in the Biblical sense? The gay Biblical sense.”

“Dean,” Sam said, lips pursing in resignation. “There’s no such thing,” he heard his mouth add on its own volition.

“Shut up,” Dean shot back, eyes glued to Sherlock’s face. At best the look Sherlock gave back could be described as strange. “I don’t know,” he told Dean slowly. From what Sam could tell Sherlock was honest. A thin vertical line had appeared above his nose and he pulled his bottom lip into his mouth.

Dean looked at Sam then back at Sherlock, spreading his arms. “Well? Was any of that of any use?”

“What about Moran?” Sherlock asked him in lieu of an answer.

“What about him?”

“Anything,” Sherlock said. “From what you saw of him; from the files, the flat across the street.”

“Is this how you work?” Dean asked, features back to curling in incredulity. “Just…brainstorming?”
“Of course it’s not how I work.” Sherlock sounded equal measures offended and tired. He resumed his to and fro with less vigour. “I’ve put some of it together, but I’m missing a key element and there is a swamp of data. I’m tackling this half-blind thanks to the element of the supernatural and to top it off, I don’t have much time.” He had walked to the wall between the two windows and now leaned his forehead against it, the gown tight across his back as his shoulders drooped. The pose should have looked over-dramatic, but it didn’t. Sherlock lifted his right hand, fingers touching the wall and moving over it as if exploring the wallpaper pattern. Sam was sure his eyes were closed. Both he and Dean watched him, mesmerised by the hush of the scene.

There was a sigh, then Sherlock straightened and turned around, meeting Sam’s eyes. “You have a discerning mind and a gift for observation. Tell me about Moran. What did you see?”

Sam revisited both his encounters with the guy. He didn’t think Sherlock would classify the mention of the thick eyebrows or the square jaw as good examples of Sam’s supposed gift for observation. But both times had been quick and not much had stood out. He stomped on his rising hopelessness and focused on his memories of the flat, then back to Moran as he’d seen him the second time.

“Um, he was awful quiet,” he said. “Not hard to tell he was a soldier. Yeah, I noticed that string around his neck, his dog tags. I remember thinking I wasn’t sure if soldiers here had dog tags like the ones back home.” Sam lifted his left shoulder apologetically. “That’s all.”

At first it looked like Sherlock hesitated whether to press for more. Then he seemed to consider Sam’s words as if looking for an answer to his question.

And then it was as if he hadn’t even heard Sam. His eyes reminded Sam of miniature glass domes, only instead of being shaken up and down by invisible hands, their pupils erupted, throwing bright specs everywhere.

“Oh,” he breathed out. Sam distantly heard Dean ask, “What? What is it?” but held his own tongue back.

“Oh!” Sherlock repeated, meeting Sam’s eyes, the blaze in them making him want to look away.

“What?” Dean demanded from Sam with a frown, turning both his palms up. “Did I miss something?”

“You and me both,” Sam told him quietly, while they observed Sherlock throw himself on his knees in front of the couch. A fountain of paper sprang from under his hands; Sherlock stopped just as abruptly as he had started, fumbled with his gown until he managed to extract his phone from his pocket and typed a message furiously.

Dean took two firm steps to cover the distance to the couch and tapped Sherlock on the shoulders, then gave him a smack with the back of his fingers. Sherlock lifted his eyes to him, still on his knees. Dean repeated the wide eyes and open palms thing. “Is it about where the body was moved?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then what, dude, come on!”

Sherlock shook his head, eyes on his cell phone’s display.
“All right, princess!” Dean told him. “Stop shaking those curls o’yours and start talking, or I swear to
God I’m going to start throwing punches!”

In that instant Sherlock’s phone beeped in his hand. Sam found himself standing next to Dean in
wait. His breathing was calm and his palms were dry; only his throat seemed to throb as if it’d
swapped places with his heart.

Sherlock read the message he’d received then lifted a luminous gaze to Dean and Sam. “Gentlemen,”
he said. “We’re ready to go and fetch my blogger.”

Chapter End Notes

I just found out that 'Of Ghosts and Men' is in the top 20 of over 400 crossovers featuring Sherlock/SPN. (I mean in 'kudos' statistics over here on AO3.) I've never been one for statistics, in part because I know very well that I'm not the kind of author who's widely read and popular. These days I tend to be happy with my corner of readership, all awesome people. But this story has been my most ambitious, most demanding writing project to-date. I love creating it and I devote to it an awful lot of care, attention to detail, thought, an enormous amount of hours, etc. To have this kind of feedback and external validation of my effort means a great deal to me and it makes me so very grateful for all of you who have been sharing this journey with me.♥
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Please, have a read at the **warnings** if you don't remember them. Once again **a reminder** about the adult rating of the story.

A very short video for the SPN portion of readers unfamiliar with 'Sherlock': **relevant to the chapter**. (The Sherlockians might benefit from a refresher, too.)

See the end of the chapter for more **notes**.

John realized that his old fear of dying was becoming an elusive thing. True, he wasn’t covered in explosives and neither was he in a battle field. He was sitting in the familiar laboratory in Barts morgue, the chair comfortable under him—standing on one’s feet for hours on end was quite hard with not much going on. Nevertheless, he understood the danger of his situation, but his fear was almost abstract. It didn’t have its old taste, like a paper cut on his tongue. It didn’t have the obliterating grip on his psyche anymore, either, the one that translated into a single-minded litany of ‘Please, God, let me live.’ Perhaps the reason was his fresh discovery of the relativity of life and death or perhaps it was because in recent years he’d been shot at, abducted, almost blown up and in general put in mortal peril more times than anyone he knew—and John knew people who spent their entire lives in war zones.

Fear for the life of others, conversely, remained a steady, robust construction that no amount of experience seemed to shake or corrode.

He heard the havoc outside the laboratory and his heart all but tore itself out in his chest, trying to simultaneously jump in hope and sink in horror. The place was crawling with demons: John had seen nothing but black eyes from the moment he was snatched. One magic knife was not going to be of any help against all of them. Just like he’d commanded an army alive, Moriarty had his soldiers as a demon, too, but this time there was nothing invisible in his network. There were three demons only in the lab and at least half a dozen outside. Moriarty himself hadn’t made an appearance yet—John didn’t know what that meant. No one had spoken to him; they hadn’t even bothered tying him up. One demon had just lifted him in the air by his throat and shaken him close to loss of consciousness, showing John his weight was merely that of a ragdoll in a demon’s hands. John rather preferred Karen: she’d been talkative, infinitely prettier, and she’d treated him the old-fashioned way with rope and a chair. The mindfuck, on the other hand—**that** he didn’t miss, but the night was young and if it was hiding James Moriarty in its bosom, John was pretty sure Karen would gain more points in comparison, even with her manipulative insinuations about incest added to the scales.

The commotion outside was coming closer and closer, voices and yells mixing with the occasional thuds of bodies hitting surfaces. John’s eyes, mouth and trachea all felt like arid land. He stared at the door, again torn between praying that a friendly face stormed in and desperately hoping that all friendly faces were far away and safe.

Sam was slammed against the door, his identity unmistakeable through the thin strip of the glass panel, so there was the end of one hope. Sam quickly disappeared, only to reappear a moment later,
flying through both doors. He was entangled with another body and both crashed to the ground in a heap. John’s guards’ attention was on the scene for two stupefied seconds longer than John’s but it was enough. John grabbed the metal box with the sharp spikes that he’d had his eye on and hurled it towards the nearest demon, then jumped on the back of the shortest one, arms locking around his throat. The first demon’s satisfying howl was accompanied by the sound of the door bursting open again, this time by Dean and Sherlock, also arriving in various stages of flight.

The demon on whom John was backpacking managed to throw him off without much effort, turning to snarl at John. His distraction cost him his life: from his place on the ground John only saw the swishing motion of Dean’s right shoulder—in and out—before the demon’s body seemed to light up from the inside. He shook before dropping to the floor, eyes clear and dead. Dean had already vanished from John’s limited scope of vision: the big island of units in the middle of the laboratory obstructed most of the room from view. John was disoriented by the chaotic movement of a number of feet that appeared out of the blue, before he realized that he was watching Sherlock being throttled by John’s third guard. Steam was rising all around Sherlock’s head and animalistic screams were coming out of the demon’s mouth. John threw himself at his legs, putting everything into his assault on the back of the knees. The demon whipped his head to growl down at him, his vicious kick sending John skidding along the floor until he hit the wall. The demon still lost his balance, landing right next to John. For a moment the evil eyes seemed to suck John in, then the demon gnashed his teeth and grabbed John by his jumper, giving one mighty jerk that made the back of John’s head bash hard against the wall. The world became a jumble, pulling away fast behind a white fog.

It was sound that first returned to John with a sickening pop; next, he was aware that the battle around him continued. The demons that had sent Sherlock and Dean flying in must have followed them. There was movement and shattered glass everywhere, as well as hissing noises accompanied with cries of pain. In John’s dizzy state the action around him flowed as if someone was showing him snippets of a film: Dean, engaged in skilful hand combat, occasionally knife in hand, his face fierce and focused; Sam, hair flying around his head, his shoulders huge in their flex to block and attack, the knife miraculously appearing in his hand as well. They were both soaking wet, completely dripping, and the demons that came in contact with them reacted as if they were touching fire, their blind flailing sooner or later signing up their death certificates.

Suddenly the film was no longer just a series of scenes, but a full feature: Sherlock, also dripping, was approaching John at great speed, sliding along the floor half on his side, half on his back. The biggest demon John had ever seen appeared like their old friend Golem, having jumped over the island as if he was a child hopping over a knee-high fence. Sherlock had managed to roll into a seated position and had just crawled backwards towards John’s half-slumped form when the demon bent over, one massive hand shooting out and its fingers closing into Sherlock’s hair. Without thinking John grabbed the big bottle next to his left hip and swung it against the side of the demon’s head.

There was a mini-explosion: hands flying to his face, the demon floundered and roared. A shadow flashed behind him and the demon shook in mesmerising golden tremors before collapsing on the floor, body contorted and very dead. Panting soundlessly, Sam bent over to extract the knife from his back. He straightened up and wiped his face with his sleeve. His gaze quickly transferred from Sherlock to John.

“You all right?” he asked.

Dean showed up behind him, eyes repeating the question.

“Yeah,” John said. Sherlock rolled his neck, droplets flying out from his curls as he rapidly shook
himself off. He found purchase on the ground and twisted to look at John, managing to present him with one eye. It was going to turn a spectacular shade of purple to compliment the lagoon-like colour of Sherlock’s irises. John gave him a weak smile. The round tips of Sherlock’s front teeth came into view with his breathless grin.

Dean stepped over the dead body at his feet and extended his hand to Sherlock who used it to spring up. John quickly followed, making a couple of steps and finding the floor undulating under him. He looked around at the mess in the laboratory and at all the dead bodies. For all he knew these had been some very much alive people who’d happened to walk past Bart’s on their way this evening. Maybe they’d gone out to meet with someone on a rainy Sunday or maybe they’d just popped out to the nearest Newsagent’s for a Galaxy chocolate bar. Some innocent strangers who were now dead, the last hours of their lives spent in a metaphorical prison, locked up in terror. John felt a chill run through him and the morgue had nothing to do with it.

His eyes lifted and met Sam’s understanding ones.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Dean said.

"God, yes," John said, clasping a hand on Sam’s upper arm when he felt his legs try to give out again.

There was a delicate creak behind them and the room suddenly felt colder. An unforgettable, loathsome sing-song voice filled the air.

“So you’re Sherlock Holmes. Molly’s told me all about you. You on one of your cases?”

John turned around, bracing himself.

James Moriarty, dressed in an evening suit completed with a bow tie, smiled lazily from the door. His eyes were clear, rounded like a child’s, and fixed on Sherlock as if he was a magnificent Christmas tree.

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“Do you like what I’ve done with the meatsuit?”

John attempted to compute what Moriarty’s question to Sherlock meant, but failed. He was still in a haze. Everything had happened in a blink of an eye: Dean darting forward, Moriarty lifting his right hand and making a motion as if he was slapping someone. Dean’s body changing direction abruptly and flying sideways, crashing against the nearest wall, then dropping on the floor. In his peripheral vision John had seen Sam start in shock at his brother’s impact with the wall. He had only begun to rush to Dean when some powerful force had grabbed hold of him and dragged him on his feet to the same wall, pinning him there. A second later John had found himself next to Sam; his little finger could have brushed with Sam’s if John had had any control over his body. Only his head was able to move within some very limited range and judging by Sam’s strain of his neck, his situation was no different. It felt as if a sequence of iron hoops were holding John upward, captive against the wall. It was then that he observed Moriarty’s left hand make an up and down motion to indicate his body, while asking Sherlock his incomprehensible question.

Obviously Sherlock was not going to have a problem deciphering it. He took a step closer, taking Moriarty’s face in, seemingly oblivious of his companions’ predicament. He ran his gaze slowly over Moriarty’s body, returning it with an intense scrutiny to his hair. The other man’s eyes never left
Sherlock’s face, their look frightening with the thrill of the closeness.

“Remarkable,” Sherlock said. He stepped forward again, coming within reach of Moriarty; he extended his hand but then stopped. “May I?”

A self-satisfied smile accompanied Moriarty’s nod. “Be my guest. I should warn you, though: the holy water won’t harm me. In case that’s what you have in mind.”

There was something distracted in the way Sherlock shook his head to negate, his eyes almost hungry on Moriarty’s features. He closed the distance, standing too near to the shorter man and making him turn his face up. The hoop that seemed to press specifically around John’s throat tightened as John observed Sherlock’s fingers ghost over the contours of Moriarty’s face then move down to his throat, never quite touching. A moment of hesitation during which their eyes locked, then the glowing white of Sherlock’s hands danced as he deftly began undoing the bow tie. Moriarty’s eyes widened, for the first time somewhat unsettled, but the fascination in them quickly outweighed any other emotion. He tipped his head back a little, helpful, a smile still playing on his lips; a couple of seconds later the bow tie was hanging undone against the panels of chest, Sherlock’s fingers busy with the top two buttons of the shirt.

A moment of realization that he was watching Sherlock slowly undress the man who’d tried to ruin their lives, John averted his eyes to look at Sam and Dean. Sam’s face was flushed from his continuous effort to move, but otherwise there was indifference to the grotesque scene in front of them. Dean was evidently badly hurt from his crash: he was still making small abortive movements on the floor, looking like an overgrown turtle shifting this way or that on all fours.

John’s gaze returned to Sherlock on its own masochistic volition. He found the picture even more oppressing: Sherlock’s fingers were now sliding down the column of Moriarty’s throat, careful and almost sensual; when they reached the divot of his collarbone they fanned out, giving John an instant of hysterical hope that Sherlock would close his hands around the bastard’s throat and squeeze. Instead, Sherlock just pushed the shirt collar wide open, baring the top of Moriarty’s chest; then, hands on the tendons where the neck met the shoulder, he brought his face closer still to look at the skin behind the ears and down the neck on the side. From such close proximity Moriarty’s eyes drooped as they remained fixed on Sherlock. They roamed the bottom half of Sherlock’s features, lips to chin, the look in them gloating and God help John, salacious.

Sherlock stepped back abruptly, hands dropping by his sides.

“Brilliant,” he breathed out.

“Isn’t it?” Moriarty replied, tone lyrical. He turned his head to look at his reflection in a cupboard glass door. His hands ran over the two hanging ends of the bowtie, then experimentally opened the shirt even more. “Huh,” he said, eyes returning to Sherlock. “I quite like it. Makes me look like a cool spy about to fuck someone.”

Sherlock said nothing, just slid his hands in his trouser pockets. John suddenly noticed that his white shirt was clinging to his chest, still soaking wet. Thank goodness Sherlock wore his jacket buttoned up, never mind that it, too, looked like it’d gone through the carwash.

“I’m so happy someone can really appreciate the effort,” Moriarty told Sherlock, tone friendly and earnest, as if they were discussing the latest architectural drawing he’d produced. It made John want to smash his face. The impulse was so powerful it distracted him from the fact that he still had no clue what they were talking about.
“You have no idea how long I had to audition to find the right person,” Moriarty continued, this time close to mournful. “Of course I say ‘audition’ but…” His whole face twitched with a quick, private grin, then he schooled it back to mock seriousness. “The candidates didn’t have much of a say.” He paused, his eyes boring into Sherlock’s prepared to eat up his reaction. “Some of them didn’t make it through the process.”

Sherlock took another step back. “I’ve heard that demons use the bodies they possess a little too freely,” he said. “I suppose it was expected that you’d be prone to excess.”

A gnawing feeling of understanding began making its way forward in John’s mind.

“Of course I have to put up with all the screaming that keeps going on,” Moriarty said, his expression now of the overworked member of staff confiding in a sympathetic listener. “I’m afraid I rather broke him with all the surgery, but I had to have my perfect face…Well…” A quick, quiet burst of laugh. “Perfect.” The amusement lingered around his mouth, which now John wished he could see better. There was something just a bit off in the way it moved. “I don’t feel pain,” Moriarty went on conversationally, “but he does and okay, it was a bit too much.” The mouth turned cloyingly regretful. “The screaming is tedious, though; every once in a while I have to put the gag on. I could have just killed him there and then, I suppose, but I kind of like the thought that I could do it at any time. It’s like having a tiny person ready to kill right in your pocket.”

“You are insane.” Dean’s voice was raw. Sherlock’s face echoed the sentiment as he stepped away further. Moriarty spared Dean the quickest of glances, before turning to Sherlock again. “Another one fond of pointing out the obvious.”

With his last movement Sherlock had turned with his back to John, so it was no longer possible to see his face. He didn’t offer a comment back, but then his head moved: he seemed to be looking around.

“I figured out your little message,” he said. "Obviously. The unfinished business. It’s becoming a theme. Last time it was Bach, now you’re quoting emperors? I see Hell has only increased your megalomania.”

Moriarty raised an eyebrow, visibly not taking offence. “You’re one to talk. Bringing here not just any hunters, but the knights of the quest against the supernatural. Although I’ve got to say, Sherlock…” He looked at Sam and Dean, grimacing a little in distaste. “They’re a bit…common. I think I prefer John.”

“Well, you can’t have him.” Sherlock’s answer was just as unexpected as it was lashing in its pointedness.

“Ah. No time for chit-chat. The American way.” Moriarty’s face emptied out. “You know what I want.”

“And I just gave you my answer.”

“Hold on, what?” John asked, stomach plummeting. “Sherlock? What is he talking about?”

“Then again…” Moriarty was drawing the words out as if they were in an exercise in opera singing. “Your old pet is just as stupid as these two.” He blinked slowly and spoke with his normal voice. “I’ll make you a final offer, Sherlock. I warned you once, because I liked playing with you. I then
tried to get you to kill yourself, because you didn’t listen. Now it’s third time lucky.” He suddenly
moved forward, the motion of his body making Sherlock start.

“I want your soul,” Moriarty said, lifting his chin to look Sherlock squarely in the face. “Or I’ll take
John’s. It’s as simple as that. He’ll give it in a second.” The dark, vile eyes moved to meet John’s.
“Won’t you, Johnny boy?”

John felt his mouth open, ready to yell or spit or swear, he didn't know. Danger signs flashed in his
mind—the last thing he needed was to make this even worse! In a horrible twist, the lock was on his
lips instantly—Moriarty had rolled his fingers, not even outstretching his hand and John’s jaw locked
in a spasm, causing him great pain that he couldn’t even move to relieve. His eyes met Sherlock’s
and something still managed to loosen in John at the sight of the uncovered distress in them.

“Hey!” Sam's voice boomed. “Cut that out!”

Moriarty’s eyes moved to him and he lifted his other hand, fingers dancing. A succession of bitten
sounds came from Sam whose lips were too tightly pressed together. Moriarty walked over to them,
face mirthless. He looked up at Sam. “Don’t interrupt,” he told him, then shifted to stand in front of
John. John’s nostrils flared to the point where he thought his anger would tear at the skin. He stared
into Moriarty’s eyes trying to convey his message without words. From this close he could see that
the man’s face was the work of plastic surgery—amazing plastic surgery, but still impossible to go
unnoticed once you realized its purpose.

Even after that nasty trick he pulled on both of us. Making us think he was dead. Having you watch
him take that drop. Yet here you are…. ” The voice was soft now, assured. “You’ll sell your soul for
him, won’t you? I think we’ll have a nice little bidding game if I let you all play.” Moriarty’s chin
pointed at Dean’s curled form on the floor then at Sam. “Those two will do whatever it takes to save
the other one. Oh, wait. They already have.” He turned and sauntered back to Sherlock. “People are
so predictable!” The ‘o’ in the ‘so’ stretched out too long, while Moriarty’s head was busy drawing
the letter in the air. John felt his jaw being released and heard Sam take a deep breath next to him.

A quiet laugh from below drew John’s attention. Dean had managed to turn himself into a sitting
position, back against the wall, his right leg folded, foot pointing to the knee of the left one. “This is
your famous enemy?” Dean told Sherlock. “Dude,” he continued with feeling. “I’m so sorry for
calling you a clown. I’d just not met him yet.”

Moriarty snapped the fingers and suddenly Dean was spluttering. He keeled over to his left, eyes
beginning to bulge.

“Stop it!” Sam called, furious. “Leave him alone! What’s the matter? I’m too big for you?”

Moriarty rolled his eyes at Sherlock, mouthing, “Give me a sec.” The strain disappeared from Dean’s
body and he clutched at his face, groaning loudly. John felt his own body slide down the wall,
rendering his brain confused about its control over it. Moriarty lifted both of his hands, this time his
fingers twisting as if they were digging into something. John watched Sam sharply curl in on himself
and fly diagonally across the length of the laboratory, crashing into a big glass case and falling down
hard, shards of glass and different objects raining down on him.

“Sammy,” Dean’s voice was so weak, only John could probably hear it. A thick trickle of blood was
running down from one corner of Dean’s mouth. “Sam.”
The island was obscuring most of Sam’s body, but John was able to see his face and shoulders. Sam’s eyes made a couple of attempts to stay open before closing, eyelids continuing to tremble. He was bleeding as well, from his forehead and all over his throat.

John thought of telling Dean his brother was still alive. He thought of crawling to Sam or of yelling some obscenity. He thought of begging, offering himself right away just so Sherlock could walk away and Sam could get help before it was too late. Fear like he’d never felt before took him over. It was as if so far he’d been watching a series of drawings in a sketchbook, but now someone was flipping the pages with great speed, the images blending and moving, breathing—turning into reality.

The four of them were in the hands of the craziest maniac John had ever met, who had the supernatural powers of a monster, the physical strength of twenty people and the viciousness of a thousand. To destroy Sherlock had become his personal mission in his old life and the one beyond the grave. John felt a great sense of perspective take over his mind—the big picture grew bigger and bigger until it threatened to overwhelm him and he was sure, sure that tragedy awaited all of them at the end of this, in one form or another, the understanding deeply intuitive and crystal clear. For one frozen moment it made John want this to be over, really over, whichever way, just so he wouldn’t have to live through it.

“I’m going to burn your demonic soul in a bonfire.” Dean lapsed into coughing at the end of his threat, lips turning crimson. Moriarty flicked his wrist and Dean doubled over, choking.

“Oh!” Moriarty exclaimed, turning to Sherlock, apologetic. John noticed that Sherlock had begun to lightly shiver. “Speaking of bonfires, that reminds me,” Moriarty said. “I told you I was going to burn you. Isn’t that funny?” His smile was all the more insane for its attempt at being adorable. “Although I must confess, I never thought I was making you a literal promise.”

“Stop this,” Sherlock said, tone flat. Moriarty looked at Dean’s wriggling form and his mouth pulled downward in a mimic of awkward social discomfort. “So noisy,” he said. “Shush!” His hand dropped by his side and Dean was left panting, face against the linoleum. He slumped further, body shifting into an almost foetal position.

Sherlock had stood with his back straight, taking in everything that was happening with eyes that didn’t hide their alarm, but without much else in a matter of body language. “You’ve adopted a much more…hands on approach, I see,” he told Moriarty.

Moriarty threw his head back and laughed, his teeth glistening merrily with his caricature-like delight. “Oh, that’s good.” He regarded Sherlock shrewdly. “And you’ve become...quieter, Sherlock.”

Sherlock returned the gaze, a silent challenge in his tilted head, then made a small, flicking gesture with his wrist. “That’s what playing dead for a year and a half does to you. You know how it is.” His eyes widened just a little with pretence that he’d just remembered something. “Oh, actually—you don’t. You did die.”

Moriarty stared at him, making John wonder whether he was going to scream in Sherlock’s face or… There wasn’t much else that came to mind; it was hard to predict the actions of an insane person. On cue Moriarty’s face suddenly split into a mad grin.

“‘There you go,’” he said. “That’s better.” The grin disappeared with ostensible slowness. “I was beginning to think you were plotting.” His eyes bore into Sherlock’s for another few moments in what John would have called hate, then he looked down at his feet and carefully walked around
some glass. John didn’t know whether it was only his imagination flying on Moriarty’s last words but he thought he saw Sherlock’s gaze meet Dean’s behind Moriarty's back.

“To go back to your funny comment,” Moriarty said, polishing the nails of his right hand against his jacket, “it’s one of the biggest perks of being a demon: you get to do so much yourself without actually having your hands dirty. I love it.” He lifted his shoulders, eyes closing as if he was a little girl talking about her new pink bike. “That, and I get to wear black a lot.”

Like with Karen, John found it impossible to catch the appearance of black in Moriarty’s eyes. The colour didn’t just invade them; they became the definition of it.

“Sam.” Dean spoke from the floor, eyes going to John in an anguished question but once again John was in no possession of his body's functions. He couldn’t even turn his head to see whether Sam was still breathing. He met Dean’s eyes, trying to communicate his helplessness.

“You fucked up monkey in a suit,” Dean ground out. John really had to hand it to him: there was just no giving up, whether from stupid bravado or real courage. Or perhaps the kind of desperation born out of life-long traumatic experiences and in turn giving birth to a touch of recklessness. Dean lifted his eyes to Moriarty, their glare murderous. “If you killed my brother, I’m going to strip your flesh into ribbons, you hear me? I’m going to—”

“Oh, do be quiet!” Moriarty spat out with irritated derision. “Of course I haven’t killed your dearest. Keep your mouth shut or you won’t get to keep it at all.”

Dean made a heroic effort to straighten up. “Big talk from a small guy,” he told Moriarty, propping himself back against the wall again. “I don’t know who you used to be, but as a demon you’re very stupid, you know that?”

From his angle John had a perfect view of Moriarty’s eyes. They flashed, their black bottomless without turning demonic. “I beg your pardon?”

“Beg all you want,” Dean shot back. “One of us should and it ain't gonna be me. And yeah, you’re a moron. Care to check what I have in my pocket?” Dean lifted a finger. "Don't get your hopes up—I didn't mean it that way.”

Moriarty hesitated, but made his way to him. He slowly crouched down. “I’ll make sure your brother is conscious,” he told Dean, tone almost loving. “Before I do rip the tongue out of that dirty...” Moriarty bit back a giggle, “looking mouth of yours. I want you to see him watching.”

Dean coughed weakly, but managed a chuckle. “You kinky son of a bitch,” he said. Moriarty smiled, his eyes remaining crinkles-free. Dean smirked back…then punched him in the face.

John’s breath caught as he watched Dean roll over with far more energy and agility John would have ever imagined he had, then stand up, swaying a little.

Moriarty unfolded himself upward while simultaneously rotating to face Dean. A dark droplet welled at one of his nostrils descending towards his upper lip. Moriarty caught it and looked at his fingers, expression almost intrigued. His gaze went back to Dean, eyes blackening in full. He tutted loudly and his hand slashed through the air, making John flinch in horrible anticipation.

Nothing happened. John’s eyes flickered over the room then went back to Dean to find him watching Moriarty with the kind of expression swashbucklers had in old movies.
“I’m surprised it was that easy,” Dean said, widening his stance for stability. “Why don’t you find a black light?” he added.

If anyone had told John that James Moriarty could ever look flabbergasted, he wouldn’t have believed it. Yet he was seeing it now, brief but real, before Moriarty’s face slackened, his eyelids closing tight in realization. They opened again and he peered down at his feet. John followed his gaze; predictably the floor appeared exactly the way it did everywhere else in the laboratory, only with the added ‘decoration’ of Dean’s blood.

Dean had conjured up something very small that looked like a tool of sorts, which he now lifted in his fist. “Took a while to draw it,” he said, “because of course I couldn’t see what I was doing. But d’you know what I could see?” All cheekiness had disappeared from Dean's demeanour. “Blood. Took a leaf out of your book, you sick bastard, and used my own blood to give myself some pointers.”

Moriarty’s eyes had returned to what on any other person would be called ‘normal’. They moved to Dean’s hand and a line appeared between his dramatically-shaped eyebrows. His own small hand indicated towards the object. “Is that…”

“That,” Dean said with pointed solemnity, “is Mrs Hudson’s…thing.”

In the silence that followed, Moriarty turned bewildered eyes to Sherlock, then to John. Against his better judgement John found himself reciprocating. Dean looked momentarily awkward, gaze jumping from point to point like that of a big boy who had been caught being silly. He waved his hand about and John stared at the object, realizing it was a very small cone. Dean cleared his throat. “Um, Mrs Hudson uses it to decorate her cakes,” he mumbled to the room at large. His confidence was quickly restored. “I was creative,” he said. “Now it’s an invisible black light paint…thing, which means that you’re standing on a devil’s trap.”

John barely had the chance to rejoice—at the very least for finally being in charge of his body again—when a new chill ran down his spine at Moriarty’s expression. He couldn’t identify what it meant, but fear or worry wasn’t it. John tentatively tried to rise to his feet, finding them incredibly wobbly, then remained on the floor, opting to start crawling over to Sam.

“I’m rather impressed,” Moriarty told Dean. “I like a bit of a challenge, Sherlock can tell you.” There was a pause. “I wish I didn’t have to kill you. But…” Another pause. John cast a glance at Moriarty and saw him spread his arms, the corners of his mouth turning down exaggeratedly. “You broke my nose. Do you know how many procedures poor Nigel had to go through until I was happy with it?”

Dean’s lips stretched in a superficially polite smile. “Fuck off,” he said with a few brisk nods.

John was glad to reach Sam and find him breathing steadily. He was still unconscious, but at least the blood had come from a number of superficial cuts; there was no serious arterial damage. He must have hit his head pretty badly, though. John carefully felt for any big bumps and found one on the bottom left. The irony that they were in a hospital threatened to smother John with the frustration it evoked. He stared at Sam for a couple of seconds, unblinking, then lifted himself up again, this time successfully. He walked over to Sherlock, whose eyes were both sharp and brimming with relief as they met John’s. John wanted to ask questions, yell, hit something—or preferably someone—just…participate again Goddammit! But he forced himself to stand by Sherlock, taking his cue from his silent, alert manner and waiting for the scene to unroll.
Moriarty was just huffing a small laugh. “Ballsy, aren’t you?” he retorted to something Dean must have said. He chewed on his bottom lip, nose wrinkling as he looked at a spot of smeared blood by his right shoe. “A bit crude, though.” His next words were to Sherlock. “I’m surprised at you, Sherlock,” he intoned.

“Crude…” Sherlock began with a small shrug, Dean finishing pronto, “but effective.”

“I didn’t know he’d also use his blood,” Sherlock added, mouth pursing in gentle rebuke as he turned to Dean.

“I told you I’d take care of it,” Dean threw over his shoulder, not letting Moriarty out of his sight. “It’s not like I drew the thing with my blood. Although I’ve done that to send some douchebags angels packing. But hey, don’t want anyone thinking I’m a one trick pony.” His last sentence was delivered with nonchalance; his next matched the grim glaze of his eyes. “Game’s over.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Moriarty said softly.

John barely registered the dark confusion on Dean’s face when the doors all but splintered with the force of the small crowd that pushed them open. Dean was grabbed by his shirt and lifted up in the air by a huge, elderly, naked man. Dean’s expression would have been priceless under any other circumstances; it quickly turned to panic when the man lifted him higher. In the next moment Dean was flung across the room. Amidst the sound of his crash John gaped at the newcomers, at first registering only the fact that they were all stark naked. Then he noticed the unnatural white colour of their skin, even harsher under the luminescent light of the laboratory, and the familiar pattern of stitches on their chests.

“Jesus Christ,” he whispered.

There was a loud groan from the direction where Dean had landed, thankfully close to his brother. John watched him get up on his knees, face contorting. Moriarty lifted himself on his toes in order to ensure he met Dean’s eyes.

“Word of advice,” he said, stretching out every word. “Don’t stage a coup in the middle of the enemy’s garrison. Or to put it in a way you can understand: don’t forget what any body can offer a demon.” He made a huge circle with his arms as if he was a ballerina beginning a dance. His face dropped, then seemed to puff up and pulse. “We’re in a morgue,” he said, his next word coming out in a shout that made John jump. “Monkey!”

Chapter End Notes

It's poll time again! Please, have a look over here if you have a moment. Thanks in advance!:)
In contrast to his almost blissful slip into unconsciousness, Sam’s return to the world was harsh and abrupt. For a moment he wasn’t sure what had yanked him back, but then he was aware of Dean near him, somehow connected to a cacophony of sound and flying shards. Thank God Dean seemed all right, at least judging by his groans and his attempts to raise himself up on his knees.

From Sam’s spot on the floor most of the room was blocked from view by the big island of units in the middle of the lab. Somewhere beyond it Moriarty’s voice rose up reaching Sam through his post-unconsciousness haze, words blurred, apart from the last one: ‘monkey’. It was screamed and made Sam feel even more nauseated. It scared the shit out of him, too; they’d met many monsters in their time, but this was the first whose human side was the darker, more twisted one. It meant no chinks in the armour. Dean would have rolled his eyes at Sam if he could hear his thoughts, but Sam would have stood his ground. If something still had some humanity left in them, there was hope. James Moriarty, however, redefined the word ‘humanity’.

Or maybe he didn’t. He was simply another face of what being human meant. It was naïve to keep faith in the illusion that ‘humanity’ equated only enlightenment, love and purity. It was especially naïve of Sam to do it, considering who he was. No matter his good deeds, there was no changing the fact that somewhere deep down he never stopped being the freak that had demon blood in him.

He tried to prop himself up on his elbow and moaned, the throbbing in his head blinding. At the sound Dean turned sharply to him, Sam’s name on his lips, stretching out a strong hand to help Sam rise to his feet. They both swayed a little, but the hand on Sam’s back was steadying. Sam pulled his facial muscles up and down, then took a look around. His eyeballs nearly pulsed in their sockets at
the sight in front of him. Naked men. Corpses from the morgue, possessed by demons. *Fuck,* they were screwed.

Sherlock was the first to speak, gaze sliding from the same sight towards Moriarty.

“Speaking of crude…” he murmured dryly.

Sam tried to look at Moriarty, vision swimming with the motion. His attempt to focus made matters worse, pushing him close to vomiting. He blinked stubbornly, stomping down on his weakness, and saw that Moriarty was just standing there, hands in his pockets, occupying the exact same spot where Dean had been slumped on the floor earlier, drawing the devil’s trap. Whether he'd completed it Sam didn’t know, just like he had no clue what else might have gone wrong. Moriarty didn’t look worried at all so the trap probably hadn’t worked. Going down the list of failures, they had also miscalculated the fresh supply of demons the morgue could provide—an oversight that could cost them their lives, no matter whether Moriarty was trapped or not. At least John was okay, standing next to Sherlock with tensed up face, eyes on Sam. Sam let his own flutter closed as if the spiked up concern in John’s gave him permission to let go for a moment. The pain immediately subsided to simmer, making Sam unsteady on his feet with relief. Dean’s hand tightened around his bicep. “I’m all right,” Sam murmured.

He was all right. All four of them were alive and relatively unharmed. It could have been much worse. He and Dean had come out of much worse.

“Hello boys,” a new voice said.

Sam’s eyes flew open against the violent wish to keep them shut until the world on their other side disappeared, or righted itself. Some distant part of him wondered what John and Sherlock were seeing. He’d never actually described Crowley to John, so he bet John never imagined that the king of Hell was a short, dark, middle-aged British guy—at least his current meatsuit—with the general air of a dapper rogue. But the shock for John must have been greater from something else Sam hadn’t mentioned: Crowley’s ability to materialize out of thin air, just like he had done now right next to Moriarty. His place allowed him an excellent view to Sherlock and John on the right and Sam and Dean on the left. Everyone was staring at him; John’s mouth had parted a little and Sherlock seemed to draw himself up to his full height, trying to stop his shivering. Sam realized he was freezing, too, and Dean’s lips had turned purple-blue.

Crowley was regarding Sherlock and John with a smug expression. The bastard was obviously enjoying the effect of his arrival on the stage.

Dean’s face was a mixture of plummeting new lows meeting some old ones. There was a hefty dose of poison in his sarcastic tone. “Sammy, look,” he said. “The ugly stripper’s here. Now the party can start.”

Crowley pulled a grimace like an offended child, addressing Moriarty. “He thinks he’s funny,” he said, indicating Dean with his chin. “You get used to it.”

“I don’t intend to.” Moriarty met Crowley’s eyes. He pointed at his feet. “Do you mind?”

Crowley scanned his attire quickly. “What’s with the bow tie? Are you trying to out…smart me?” Despite the pleased twist of his lips at his own *double entendre,* his eyes were shrewd.

“He was at Wigmore Hall,” Sherlock spoke from his spot.
Moriarty nodded without breaking eye contact with Crowley. “Like he said.” His gaze went down to the floor again, wordlessly this time, then he tried to smile at Crowley.

Crowley looked down before turning his back on him without a reply. There was a continuous crunching sound as he came closer, kicking lightly pieces of debris out of his way. His eyes lit up when they locked on Sam.

“Good work,” he threw over his shoulder. “You got my present.”

“I might have broken it a bit,” Moriarty replied. “But the main part’s working.”

“I see you’re still playing on a few boards,” Sherlock told him.

“Well, since you dismantled my network.”

“You did a good job at trying to stop me. All those mysterious deaths. Killing people who were loyal to you so they don’t talk.”

“Don’t be stupid. They were only loyal to my cash. And they were perhaps a little afraid of me. Okay, a lot.” Moriarty paused. “Sebastian is the only person who’s ever been loyal to me.”

“But you still used him as bait to get me out in the open.”

“Do I detect reproach? Don’t bother. Demons are completely guilt-free. No morals or tedious scruples—”

“Not that you had any to begin with.”

“Ouch.” Moriarty rolled his neck like a reptile after a long rest. “Now let’s get back to business, shall we? I’ve got four demons here who’ll break John’s neck before you even look at him. Your other… associates’ too. It’s the rooftop all over again…my dear.” Moriarty’s timbre had turned low and deep. “Only there’s no cheating anymore, Sherlock. I wasn’t best pleased to die and find I was lacking of your company.”

In turn, Sherlock sounded that way of his Sam was beginning to suspect was a bit of a norm: posh and bored at the same time. “I would say I’m sorry, but I’m really not,” Sherlock said.

“But you will be.” There was something rich, caressing in Moriarty’s voice when he talked to Sherlock. It made things creepier by ten; everything about that guy was creepy, way above anything Sam had imagined. He’d found Moriarty almost charming on some of the pictures, especially the candid ones where he looked kind of relaxed.

On cue, there was a little exhalation of laughter. “You can say that I want a change of our terms and conditions,” Moriarty said. “I used to owe you. Now I’ll own you. That is,” he added, “unless you want John to take your place. Honestly? I’m not sure what I’d prefer. I will be disappointed not to have your soul, but I’ll console myself with watching John turn everyone’s favourite in Hell, and that’s not a good thing, Sherlock.”

John twitched next to Sherlock, making him abruptly cast the quickest glance at him, eyes wide, almost warning.
Moriarty produced a white handkerchief from his jacket inside pocket and pressed it to his nose. He looked at the red spot that had formed on it and only then did Sam realize there was some blood on his face. Everyone had blood on them in various quantities and shapes; only John seemed to have gone through it all without that kind of ‘decoration’ on his person—Sam counted that as a success. So Dean must have punched Moriarty and it looked like he’d trapped him as well. Not that it was of any use right now. If anything, Sam’s stomach churned at the prospect of someone like that psychopath holding a personal grudge against his brother and still being alive.

Speaking of psychos, Sam gave Crowley a surreptitious look. He found him following the conversation, eyes still shrewd, his expression entertained.

Moriarty meanwhile was telling Sherlock, solicitously, “Let me give you an incentive. Why don’t you ask your new friend over there?” He looked at Dean, the curve of his nostrils evoking comparisons between Dean and a slimy thing. “He can tell you all about Hell’s many wonderful ways of torture and mutilation.” This was spoken in that disturbing melodious voice he’d used earlier. Sam had never met anyone talk less like a normal person.

“You know all about it, Dean, don’t you? Don’t be modest.” Moriarty didn’t do it, but Sam still pictured him waving a finger at Dean. “First-hand experience…if you pardon the pun.”

Dean’s gruff, honest voice washed over Sam like clear mountain rain. “Go to Hell,” he said.

“That’s what I’m trying to do…thicko!” Moriarty’s eyes bulged a little. “I’m just looking for company.”

Sherlock’s voice was subtly dismissive. “None of us is interested.”

“Oh my God!” Crowley rolled his eyes theatrically. “Ladies! If I leave it to you, we’ll be here until the cows come home. Now stop flirting and get on with it.”

“Hang on,” John said. “Get on with what?”

“The smooching,” Crowley responded, walking over to him. “The kissing. That’s how a deal is sealed. I won’t have the pleasure; I’m just overseeing this time. Jimmy here will be the one to make out with one of you two.” He took in John’s ashen lips and grave expression. “We haven’t been introduced,” he told him, a touch over-polite. “So you’re the famous John Watson. Having not just eyes and curls over here run to come to your rescue but the big unfriendly giant as well?” He gave John a pointed look up and down. “Personally? Can’t say I’m overly impressed. I’m sure you know who I am.”

Sam watched John’s stance turn military and a flood of admiration chased away some of the cold for a moment. “Yes,” John said and cleared his throat. “Same here.”

Crowley turned to Moriarty, with the kind of amused surprise on his face Sam knew he’d put on for show. “Another funny one, eh?” he said.

Sam felt his head had cleared enough for him to speak without fearing it’d reveal he was in a bad shape. Time to both divert Crowley’s attention from John and try to get him to talk. It was a weakness of his: always chatting and boasting. “Why don’t you cut the crap,” Sam said, happy to hear his voice steady, “and tell us what you want?”

“Moose!” Crowley’s teeth flashed with his grin. “I was beginning to miss your voice!” He walked
back over to them, stopping at an arm’s length from Sam which meant even further away from Dean. In a roundabout way it felt good to see that despite his considerable powers Crowley didn’t underestimate his history with them.

“Sam asked you a question, you son of a bitch,” Dean told him. “Stop trying to be a smart-ass, it’s a lost cause. Just tell us what you want so we can tell you to fuck off and have the balance in the Universe restored.”

Crowley turned to Moriarty, exaggerated exasperation on his face. “See what I’ve had to put up with? For years!”

Moriarty looked back at him, blank. “Do you mind?” he repeated his earlier request, the whine in his voice cold and even more prominent.

“He doesn’t trust you,” Sherlock told him. “Naturally.”

Crowley raised an eyebrow at him. “And what do you know?”

Sherlock’s expression turned almost poetic. He brought his face forward and breathed out his next words. “More than you can possibly imagine.”

Crowley narrowed his eyes, considering him. His face lost its habitual mask of dry flippancy and he appeared serious for the first time since he’d shown up. It was a rare sight and it gave Sam some weird hope that somehow Sherlock could talk their way out of this. He knew he was buying into the myth of the great Sherlock Holmes, but what he’d seen and heard from Sherlock so far was enough to lift Sam’s progressively desperate spirits. There was no doubt Crowley was here first and foremost for his own agenda, which did not bode well for Sam. Crowley had to want his heart; Sam had tried to get him to spill why. The reason his heart was still in Sam’s chest was that Crowley was enjoying…peacocking about, confident he had them all by the short and curlies. It also looked like he’d struck some kind of a business arrangement with Moriarty.

Sam quickly looked at Dean, taking advantage of the fact that Crowley was distracted. Dean’s eyes reflected Sam’s own question: any ideas? In three seconds Sam took it all in: Crowley’s figure, clothed in one of his patent expensive dark coats, Moriarty watching Sherlock as if he was hypnotized by him, the four demons spread across the room in the little space that was left unoccupied and looking like the living embodiment of mindless viciousness. He looked back at Dean, panic slipping out from under the lid Sam had slammed over it. No wonder he was hoping Sherlock could perform miracles. Even the knife was lost somewhere amidst all the rubble.

Whether Sherlock did have something up his sleeve remained unclear when the tight space suddenly became even tighter. Shadows had appeared outside the door, then it was pushed open, two men shoving forward Mycroft Holmes and Lestrade. The eyes of the thin and wiry guy filled with black. Great. Two more bargaining chips for the bad guys and two more demons.

All attention was on the newcomers. Mycroft looked dishevelled; the knot on his tie was askew and his grip on his umbrella handle white-knuckled. Lestrade’s hair stood up in wet spikes, his beige raincoat was covered in damp patches of rain and his upper lip seemed swollen. He was holding his own umbrella as if he didn’t know what to do with it, expression dazed and valiantly trying to appear less frightened.

“Mycroft!” Crowley exclaimed with fake cordiality. “You don’t call, you don’t write! Surprised to see me? I always turn up…” His eyebrow curled with extra flair. “Like a bad penny.”
Sam barely had the chance to swallow around his new shock, this time at Crowley’s acquaintance with Holmes, when Dean shifted, actually looking peeved. “What is this, a freaking ‘Friends Reunited’? Dude,” he told Moriarty. “You should’ve picked a bigger room.”

There was a motion across from Sam that drew his gaze away again, this time to Sherlock. Sherlock had stretched his neck forward and to the side, taking in slowly his brother’s worse for wear appearance. He pulled back and looked at Crowley. “Oh, you’ve really gone and done it now,” he said, voice like velvet.

The briefest shadow of disconcert flickered over Crowley’s features, before it pinched in displeasure. “I promised Jim I’ll bring your brother here. You should thank him for asking me to bring him alive.”

Mycroft Holmes’s unruffled voice filled the air. “Enough.”

With measured steps he progressed across the room in their direction uncaring of broken pieces of glass or chemical spillage. One of the demons had made a motion to grab him by the arm, but Crowley indicated his ‘No’ with a barely perceptible shake of the head so the mook remained behind Lestrade, looking like a stupid bodyguard from a second rate action movie.

Mycroft arrived in front of Crowley, making him have to lift his head to meet his eyes; maybe it was Sam’s imagination, but the tilt of his chin seemed almost defensive. From less than five feet Sam could see Mycroft’s shirt had some dirt on it, at least on the bit that was showing above his waistcoat, and there was a blooming bruise on his right cheekbone.

His piercing, humourless gaze fixed Crowley. “It’s in your best interest to leave immediately and take your…lot with you,” he said. “James Moriarty will stay, of course.”

Crowley gave Mycroft his best haughty expression. It was an impressive feat, considering with whom he was having a face-off. “Things have changed a little since we last saw each other,” he barked. “I’m the king of Hell now.” His voice rose. “So I’m not going to let some stuck up geezer order me about! All right?” Sam couldn’t help but flinch—the last bit was actually shouted.

A huff of laughter came from behind Mycroft. “They’re both so arrogant, aren’t they?” Moriarty drawled, casting Mycroft Holmes the same gaze he’d given Dean earlier. “The Iceman and the Virgin,” he murmured to himself, another burst of amusement on his lips, this one soundless.

Mycroft rolled his eyes then hissed, hand going to his cheekbone. He cast Crowley a scathing look, chin lifting to boost his formal air even more. Crowley’s face turned challenging and disparaging. Moriarty cleared his throat pointedly. “I don’t want to spoil your fun,” he said, his playful tone in contrast with his alert eyes. “But it would be just a teensy bit silly to underestimate that one.” He paused, face turning ominous. “Not to mention that he’s one of my presents.”

“Oh, shut up,” Crowley said, not even looking at him. He spoke to Mycroft next. “You and that cocky brat you’ve got for a brother both act like you know something I don’t. Do I need to demonstrate to you how dire your situation is?” He suddenly snapped his fingers and the demon behind Lestrade moved in a flash, grabbing Sherlock by the hair and bringing him down to his knees, a knife glinting in his other hand. John’s fist connected with the demon’s face; Sam hadn’t even blinked and John was on the floor as well, one of the naked demons gripping him by the throat. The first demon yanked Sherlock’s head back and pressed the blade of the knife under his chin.
Sam’s jaw tightened, noise filling his ears. Dean’s hands had balled into fists and his whole body was poised for action, any action, no matter how reckless. Sam was really with him. His gaze jumped to John and Sherlock before returning to Dean, and in a split second calm stole over him: if this was how it ended, at least he had his brother with him and he was going to die trying to protect a friend. He was also going to lose his heart in the process, because Crowley wasn’t getting it.

Mycroft’s gaze had fallen to his brother’s straining face. He turned back to stare at Crowley, gifting him with the kind of look that would have made any lesser creature’s balls shrivel.

“Very well,” he said. He took a small step back—a wary shadow floated over Crowley’s features—then cleared his throat. “I know why you’re here,” he said, a new, loud ring to his voice.

Crowley waited for a few seconds. “Is that it?” he said, incredulous. “That’s not a secret, mate.”

Mycroft gave him the tightest smile, eyes looking as if he’d found the tip of his best umbrella ruined. “You’re here, because you need Sam Winchester’s heart to lay your hands on the angel tablet.”

A beat, the words still echoing in the room, and then there was a sound in the air—the best sound Sam had heard all night. A fluttering sound.

And speaking of umbrellas, Mycroft abruptly pointed his at Sam, its tip extending to reveal it was the tip of an angel blade—ready to be pulled out and used.

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For one night John had seen his fair share of dramatic appearances to last him for a decade, but Castiel’s took all the awards. Mouth and eyes pinched in a way that would have given him a resemblance to a furious kitten if he didn’t look like wrath itself, Castiel smacked his palm against the forehead of the nearest naked demon, lighting him up like a Christmas tree, until his body was once more completely dead on the floor. In the following few seconds, complete chaos took over the lab. Sam charged forward, stabbing another one of the naked demons with something long and silver, while Dean swung up on the unit and ran over it in Sherlock’s and John’s direction. John was dimly aware of Greg waving a long silver thing as well, but most notably of the abrupt release of his own throat. It was impossible to tell who was fighting whom so John stayed on the ground and started crawling determinedly toward the demon killing knife he’d seen ages ago and desperately not looked at as to avoid drawing attention to it.

He tried to protect himself from kicks and blows, not always successfully; his slow progress was further hindered by the fall of another naked body landing right on top of him, crushing him to the ground while it died the golden light death. John saw stars and his mouth filled with the copper taste of blood, but he managed to roll the body off and kept going—his target was all the way across the room behind the spot where Crowley and Mycroft had stood. John barely registered cutting his hand on a piece of glass; there was a stabbing pain in his knee as well. More shards rained down all over the place making John cover his head and squeeze his eyes shut, but then he was back to crawling, eyes watering in their focus on the knife, nearing but still too far.

The blurred background behind it suddenly came into focus when a pair of calves clad in suit trousers moved. Mycroft’s foot extended, his black shoe giving the knife a kick with the exact force necessary for it to slide along the floor in John’s direction. The room was quieting, but John didn’t care, ears going deaf but for his own heartbeat in them. He reached out and folded his fingers around the knife’s handle, got up, walked around the unit, took three more steps, met James Moriarty’s grotesque, evil eyes for one last time and plunged the blade between the fifth and the sixth rib on the
left side of his chest.

He stumbled backwards as he drew the knife out, gaze going down to the glistening red on the blade before jumping back up.

It was as if an electrical storm was raging inside Moriarty, his eyes and mouth rounded into circles. John stared at him breathless, until the lightning abruptly stopped and John was looking at a dead body on the ground. He swayed on his feet and took another step back, hitting the unit tabletop. Mind reeling, he saw Sherlock, Sam and Mycroft looking at him from where they’d gathered by the door, not a demon in sight. John registered some small noise outside in the corridor. He met Sherlock’s crystal clear eyes, both of their gazes unflinching and completing some chain that John hadn’t been aware of having links missing.

Suddenly Sherlock and Sam seemed to be startled by something, both pairs of eyes fixed on the spot in front of John in alarm. A mighty chill ran down John’s spine and he slowly turned his head to face the empty space where Moriarty had been standing a few seconds ago. Only it was as empty as the chill that had run down John’s spine had been metaphorical.

Coloured in dark tones and looking slightly transparent, Moriarty lifted a hand to put it over his lips dramatically. He met John’s eyes, gleeful mockery in his own; his arms flew open, eyebrows going up, more ridiculous than ever. “Surprise!” he sang, voice high.

John felt as if a white, impenetrable cloak fell over his mind.

Moriarty shrugged, apologetic. “Here I am again. I’m like a Russian doll!”

This was a nightmare; a sodding, never-ending nightmare. Or maybe this was Hell and John just didn’t know it. He’d sold his soul and this was his Hell, the one he’d been living in for years now, with this monster showing up to suck the happiness out of John over and over and over again, until one day John was going to snap and turn demonic himself, because his soul could not face James Moriarty one more time. Why couldn’t this bastard just die?

Moriarty was smiling, bluish eyes avid on John’s face as if he was reading John’s thoughts transcribed on his forehead. John felt his teeth press against his bottom lip for a long exhale of the letter ‘f’, the swearword a pathetic outlet to the hollering he was doing inside. Red mist took over his vision and his fist flew out on its own volition to the hateful face in front of him.

The air it predictably went through still felt like ice.

“Oops,” Moriarty said, lips pulling down in an expression of awkwardness as if John had just embarrassed himself greatly in public. He abruptly turned serious, surged forward and slammed into John.

The cloak over John’s mind turned black, suffocating him until he could barely see. Cold and terror spread through him like thick billows of smoke.

His mouth opened. “Did you really think it would be that easy?” It was his own voice, but it wasn’t him. Sherlock, it’s not me! Sherlock! Sam!

“I expected the stupidity from the monkey, but you disappoint me, Sherlock.” Sherlock, a distant figure, as if at the other end of the longest, most desolate train platform.
Next, Mycroft’s face, blurred. “And you? Did you just bring a knife into a fist fight?” A tutting sound; some tiny part of John still gasping weakly realized the sound was coming from him. Something glacial compressed against his chest, his feet, his skull, threatening to pause time at the moment of crushing and keep it there forever.

A note rang somewhere in the distance. A single note that began ringing in an infinite number of realities. A familiar, stunning note; calling, chiming.

“Get out of him, you son of a bitch.” Familiar voice this time. Soft timbre, angry, powerful, like a white blizzard. Sam.

Breathe.

More smoke, noxious and filling in every nook and cranny.

Tutting again. “Get out of him or…? Or what? You’ll never touch Johnny boy here.”

Chiming.

Sherlock’s face coming into focus. A surge of feverish, dark passion like fire licking ice cubes, their hissing painful and ecstatic. Sherlock circling; circling with Sherlock. Talking. “What does it feel like, seeing John like this? Shall I tell you a secret, Sherlock? Shall I tell you what it feels like seeing you, for him?”

A pause. “Not necessary.”

Chiming. Blackness, drowning it.

“You’re never going to find where I moved my body, you do know that?”

“Yes.” Sherlock speaking. Chiming. “But I’ve found something better.” His eyes shifting to somewhere behind. “Sam, do you mind?”

“With pleasure.”

A whip of the head, Sam Winchester’s face like a vengeful spirit’s—oh, funny! A lighter in his hand, the smell of alcohol, something small wrapped in a cloth in his other hand. Fire, the thing dropping ablaze at Sam’s feet right next to a small, broken body with black hair and empty eyes, collar wide open and the string of a pair of dog tags missing from around the neck, no, no, no—But also yes! Very good! Very good, Sherlock! Thank you! Sherlock…

Chiming.

Sherlock’s eyes, so far, so close, not letting go. “Goodbye, Jim.”

Free. Free.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Thanks to the wonderful enname for the prompt beta on yet another huge chapter! Special thanks to my awesome 'Bobby' nausicaca83 for going over the SPN mythology with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Moriarty leaving his body. The world returning: colour, sound, gravity, air. Moriarty’s ghostly form in flames, spreading upward. The last snapshot of him: looking at Sherlock and grinning, his head turning black then disappearing like soot blown by the wind. Nothing in his spot. Gone.

John’s knees buckling. Sam, a warm wall behind him. Sherlock, close, head ducking, face on the same eye level as John’s: “Are you all right? John? Are you all right?” The sound of straw crushed in a palm or under feet—the sound of John’s neck’s cracking from his nod of confirmation.

Doors bursting open. Dean and Castiel, breathless. Dean’s eyes straight to Sam, relieved. Everyone talking: questions and answers. A moment of quiet. Dean turning to Castiel, pulling him into a hug; pulling back, hitting his shoulder, hard: “What the Hell, Cas? Where were you? I thought your wings were charcoal on the ground somewhere, man!” Castiel, looking at his feet, murmuring. Dean and Sam exchanging a glance above his head.

Greg coming in, mobile pressed to his ear. Talking, pacing up and down, running his hand through his hair.

Mycroft’s hand to the blade in Sam’s hand: “I’ll have that back now.” Eyes meeting, two brisk nods.

Sam again, careful, prying the demon knife from John’s fingers. A thick droplet of blood on it. John following its journey down with his gaze. Sherlock’s face coming into focus next to Sam’s. Both set of features too much, overwhelming. John closing his eyes. Dean’s voice: “Cas, just…do your thing, okay? We all need it.”

A gentle, cool touch against his forehead.

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When John opened his eyes next, reality had stopped its ‘separate scenes’ method of projection against the big screen of his mind. It was organic again, only the last hour seemed to have happened at least a week ago.

They vacated the premises through some back doors and came out of Barts to find two black cars waiting for them, engines running. John climbed into the back of one of them not really thinking, just following Sherlock. There was a short but animated altercation outside and a moment later they departed, their driver no longer the anonymous face behind the wheel. Dean was driving, Sam riding in the passenger’s seat, John at the back between Sherlock and an angel of the Lord. The second
black car followed right behind.

Their journey through London was unobstructed by traffic or other incidents. It was close to one o’clock in the morning so the first wasn’t a surprise, but given the way John’s life tended to unroll lately, the second rather was.

In contrast to the silent, short ride, the first ten minutes in Baker Street were quite chaotic. At the sound of their party coming through the front door Mrs Hudson showed up. John was very grateful they were no longer injured thanks to Castiel’s healing touch, but evidently angels didn’t care much for cleaning people up too, while they were at it. Mrs Hudson took in their bedraggled, bloody appearance, grasped the front of her gown and proceeded to come as close to hysterics as John had ever seen her. She was used to seeing her fair share of startling entrances at all hours, but the experience was usually limited to two individuals at the most, not pretty much half the people in her acquaintance, including the always immaculate Mycroft Holmes. John and Sam lingered behind while everyone else’s feet thudded up the stairs. They managed to calm Mrs Hudson down by reassuring her they only looked terrible and that ‘it’ was all over now. (John caught Sam’s eye repeatedly, taking some reassurance in the words himself.) Mrs Hudson followed them upstairs where she stopped to clutch at her chest again, this time at the state of the living room. In John’s absence, Sam, Dean and Sherlock had evidently begun moving the furniture around, but must have abandoned their job halfway through. In addition, items from Sherlock’s boxes were strewn about all over the place as well as tons of papers. The rest of Sherlock’s boxes remained unpacked but gaping open to reveal their various guts, contributing to the visual of a cacophony that could never, ever be eradicated. In his heart John felt their landlady’s reactions tonight were all justified.

Sherlock disappeared in the direction of the kitchen straight away, while Lestrade headed for the window, finishing his latest conversation on the phone and holding Mycroft’s eyes. Mycroft walked over to him and they turned their backs to the rest of the room, falling into some sort of a hushed consultation.

Mrs Hudson turned her wide-awake eyes to John and spotted Castiel standing between Sam and Dean.

“Who is this nice young man?” she asked.

“This is Castiel, Mrs Hudson,” Sam replied when no one else took the initiative. He looked at his brother, unsure, then added, “Um, he’s an angel. From Heaven.”

A high-pitched “Oh!” met his words and Mrs Hudson’s hand flew back to the front of her comfy looking dressing gown. “I’m so sorry,” she told Castiel with feeling. “If I’d known you were coming I would have worn something more appropriate, but no one tells me anything anymore.”

Castiel took a deep breath in preparation to speak, but stopped with his mouth open, frowning. His confused gaze shifted up to Sam who cleared his throat, seeking help from Dean or John in vain. “We didn’t know he was coming, Mrs Hudson,” he offered.

“And we’re not telling you things,” Sherlock shouted from the kitchen, “because you’d have a litter of kittens if you knew what we got up to.”

Castiel forgotten, Mrs Hudson marched over to the kitchen portal from where she waved a finger.

“Sherlock Holmes, nothing you do can shock me anymore.” She turned to the rest of the room. “It can’t,” she reasserted, her aged face the picture of earnestness. She addressed Sherlock again. “I was
just worried, that’s all, and I— Oh, you’re making such a mess.” Mrs Hudson disappeared into the kitchen. “I’ll finish this, why don’t you take a shower?”

The idea of the shower was sensible; John should have been taking one as well, or at least changing into clothes that smelled less like chemical spillage and mayhem, but his knees suggested it was a better idea to lower himself into his chair for the time being. He did, thinking longingly about a cup of tea.

One materialized by his elbow. He looked at it mystified then his gaze slowly crept up to the tea bearer who revealed himself as Sherlock.

“What’s this?” John asked. He’d be the first to confess it was a really stupid question but Sherlock was evidently on a roll acting out of character. “Tea,” he answered John promptly. “I made you tea.”

“Okay.” John blinked at him. “No,” he said as an afterthought. “I make you tea. Why are you making me tea?”

Touchiness fleeted over Sherlock’s features, magically helping John’s head to clear up a bit. “Are you going to drink it or not?” Sherlock asked.


Sherlock’s face was overtaken by the kind of accusation that plucked at one’s heartstrings as if they were those of a broken violin. An image of what that face must have looked like at five years of age popped into John’s head out of nowhere. He could just picture it, staring up at Mycroft under what must have been the mini-black curls of doom, and forgotten warmth replaced the chill John had felt for too long towards Sherlock’s older brother.

He hastily took another sip from the vile beverage, sniffing. “It’s better than nothing,” he lied. He lifted his eyes to Sherlock. “Thanks.” That at least was truthful.

Sherlock squinted at him in suspicion, but departed in the direction of his bedroom. John considered making himself a decent cuppa, but that would have felt like stabbing Sherlock in the chest with hot iron, so he resolved to remain seated and make the best of his situation. No one was paying him any attention, which he found refreshing and quite wonderful. He cast a look around.

The far window had firmly established itself as the ground where council was being held: from what John could hear Dean, Sam, Mycroft and Castiel were speaking quietly about the angel tablet. The Winchesters wanted to find it before Crowley. John suspected Sam’s heart probably had something to do with the whole thing, so how they were going to get the tablet while keeping all of Sam’s organs intact was quite a troubling question. John would have liked to be told what was going on. It wasn’t fair that only angels and professional hunters were in on this thing. John had been there when Sam was attacked the first time, that demon burning his tattoo and trying to possess him then take him to Crowley. (On its own volition John’s hand went to the outline of the amulet under his shirt.) John had been the one with Sam that night; it was still just the two of them back then, none of the others had been around yet. He had the right to know what danger his friend was in. He’d just have to ask Sam.

His eyes shifted to Greg and Mrs Hudson who were seated at the dining table, chatting—Greg seemed to be catching up Mrs Hudson on the events of the evening. Mrs Hudson was fretting just a little, the exact amount to express concern without being a nuisance. John really loved his landlady.

His massive yawn communicated to him that his brain was threatening to call it a day, but he wasn’t
going to bed until he heard some explanations about tonight. He stretched out his legs deciding to get
up and start the fireplace. It was the first really cold night since the end of the summer.

By the time he finished Sherlock had returned to the living room and flung himself down into his
armchair. Freshly showered, he’d changed directly into his pyjama bottoms and a t-shirt, his favourite
blue gown finishing his outfit. He was evidently past the point of caring about propriety of
appearance, but then again he’d also gone to Buckingham Palace dressed only in a long white sheet,
so John should probably keep a sense of perspective.

Mycroft removed himself from the little group by the window and turned to Greg. “Lift?” His voice
sounded uncharacteristically rough.

Greg straightened up gingerly. “I won’t say no to that,” he told him, then murmured, “or to a
holiday.”

“That can also be—” Mycroft began but Greg lifted a tired hand. “Don’t even…”

Mycroft was about to retort, but seemed to think better of it. He closed his mouth, ran his fingers over
the back of his head and adjusted the knot of his tie, then pivoted on his feet and headed to the door.
At the threshold he stopped and looked at Sherlock over his shoulder. Sherlock held his brother’s
gaze, his own infusing with baby-like fixation. He suddenly tipped his chin in what made John want
to rub at his eyes, incredulous, because the gesture looked very much like acknowledgement.
Mycroft’s eyelids pressed closed for a second too long, before he gave his brother a nod, sighed
heavily and walked out of the flat.

Greg waved his goodbyes in all directions, looking like a broken dummy of a traffic policeman, then
followed Mycroft, shoulders hunched. John noticed he didn’t have his umbrella with him so at least
one of the new demon killing knives was staying with them. It spoke volumes about the speed of
John’s recuperation that he found the fact really comforting. It was good to feel afraid again.

He turned to Sherlock. “I thought he’d be staying.”

Sherlock was examining the contents of a small leather pouch he’d pulled out from the box nearest to
his chair.

“Who, Mycroft?” he said, familiar irony sneaking into his voice. “You know him, John. Tonight’s
the most active he’s been since he was twenty and tried to impress that constable who came to help
with Mrs Hill’s cat. He loathes physical exertion. He’ll probably use tonight’s effort as an excuse to
stuff himself with cake.”

Before John decided whether to comment, Dean swooped in from the other end of the room like a
swarm of cross beetles.

“If it wasn’t for him,” he told Sherlock, “we’d be all attending each other’s funerals now, so don’t
talk smack about your brother, you twit.” His countenance underwent a hundred and eighty degrees
transformation, turning curious and shyly uncertain as he met John’s eyes. “Did I use that right?” he
asked in a lowered voice as if he wasn’t standing close to Sherlock. John boggled at the tricky
question but thankfully Dean didn’t wait for an answer. “I checked out some British slang on the
internet,” he added, inordinately pleased with himself.

Sherlock shifted in his chair to face Dean better. “So I can understand your insults better? I’m
touched.”

Dean looked a little thrown, but recovered quickly. “Don’t flatter yourself, dude. I was only—”
“Well, I’ll be going downstairs,” Mrs Hudson said loudly from the dining table. “Leave you all to talk.” She got up and turned to Castiel. “It was nice meeting you.”

Castiel was still by the window with Sam, standing upright and immobile as if someone was paying him to do it. He looked at Mrs Hudson, his expression bewildered once again. He sought Dean with his gaze; Dean widened his eyes in response and walked back to the window, a further prompt in the sharp tilt of his head towards Mrs Hudson.

Castiel took a step closer, startling her a little. He studied her face for a couple of seconds.

“You are sincere,” he said. “Thank you.” He paused. “Goodnight,” he added solemnly. John had forgotten how strange his voice sounded: low and rich, it evoked associations to luxury chocolate.

Mrs Hudson smiled to him uncertainly, then gave Sam and Dean one final look and shook her head. She did the same with Sherlock and John and left—another one sighing.

John met Sam’s eyes across the room and rose from his chair. “Let’s bring the sofa back to the fireplace,” he told him, “so we can all sit together.” He thought he heard Sherlock mutter something behind his back, but ignored him.

Dean began taking his jacket off. “You do that,” he said, “but we need to clean up first. Eat something, I’m starving.” The last was to his brother. “No,” he corrected himself, “first I’ll go and get some glasses.” He turned to Castiel. “You’re coming with me.”

Castiel’s eyes shone and he squinted, confused. “I don’t understand,” he said. “Do you need my assistance with the retrieval of the glasses? Are they necessary for a ritual? I assumed your intention was to consume alcohol.”

“Yeah, and it’s also not to let you out of my sight.” Dean walked towards the kitchen, beckoning. “Come on.”

Castiel hesitated before following, his raincoat making whispering noises with the movement of his arms kept close to his body.

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Alpha Pizza saved the day once again, being one of those establishments that took to heart London’s reputation as the city where you could find any type of world cuisine at any hour. That was a bit of a myth in John’s experience: in the dead of two o’clock on Monday morning pizza and fried chicken was all that London had to offer to the NW1 postcode residents, keen to stay in their homes. Thankfully, in their case pizza was just fine: it was consumed without any fuss and in a manner that evoked comparisons to a pack of wolves. There were less than thirty minutes between the order and the delivery, too, which everyone but Sherlock and Castiel used to wash the night off and change into clean clothes.

While enjoying the hot spray on his head John found himself musing on evolution or rather, the remarkable resilience of the human psyche. As long as there was no impending doom in their lives, people tended to circle back to the basics: shelter, warmth, food, rest. John had just had the most extraordinary night of his life, the meaning of half of it still waiting to be pulled out of obscurity, yet he was patient to first recover some of his faculties.

When he came back downstairs he found that Castiel was gone again, this time temporarily, to check on Kevin the prophet. It made John wonder whether he was ever going to spend more than a few minutes in Castiel’s company. (Castiel was an actual angel. Dean had mentioned wings.)
He chatted to Sam briefly in the kitchen while they waited for Dean to come up.

“I’m pretty sure Cas will be back,” Sam said, nodding. “That was why I told Dean we should really ask him to go check if Kevin’s all right.” He looked thoughtful. “Something’s definitely wrong with him. Cas, I mean.”

“Do you think it’s somehow connected to the angel tablet?” John asked, remembering how glad he’d felt in the early days of his flatshare with Sam when he was able to speak to him in his own language. It was miraculous that now John spoke it with some assurance.

“Not sure,” Sam replied, running a hand over his face. His features made him look like an exotic animal more than ever, especially his wide-set, almond-shaped eyes. Perhaps his face was exposed more by his wet hair, combed back. It had grown even longer and the ends were curling upwards.

Sam was just looking at him, waiting for his input so John searched for something comforting to say, seeing that he didn’t have anything useful. “It might not be something wrong with him,” he said hopefully. “Right?” He cringed at his awkward phrasing, but Sam didn’t seem to notice it.

“It’s bad,” he told him emphatically. “Trust me on this: if an angel starts acting strange it’s never good news.”

John nodded. “Okay. What are you going to do?”

“Just…keep an eye on him, I guess.” Sam shrugged. “At least he’s sticking around now because of the angel tablet, so our travel’s just gotten way easier.” He smirked a little. “Too bad, though—I was looking forward to the long-haul flight with Dean. Dude, he hates flying so freaking much!”

John chuckled at that, shaking his head at Sam: thirty years old rock of a guy, possessor of a deep, complex personality and one time saviour of the world, reverting to a little brother brat in the space of two seconds.

John’s watch was showing exactly two o’clock when he cast a look at his companions to make sure the time for the Q&A session had come. Sam was sitting where he usually did, at the end of the sofa closer to John’s armchair, while Dean occupied the other end in a more gregarious fashion. Sherlock was sitting across from John in his leather chair, his legs bouncing lightly, hands going with them as they rested parallel to each other over his thighs. His gaze was fixed straight ahead, but despite the light from the fire and the few lamps, John couldn’t tell whether Sherlock was looking at him or through him.

Everyone had elapsed into silence. John took a breath, suddenly aware of the sense of momentum, then turned Sherlock. “Okay,” he said, his own voice sounding amazingly calm to his own ears. “Do you want to tell me what happened back there?”

Sherlock’s eyes shone as his legs stilled. “What do you want to know?”

John had thought about it while he was upstairs. “How come Moriarty was a ghost? Did you know about it?” The second question was directed both at Sherlock and at Sam and Dean.

“Obviously,” Sherlock said.

“But not before tonight,” Sam added. “Um, Dean and I didn’t know, I mean.”

John nodded, pausing for a moment. “How?” he asked Sherlock. “No, wait. When did you know?”

“Long before any of us,” Dean said, casting Sherlock a half-hearted look of reproach. “Who’s
shocked?"

“I knew the night we got Moran,” Sherlock told John. “The evidence was in the room—it’s not my fault no one else noticed it or made the right deductions.”

John was already feeling tired at the prospect of the night going on with constant quarrelsome repartees. “Listen,” he told Dean. “Just let him talk. Please? Just don’t…” The tiredness was evidently more wide-spread that John had thought, because he now found he simply couldn’t face having to explain a fairly large chapter of the Sherlock manual to Dean, so he just shook his head as an end of his sentence.

“Fine, whatever.” Dean looked grouchy, but seemed to settle himself a bit more comfortably.

Sherlock served him with a juvenile glance of triumph then returned his attention to John who was by this point appreciating Sam’s close, silent presence particularly strongly.

“On the night we caught Moran,” Sherlock began, “you heard me tell him I wasn’t sure how Moriarty did it. I was referring to his supernatural status that obviously helped him get rid of his old accomplices without leaving a single trace. I was telling the truth: I really didn’t know how he did it.”

“Yes. His promptness of response was the first thing that sparked my suspicion.” Sherlock paused, the fingertips of his hands meeting in his lap. “I knew their history; Moran giving up Moriarty’s game just like that struck me as rather unlikely. However, I prefer any psychological deductions I do to be supported by evidence, so I proceeded to examine both Moran and his ‘second home’ with the same care for detail I dedicate to any crime scene.” Sherlock leaned forward, gaze definitely fixed on John.

“Data and logic are to be found everywhere, John, sooner or later, regardless of the realm we’re examining. The answers would be there as usual—I just had to look.”

He leaned back. “And they were. By the time we left Moran’s room I had deduced that Moriarty was not a demon, but a ghost possessing demons.”

“How?” John repeated, already feeling himself being swept away in Sherlock’s unique way to not just solve a mystery, but present its unravelling on a large canvas that he filled with content in a masterful way.

“What did you see in that room, John?” Sherlock asked, his deepening voice betraying he was enjoying their familiar ride as well. “What do you remember?”

“Um, it was bare. Not very cosy. I mean it wasn’t like he lived there.”

“Details, focus on the details.”

John cast his mind back. “Not much furniture. There was a bottle of whiskey? You said he’d spent a lot of time there but I saw no creature comforts. There was just a blanket…I think.”

“Good.” Sherlock leaned forward again. “Only it wasn’t one blanket. There were three blankets. One of them was made of camel wool—that’s how thick and warm it was.”

Understanding swam through John’s mind like a quick school of silver fish. “He was cold…” he said, eyes riveted on Sherlock.

Sherlock nodded. “The weather this autumn has been exceptionally balmy—tonight’s the first night we have needed to use the fireplace. People have been walking around in t-shirts. Even at night the
temperatures haven’t dropped to anything remotely close to call for the use of a few blankets, one of which really warm, in addition to the constant use of the fireplace. There was also an electric heater in the room, turned towards the sofa; its plug was in the socket. Moran hadn’t just been chilly—he’d been very cold, freezing almost, constantly. Now, I knew that demons didn’t bring about a drop in temperatures.” Sherlock’s eyes glowed green like those of a cat that had just got a hefty portion of that silver fish school. “But ghosts…” His voice trailed off.

“Make your ass freeze off whenever they show up,” Dean finished. His face had turned both relaxed and alert. “It’s one of the main signs it’s a ghost we’re dealing with,” he told John. “It gets so cold, your breath starts coming out of your mouth like steam.”

John turned to Sam, more dots joining rapidly. “You were all shivering in the lab,” he said. “I thought it was because you were wet and we were by the morgue.”

“It was.” Sam nodded. “But it was much colder than it should have been…”

“…because of Moriarty.” John stared at the condensation on his glass on the table. “All those times I felt chills…” His gaze returned to Sherlock. “He was always around. They were literal chills.”

Sherlock hummed in confirmation. “Go back to Moran’s place,” he said. “You said you remembered the bottle of whiskey. Anything else?”

The image popped up in John’s mind’s eye. “It wasn’t full, maybe half of it left?”

“How many glasses?”

John gave an answer that didn’t stem from a memory but from deduction. “One, was there?”

Sherlock gave him his slow smile of approval. “Yes, one. One bottle of whiskey, one glass only. I knew Moriarty preferred wine, but for him to be there, spending time with his right hand—”

“Oh, come on, man,” Dean cut in. “Really?” Sherlock’s flummoxed stare made John want to hold his lips with his fingers to stop them from splitting his face. His eyes met Sam’s amused ones.

“Couldn’t find a better way of saying it?” Dean continued.

Sherlock’s gaze went helplessly to John before returning to Dean, still bewildered. Dean stared back at him, lifting up to move his face closer. “Right hand,” he said. His arms were propped on his legs, the two hands hanging between his thighs; the right one twitched with his words, but John was grateful Dean had refrained himself from making the gesture.

“You know, spending time with his right hand…” Dean’s eyes grew comically emphatic. Sherlock was now looking at him as if he was worried about his mental health. Dean turned John, gaping a little.

“He really doesn’t understand what you mean,” John told him.

“What is it?” Sherlock said, the line between his eyebrows completely oblivious.

John suppressed a sigh. “It’s erm…it’s an euphemism. For masturbation.”

Sherlock’s eyes moved quickly between two invisible dots, then his face cleared. “Oh,” he said. “Thank you.” He took a breath. “As I was saying, whiskey might not have been Moriarty’s beverage of choice.” Dean goggled at him then slumped back, resigned. “But he did enjoy a glass with Moran,” Sherlock finished.
Sam spoke. “Yes, I remember glasses in some of the pictures of Moran and Moriarty. Always at some isolated garden or beach.”

“Exactly,” Sherlock told him. “From what I’d read on demons they didn’t lose taste for the pleasures of the flesh—on the contrary. I examined both the bottle and the glass for fingerprints, but I already knew I’d find just one set. It was the final proof that it wasn’t a demon who had visited Sebastian Moran, but a non-corporeal entity. Question was what. Ghost or vengeful spirit fitted the bill, because of the cold and because of the manner of Moriarty’s death. When I had done the research on what was expected of me as a ghost, I’d found out ghosts were either connected to a place of importance for them, usually that of their violent death, or were attached to an object of importance to them. It was obvious that Moriarty wasn’t…haunting Barts, to use the correct term. So object it was. Moriarty seemed…” Sherlock stumbled again and got up abruptly in his frustration to find the right word. “Mobile,” he said.

He began pacing up and down in front of the fireplace. “I couldn’t imagine him letting anyone carry the object to which he was attached. It would have meant he was completely out of control. Not something that fitted his character, no matter whether he was a ghost or a man. For him to have a complete freedom of movement he had to be the one in possession of that object. That meant he somehow carried it with him. From there it wasn’t a difficult leap to figure out he had a corporeal form as well. That in turn put Moran’s ready reply earlier in the car into a brand new light. It was obvious Moriarty wanted me to believe he was a demon, which meant that his ghost wasn’t possessing mere humans. He was possessing demons.”

John turned to Sam. “Is that possible? I mean, okay, yes, obviously. But…can demons be possessed?”

“First we heard of it,” Dean said.

Sam elaborated. “We don’t know how it works but there’s no reason why it couldn’t happen. It clearly did.” He turned to Dean. “It’s still a meatsuit, right? As long as the demon lets the ghost go in…”

Dean slumped a little, looking comfortable despite the disturbing topic. Or maybe because of it—John would do well to remember this was where the Winchesters were in their element. “Crowley can make any demon do whatever he says,” Dean said, eyebrows knitting. “Not just because he’s their King. He’s very persuasive.”

“So what?” John asked, looking between all three. “He provided Moriarty with demons to use them as some sort of a cab service? Go anywhere he wants?”

“No just that.” Sherlock’s eyes gleamed at John, wide. “Power, John. Yes, freedom of movement; but also great strength and new abilities. You saw what he could do with just a flick of his wrist.” Sherlock paused. “Most of all, if I believed he was a demon it would have lent the ‘deal’ he’d offer me credibility.” Sherlock’s shoulders hunched a little as he looked down at John expectantly.

“He never wanted to make a deal,” John said slowly.

“No, he didn’t.” Sherlock straightened up. “He only wanted me to sign that stupid contract selling my soul to him.” John couldn’t miss the derision that the supernatural aspects of things still seemed to provoke. “Then his plan was to kill you anyway,” Sherlock continued. “Mycroft as well, while we were all there, then let Crowley unleash his hellhounds on me.” He turned to Dean. “I believe that is the procedure?”

“Yeah,” Dean said, eyes hooded. “If you want to call it that. ’s not a procedure you want to go
“Oh, I do.” Sherlock brushed a curl away from his forehead. “I don’t care much for mutant hounds anyway. Never have.” He turned a serious face down to John then a slow smile tugged at his mouth’s corners until his eyes almost disappeared in the crinkles around them. John could feel himself light up inside like a hundred watt bulb: at the rare sight, at the shared memory, at the inexpressible joy of having Sherlock back. He tried to school his features into something more appropriate for his next question.

“What’s up with Mycroft?”

It was Sam who answered. “Ghosts are not like humans or demons. They’re either lost souls who are forced to relive some tragedy, usually that of their death. Or in most cases they just want revenge, that’s all. Sherlock told us Moriarty blames three people for him ‘cheating’ with his death: Mycroft, Molly Hooper and Sherlock himself.”

John’s back turned into a straight line. “Wait a minute. Molly…Has someone—”

“Relax,” Sherlock interrupted. “Molly’s fine and so is that girl from downstairs.”

“Katie,” Sam said. Sherlock shot him a quick glance, but repeated, “Katie.” His lips suddenly quirked. “I’m given to understand that they were both already doing admirably well protecting themselves when help arrived.” He paused, momentarily looking miles away. “Clearly it’s time to abandon the notion of the damsel in distress altogether.”

For a few seconds there was silence in the room, then John shuffled in his seat. “Was Mycroft in on all this? Tonight, I mean.”

There was reluctant humour in Sherlock’s pale eyes. “What do you think?”

John nodded slowly, reminded of Mycroft’s face at his departure earlier. “Can’t imagine he was too happy,” he commented.

“No,” Sherlock said lightly, arranging some items on the mantel. “All the more that it’s usually him who abducts people. Must have been a novel experience.” His gaze stopped just as his fingers stilled. “It wasn’t strictly necessary for him to come,” he said, too quiet for John to be able to read anything in his voice. “He insisted.” Sherlock remained motionless, then suddenly pivoted to face John again, expression perky once again. “Much to our advantage as it turned out.”

John added the new detail of the brothers to the big unfathomable mental picture he’d put together on their relationship. (He felt the picture could give Jackson Pollock a run for his money.) “Okay,” he said. “So Moriarty was a ghost. How did you—”

“How are you doing, by the way?” Dean cut in, eyeing him from where he was now half-keeling over to Sam.

“I’m fine,” John replied, keeping his tone neutral. He was fine in an immediate way, but he was pretty sure he’d blocked a lot of the experience of being possessed by Moriarty. If that block remained in place for good, he was all in favour. He doubted it was the kind of thing Ella would help with. John knew he’d never be able to make sense of it, compare it to anything or ever completely forget about it. It was almost wrong to become truly fine with it, so he’d have to learn to live with the memory. But he could also sense another memory: that of the note, of Sherlock’s soul chiming—and it shielded him. A counterpoint that was never going to bend or melt or decay and let John be taken over again, this time by his own mind reliving the experience.
He realized Sam had his gaze trained on him and repeated, with more emotion, “I’m all right.” He smiled, the twinkle in his eye privately directed at Sam. “Had a little taster of what you have to look forward to when you get up in the morning. Nice!”

Sam’s dimples flashed out of the blue with some deprecation directed at the universe at large.

Dean smacked his palm against his leg. “All right,” he told Sherlock. “Tell him how you cracked it was the dog tags so we can all go catch our beauty sleep.”

Sherlock lifted his shoulders daintily, making the satin of his gown catch the light from the fireplace.

“I would take credit for it, but I’m sad to say I had missed something obvious.” His eyes went to Sam. “Thankfully others hadn’t.” Something sulky took over his mouth for an instant. “Even if they didn’t know what it meant.”

John turned to Sam. “What is he talking about?”

Dean was about to reply but as much as John was beginning to quite enjoy his turn of phrase, he was glad it was Sam who actually spoke.

“I noticed something on the night we got Moran,” he said. “There was nothing interesting about him, he kind of looked almost clinical. Probably tried to remove any details that could tell Sherlock something about him.” Sam’s lips turned downward into a pleasant, mundane mimic as he shrugged. John was once again struck by his ability to be like that while he talked about some pretty heavy things.

“Perhaps he overdid it,” Sam continued, “because it actually made that one thing stand out. He had this chain around his neck and I wondered whether soldiers wore dog tags over here. Earlier when we were trying to figure out how to kill Moriarty, I told Sherlock about it.” Sam didn’t bother to hide his cool accusation as his eyes met Sherlock’s. “Turns out, he was also working on ways to gank Moriarty, only he had his ghost in mind.”

“Yeah,” Dean spoke, evidently eager to have his say. He glared at Sherlock. “I still haven’t forgiven you for that. It was a major blow up waiting to happen in our faces, man! What were you thinking?”

“Hmm, what was I thinking?” Sherlock lifted his eyes to the ceiling for a moment in mock wondering. His gaze dropped to Dean. “Probably that as soon as you’d heard Moriarty was a ghost you’d have put two and two together and figured out he had to have some fairly serious connections to be possessing demons without a problem. Even you would have concluded he’d found a partner in the King of Hell.” Sherlock’s features were a flurry of irony. “Judging by the way you react every time someone as much as gives your brother a bad look, I somehow doubted you’d be so helpful with a plan that involved leading him into the hands of the person who wanted his heart.”

“You know what that’s called, right?” Dean’s voice rose and so did his back from the sofa backrest. “Manipulation. That’s real low, way below the belt.”

Sherlock didn’t even have the decency to look chastised. “I’m sorry,” he said, exaggerated imitation of confusion on his face. “Have I left you with the impression that I care?”

John sighed and rubbed his eyes. “Can you postpone the bickering for later?” he asked, making a point to not look at anyone in particular. “I just want to hear about the dog tags and go to bed.”

Predictably, Sherlock started rattling out his deductions, although now in a bit of a huff. “Moran had been dishonourably discharged from the British Army. It meant these weren’t his dog tags. I remembered how he and Moriarty had met: the double murder of the American soldiers. Then I
remembered something else. Moriarty liked to keep souvenirs—the Carl Powers case, remember?” Sherlock lifted excited eyebrows at John, huff forgotten. John hadn’t expected any different. He’d known it would take all of three seconds before his genius friend who had the emotional intelligence of a baby gorilla got smitten by the pieces of his current jigsaw falling into place.

“He’d kept his first victim’s trainers for years, John,” Sherlock went on, “instead of getting rid of them, especially considering that they could have clearly served as evidence against him.” He returned to his chair, face turning even more exotic with his dangerous smile. “Then another, far more important realisation arrived. The first time I met Jim Moriarty, he was playing a role. But he did tell me his real name and he did leave me his actual number. What if it wasn’t all an act? Perhaps he’d wanted me to meet the real him, at least to a degree. The gay act… Dean had asked me about the nature of Moriarty’s interest in me and it made me wonder: what if he came to meet me as a much more truthful version of himself than I’d have ever thought? Add to that the fact that he wanted us to finish what we’d started in the same lab where we’d first met.” Sherlock paused, his steepled fingers pressing against his open lips. He spoke through them. “I cast my mind back to that day, bringing out every single detail about Jim Moriarty and it was right there, always had been: the chain around his neck. Exactly the kind dog tags are attached to. Two dead American soldiers. One pair of dog tags for Moriarty, one for Moran.”

Evidently some of Sherlock’s deductions hadn’t been revealed to Sam and Dean earlier, because Sherlock had his entire audience holding its breath.

“I checked in the files immediately,” he said, voice rumbling in the silence. “And found that the two dead soldiers’ dog tags were missing. I sent a quick text message asking about the chain on Moran’s neck. If it was that of a soldier in the American army I knew I’d found the object to which Moriarty’s ghost was bound: something important, of personal value.” Sherlock’s gaze wandered, unfocused, before it zeroed in on Sam. “I may have failed to select an appropriate item for myself for that ritual, but perhaps there’s some truth in the belief that one is far more capable of astute observation when it doesn’t concern one’s own affairs.

“Anyway, the reply to my text message confirmed my theory. From then on it was only a matter of devising a plan of action. We would have had to act really swiftly once Moriarty turned into a ghost. So as soon as he showed up I found an excellent pretext to check that the chain was indeed around the neck of the body he was possessing and then I ensured a quick and easy access to it for when the time came.”

“To be honest,” Sam spoke, “we didn’t know how exactly it will go down. We were hoping that we would deal with Moriarty,” Sam indicated between himself and Dean, “when you and Sherlock were already out of there.”

“Yeah,” Dean said ruefully. “But then as soon as we trapped him the son of a bitch brought in the Chippendales.”

At that John couldn’t help it: he tucked his chin to his chest and giggled, both at Dean’s colourful choice of words and at the absurdity of this whole conversation. He couldn’t stop for a few seconds, his condition not aided by Sherlock’s blank gaze.

They really ought to have all been in bed long ago.

He just shook his head at Sherlock, but Sherlock continued to stare at him, looking endearingly lost under his stroppy expression. “I’ll tell you later and then you’ll delete it immediately,” John told him. “I promise you.”

“Delete it from where?” Dean said. “What is he, Robo Sherlock?” He rubbed at his chin, muttering
to himself. “That would explain a lot.”

Sam turned to him sharply, pinch-mouthed. Dean rolled his eyes but when Sam didn’t relent, he looked back to Sherlock. “No offence,” he told him, much like one sibling would apologize to another because their mother made him. Sherlock just fixed his unblinking gaze on Dean for long enough to make him jittery, which John suspected was Sherlock’s secret plan of retaliation. Perhaps if the day had been less on the enormously taxing side John would have even figured out retaliation for what.

He yawned until his jaw cracked then stretched his arms, flinching a bit. His body felt the way it did in the early days of his military training. “Right,” he told the room at large. “I’ve got more questions but they can wait.” He turned to Sherlock. “I’m going to bed.” Sherlock nodded.

John got up almost grabbing at thin air to pull himself up like an old man. He rolled his neck and turned to Sam to wish him and Dean goodnight when a disturbing thought managed to fight its way out through the recesses of his numbing mind.

“You’ll be here in the morning, right?” John asked Sam. “You won’t just…um, flutter off with Castiel without saying goodbye first?”

Sam got up. “No way, man,” he said. “We won’t just ‘flutter off’.” It was obvious he was way more adapted to this kind of existence, because he still had some energy left in him to make his delivery slightly sassy. Face dropping, his next words sobered up John from the pleasant haze he was already slipping in. “The angel tablet is here,” Sam said. “In England. We need to get it and Sherlock’s brother might have some information for us, so we’ve got to wait and see whether it’s anything useful.”

Dean got up as well, stretching first, before folding his arms across his chest. “Sorry,” he said. “You’re stuck with us for a little longer.”

John nodded his gladness at the news that he was going to see more of his new friend, then headed to the door. There, he turned to cast his old friend a parting look—just to see him again, sitting there alive and not going anywhere.

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Sam couldn’t wait to go to sleep, but Dean was still restless, probably worried that Castiel was taking too long or wouldn’t return. He kept walking in and out of the bedroom and banging things louder than necessary, while talking.

“I don’t know, Sammy, that dude is weird,” he was currently saying on the topic of Mycroft Holmes. Sam hoped his yawn conveyed both his agreement and his ‘So what?’ adequately. Looked like it did, because Dean stopped in the middle of the room, his shirt half-shrugged off. “Do you want to walk in somewhere following what he told us?” he asked Sam.

“He helped us tonight. We were kind of desperate back there.”

“No, he helped his brother.” Dean continued undressing, shaking his head. “I don’t like it—how did he know about the angel tablet in the first place, huh? What does that mean, ‘confidential sources’? Who even talks like that?”

Dean was obviously waiting for an answer, eyes shining like beer glass hit by the sun. It was an altogether too lively colour.

“I don’t know, Dean,” Sam told him tiredly. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, having just put
his pajama bottoms on. The question that occupied his mind a lot more right now was whether he’d be cold sleeping in just a t-shirt.

Behind him there were noises indicating Dean was moving about again. “I’m telling you something doesn’t smell right here. The guy’s got an angel blade, Sam! And his buddy had one too.”

Sam turned, sighing. “Thanks to which we’re still alive. Quit panicking.”

“Hey! I’m not panicking.” Dean would have appeared a lot more intimidating if he wasn’t standing in his t-shirt and boxer shorts, his bow legs planted wide and looking even funnier. He started listing, using his fingers as a check-list: “The blades, the ‘confidential source’, knowing the tablet is somewhere here. Hell, he even knew Castiel will show up as soon as he mentioned the angel tablet.”

Dean shook his head again. “I’m telling you, dude, that’s got something to do with Cas being incommunicado for so long. I don’t know what’s going on with him, but it’s seriously wrong.”

Sam had tried making Dean stop saying the last two sentences with both his eyes and his lips, but if his brother hadn’t learnt that Castiel appeared exactly when you were talking about him, it was his problem.

Dean must have felt Cas’s breath on his neck, because his face twitched with suspicion, then he turned and promptly jumped out of his skin. “Jesus, Cas, cut that out, will you?” He took a few steps back. Castiel squinted at him. “I can assure you I am perfectly fine,” he told Dean. “So is Kevin.” He reconsidered. “In a manner of speaking.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked.

“And if you’re so fine,” Dean told him, “why don’t you tell us who Naomi is?”

Castiel’s face turned vacant. “I don’t know anyone with that name.” He turned to Sam. “The prophet is safe and his location is protected. He is not healthy, but there’s no permanent damage.” Cas’s eyes returned to Dean. “I helped him with the Enochian. You’ll have the spell you’ll need to say after the first trial in a day.”

“Well, just enough time for us to get the angel tablet,” Dean said, eyes rounding sarcastically. His face sagged. “All right, Cas, you take the couch.”

Only then did Castiel finally move. He took a few steps towards the only chest of drawers in the bedroom, picking up Dean’s wallet from there and turning it in his hands, examining without opening it. “I don’t sleep,” he said; quite uselessly, Sam thought, because they already knew that. Cas on the other hand was evidently never going to know what humans really meant when they said some things.

“Then sit on the damn couch and flip through the channels all night,” Dean told him, exasperated. He turned to Sam. “At least he won’t be watching porn. They don’t have porn, I checked. Probably because they’re British. Hey!” He exclaimed suddenly, lowering his voice for his next words. “Do you think it’s true, what Moriarty said? Do you think Sherlock’s really a virgin?”

Sam let his pause stretch for a couple of second. “I’m going to sleep,” he told his brother and slid under the covers.

He didn’t care whether Sherlock was a virgin or had orgies every fortnight. He didn’t care if Castiel would stare at an empty TV screen all night, or whether Mycroft Holmes was some kind of a puppet master. What he cared for was that they were all alive and unharmed. The demon tablet and Kevin were safe, Cas was back and there was a lead on an angel tablet. Dean was right here, safe and close
if currently annoying like a bumble bee trapped in a small room. Last but not least Sam was not leaving Baker Street just yet and right now that thought was better than any comforter he might have wished for.

Chapter End Notes

Some visuals can be found over at my LJ. I hope you enjoyed the update! :)
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Another double chapter. Originally, the content of it was supposed to spread over three paragraphs. That didn't work out quite so well. The story has grown again: this one is an extra chapter that I do hope you enjoy and I've added a provisional extra one for the actual finale—just in case I don't manage to write it within one chapter.

Tons of visuals over here.

John wasn’t surprised that he didn’t have the most peaceful of rests. There was tiredness and then there was…well, he didn’t even have a word for this. Quite frankly his adventures as of late could easily stretch over a novel. The bottom line was that at best he dozed off for a while during the rare moments when his brain didn’t produce vivid, often disturbing images behind his closed eyelids. It felt as if it was an overloaded boat under the threat of sinking, stuff being chucked out overboard to make it lighter. He had been quite all right downstairs, but once his head hit the pillow all the metaphorical fences shook and fell, releasing the beasts.

It was a little after seven in the morning when he decided the hour was late enough for him to justify his staying awake. Nothing like holding on to petty constructs of what was acceptable and unacceptable after a horrible night of fighting demons, being possessed by a ghost and having an angel stay for a sleepover two floors below. John tucked his hands under his head, fixed his gaze on the ceiling and gave himself over to reflection. For all its work overtime, his brain seemed to have done the job of restoring enough of its mental capacity for thinking to become a cohesive act again.

From what John could tell, Moriarty was gone for good. Sam had salted and burned the object to which his ghost had been attached and John had seen the flames consume his ethereal form like fire pages of a book, the black burnt bits of paper left at its wake disappearing completely to leave only empty air behind. John knew what he had seen, but he couldn’t let himself rejoice. After meeting Sherlock, his trust in his own observation had undergone quite a bit of adjustment with the world Sherlock had shown him—a world that was richer and more intricate than anything John would have thought possible. But meeting Sam…it altered the very foundations of what ‘possible’ constituted. He could no longer trust his own eyes, full stop. It didn’t matter whether he observed or noticed details—it was the conclusions that he drew from what he saw that could be wildly inaccurate, because the world no longer worked the way John had known it all his life. It was like being an infant and having to learn everything all over again.

Well, not exactly. The Solar System was still in place and so was gravity. People were still people. Sherlock was still the most brilliant man John had ever met, conquering even the parallel, miasmic world of the supernatural by applying his mind to it. Mycroft might have had an angel blade, but didn’t wield it. Dean stabbed demons like the pro he was yet he checked British slang on the internet and worried about using it correctly. Sam had been Lucifer’s chosen one—no, the one who had defeated Lucifer!—yet he was still a bit of a lost soul like the most human of humans. Yes, people were still people, so John wriggled a bit lower in bed with the comfort of that thought.

His mind returned to the Winchesters. Dean had a personality and expressiveness that were as subtle as a male peacock’s tail so a lot of the time they did a good job of distracting the eye from his
physical appearance. But when his face stopped moving and he kept quiet it was hard to miss it: the man was beautiful, nothing conditional or apologetic about the adjective. John could see him in his mind’s eye as he was last night when he’d stood up next to Sam to confirm they were staying a bit longer, facing John, arms crossed over his chest. The pose had defined his biceps, well formed and proportionate, permanent. Dean’s sensual, almost delicate features coupled with Sam’s towering, powerful physicality had made it easy to overlook that the eldest Winchester didn’t just play chess to keep in shape. He was a fascinating paradox, just like his brother. The events of the night had whipped up his masculine, rough side to the fore. John had seen him in skilled hand-to-hand combat; bloody and uncaring about it; he’d noted his recklessness. He hadn’t missed the fact that there was a scary side to Dean’s character: a merciless, ferocious side that had been his first introduction to Dean really, when Dean had been ready to blow off the face of the man he suspected had killed his brother. Then again John had also seen him coy, witty, vain, shy and caring, all within the space of a few days.

Funny enough, although the same kept applying to Sam, the way John perceived him was completely different. Mostly in that whatever pieces of Sam appeared on stage, they all seemed to slot into his designated shape in John’s mind and John didn’t even have to stop and supervise the process or reflect on it. Sam continued to be Sam-like in a way that bizarrely recalled one of the theories on déjá vu: what the brain perceived as something that had already occurred in the past was in fact something brand new which a temporary brain malfunction sent wrongly to the long-term memory banks. Whatever Sam did, however he revealed himself, it was as if John had already known him for it. More than that: had already accepted him for it.

***

When John showed up downstairs some twenty minutes later he found Sherlock sitting in his chair and fiddling with his violin. He was still in his PJs and gown with the addition of a pair of thick, dark burgundy socks, the sight making John want it to be Christmas already.

“Morning,” he said. Sherlock just looked up and fixed him with his gaze for a moment, then nodded and lowered his head back to the instrument in his hands.

John headed for the bathroom, wondering what they’d have for breakfast.

Just as he was returning to the living room Dean walked in, looking rather well-rested compared to John, as an illustration to John’s earlier musings on what remarkable characters the Winchesters were. They both cast the room a quick glance. Sherlock was nowhere to be seen, his violin put diagonally across the seat of his chair as some sort of a ‘Reserved’ sign.


John threw his damp towel over his shoulder trying to feel manly in his robe. At least it was manly—not much of a competition against Dean’s plain dark grey t-shirt and blue jeans, but John felt it was a good British robe.

“You might want to check with Mrs Hudson,” he told Dean. “We’ve got nothing except some butter. All the shopping from yesterday…” There wasn’t much of a point in ending that sentence, Dean giving a quick nod of understanding already. Besides, John would have felt absurd adding something like: ‘when I was abducted by demons’ to a conversation about breakfast. He could accept it had happened, but talking about it was just plain inappropriate in this context.

“Where’s Sam?” he asked, peering behind Dean like an idiot. Sam had the same chances of
successfully hiding behind Dean’s back as Sherlock behind John’s.

“Push-ups,” Dean replied shortly. John was about to ask after Castiel when Sherlock walked into the
room, dressed in a dark grey t-shirt and a pair of blue jeans, making John blink rapidly, memories of
Sam’s words about shapeshifters swimming to the forefront of his mind.

“You out to get us some food?” Dean asked him hopefully. John didn’t see Sherlock’s expression,
too busy ducking his head to hide his own at Dean’s cute cluelessness about the order of the world in
this household.

“No,” Sherlock said in a beat. “I’m going for a swim.”

Dean’s hands suddenly flew to his hair, frisking it this way and that, then he looked at Sherlock
seriously. “All right,” he said. “Let’s do this.”

“Do…what?” Sherlock asked. It was the ‘spending time with his right hand’ incident all over again.

“I can do with a swim,” Dean informed him amiably. “That bed downstairs is not doing my back any
favours, man. And I can’t let my little brother go all Hulk on me.” He turned to John, completely
ignoring Sherlock’s mildly incredulous expression. “I’ll go borrow Sam’s trunks and tell him you can
both fix us some breakfast while we’re out. Or we can go and find a diner when we get back.” He
turned to Sherlock. “Hold on. I bet you don’t have diners over here?”

Sherlock blinked at him twice, reminding John of one of the dolls Harriet had when she was little:
the eyelashes appeared quite natural, but each time the doll blinked the eyes opened back to the full
which was where the natural look ended.

“No,” Sherlock told Dean slowly. “We don’t have diners.” He sought eye contact with John, who
immediately looked away, pushing his lips forward to prevent his amusement bursting out. He
cleared his throat.

“We have cafés,” he told Dean. “Maybe Greg and Mycroft have managed to cover things up
downstairs and Speedy’s open. You two go for a swim and then we’ll sort something out for
breakfast.”

Dean’s index finger pinned an invisible badge of honour on John’s chest. “Good man,” he said
sincerely. “I’m glad we came to save your ass last night. No going out, though. Sam’s not to leave
the house until I’m back, you got that.”

It was clear by Dean’s pose that he expected some formal reply so John nodded. “Got it. Um…” He
scratched his head, uncomfortable at the thought of telling Sam how to look after himself. “You
might want to tell him that, too.”

“Oh, he knows better than that. All right.” Dean stretched exuberantly, making some purring noises.
“Come on, sunshine,” he told Sherlock’s frozen face. “Let’s go work up an appetite some more.”

Still avoiding Sherlock’s insistent gaze John scurried out of the room, finally grinning in peace as he
trotted up the stairs to his bedroom.

***

Sam was pleased to find 221B’s living room occupied only by John. Dean had started talking as
soon as he’d opened his eyes, which was both out of character and unwelcome. In turn, Cas showed up in the bedroom as soon as he heard Dean’s voice and proceeded to pace back and forth, insisting they began the search for the angel tablet immediately. It took all of five sentences for voices to be raised, Dean’s to the tune of the Winchesters not being ‘goddamn gods’ and having to wait to have something that told them from where to start. Then Castiel vanished abruptly, cross, but at least he said, “I’ll be back,” before doing it. Dean swore and shot out of bed, looking around and calling Cas’s name—the action quite useless, of course, but Dean often favoured instinct to sense. He went on grousing and banging things around the room, mercifully disappearing into the bathroom at last.

Sam was halfway through his sit-ups when Dean re-appeared, freshly showered and shaved. At least he kept his complaints about the ‘stupid British taps’ to a mutter as he went around the flat getting ready and probably searching for food. He returned to the bedroom and watched Sam do his push-ups until Sam gave him a hard-boiled look, communicating that he wasn’t going to abandon whatever he was doing to cater to Dean’s stomach. Dean watched him for another few seconds then went upstairs. When Sam came out of the bathroom he wasn’t back, so discovering John alone while nice was also a little worrying.

“Morning,” John told him, turning to look at him from the couch. The TV was on, the sound low.

“Hey,” Sam greeted him back. “Where’s Dean?”

“Ah, he…he and Sherlock went for a swim.”

“Really?” Sam could hear his voice go a little high with the question.

“Yeah.” John paused, then lifted the cup in his hand. “I made coffee.”

“Cool. Thanks, man.” Sam headed for the kitchen, looking forward to some decent, hot coffee.

“I was told we should sort out breakfast,” John added behind his back. “And that you’re not to leave the house until your brother’s back. What do you want to do?”

Sam didn’t reply until he’d taken a sniff and a sip of his drink. “I don’t know,” he said, lowering himself next to John. “Leave them to fix their own breakfast?” His hand went to his stomach. “I am kind of hungry, though.”

“Okay, then. Let’s order something in.”

Half an hour later they settled around the dining table unwrapping EAT bags full of pastries, fruit, yoghurt and juices.

“I can’t believe I missed all the signs that Moriarty was a ghost,” Sam told John and bit out a third of his banana.

“That’s the ‘being hit with a heavy dose of Sherlock’ talking,” John told him around his own mouthful. “He does that. I used to feel like an idiot half the time when I met him. He doesn’t just see everything, but the way he explains it…” John met Sam’s attentive eyes and spread his arms a little. “He makes it sound so simple.”

Sam waited to swallow before replying quietly, “Yeah.”

John lifted his eyes to him again, hand stopping mid-air to the jar of jam. “He is a genius. Who has
perfected his skill—that’s *all* he’s been doing for years.”

“So have I.” Sam remained pensive for a few seconds, then shrugged and went on eating. For all his tendencies of inner emotional entanglement, Sam didn't think he was someone fundamentally insecure. There wasn’t going to be any drama based on insane competitiveness—he was just disappointed that he’d missed something he thought he was supposed to see as it was in his area of expertise.

“It’s Moriarty as well,” John said. “Mycroft once called him the criminal mastermind of the century or something like that.” John quirked his lips. “You know Mycroft, right? If he says something like that…”

“Yeah,” Sam contributed eloquently again. He gazed at his cup, turning it in his hands. “It’s kind of worrying that this kind of guy was Crowley’s business partner.”

“Do you think he’s behind what Crowley knows about the angel tablet?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Whatever it is, there was some exchange there. Crowley got Moriarty some demons to ride. What did he get in return? That’s what I want to know.”

They elapsed into silence and finished their breakfast, then John went to make Sam another coffee and a cup of tea for himself. Sam cleared up the table taking the rest of the food to the kitchen. He started doing the dishes while John waited for the kettle to boil.

“Did Mycroft tell you anything in particular about the angel tablet?” he asked Sam.

“Just that it was here and that he had some confidential sources—that’s how he knew.” Sam injected some snappiness in his tone; while not as miffed with Mycroft Holmes as Dean was—perhaps because he’d been exposed to his ways for far longer and far more intimately—he wasn’t too happy to play hide and seek, either. Freaking Holmeses and their secrecy. At least Mycroft had promised to send their way everything he could lay his hands on. Sam told John as much. John nodded and returned to making them beverages.

“What about Castiel?” he asked. Sam opened his mouth to ask what about him when John spoke again. “Hang on!” He passed Sam his cup. “You were next to Crowley when Castiel showed up. Did you see what happened to him? I mean, maybe Castiel…I don’t know…”

Sam could see John was struggling to say ‘killed him’ and some warmth spread from the cup in his hands through his arms and chest. He’d seen that when necessary John shot and fought without batting an eyelid, a cool, pitiless side to his character that was both fascinating and a little disturbing. (Perhaps the latter contributed to the former.) Yet deep down there was something relentlessly Human about him, too. Sam knew that with someone like John by your side you’d never stop seeing the world in shades of gray nor you would become too numb to make calls that were too easy.

They took their drinks to the living room while Sam answered John’s question. “Crowley just took one look at Cas, said ‘Drat!’ or something like that, and disappeared.” He smirked a little. “I bet he spent the next hour cursing himself for ever involving Mycroft Holmes in his plans.”

“Well, Mycroft did warn him,” John said, returning Sam’s smile a little tiredly. He wore a plain, soft looking dark blue sweater and a pair of jeans, the ensemble and the morning light bringing out the gray in his blond hair and the blue in his eyes. There was something faded about him, but not in a washed out way: more the way a favourite soft toy changed over time. He had obviously under slept
The recent events had taken their toll on him, but he was John Watson: a brick, a soldier; an unassuming, awesome guy who had a grasp on things like few people did and who could become the grasp you needed to have.

An inquisitive ‘fellow’ too. “How do you think they know each other?” he asked. “Crowley and Mycroft.”

“You tell me.”

John’s lips twitched again then he nodded. They both took a sip and remained silent for a while, only the city noise from the start of the week filtering through the closed windows. The atmosphere was still quite tranquil.

“So, Cas,” John said. “Doesn’t he know where the angel tablet is? I mean, because he’s an angel.”

“No, it doesn’t work like that. Crowley’s the King of Hell and he didn’t even know there was a demon tablet in existence.”

John squinted ahead and nodded slowly. “Yeah, of course. Makes sense.” He rubbed at his face and yawned behind his palm. “Do you know whether the angel tablet does the same like the demon one?” he asked. “Closes the Gates of Heaven?”

That was one of the first things Sam had considered last night while he was riding next to Dean on the way back.

“There’s no way of telling,” he told John the truth. “But it has to be something like that, right?”

John hummed. “Maybe there’s one for Purgatory,” he added musingly.

That Sam hadn’t considered. “Maybe. Although from what I got from Dean, Purgatory is not like Hell.”

“What do you mean?”

“For starters, it’s ten times harder to get out.”

John leaned forward. “Are there doors to it as well?”

“More like these…weak spots that kind of open…” Sam made some circular gestures with both his hands, drawing an invisible hole in the air. “I’m not sure,” he confessed. “The way Dean described it it sounded almost like a portal. Like…something opening to let you go from one dimension to another. Only there weren’t random spots but like special ones.”

“So they’re not fixed in place, like the Gates of Hell?”

Sam shook his head, uncertain. So many questions without answers but it still felt good to have John bombard him with them. Usually it was just him and Dean, under stress to finish a hunt before the hunt finished them. There was no leisurely conversing and besides, admitting there were no answers was not their way. They had to find them or someone was going to die. Quite often one of them.

“Dean said he heard nothing about any Gates,” Sam told John, “and he spent a year in Purgatory. He said he didn’t even know whether there were more spots like the one he got out from.”
John kept looking at him for a few seconds, obviously absorbing the information, then leaned back in his chair.

“Well, one tablet at a time,” he told Sam, his face earnest. “Right?”

Sam let his chuckle leave him like an exhalation. “Right,” he said. “As long as Cas is keeping an eye on Kevin, the demon tablet can wait. Kevin needs to figure out the rest of the trials anyway. We’ve got to focus on the angel tablet—if Crowley gets his hands on it…” Sam left his sentence ominously unfinished. By the look in John’s eyes he got the picture pretty clearly.

Sam stretched up, turning a bit restless by the talk. “I better start doing some research,” he told John, getting up.

“Where will you start?”

“I don’t know. Google?”

John grinned. “You can use my laptop,” he said, pointing at the dining table. “It’s over there.”

Sam walked over and opened the computer, settling down at the table. He spent twenty minutes clicking on some links and printing some stuff that seemed a little far-fetched, but did talk about God’s scripture and the Gates of Heaven. Having heard Sherlock’s deductions last night had once again confirmed to Sam that the tiniest detail hidden in an otherwise unremarkable picture could be crucial. Sam picked up his papers and after some hesitation walked back to the other end of the room. Light from the window behind Sherlock’s chair was falling perfectly for reading so Sam settled in for the time being, ready to get up as soon as Sherlock returned. John had walked around tidying up and washing the cups, his steps and actions lacking any of Dean’s brashness. He was now back on the couch in Sam’s usual place watching TV.

“Will it bother you if I left the volume on low?” he asked when Sam sat down.

“No, man; it’s fine.”

John started flipping through the channels, casting Sam a look from time to time. For a while Sam was a touch self-conscious but then John found something that held his attention and so did Sam. It wasn’t going to give them a lead on the angel tablet for sure, but it was quite interesting nonetheless, concerning a theory on what Sam suspected was the birth of Heaven’s language: Enochian. As it often happened when reading absorbedly, the rest of the world faded away but in this case it also felt as if it had turned into a cocoon.

When half an hour later Sam lifted his eyes John had stretched out on the couch, arms crossed over his chest, feet at the ankles. His face had sagged and his eyes were closed, hair and eyelashes glowing a little with the slanted October rays of sunshine. He was breathing evenly so Sam got up and turned off the TV, then went back to his reading.

***

Whatever Sam had expected, it was not that noon would come and there’d be still no sign of a package from Mycroft Holmes.

Sam had read and John had slept, both undisturbed, until ten o’clock. That was when Sherlock and
Dean returned, arguing about something all the way up the stairs. They walked into the room and pretty much ignored Sam and John, too wrapped up in what after thirty seconds Sam privately labelled as a pointless conversation that went round in circles.

“You just don’t ask people things like that,” Dean was telling Sherlock for what sounded like the fifth time. “When you hang out with another dude you talk about chicks. You talk about sports. You can talk about cars, beers, whatever!” Dean waved his arms around to illustrate the vast number of topics one dude could apparently pick from when talking to another dude. “What you don’t do is ask about stages of bodies’ decomposition!”

“It’s extremely rare to find someone like you,” was Sherlock’s reply. He’d disappeared into the kitchen during Dean’s tirade to pick up a bottle of water, which he lifted to his mouth and proceeded to drink half of in big gulps. His curls were damp and very…swirly and Dean was sporting rosy cheeks, so at least it looked like they’d had a good exercise.

Dean stared at Sherlock drinking without saying a word, although Sam couldn’t tell whether he was just being rendered speechless or showing surprising tact. Sherlock’s chest heaved with his sigh as he lowered the bottle and he almost wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “With such first-hand extensive experience,” he went on. “I’ve already explained that there are barely a handful of cases over the last decade when bodies have been exhumed at a later stage of decomposition—”


“You actually dig them out,” Sherlock told him pointedly. “Why can’t I ask about them?”

“Because I do it as part of my job. I don’t get a kick out of it!”

“And knowing about it is part of my job.”

“Yeah, not doing yourself any favours here. You chose your freaking job.”

“Yes, unlike you who obviously abhor your occupation and in no way take pride or pleasure in it.”

“Oh, who are you now, Doctor Freud? And don’t change the subject...”

They had already moved to the kitchen where they started on the food ravenously with Dean not even sitting down for the first half a minute. He continued talking—it wasn’t news to Sam that his brother might as well have been called Maugli—while in deference Sherlock chewed silently, yet let his eyebrows dance so eloquently it was as if he was making a video for a training course on their use.

When Sherlock and Dean had walked in Sam shot up from his seat and John rose from his prostrate position, startled and rubbing his eyes. Half-way through the scene he’d stretched out on the couch again, Sam following his lead and sitting back down in Sherlock’s chair. Their gazes met and John bit both his lips, then took one of the well worn cushions from under his head and put it on top of his face. Sam felt his nostrils twitch, but lowered his face to his papers, feeling that grinning would somehow put him on the same level with the kindergarten in the kitchen.

“You had a good swim then?” John called in a moment, catching a pause.

“It was awesome,” Dean called back. He twisted on his chair meeting Sam’s eyes all across the space. “The showers were modern and gorgeous.” His tone had turned gushing. “That place was not
too shabby, Sammy.” He turned around again to look at Sherlock sitting across from him. Sam had a fleeting suspicion Dean might have given his ankle a kick under the table. “I knew you’d be going someplace nice for a swim.”

They spent the next hour talking about the night before, speculating on the angel tablet and having random topics pop up into the conversation such as why there was a smiley face on the wall and Sherlock’s ‘amazing’ collection of bullets that Dean discovered by wandering into Sherlock’s bedroom without asking for permission. (Sam hadn’t been there since the moment it had ceased being his bedroom.) Mrs Hudson showed up to check on them, wearing a nice dress that Sam suspected was for Castiel’s benefit, if her darting eyes examining the room were anything to go by. She actually did ask about the ‘handsome angel’, but seemed to take the news that he was temporarily absent in her stride.

“Mrs Hudson, you are wearing a new necklace,” Sherlock said, squinting at her. “Are you hoping to catch yourself a…what was that common term? An angel boy toy.”

Sam had decided some time earlier that while Dean was in this household the rest of them were free from having to come up with quick replies to Sherlock, but watching his brother gape in dismay now made him revisit his opinion.

“Stop being silly, Sherlock,” Mrs Hudson retorted, picking up an empty mug perched on the window sill.

“What is wrong with you?” Dean found his words. “Don’t you have a filter on your mouth like at all?” Sam was beginning to worry about whatever bits held Dean’s eyes in their orbs.

John’s input provided a glimpse of understanding as to why he was the special person who’d managed to establish a functional relationship with someone as difficult as Sherlock. “I think Castiel would be lucky to have our Mrs Hudson for his date,” he said gentlemanly, arm going around Mrs Hudson’s shoulder for a quick squeeze, while his eyes glinted at her, a bit naughty. She shook her head at him. “Now you’re being silly,” she told him affectionately.

“I didn’t—” Dean stammered. “I didn’t mean that…” He gazed at Mrs Hudson, honest to God blushing. She was watching him with a puzzled frown that Sam could easily see his brother interpreting as an offended one. Everyone else was looking at him, too. “Cas won’t be interested,” Dean blurted out then lifted his hands straightaway spreading their fingers wide in a gesture of negation. “I mean, *not* because you aren’t a…Because you look just *great* for your age!” He took a breath like a little child after half an hour of crying. “I only mean that Cas…He’s an angel and they don’t…”

That seemed to be all Dean had fuel for. He gaped like a fish out of water for another second or two, then pointed to the kitchen and marched into it without another word. John looked away with twitching lips. Sherlock had been sitting in his chair, examining his violin when Mrs Hudson had shown up; he’d lifted his gaze from his lap to follow Dean’s retreat so didn’t reciprocate John’s amusement, but Sam for his part let his smile split his face into two—he felt like he should have been filming this on his phone.

Sherlock returned his attention to the instrument and murmured, “You *are* seeing someone new, though.”

“I’m really not,” Mrs Hudson told him emphatically. “You can’t always be right, dear.” Sherlock frowned at her as if she hadn’t finished her sentence but she went on to ask about whether they were
Another hour passed during which Sam and John tried unsuccessfully to watch a documentary on the Pharaohs. Sherlock kept walking to and fro in front of the TV, dropped things and rustled papers, opened a jar with something disgusting in it that made them all gag and rush to open the windows, Dean threatening to make Sherlock eat the contents of the jar. This went on until Sherlock threw a tantrum that he was bored, ending with him dropping in his chair and actually hugging his knees to his chest. Other words than ‘bored’ sprang to Sam’s mind such as ‘jealous’ and ‘childish’.

Meanwhile Dean had surfed the internet, stomped around the flat and tried to engage Sam in conversation. He whined about missing the Impala—Sam had to explain to John that no, Dean didn’t have a girlfriend back home, just an unhealthy obsession with his car otherwise known as ‘Baby’—and mostly nagged Sherlock to call his brother. At last Sherlock caved in and texted Mycroft.

Instead of a reply Mycroft called back in ten minutes. Sherlock was by the window next to the dining table, arranging some music sheets on his note stand. He listened to Mycroft with his back to the rest of them, his only input occurring toward the end of the very brief conversation.

“You can see how from their point of view it’s your affairs that are petty and trivial,” he said, something undeniably gleeful in his velvet tones. “Fine,” he added in a moment. “I’ll let them know.” He hung up and turned around.

“It’ll take at least a couple of days if not more,” he said. “My brother would like me to impress on you that he is bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders.” Sherlock paused to let his implied eye roll sink in. “So he would appreciate it if we didn’t bother him for the time being.”

Sam had barely noted the change of personal pronoun that included Sherlock into their affairs when John spoke. “So basically he asked you to tell us to sod off and leave him alone.”

“Basically.”

“Marvellous,” Dean muttered. He turned to Sam. “So what now? We just wait?”

Just wait. Here.

Sam imagined this was what kids who got to go to school every day felt when they were suddenly given a day off because of the cold weather.

“Guess so,” he told Dean, eyes going to the window. A whole day off and the weather wasn’t even cold, the weather was awesome!

For a moment Dean stood in the middle of the room looking a bit stranded then met Sam’s eyes again.

“All right,” he said, determined. “We’re going out.”

“Where?” Sam asked.

Dean wriggled animated eyebrows at him. “Everywhere, dude! Let’s hit the town, go see where the Queen lives. Be tourists for a day, huh?” He gave Sam one of his excited grins, the kind that betrayed someone who had literally been to Hell and back and still found pleasure in doing something simply because he hadn’t tried it or rarely got to do it. The adventurous, open-minded grin
Sam saw less and less these days.

He felt his own automatic response flicker through his features then melt away. He knew he often responded to his brother with a mildly condescending small smile or look. It was a default setting somehow, all the way back from his childhood—a childhood too short-lived and too un-childhood-like—from when Sam was fourteen, maybe even younger, and realized that while he would always be Dean’s little brother, on a pretty substantial level he would also always be the more grown-up of the two. It wasn’t about how old he was; it was about who he was as a person; who they both were as people. All those years during his youth, trying to fit in, trying to be normal, which so often equated to being a good, serious kid. Youth, made heavy by the constant conflict of trying to blend in yet also to be noticed. Prove himself to everyone they met, to Dad, to himself, even to Dean. So that came out in all kinds of ways, some of which never left.

Jess had told him once, quite upset, that despite his caring nature and his sensitivity, he was a judgemental jerk sometimes who often acted like he was fifty. She’d pointed out the little disparaging huff of a smile that had appeared on his lips earlier during their conversation and Sam had apologized, instantly knowing who had been at its receiving end the most. Because if part of Sam had been fifty forever, part of Dean had remained eternally eighteen. Standing in the middle of Baker Street’s sunlit living-room Sam realized that the day Dean lost that part of himself would be the day when the world would feel as if a new ice age had begun. After each blow life dished him out Dean had stood up, more jaded and chipped, his light further dimmed from the inside; and every time Sam had grown as anxious as a baby did when the familiar smells, sounds and sights of its close people grew distant or disappeared.

He gave his brother his most sincere, enthusiastic grin, noticing with a pang of wistfulness the surprise in Dean’s eyes, quite reflecting his own. Rare sights indeed.

“You got it,” Sam told him.

Dean’s nod was like him: larger than life. Happy too. He clapped his hands and rubbed them together, then swivelled to Sherlock and John.

“We even got some locals to show us around,” he said.

“Oh God.” Sherlock uttered a sigh.

***

Agreeing to Dean’s idea had turned out to be more fun for Sam than just indulging his brother.

In his early weeks in London before John’s return, Sam had spent some time duly going around one of the most famous cities in the world. Duly being the operative word. Alone, raw from his fallout with Dean and the myriad of emotional consequences it had brought in its wake and missing Amelia to boot, Sam had stood in front of Big Ben with his fists bunched up in his jacket pockets and just ticked it on some mental list. A distant part of him had raised an assertive voice, begging him to look closer, appreciate this truly impressive, beautiful sight but after another half-hearted attempt Sam had walked off along Westminster Bridge in the dense fog of his then existence. He’d overheard someone say that the big clock tower was even more stunning at night but he’d never even thought of setting foot by it again at any hour.

When he and John struck up their friendship Sam’s perceptions of London changed in due course. John showed him a more intimate face of the city. He did more than that: he shared London with
Sam in a way that made Sam feel as if he had skipped the whole first stage any migrant went through—experiencing it as a tourist—going directly to the part where he appreciated the wonder of what was around him, but it took the backseat to him interacting with London and actually living in it. They’d gone to a few museums and other interesting places, took walks around the central part of town and the parks, visited some good dives... It had all been far too brief. Sam’s life had caught up with him, John’s following suit but those five-six weeks of relative peace and normality had remained embedded in Sam’s mind; stretched and blown out of proportion as far as reality was concerned, but looking quite adequately big in terms of how special they felt to Sam.

Now he got to do the tourist thing again and boy, was it different! It was good. Better than that—it was real. From the arguments in which direction to go on account of different priorities, to the aching feet, to the rare silence engulfing four completely different individuals like a giant soap bubble as they all looked at the same thing, no matter what it was. Silence with a different root in each of them but nonetheless filling the space between them in a meaningful way while the bubble glistened around them, changing its hints of colour over its transparent surface and adding beauty to London that Sam had missed entirely the first time around. Big Ben was stunning in twilight.

In more prosaic terms, they managed to go to only a few of the major tourist attractions in the very heart of London, took a walk down the South Bank to Tower Bridge and the Tower of London and visited the Canary Wharf area. (Sam was reminded of the incident where Moriarty had done the unthinkable: broken into the Tower of London. Not just that but from what Sam had seen on the pictures he’d also sat on a throne, covered in jewels and wearing a crown—all just to get Sherlock’s attention. Unease crawled into him for a moment at the thought that this dead man, wasted ghost or not, was still their adversary in the potential legacy he’d left through his partnership with Crowley.)

Unsurprisingly, Sam found John an excellent companion: agreeable, willing to compromise, understanding his role as a host and playing it perfectly, by both giving a fair description of what a certain place could offer and letting his visitors make their choice. He was also creative in his suggestions that covered a good mixture between what would have made it to any generic guidebook and places that were off the beaten track yet pretty nice. He and Sam fell in and out of conversation quite naturally, comfortable either way.

Sherlock and Dean were a nightmare, individually and especially together. Sherlock’s nose was either buried in his phone or up in the air from where he looked haughtily at everyone. His slim figure clad in a dark coat, collar up, coupled with his high cheekbones and his wide-set eyes in their striking colour gave him the air of someone from an old black and white movie about Dracula. He scanned people unabashedly and they noticed him, too, so half the time there was some staring going on. Sherlock kept muttering deductions about strangers, sometimes within earshot of the strangers. (Sam could swear he saw John pinch him once to make him shut up.)

Dean was easily distracted by pretty much everything: the multicultural crowd, the eccentric individuals, the multitude of foods, the cars, the pretty women, the actual surroundings and Sherlock. As a result he wasn’t finishing half his sentences, missed out on a lot and wanted to go everywhere, completely in denial about the fact that they didn’t have Cas handy there with them, so the laws of physics applied to them and they postulated there was only so much distance people could cover within sixty minutes.

Despite their separate occupations, he and Sherlock still found ways to bicker all the time. They also complained constantly, about each other or their surroundings—in Dean’s case to whoever was nearest to him which included strangers on the Underground platforms. The four of them had somehow managed to reach an agreement to only take the tube for a few stops, more for the quintessential London experience than anything else: it was easier and quicker to walk on foot in
Central London and Sherlock was passionately pro-taxi services anyway. Both he and Dean presented a united front against the idea of taking ‘the tube’ and continued to express their discontent until Sam wanted to push them both in front of the approaching train. John’s glinting eyes told him he had a ready partner in crime. It was rush hour which did lend some justification to the complaints, but on the other hand it also meant no one would see who the pushers were in that crowd.

Sherlock went on pouting on the train, sandwiched between an inconsiderate tourist’s massive backpack and a large man in a suit who smelled of sweat and had a zombie look—thankfully, he wasn’t a real zombie—while right next to them a woman was trying to hush (possibly by breastfeeding?) her indignant baby that seemed to give voice to all of Sherlock’s silent suffering. One stop before they got off Sherlock stopped refraining himself to casting scathing glances at John and upgraded his behaviour to making scathing comments, to the effect that this was what he’d been missing all along during his ‘exile’ and how kind of John to offer it back to him as soon as Sherlock set his foot out of the front door.

Dean grumbled a lot as well, until Sam got tired of giving him stern looks to make him at least do it more quietly and started elbowing him. Despite the fact that he was short, Dean was hunching exaggeratedly, having declared the roof of the carriage too low. He glared at people who pushed him to get to the doors and looked scandalized at those who pressed into him as they tried to get on the train, the short, busty brunette the obvious exception. Sam was glad she got off after only one stop—his brother’s good looks and charms were practically like superhero powers at such close proximity. He’d even borrowed Sherlock’s cologne before they left Baker Street so the afternoon was spent with the two of them stinking up the place but evidently not to the displeasure of a considerable number of women, a few guys and two specimens of undefined age and gender who looked like something out of the pages of an urban magazine from the future. One of them had the kind of fringe that obscured most of his face and for a moment confused Dean about his membership to the male sex, leading to a particularly awkward moment on the Southbound platform of the Jubilee Line at London Bridge. Sam considered the episode a reward for his patience.

Dean continued to voice his opinions: on the trains that were just so ‘cute’ and so ‘freaking tiny’ that Dean was afraid he’d break them if he walked inside, on the ridiculousness of the fact that Sam didn’t have a car—How could Sam not have a car? It was just wrong!—on the prices of the train fare and on the very fact that they were on a train when there’d been perfectly good cars to steal, then return to their damn owners later.

John had boggled at Dean some, but to his credit he’d gone with the flow choosing aptly when to ignore him and when to throw a comment back. His handling of Sherlock reminded Sam of the ways of an old married couple. It was very rewarding to have John turn around on the escalators on the way up, for once taller than Sam, and lean down to share under his breath his admiration for Sam’s patience with his flesh and blood brother.

***

John reckoned the normal rules of what constituted rest didn’t apply to the Winchesters. After a dramatic night filled with ‘ganking’ demons and ‘wasting’ ghosts, Sam and Dean had both slept several hours then sprang back to life as if nothing major had happened the night before. Sam had done his work out; Dean had gone for a swim. Sam had dived into reading; Dean into socializing the Dean Winchester way. Then they’d found plenty of energy to be tourists in a city like London that both charged you and drained you. They all spent long hours amidst the town’s hustle and bustle, followed by a lively dinner at a nice place near Cambridge Square, which was the point where John felt that the difference between him and his other three companions was becoming glaring. Everyone had a drink before their food arrived and another with it. No one seemed affected but John, whose
feet began throbbing pleasantly as if they were in a warm basin and his visual perceptions of the world acquired some white and floaty sheen. His hearing wasn’t all that sharp, either.

At the table both Dean and Sam were quite animated in their own ways: nothing new with Dean who was like a bottle of superb scotch that you drank a little too fast, but seeing Sam come out of his shell was a surprise and a treat. If John continued his comparisons to alcohol Sam was like champagne, delicate but very strong and seeing him lively was like discovering that on top of everything the champagne was one of those rare bottles where there were actual golden flakes in the liquid.

Sherlock had added his low timbre to the conversation, even chuckling once or twice. Playfully irreverent, eccentric and brilliant, he was incomparable—a drink unto his own.

John was tipsy and happy.

After dinner it was Dean who suggested they hit some bars and Sam who told him they should go to at least one pub. “Hey, maybe we can,” Sam began and Dean finished with him, “…hustle some pool.” John watched Sam and Dean stand in the sea of people, unmoving, a look of plain love and adoration on their faces that was all at once terribly human yet echoing mythical tales of soul binding rituals.

Next to John Sherlock was a tall and dark presence John sensed without even turning his gaze to him. He swayed just a little on his feet, wondering whether he could feel Sherlock near even with his eyes closed, then tentatively touched his own cheek to find it a little numb.

“Okay,” he said. “I think I’m going to head home. I’m already…I’ve had enough to drink already.”

Dean threw his arm around his neck, the gesture lacking even a touch of inebriation. “What? No way, man! I can’t let the guy who looked after my lil’ brother go home. I gotta buy you a drink. C’mon.” He gave John a white-toothed smile. “I’ll get you a big glass of orange juice first, what d’you say?” John had the feeling that half the words coming out of Dean’s mouth had something twisted and bent about them to sound uniquely his own. It was nice.

“Okay,” he agreed, looking at Sam who gave him a small smile. His gaze shifted to Sherlock. “You coming?”

“Of course he’s coming,” Dean replied, irrationally affronted. He eyed Sherlock literally face to face, reminding John once again that in their little group he was basically Gulliver in Brobdingnag. (He was grateful he contained this particular witticism to his head, because in his state pronouncing that word out loud would have made him an ambitious speech therapist’s dream.)

“Apparently I’m coming,” Sherlock told John.

“Okay,” John said again. He straightened up, arms tucked close to his body. “But we’re taking a long walk first,” he added firmly. “I need to clear my head.”

Sam kept smiling at him. “Lead the way.”

***

They got home after one—John and Dean downright drunk, Sam ‘buzzed’ and Sherlock slightly flushed and molten-limbed.
John supposed that the only way the night deserved to be called was awesome. There was beer; lots of beer and good beer, too. First, while sober, Sam and Dean had hustled pool like two people who could make a living out of it, their performance flawless and their unspoken connection wicked. Sherlock had watched them with considerable interest, then followed Dean to the gents. Ten minutes later they had emerged from there and proceeded to pull off a con that saw Sherlock in a first-class performance as a waspish, sycophant talent agent and Dean matching him as a famous actor from across the pond. There were also three guys as the genuine losers of respectively an expensive pen, an even more expensive pair of sunglasses and a hundred quid.

While following Dean and Sherlock down a dark alleyway leading them all away from any potential persecutors, Sam had jostled John’s shoulder lightly, murmuring, “I guess we can watch ‘The Real Hustle’ in peace tomorrow.”

John had thrown his head back with his laugh, almost losing his balance. “God no,” he told Sam. “Not putting any ideas into their heads.”

Their sort of illegal activities had taken place in a pub. They’d gone to an All Bar One from there.

Most of the night Sherlock had been his enigmatic, striking self; keeping close to John, watching the people around them and making a caustic comment or a deduction only once in a while. Just before entering the zone where any profound insights aided by drunkenness were cursed to sink into oblivion, John had thought that this was it: Sherlock’s own return to the world of the living. That he must have missed being himself out in the open, no matter how self-sufficient he often was. No man was an island. John had suddenly remembered how earlier in the afternoon they’d sat outside in a bar by one of the quaint quays tucked in behind all the metal and glass of Canary Wharf. Sherlock had waited for Sam and Dean to give their order, then lifted his collar up and up with it his piercing gaze had gone all over to the waitress's face. “Earl Grey, please, lemon if you have any,” he’d said. “And my friend John would like to have a black coffee and your number.” The girl had smiled, murmuring something non-committal, then disappeared. John had been met by a pair of too innocent, steel-blue eyes, the light and all the buildings reflecting in the water doing wonders to Sherlock’s ever-changing irises. John had swallowed and realized he was finally seeing Sherlock in broad daylight, again.

In the bar Sherlock was there every time John looked at him, meeting John’s eyes. Alive. John prayed he wouldn’t say or do anything hopelessly sopp[y, or stupid, or both that he wouldn’t remember in the morning and that Sherlock would never tell him, of course—Sherlock who didn’t know when to shut up—because they were British and blokes and Sherlock was Sherlock.

John had put a hand on Sam’s back and when Sam leaned in to listen John asked him, very seriously, if Sam could keep an eye on him and remember if John did something hopelessly sopp[y, or stupid, or both, then told him tomorrow.

“Sure,” Sam said and John wanted to hug him.

His last memory before slipping into the zone of no return was standing next to Dean at the bar. It was very busy for Monday night, probably due to the central location and the large group of foreign young people, over twenty of them. Sherlock was pressed against John on his other side, surfing on his phone with a deep line between his eyebrows, and Sam had gone to the loo. John was looking at Dean who was finally sloshed and was laughing at the bowl of peanuts.

“You’re in a good mood,” John told him, grinning wide.
Dean lifted his shoulders, the gesture generous and devil-may-care. “Why wouldn’t I be? We wasted an evil son of a bitch last night and we got one over on Crowley.” His words were only a little slurred. “Cas is back.” Dean’s head lolled forward and he lifted a finger in the air. “He might have a few screws loose, but he ain’t dead so we just gotta find a way to fix him. I got my drink, I got my brother—the only thing I’m missing is my baby, but she ain’t going anywhere.” Dean’s very tone sounded misty eyed. “She’s waiting for me back home.” He’d raised his half-full glass, tipping his head to himself, then casting John a slanted look to go with his slanted smile. “I’ve had worse nights.”

John had huffed a laugh and raised his own glass taking a sip. For a moment they’d stayed quiet, the noise around them like a big, heavy blanket of mismatched woollen patches. Then Dean had suddenly straightened up, head going left and right, unfocused gaze trying to get back in the game. “I can hear Sammy,” he said. “Some asshole is being an asshole to my brother.” He blinked and shook his head a little, still looking around.

John wanted to join him in the search, but he would have been next to useless. There was also one major flaw he could spot in Dean’s statement. “How can you hear him in here?”

Dean’s eyes returned to John, their concentration an effort and a success. He bowed his head, expression going confidential. “You know my brother, right? You’ve lived with him. You know him.”

“I do,” John told him, because it was very true.

Dean nodded, gratified by how well they understood each other. “You know his voice. He’s kind of… I’m loud, I know that and our Dad was kind of gruff, the way he sounded, but Sammy’s all…”

Dean wasn’t even looking at John anymore, or at his glass, or at anything really. “He’s not like that. He’s like, ah, like that low guitar, man, that I can hear under all the…” Dean remained frozen for a moment, lips parted, then his eyes returned to John. “I can hear my brother anywhere.”

Dean nodded to himself and put his glass on the counter with some force. “There he is,” he said, jaw setting tighter as he walked around John. John looked over and yep, there he was: Sam, with his friendly, pacifying expression cornered a little as he was talking to two cantankerous looking guys.

A familiar rumble filled John’s head. “I’ll go out and get us a cab, shall I?” Sherlock said.

John let his eyes drift closed for a second, the world spinning, then nodded.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

The warnings for the entire story are here; a reminder that they say "There won't be anything that can't be seen on one of the shows." (In this case, 'Supernatural'.) If you'd like to know more about the warnings for this specific chapter in advance, please drop me a comment or a PM.

Quite a few visuals over here at my LJ. There are also a couple of audios that go with the chapter: Sherlock's violin piece, Dean's rock piece (Taken from this scene.)

I just want to add that I was looking through the kudos section of the story and it warmed my heart to no end to see both completely new names and names I recognize from LJ and my 'Sherlock' stories all the way back to two-three years ago. I also saw names I remember from comments here or on other fics of mine, old and more recent. It sometimes gets a bit desolate writing this story, especially when there are chapters with hardly any feedback, but then there are other times when my sense of having an audience is very powerful. Thank you all for reading and coming this far down the road with me.♥

Sam was familiar with the ‘Never again’ oath more from observation than from experience, but it looked like his body was trying to remedy that. He would have feverishly sworn to never drink again if he wasn’t afraid that any fervour right now, of any kind, would make him puke his guts out in his own bed. His last drunken episode hadn’t been that far back in the past for him to use forgetting it as an excuse. He just hadn’t expected to be hungover after what he’d drunk. He must have become the lightweight Dean enjoyed teasing him he was, especially back in the day when they still went out to bars together.

Dean. Sam was grateful that he was back to sleeping alone in the bed, because the thought of having his brother’s poisonous fumes added to the air in the bedroom was enough to make Sam curse his imagination. Why did he have to think about Dean now? It was tantamount to thinking about whiskey, or about groaning pitifully and hugging the toilet—none of which improved Sam’s situation.

Five minutes later, having set a new world record for gingerly getting out of bed, Sam was casting an eye at Dean’s lump of a form on the couch. Dean’s face was mashed up against the couch’s armrest, mouth open. The little flame of remorse Sam might have felt for Dean’s discomfort dwindled and died when he realized that his brother didn’t look worse than what he did when he slept in his clothes in some crappy place after they’d had an insane run. He’d tried to drink the river Thames in alcohol last night. If someone threw up in the basement flat this morning and it wasn’t Dean, this world would have passed the point of no return as far as its redemption in Sam’s eyes was concerned.

He wondered how the casualties upstairs were doing.

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It was close to midday when some semblance of normal conversation took place between the occupants of the B and C flats at 221 Baker Street. Sam had gone upstairs forty-five minutes after he’d woken up; it turned out he’d slept until ten. He found John in the living room, sitting on the couch and looking so green around the gills that he single-handedly restored Sam’s faith in justice. He would never wish anything bad on John, but he couldn’t bear the shame of being the only baby in the house who was suffering the consequences of a night out.

They’d exchanged sounds that would have been more in place at a building site full of burly, unhappy men; a few words followed, unnecessary, since they mostly stated the obvious, but some things just had to be said out loud for emphasis. Then John, evidently fortified by Sam’s strong, silent presence, made his way to the kitchen. Sam followed on his heels. Coffee was produced, both of them looking at the coffee machine with dazed longing as it worked its magic. They had proceeded with the consumption of that well-known cure for stupidity, the odd words slowly turning into half-formed sentences. There were some classics, such as tentative questioning about any potentially embarrassing moments as well as some context-specific words to the effect of wonderment about Sherlock drinking shots and Dean managing to get that much booze in his body and stay upright. The exchange between John and Sam still resembled something that with clever editing would have sat well in a Monty Python sketch so it didn’t qualify as normal.

Nor did Dean’s bleary-eyed contribution some fifteen minutes post-Sam’s appearance. Dean walked into the flat having first gone up the steps in a sorry manner that was like balm to Sam’s soul—he would never wish anything bad on his brother, either, but sometimes fairness trumped kind-heartedness—then he swayed unsteadily on his feet, rubbed his stubble, lifted a hand warningly, winced with the tilt of his head that had accompanied the gesture and said, “No one speak to me like…ever. If there’s no coffee left, you better have an excuse.” If Sam was a petty person he’d have asked how they could accomplish the feat of offering said excuse when they weren’t allowed to talk, but he magnanimously let it go. It was too much effort anyway.

Dean then joined the ritual of coffee drinking and sharing the obvious, only his input had been limited to single words. He spent most of the time with an arm over his eyes, despite the fact that John—the kindest soul Sam had ever known, Sam decided—had got up amidst his plight and drawn the curtains almost entirely closed.

Sherlock was the last addition to their mirthless little party, strutting in a little before twelve o’clock, his…avant-garde hair the only clue that something was amiss. Evidently he’d taken a shower last night and gone to bed with wet hair. This demonstration of good hygiene habits already placed him in a position of superiority to the rest of them, out of whom the only person who might have slept in something other than his clothes was John. (Sam based that on his observation on John wearing a different pair of jeans this morning, his worn ones for home, together with a white t-shirt and a plain black v-neck sweater. Sam appreciated John’s abstinence from stripes or any other geometrical shapes that could trouble a hungover dude’s eye. It forced him to address his own lack of consideration—he’d put on the first shirt he found this morning, which was his blue and yellow plaid one. He thought he’d seen John shudder when his gaze had fallen on it earlier.)

It spoke sad truths about the state of affairs in their big household that what passed for normal conversation was an argument between Sherlock and Dean. When Sherlock decided to speak in sentences of more than four words, half of them long-winded and sarcastic, Sam was a good brother and backed Dean up in his suggestion that Sherlock ‘shut his mouth’. True, Sam participated only with his most scolding facial expression, but he gave it his best.

“Just because you drank lemonade through a straw like a girl all night…” Dean told Sherlock, then
grunted a little and didn’t finish his sentence like a real man.

Sherlock dropped in his chair covering his knee with his blue gown with the kind of flair Sam found assaulting to the senses.

“‘I’m afraid,’” Sherlock said, “that a comparison to the fair sex, while not a compliment in my books is not an insult, either. Besides, you yourself bought me two drinks in the last bar.” Sherlock looked up to the ceiling, expression wildly exaggerated in its contemplativeness. “I suppose last night’s genocide on your brain cells could explain your stupidity this morning, but I’m not sure that your drinking habit is an excuse enough for it in general.”

“Oh, blow me,” was Dean’s classy come back. He let his head thump gently back against the couch backrest, closing his eyes.

Peace was restored when Sherlock was spotted twice rubbing his temples discreetly, revealing he wasn’t exactly box fresh. He was still far too much better than the rest of them, though, so it was only after Dean and Sam were allowed to shower in 221B that Dean seemed to forgive him this sin. (The shower in the basement flat had offered its swan song the day before; for the time being, Sam didn’t have it in him to be a plumber or anything other than a clean person sitting on a couch and drinking coffee and water.)

For a couple of hours they just hung out, the TV on with the sound on mute, the light gradually being allowed back into the room. With the exception of Sherlock who was doing something on his laptop, they mostly stuck to re-living the events of the previous night—Sam found it a welcome change to re-living the events from the night before last. No one seemed to confess to anything mortifying or to produce blackmail material so all in all Sam felt this could turn into one of those experiences he told fondly one day. Provided he lived long enough to have anyone to tell it to, but he drove right past the thought. It wasn’t the best plan to ponder it while his head was still two steps away from feeling like one of those pool balls he’d hit so well last night.

At some point Mrs Hudson showed up with a quiet, “Yoo-hoo,” that made Sam think warmly of her. She brought up some basic food supplies and did the equivalent of patting their heads by tidying up a little, making them grilled cheese on toast and emitting sympathetic noises. She kept the chatter to a minimum, enquiring after their night and expressing her approval of their taking time off. She then literally patted Sam on the head, mentioning in passing that he had such good hair, good for him, then promised to return to check on them in a few hours.

Half an hour later a delivery of clothing items arrived, courtesy of Mycroft Holmes.

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“I still think a new suit would have been nice,” John grumbled, adjusting his new tie in front of the fireplace mirror. Sam gave him a small smile of acknowledgement, just like he had the previous two times.

They were getting ready to go to a place where there was supposed to be a stash of books with some potential clues on the whereabouts of the angel tablet. Apparently, it wasn’t your average library—not only were the items banned from being taken out of the building, but having access to them was a subject to some paperwork. It had arrived together with the clothes. The clothes further suggested they were going to some kind of secret Government vault. There were two suits, one for Sam and one for Dean; four shirts, two for each of them; and six ties. Two of them had had a post-it note stuck on their boxes with the initials ‘JW’.
Dean had lifted his suit to eye level, pulling his head back and away from it as if it was contaminated with some nasty bacteria. “Why is your scary brother going all Project Runaway on us?” he threw over his shoulder at Sherlock.

“He says we’ll only have two hours.” Sherlock had spoken from the fireplace where he was reading a note. Sam had thought that it wasn’t surprising the Holmes brothers still chose to communicate the old-fashioned way from time to time. “He’s got clearance for us for today only,” Sherlock continued. “We need to be there in an hour.” He’d lifted his eyes, meeting Sam’s across the room. “No time for shopping.”

“Hang on,” John said. “Why do I get just a tie?”

Sherlock walked over to join them at the examination of their delivery. “Well,” he said, voice rumbling a little, “I would venture a guess that since you have your own suits, my brother didn’t send you one.”

“But he sent me a tie. Actually, he sent me two ties.”

Sherlock had hummed absent-mindedly, examining one of the boxes with John’s ties—Sam had caught something in beige and cream-like colours. “Good ones too,” Sherlock continued. “Having a boyfriend is bearing fruit for Mycroft, although his taste is also abysmal, so perhaps not.” He completely ignored the interest his statement produced in John and Dean, taking out one of the ties from its box. “The second tie is in case something happened to the first.”

“I have ties,” John pointed out obstinately.

Sherlock looked up, expression acquiring the kind of serene innocence Sam had begun associating with an oncoming insult. “We can assume that Mycroft couldn’t bear letting you go out wearing one of them.” His eyes widened infinitesimally. “There’s a limit to everything, John.”

John’s sour face fell to the background, obscured by Dean’s prominent grumble.

“What does he think?” Dean lifted the two shirts with the post-it note saying ‘DW’ on them, a shirt in each hand. “That we’re four-year-olds? Is that why Sam and I got two shirts each? In case we spill some Ketchup on one?”

Sherlock shrugged. “Mycroft’s always been the prudent sort. It makes him even more boring.”

“Last thing I’d call your brother is boring,” Sam murmured, fingering the material of his suit. “This is actually very nice,” he added. He lifted his gaze and almost took a step back, defensive against the combined strength of the other three’s glares. Clearly that hadn’t been the right moment to discover some newfound appreciation of Mycroft Holmes.

But the clothes were quite nice. Not only were they a perfect fit—how Holmes knew their exact measurements was something Sam was torn about whether he wanted to know—but they also felt great to the touch and everything was matching perfectly to the last button. The most luxurious items they’d ever had, easily.

“One thing’s for sure,” Dean told Sherlock now, joining John to look at himself in the mirror above the fireplace. “Your brother’s not a cheapskate.”
Something of such good quality had to be expensive, Sam agreed privately. As to the way he and Dean looked...

“Oh, goodness me!” Mrs Hudson’s hand went to her parted lips when she saw them. She’d peered out of her flat, hearing them all come downstairs and now came close. “You are both so dashing,” she said, eyes flicking between Dean and Sam. “Look at you,” she added to Dean, sounding kind of proud and tugging a bit at the seam of his jacket on the left side. Dean took the praise a little flustered, but the darting looks he cast around were not shy, in contrast to his smile. Sam rolled his eyes above Mrs Hudson’s head and Dean gave him his best ‘Jealous!’ little smirk.

Mrs Hudson took them in again and said they all looked very handsome. “You, too, John,” she added kindly, not brightening up John’s mood at all. Sam had to admit that between his and Dean’s soft gray suits and Sherlock’s charcoal one, John’s vivid brown wasn’t fighting tooth and claw to come out on top as the best. That was without even addressing the issue of its unfortunate cut. Sam was no fashion expert, but nice clothes were nice clothes. They were easy to spot, it wasn’t rocket science—and John’s suit didn’t fall in their category.

“I look like I’m your pimp,” John said under his breath as they were all settling in the cab. “Three male escorts and their pimp, marvellous. Which one of my boys would you like to hire?” Dean started, for a moment not catching up that John was pretending to have a conversation with an invisible client. “That one?” John went on, dryly polite, looking at empty air. “Great, fifty percent off on the brother.”

Sam was already smiling, but then had to grin wide when Dean asked, suspicious, “Which brother?” John just cast him a quietly disgruntled glance and looked out his window without replying. Sherlock was already in a world of his own, fingers tapping something on his leg.

He’d played his violin for fifteen minutes before the clothes arrived, a classical tune, its melody sparkling and light. They’d all listened, enthralled. He was very good from what Sam could tell. Dean offered the same feedback verbally, giving Sherlock’s delicate shoulder blade a big clap.

At the massive stone white building they went through clearance all right and were led to a small, plain square room with no windows. There were four chairs and a table in it as well as a big bottle of water and four glasses. A copy machine was the only other thing in the room. In a moment a middle-aged woman with a very business-like demeanour brought in a big box full of books, print-outs, maps and other papers, left it on the table and told them she’d come to pick them up in a couple of hours. “The restroom facilities are right next door,” she added. “Please, don’t leave the room unless you need to visit them.” She pointed to the white phone mounted on the white wall by the dark door. “If for whatever reason you need to speak to me, press one.”

Not a minute after diving into the box and Sam was unable to contain himself.

“Dude,” he told Dean, a little breathless. “This is better than the stuff Mycroft sent us for the soul binding ritual. I mean look at this: a map on the potential locations of the demon tablet! There are other maps as well and I don’t even know what they’re for! This is a freaking treasure, we need to copy as much as we can. Here, start on this one.”

“Er, nerd alert.” Dean spoke out of the corner of his mouth. Sam raised a sardonic eyebrow. “What? I’m embarrassing you in front of the cool kids? Start on the map, Dean.”

Dean shook his head but went on to start copying.
The only stray thought invading Sam’s mind in the next couple of hours was a panicky one that they’d never be able to go through everything in two hours. John was the one who suggested they created some sort of a production line system, admitting that he was their weakest link. “I should work the copy machine,” he said. “It’ll take me ages to decide whether something is worth copying and we’ll waste time if I stop to ask you all the time…”

“No, man, you’ll be all right,” Sam hurried to tell him.

“Yeah, if we were back home with no ticking clock on the wall. Come on, you and Dean are the experts and Sherlock’s a genius.” True to John’s statement, Sherlock hadn’t even lifted his head from the three manuscripts he was going through at the same time. John waited for one second for Sam to reply, then nodded firmly. “Good.” He walked the copy machine and took over from Dean. Dean and Sam exchanged a glance, then Dean lifted his shoulders and dropped in the nearest chair dragging closer a few yellowed papers tied up in a stack.

Two hours later to the minute their hostess re-appeared, a pair of frameless glasses on her nose. If she thought anything about the pile of papers each of them had in his hands she didn’t let out. Her black eyes scanned them quickly up and down, evoking a sense of omnipotence of observation. She had quite unusual, beautiful eyes emphasising her Asian origin—Indian or Pakistani, if Sam had to guess. They averted to the table, but she didn’t check the contents of the box and Sam remembered noticing two small cameras in the corners of the ceiling—they’d probably been watched all along.

“All right,” Dean said as soon as the cab pulled away from the curb. “I need a break.” He loosened his tie immediately and ruffled his hair. Sam felt the need to shake his head as well. Before they left he’d combed his hair back carefully, pressing it down and tucking long strands behind his ears even more neatly than usual. He ran his fingers through it now, scraping his nails over his scalp a little and feeling a few pleasant twinges. He too undid his shirt’s collar button, gaze falling on John who was taking off his jacket.

Sherlock was the only one wearing his own clothes top to bottom and also the only one not wearing a tie. His suit was a far cry from John’s and the cheap-looking things Sam and Dean hired when they had to play the part of some official representatives back home. The cut of the lapels alone was extremely cool and sharp; to match it Sherlock wore a sparkling white shirt that seemed to gleam at certain angles. In a bizarre way his personality made him both the one who looked most natural in formal wear yet at the same time, especially back in that building, he had appeared almost disrespectful in his choice of attire. Sam, Dean and John had looked conservative, nice suits or not. There was something deliberately facetious in the way Sherlock had carried himself. He’d taken in everything on their way in and out, looking a bit like a bird of prey, his mouth curving in a private smirk once in a while. Sam had heard him murmur a comment to John about the anonymous lady: her new relationship working out well for her or something to that effect. The explanation that had followed had been for John’s ears only, but Sam had no doubt it was a logical one.

He was suddenly reminded of his very early days in London when Sherlock Holmes had revealed himself slowly under Sam’s research while managing to retain his mystery—a bit of an enigma to not just Sam’s foreign eye, but it seemed to everyone else’s, too.

They poured out of the cab on Oxford Street, Sherlock giving instructions to the cab driver then darting through a narrow gap between two buildings, easily missed if you didn’t know it was there. It took them to a small square hidden behind with bars and bistros offering a variety of food. They were long overdue something substantial and, at least in Sam’s case, the effects of his hangover had disappeared without a trace as soon as he’d gone into his ‘geek’ mode. They took a seat in one of the places and while waiting for the food Sam’s fingers twitched over his stack of papers on the table.
next to his cutlery. He couldn’t help himself and started scanning through the top few pages. There were some excerpts with theories on God’s scribe, Metatron, as well as photographs of ancient wall drawings of what a tablet with the Word of God might look like. Sam remembered that back in the ‘library’ he’d come across some legends about where those tablets were hidden on Earth and Dean had been particularly excited when he found something like a list, hand-written, with symbols in Enochian and a drawing that was the spitting image of the demon tablet. There’d been a list of numbers underneath as well as some words in Latin that looked like names of places. The odds were the angel tablet would look like the demon one, so with all the Enochian…

“Pass me that page with the Enochian and the numbers,” Sam asked, already reaching over to the pile of papers by Dean’s hand. He got a smack on his fingers for his troubles.

“No,” Dean told him, pulling the papers closer. “We’re doing that back in the house. Eat.”

There were indeed plates with food in front of all of them. Sam gave Dean his best whiny face without producing an actual whine, but Dean was busy raising an eyebrow at John’s steamed salmon and vegetables. “I’m afraid to ask,” he said, pointing at John’s plate. “Was it Sam who infected you with his new age eating—?” Sam saw Dean stop himself just before the word ‘crap’ flew out of his mouth and was grateful that while his brother had no qualms about insulting Sam’s eating habits, he was at least mindful of the kind of thing you shouldn’t say at a table full of eating people. “Or are you just…like him?” he finished, the ‘weird’ unspoken, too, but just as clear.

John gave Sam a quick look with a quicker smile. “I’m a doctor,” he replied. “I know a thing or two about healthy eating.”

“Healthy eating, shmelty eating,” was Dean’s input on the topic. He bit into his burger, turning the bite around in his mouth a few times, then giving out a downright groan of pleasure. He swallowed quickly and stuffed some chips into his mouth. His eyelids fluttered up and down with his blissed out expression and he gave Sam cheerful thumbs up pointing at his plate. Sam rolled his eyes, smiling despite himself and tucked into his risotto.

Sherlock was eating some panini that smelled delicious. There were two pieces with some salad on the side; Sherlock picked out and ate all the cherry tomatoes, then used his knife and fork for the panini. Dean was giving his plate glances that weren’t too subtle, especially after Sherlock cut the bread and the scent took over the table. Dean told him to stop being fussy and eat his goddamn sandwich with his hands like it was supposed to be eaten, then went on badgering him about stuff between his own bites so Sam suspected Sherlock gave him half a panini piece just to make him shut up. (He ate the other half, but only started on the second piece, prompting John to say they should get dessert. Sam, itching to be back so he could start on the papers, was forced to stay in the bistro for another twenty minutes—Dean’s response to the idea of desserts had been the kind that put an end to all hopes of leaving.)

They walked back to Baker Street—it was only a fifteen-minute walk and the weather was still fine. Sam felt something nostalgic tweet in his chest at the thought of having beautiful fall weather as his last memory of London. Whatever they found after today’s visit to the top secret library, whatever else Mycroft Holmes might have for them later, Sam knew that he was here on borrowed time. He’d had his day off. Sooner rather than later the end of his stay was coming: he and Dean either returning home in a few days with an angel tablet in their possession or returning empty-handed, their focus back on the demon tablet. After all, one of the surest ways of preventing Crowley to get his hands on it was to lock the Gates of Hell for good.

There was a third option of how things could go down, but it was always there. It’d become such an
intrinsic part of what the future might hold for Sam or Dean, or both, that they rarely stopped to
dwell on it, let alone talk about it. Sam was sure that in some very private moments they both thought
about the end of the road, the final stop. But wasn’t that what ordinary people did too? The only
difference was that for Sam, the idea barely had the chance to revert to something abstract again,
under the indestructible force of the human psyche which couldn’t have survived contemplating
death in any other way...then his life’s wheel spun again, stopping at yet another point where the
thought of dying was as real and concrete as an upcoming appointment to see a specialist.

It was ironic that the Reapers kind of were that. Death the Horseman was certainly a specialist, but
Sam very much doubted the screwed-up likes of Sam Winchester had an appointment with Death
himself when their time came.

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Sam hadn’t intended to look into Speedy’s until the moment they’d got to Baker Street’s front door.
The café had been closed when they went out earlier, but it was open now, two tables out, both
occupied.

He’d called Katie the previous day after first taking his phone in and out five times within the space
of the morning. Just before Sherlock texted Mycroft Sam had finally pressed the button taking his
call to Katie’s cell. He’d been surprised to hear another woman’s voice answer after the third ring. It
turned out it was Molly.

“I’m staying with Katie for a day or two,” Molly had said, voice managing to sound like small bells
on a sleigh even over the phone. “She didn’t want anyone from her family or friends around; well,
you know, it’s hard to explain...” Molly had given out an awkward chuckle, making Sam wonder
what kind of a girl looked and talked so...girly, yet became a mortician, mixed up with Sherlock
Holmes and fended for herself against demons.

“No, yeah, sure,” Sam replied. “That was very nice of you. Ah, can I talk to her?”

Molly had gone on to tell him that Katie was asleep, then assured him her recovery was going just
‘brilliant’ and they were both fine. Sam had been eager to end the conversation—he was never very
comfortable talking to strangers outside the job.

“Is, um...Is Sherlock okay?” Molly had asked quickly just when he’d been ready to hang up. “I
mean, are you all okay? We got a phone call from Greg but I just wanted to make sure everyone was
all right.”

Sam reassured her they were all fine.

He now found himself hesitating again, eyes on Speedy’s door.

“You go in,” he told John and Dean who’d lingered behind and were watching him. “I’ll be up in a
minute.”

John nodded and disappeared inside the house, but Dean gave him a long look. “You be careful,
Sammy,” he told him at last, before casting the street a wary glance up and down and coming close,
almost pressing into Sam. In a split second the knife was nestled in Sam’s suit jacket inside pocket
and Dean was shutting the front door.

When Sam walked in he saw Katie behind the counter with her back to him, cleaning the coffee
machine. Her dark hair was in a plait today, short hairs sticking out all around the globe of her head like the echo of a halo. Katie had got her hair from her African mother, she’d told him.

“Hey Katie,” Sam called as gentle as he could. She turned around with a start nonetheless; her eyes wide and far more intense than Sam had ever seen them.

“Sam, hi. Ah, hello.” Katie’s round, soft hands twisted in her apron and Sam felt strange comfort. Seeing the gesture and hearing the stammer—it was evidence that Katie was herself, that whatever demon had possessed her hadn’t broken her irreparably.

“You okay,” Sam asked stupidly, then hurried on. “Listen, can we talk? Just for a minute, someplace private?”

Her eyes had gone to the back door as soon as he’d started asking the question. They returned to him, more heavy lidded than Sam remembered them. He realized that Katie wasn’t wearing any make-up. Her skin looked flawless; he distantly wondered why women did wear make-up—it only distracted the eye from their natural beauty.

“I’ll go and check if John could cover for me,” she said.

“Okay.”

He watched her walk in the direction of the kitchen, for a moment wondering whether if he prayed to Cas he’d come, erase the horror of the last few days from Katie’s mind. It was a fleeting thought, tempting like oblivion, but discarded like the drug that could provide it—Sam didn’t know whether for him or Katie. He didn’t get to decide these things for people. What concerned them was theirs, good and bad. The belief felt novel yet quite fundamental, maybe re-instated, maybe re-born. He barely had the chance to explore its origin when Katie was coming back, face a tad more relaxed, John the cook behind her.

As soon as the door of the little staff room flapped closed behind them Sam was gazing down at her with all the earnestness he had.

“Katie, I’m so sorry,” he said, open hands shaking an invisible ball in front of him with the strength and sincerity of his statement. Katie must have misinterpreted the gesture as an invitation, because she grabbed hold of his hands.

“It’s okay, it’s fine,” she said in one breath. Sam’s fingers clenched around hers. “No, it’s not,” he told her. “This is my fault. I should have, I don’t know—”

She’d been trying to speak over him from his first word and now squeezed his hands almost painfully, her timid voice rising. “No, it’s not. It’s not your fault. That’s just…not true, okay?”

Sam took a breath to argue but she shook her head firmly, eyes blazing with the rare kind of steel that made everyone turn into an obedient listener.

“No, no, listen, okay? It’s not your fault. It’s as much your fault as it’s…the fault of the victim of a crime.” Sam stared at her, swept in her odd words and their conviction. Her throat worked harshly, the gulp tender nonetheless. “I had that thing in me,” she said, not letting go of his eyes or his hands. “I know how evil it is. Something so evil, it’s no one’s fault, okay? It’s out there and if it hadn’t happened to me, it would have happened to someone else.”
But it happened to you, Sam wanted to say. It happened to you and to Jess and to Mum, because of me. He kept gazing at Katie, unable to look away despite the great wave of exposure toppling him under.

She shook her head as if hearing his thoughts. “It’s not your fault that those…that demons exist. You can’t blame yourself. They just do, and it’s like…it’s like blaming yourself for the existence of evil. Listen,” she went on with renewed urgency, shaking his big hands in her small ones. “I was able to—Everything that demon knew I knew as well and it was horrible, just so, so horrible—”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“No, no, that’s not the point. I mean I know about you and your brother.” Katie paused. “You hunt these creatures, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Sam croaked weakly then cleared his throat. “Yeah.”

Katie gave him a small smile, unexpected and so welcome that Sam felt it like an oxygen mask after a long, deep dive. “That’s great. That’s just…I mean, all that evil and you go against it.” She suddenly made a brisk motion with her wrists as if telling him off with the gesture. “Don’t blame yourself, please? Molly told me you all finished off the guy who sent the demons to take John; he was her ex-boyfriend or something…” Little wrinkles marred the skin on Katie’s smooth forehead for a moment. “Never mind that,” she said, looking at him intently. “You’ve done nothing wrong, okay? Thank God you and your brother were here!”

Sam began nodding at her last words, trying to tell her that this was exactly it, only kind of reversed. That if he hadn’t been here, if he hadn’t struck up a friendship with her Moriarty’s demons would have found a different way to get to John, not using her. That maybe if he’d insisted John didn’t leave that day none of this would have happened. That she was right: he was a goddamn hunter. He was supposed to be one of the best and protect her and his friend. He should have seen Moriarty was a ghost. Hell, he should have hunted down his fucking demon ass first and then wasted his spirit long before Moriarty had had the chance to put all his figures on the board. Sherlock and his stupid games, but Sam couldn’t blame it on him. Sherlock had done the job in the end, with a little help from them, but Sam…Sam should have known better, he should have acted quicker; he should have done his goddamn job.

“Sam.” Katie called his name and he realized he was looking at her through a mist, his jaw tight and his lips pursed. He took a deep breath through his nose and extracted his hands from hers, straightening up and rolling his shoulders. He waited for a couple of seconds under her patient gaze, then when he was sure his lips would listen to him, he let them relax. “I’m glad you’re okay,” he told her. It was a simple truth and he stuck to it. He couldn’t explain the mess of guilt and fears he carried around, roping him good and strong in a way so complex, Sam had grown hopeless of ever escaping its prison. Letting people down, failing, being a danger to people by sheer proximity—simple truths but this was not the time, the place or the person to talk about them.

“I heard you and Molly did quite well yesterday,” he told Katie, attempting to change the subject with a smile. It didn’t reach his eyes but he could see Katie’s face light up a little at his effort.

“Oh, um…I don’t know, really. I mean it all happened very quickly. Sherlock had sent Molly some notes about what to do against demons and a friend of his, I think, sent us some charms to wear.” Katie’s fingers went to the silver string visible around some of her neck. Sam noticed her dark skin had sheen of perspiration. “I’ve been drinking holy water,” she went on. “Going to the bathroom all the time, every ten minutes, seriously. I mean it’s probably stupid, but I reckoned, well, the human
body is seventy percent water…”

“That’s not stupid at all,” Sam said. “That’s great, a great idea. Did it work?”

“Yeah, I think it did! I mean it wasn’t like all the steam and hissing when we actually chucked the water in their faces but, ah, they definitely let go of me when they touched me…” Katie was speaking a little distractedly, her gaze going to the door once or twice, probably without her realizing.

Sam nodded rapidly. “That’s genius, Katie. That’s—”

He couldn’t finish his sentence. Katie’s lips had pressed against his, her hands closing around his upper arms as if to hold him in place or use him as leverage to stand on her toes. For a couple of seconds Sam remained passive and shocked, starkly aware of everything. Then the awareness seemed to complete a full circle, connecting its starting and finishing point with a quiet click somewhere in him that switched off his mind. He closed his eyes, right hand cradling the back of Katie’s head, left hand clasping around her elbow. He pulled her flushed against his body and kissed her back.

When they parted, her face was flushed and her breasts undulated like sea waves under her t-shirt. Sam just shook his head at her in silent question, lips forming the start of a ‘What?’

The knuckle of Katie’s index finger brushed over her upper lip very lightly, taking away the trail of moisture. She didn’t seem to realize what she was doing, the whites of her eyes showing quite a lot.

“I—I’ve thought about…” She closed her mouth, swallowed thickly and took a breath. “I just wanted to do this,” she said quickly, then went on in a stream of words. “Because of the last couple of days and how crazy it’s been, and I just, I mean, everything’s just completely bonkers, but it’s still my life, you know, and I was thinking what if I die tomorrow—”

“Don’t,” Sam interrupted, jaw growing spastic again. He stepped forward lowering his head, eyes boring into hers. “Don’t say that.”

“No, no.” She looked almost frightened. “That came out wrong. I didn’t mean—”

Sam shook his head. “No, look. I’m sorry. I just…” His eyes had unfocused to somewhere behind her, to that invisible black hole where people just vanished and never came back to Sam’s life; one exception, one single, most important exception, but while Dean was the most important one, he wasn’t everyone.

He met Katie’s eyes. “How about we go out, get a coffee tomorrow?” he heard himself ask. His lips turned into the kind of smile he was surprised they still remembered the seductive curves of. “We should go out properly, you know. In the spirit of you never know what tomorrow might bring.”

He was already cringing inwardly about his lame lines, but Katie blinked quickly at him what was undoubtedly some secret love Morse code for eyelashes. “Really?” she asked, eyes roaming the bottom half of his face. She gave him a sudden, radiant grin, like a bolt of lightning splitting the world into two parallel ones and showing Sam Katie both here and in the other one, where she was totally splashing some demon bitch with holy water. He should definitely ask her to tell him more about how she and Molly kicked ass.

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s a date.”
Sam was the last one to go to bed and he only did it when one of the surest signs he was done for the night kept occurring: reading the same thing over and over again without even realizing the repetitiveness of the action the first three times.

There was a lot that they’d gone through and a lot that they’d found useful, only not about the angel tablet. Most of the materials they’d copied had been a shot in the dark—they’d just operated under the motto: ‘The most tenuous link—off to copy machine’. It turned out that most of what they had was about the demon tablet and Metatron. Sam had taken notes, he’d underlined and he’d joined bits together. Dean had worked hard, too, and so had John but Sherlock had been really indispensable. He’d gone through the pages at amazing speed, scanning through them with a frighteningly robotic gaze and sending them in three directions: one straight to Sam, one to Dean for a more expert check-up and the third direction was to the biggest pile of what was basically junk. Okay, for some academician some of it might have been the Holy Grail, but for people in need of coordinates and some rock solid data on the angel tablet it meant nothing.

John had helped Sam read through what Dean and Sherlock handed to him. He hadn’t complained once during the eight hours; his voice, toned down into further softness by his consideration for the focus of other two, had been Sam’s most welcome companion on and off all night. John had asked a lot of questions, some of them ridiculous, some of them very sharp and Sam had taken the time to answer all of them, check out everything John showed him. It hadn’t been a burden but a reward, just like having John’s help and close company.

The next day began much like the previous had ended, thanks to a new package from Mycroft. Technically it was a very big box overflowing with books, photos and printed pages as well as various items some of which Sam recognized as stuff you needed for different rituals. (He was pretty sure the small bones next to the pouch with earth in it were those of a black cat, which meant the earth was graveyard dirt. Whether Mycroft had just sent them whatever he could lay his hands on that had relevance to their ‘business’ was unclear. Sam was relieved he hadn’t included pictures of him and Dean with the bones and the dirt; such a blatant hint that they’d need to summon a Crossroads demon and make a deal would have been very worrying.) At the sight of all the books Dean’s bottom lip came as close to wobbly as Sam had seen it since Dean had arrived. He turned a pair of huge, upset eyes at Sam who just picked up the two biggest books in silence and settled at the dining table.

“We’ll help,” John said, coming to stand next to Sam and peering into the box. “Won’t we, Sherlock?”

“Of course,” Sherlock said, voice rich and calm. He’d been looking at something under a microscope in the kitchen and wandered in when the box arrived. John told Sam in a murmur that Sherlock had been working on a theft case in parallel with their research.

Hours rolled by with a few bizarre scenes to break their monotony. One was Castiel showing up out of the blue, the sound of his appearance—like a gust of wind sneaking through a closing door—incredibly loud thanks to his timing. They had all been utterly quiet for a few minutes so Cas was greeted by four startled pairs of eyes. He looked extremely disoriented, a flicker of fear on his face. Dean got up immediately and after a few generic answers from Cas along the lines that both he and Kevin were okay, Dean took him downstairs to the basement flat, his gaze indicating to Sam that he thought it’d be better if he spoke to Castiel alone. Sam was happy to let him try that. For one thing, he was worried about Cas and for another, they didn’t need any loose cannons if they were to go into
battle soon.

Dean came back up in fifteen minutes, alone, sitting down heavily next to Sam, eyes on his hands that hooked together on the table. “He can’t tell me where he’s been,” Dean said. John was listening while Sherlock kept reading. “He’s talked to Kevin and spent some time there, that’s for sure,” Dean went on, “but the rest is like a giant fucking blank page.”

“Did he tell you he couldn’t remember where he’s been?” Sam asked, rubbing at his eyes. “Let’s call Kevin, see what he’s got to say.”

“No, leave it.” Dean’s gaze shot up to Sam’s face, before returning to its previous point. He seemed to be considering something, shoulders slumped. “We’ll only freak Kevin out and that kid’s like a hysterical storm waiting to happen.” It was Dean’s turn to rub his eyes then he got up, grabbing his jacket. “I’m going out. I need to do something other than sit around buried in papers.” He stared at the far wall, his gaze both absent and tense, then he made a jerky motion with his head. “Man, I miss my car.”

The second surreal moment occurred in the early afternoon, but at least it also provided comic relief. Sam and John had gone out for half an hour, their turn to clear their heads. When they opened the front door at their return, they could hear loud music from upstairs—a rock piece that Sam was sure could be traced back to his brother. The music was blearing at the landing outside the flat. They’d stood at the open door for close to half a minute, unnoticed, faces transforming from slightly gaping (in John’s case) to entertained. In the living room Dean was singing on top of his voice, drumming in the air frantically or playing the air guitar, hips shifting left and right while he pulled all kinds of faces he’d have probably thought made him look cool if he wasn’t the unselfconscious dude he always was when doing that.

Sherlock was using his leather armchair as a bed, body stretched out into one long, lean line, heels propped on the floor, upper back on the chair backrest. His fingers were entwined on his stomach. Sam noticed him cast Dean a glance once or twice, but altogether he seemed to occupy another reality.

There wasn’t a hint of awkwardness in Dean when he discovered he had new audience. “Dude!” he exclaimed to Sam, turning down the volume with a small remote. “Sherlock’s got this high tech audio system and it is awesome.” Dean beamed at Sam, who scoffed a little. “He downloaded a couple of tunes,” Dean continued, unfazed, shoulders dancing with his excitement. “And he put them on a memory stick then plugged it in directly. Did you hear the sound? Huh? Huh?” Dean looked as proud as if he had personally invented the MP3 format.

“If you’d let me have my iPod in the Impala…” Sam began, but was cut off mid-sentence.

“That was a douchey thing to do to a classic car and you know it!”

It was close to five o’clock when Sam heard steps coming up the stairs. He was really engulfed in trying to work out the links between the Enochian words, the Latin ones that sounded like places and the numbers. Any system or variation of coordinates gave them nothing. Even Sherlock had given up after two hours. He’d stuck the sheet on the mirror together with some papers with scribbles of his own, then he’d looked at them for ages, occasionally muttering to himself. At last his hands had flown to his hair to frisk his curls and he’d made a frustrated sound close to that of a pissed lion, before stalking off out of the room. The sound of his bedroom door shutting with a bang had echoed in the flat a moment later.
Sam was the last to lift his head to their visitor finding with some surprise that it was Greg Lestrade. Next to Sam Dean seemed to have taken in Lestrade’s grave, battered face. “Jeez,” Dean said. “Who died?”

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John watched Sam slide down the wall until he was slumped on the floor, face heart-wrenching and disconsolate. Tears brimmed in his eyes but his gaze didn’t move away from where it had stopped as soon as they’d all walked into Speedy’s.

Katie’s eyes were closed; her body laid out in a natural pose, like a girl whose reverie had quietly flown over to a deep sleep. The bright red spot on her chest was like a mockery of a red rose. John felt his own eyes prickle.

“This was left on her,” Greg spoke, passing a folded piece of paper to Sam. His hand remained outstretched in the empty air, unmet. The tears were suspended lakes in Sam’s eyes, the almost imperceptible, agonizing tremble over his face not enough to make them roll down.

Dean was standing next to Sam looking down at him, his own face grief-stricken; tormented in its helplessness. He lifted his eyes to Lestrade and walked around Katie’s body carefully, then reached for the piece of paper without a word. Lestrade handed it to him. Dean went over the text quickly, nostrils flaring, a shadow of fury settling over the one of anguish, doubling the darkness on his face. Dean’s hand dropped by his thigh and he made a couple of random steps looking at his brother, before suddenly erupting in a volcano of motion. Glass, porcelain and metal were swept away from the tables by his destructive hands, shattering all around him; then, just as abruptly as the room had exploded it turned silent again, the only sound the hum of the traffic outside: perpetual and careless.

John didn’t know whether Sam had even moved at the noise. Dean crouched down next to him, the paper crumpled in his hand. John looked up to Sherlock who was standing very still, arm brushing John’s shoulder. He now averted his gaze from Dean to meet John’s questioning eyes.

“Coordinates of the angel tablet location,” he said levelly. John wanted to pull him into a hug for his quiet tone.

Sam turned his face up to Dean, the look between them making John understand once and for all why the gentle word ‘compassion’ had the fierce one ‘passion’ as its root.

“It’s Crowley,” Dean ground out. “He says no more games or more people will die. He’s given us coordinates, says he’s waiting for us there.”
John closed the door behind Sam and Dean and turned around to face the room. His gaze went to the window straight ahead and rested there, unseeing, before moving left and meeting Sherlock’s. John felt that he should say or do something, but nothing came to mind. It was only seven o’clock. He had never thought that having an entire evening off with his still wondrously returned from the dead best friend, doing as they pleased, would hold so little appeal. It had nothing to do with Sherlock or the unoccupied time at John’s disposal. Context was everything sometimes and in this case, it was frustrating and even depressing to have a quiet night in.

Not when Katie’s body had been driven away to the morgue a mere hour or so ago. Not when John had had to watch Sam regain his composure and his speech, but not the bright flame which had grown steadier and bigger in the last few weeks, despite the perils they’d been through. Not when they’d all spent the last hour together, discussing the rendezvous Crowley had set up for Sam—it turned out Dean’s use of the personal pronoun ‘we’ had been quite inaccurate—and trying to keep a steady, thick thread of conversation not just to help them face what was coming, but hide behind their backs what had been.

Sam had met John’s eyes perhaps a couple of times, each time serving a purpose and lasting not a fraction longer than the bare minimum.

Twice John had asked him whether he was okay, fully acknowledging it was an absurd question. Twice Sam had responded in a way that wasn’t perfunctory, but was nonetheless the equivalent of looking through a thickly fogged mirror. The first time was downstairs, as they were about to come up. Sam had given him a long look, as if waiting for John to be his prompter and offer the answer for him, then had just shaken his head without a verbal response. The second time was when Sherlock and Dean had both bowed their heads over the laptop, reading up on the place they were going to on the next day. (Dean had said they needed to prepare and no one had argued.) John caught Sam on the way back from the bathroom.

“I’ll be all right,” Sam had replied, gaze fractured yet single-minded trained ahead of him. “Thanks,” he’d added, the word sounding like a sluggish, disoriented afterthought.

It was almost a relief when a minute ago Sam had looked at his hands in his lap and said, “We should go downstairs, better get some rest.” Something oppressing had started sliding under John’s skin, affecting him, no matter how grounded and level-headed he’d tried to stay; for himself but mostly for Sam. It didn’t look like Sam had needed it. John doubted he needed anything more right now than to crawl back to whatever place his spirit of a stray dog usually did after yet another blow; curl in there, breathing shallow and fast and heartbreaking; have his brother prowl around, helpless and madly protective.

John was very glad Dean was here. Once again he tried to wrap his head around these two men and the kind of lives they led. It was one thing to hear stories about it but another to have pieces of reality make these stories leave the realms of the abstract and come alive with understanding. So far it had happened more…outside of John somehow. Demons and ghosts; oddly enough even being possessed. But this, here: Katie’s death, Crowley waiting to tear Sam’s heart out—it was personal. Moreover, John felt the full weight of the realization that this was the fabric of Sam and Dean’s life. Katie, Crowley—probably a regular occurrence for the brothers.
All the things Sam had told him and John had thought he’d really heard, thought he’d got; every shared detail, Sam’s whole background about which John had constantly felt some sort of factual undernourishment… John had been knocking on the wrong door all along. He hadn’t needed to know more or have more details. He hadn’t integrated the real meaning of what Sam had told him. The demons and the ghosts and the rituals turned out to be some sort of fodder: there’d existed a rational comprehension of their connection to Sam’s person, but nothing really substantial, no real understanding. This was Sam’s life. This was what had shaped Sam into who he was from the moment he’d been a tiny infant, six months old, for God’s sake. There was monstrosity beyond the monsters; it had no name, no face, no archetype. It made John want to lash out at the universe at large.

This was Dean’s life as well. They were downstairs now, clinging to each other without maybe even being in the same room, because this was what they knew to do. This was what they knew, full stop.

Earlier, John had felt the way he did in a dream on the cusp on turning into a nightmare. A part of him panicking to wake up—a part of him feeling the relief at the prospect of freedom from that oppressive atmosphere. Not talking about Katie, but having her metaphorical ghost there all the time, in an unsettling way much like Sam had been too… It had gotten to John.

But then Sam walked past him without even a look, just a ‘Goodnight’ on his exhale, his shoulders hunched despite his lifted chin and John knew straight away that his relief was short-lived, born out of a sense of powerlessness and disconnection, because now he was feeling worse.

He shuffled at his spot, taking a deep breath and walking over to the other end of the room. He stood behind his armchair, hands propped on the top of the backrest. Sherlock’s gaze had followed his progression all along and now met his again.

“I don’t know what to do with myself,” John confessed.

“There isn’t much you can do.”


Sherlock took him in, not showing any signs of being stung. “Treat the situation not as a doctor, but as a soldier.”

“Treat the—These are my friends, Sherlock! I can’t just…” John could feel his pulse in his temples. His voice was still ringing in his own ears, the sound helping him interpret correctly his behaviour as taking his frustration out on another person.

Well, Sherlock used to do that to him all the time. If John was lucky—he didn’t even wish to contemplate the convoluted paths through which his psyche associated that with fortune—he was going to serve as the Wailing Wall for Sherlock’s demanding personality for years to come. On John’s part his was a drop in the bucket.

He walked in the kitchen, throwing over his shoulder, “Do you want a cuppa?”

“Please.”

In a few seconds Sherlock joined him, leaning on his hip against the edge of the kitchen counter and
watching him make tea. He waited for the kettle to switch off before speaking again. “I can see that
the experience I put you through with my ‘death’ hasn’t affected your inability to distance yourself
emotionally.”

John didn’t lift his head. “You think that maybe you should be glad about that?” he said amidst the
clanking sounds of the tea spoon inside the china.

When there was no reply he cast Sherlock a quick sideways glance and found him observing, close
and interested. John shook his head to himself, slipping into the feeling of being under Sherlock’s
scrutiny as if it was a warm bath.

He handed Sherlock his cup and opened the cupboard to take the almost empty pack of biscuits out.
“Come on,” he said. “It’s not winter yet, but we can still light the fireplace and you can tell me what
great mysteries you solved while you were gone.”

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When John came downstairs in the early hours of the following morning, it was because he thought
he’d heard Mycroft’s voice. He was right—Mycroft was standing by the table, appearance as
immaculate as ever, his coat on. Next to him on the table there was a pile of papers comprising of a
lot of thin, separate folders—they had to be files.

Sherlock was also fully dressed in one of his suits, fingers flying over the keys on his phone. The
British Isles tea set was on the coffee table, one steaming cup in front of Sherlock. Either he hadn’t
offered his brother a cup or Mycroft’s visit was a flying one and he’d declined the beverage.
(Sherlock hadn’t lost his sharp tongue where Mycroft was concerned, but from the little that John had
seen of them together lately—ironically, quite more than he normally would over such a period of
time—he could put his money more safely on a cup being offered.)

The tea set was telling. All they’d used since Sherlock’s return was teabags; in fact, up until Mrs
Hudson brought them a pack of Tetley’s with her ‘first aid’ food shopping they hadn’t had any tea
left in the house. (The cuppa Sherlock had made for John post-Moriarty possession turned out to be
concocted from an old teabag used earlier and left in a plate on the counter. Sherlock had ‘recycled’
it like John’s auntie used to do. No wonder the drink had been so weak. When John made the
discovery his mind had boggled almost as much as it had at the experience of having an evil spirit
take over his body.) Sherlock never used the teapot for teabags, so there was loose leaf tea in it. It
could only mean one thing: Mycroft hadn’t come in empty-handed, folders notwithstanding.

John exchanged greetings with him and was just stretching his hand to take from Sherlock the
proffered freshly poured, deliciously aromatic beverage when there was the sound of steps up the
stairs and a moment later Sam and Dean walked in. The way they’d put themselves together
presented an interesting albeit unflattering counterpoint to the Holmes brothers. One look at Sam and
Dean’s general air of sleeplessness and buried torment and John felt the lightening of his heart after
an evening spent with Sherlock diminish on the spot.

“Morning,” he said to both of them, then looked at Sam. “Shall I put the coffee maker on?”

“Yeah,” Dean replied immediately, his voice sounding flat despite its rough edges. He rubbed at his
eyes and then at the top of his head. John retreated to the kitchen so he only heard Dean’s next

“Take a look yourself.” Mycroft’s much less masculine voice, the posh twang in it standing out from
a mile. For a moment there was silence. John returned to the room to find Dean examining a file with a deep frown, Sam reading over his shoulder.

“This is Malvern Mansion, where we’ll be going,” Dean said, eyes still on the pages. “All these are what? Cases from there?”

“Who were the vics?” Sam spoke for the first time since what seemed eons ago, making John’s stomach clench at the sound. He’d never, ever realized just how different the two brothers’ voices were. Dean’s words from the bar suddenly acquired a much more profound meaning, just like the Winchesters way of life had for John the night before.

Mycroft had opened his mouth to respond to Dean, but now addressed Sam. “You won’t like this, Mr Winchester. The victims were like you and your brother. One of the reasons you didn’t find any of this in the press or online; whatever had leaked out—”

“Hold on a minute,” Dean interrupted. He pointed at the pile that suddenly seemed to have grown by ten inches in John’s eyes. “Are you telling me these are all…What, they were all hunters?” Dean sounded a lot more incredulous than anything else.

”Mostly,” Mycroft said.

Sam might have still had his grey, shut down expression, but there was an edge of intelligence in his gaze, still locked on Mycroft.

“How many?” he asked.

“Twenty-four in the last year, altogether.”

Sam’s eyes moved to the files than back to Mycroft. “And before that?”

Mycroft’s pause couldn’t have been accidental. “None.”

“Obviously the work of Moriarty and Crowley,” Sherlock spoke, leaving his empty cup on the table and getting up. “Moriarty would have needed some time to find his bearings first; establish himself and get in touch with Crowley.”

Sam was listening to him, but Dean had moved to the table, picking up a few files and reading through them quickly.

“Sammy, this is some seriously fucked up business,” he said. “I already have here what looks like a Rakshasa, a vamp and a ghoul. All within the space of four weeks. What is this, some freaky Friday Monsterfest?” Dean was looking up at Sam, his eyes betraying that the intensity of his gaze was as much about the topic as it was about drawing Sam out, engaging him.

John left to the kitchen again to pour Sam his cup of strong black coffee, adding sugar at his own discretion—Sam drank his coffee without any sweetener more often than not, but John felt his friend could do with some sugar in his bloodstream right now. There was no talk coming from the living room. John took the cup to Sam who was examining a file, two more ready for the same under the open one. Sherlock was flipping through two files side by side on the table and Dean was still going through one of those he’d picked up.

John held the cup close to Sam, but when there was no sign Sam had noticed him, he thrust it in his
line of vision. Sam’s startled gaze met John’s, for a nice, all too brief an instant. He was still
distracted and therefore oblivious about any context; open. It transformed into something close to
lifeless very quickly, making John want to have his cup of tea in his hand, gulping it down until it
burned his throat.

“Thanks,” said Sam at least.

“You’re welcome.” John kept looking up to him, calm but insisting. “What did you find?”

“Um, looks like it is a Monsterfest.” Sam’s eyes were back on the pages. “I’ve never seen anything
like it.”

“Yeah, man,” Dean said, opening a new file and giving it a fleeting glance. He turned to John. “It’s
like someone kept a secret Monster zoo there and one day released them all from their cages.” John
watched him for a second, still occupied by his discomfit about Sam. Then Dean’s words sank in and
horror began to bloom in John’s chest. Dean didn’t add anything further, however; his gaze fell on
the cup in Sam’s hand and his expression turned a touch prissy, sitting strange on his handsome,
hooded features. “Coffee left?” he asked, then didn’t wait for John’s reply. “Good,” he said with a
fake flash of a smile, marching in the direction of the kitchen.

“I should have something else for you in an hour or two,” Mycroft spoke. “I hope.”

That snapped Sam’s attention out of the pages. “What is it?”

Sherlock straightened up too, sharply turning to his brother. “Did you manage to track something
down?”

Dean showed up from the kitchen, having barely gone into it. “Track down what?” He pointed at
Sherlock, the look in his eyes really serious below their pissed off glare. “If you’ve kept another one
of your goddamn secrets, I swear to God, Sherlock—”

They couldn’t find out what Dean had in store for Sherlock. “It’s not a secret,” Sherlock cut in. He
was looking at Dean, but his sentence ended with his gaze on John. “There are no more secrets.” He
turned his back to the room, picking up the file on top of the pile. John had a suspicion it was only so
his hands wouldn’t be empty.

John suddenly felt the emptiness of his own hands even more keenly—perhaps standing next to a big
man whose chest had a hollow echo every time John called out to him had something to do with it.
He left Sam’s side and walked back to the coffee table, sat in his chair and took a big, fortifying gulp
from his tea. It had cooled quite rapidly; the mornings were getting chillier and chillier, and so were
the nights. The black soot in the fireplace was a reminder that its warmth was quite welcome some
ten hours earlier.

Meanwhile Mycroft began speaking again. “I’ve been trying to locate something that belonged to the
late James Moriarty. Or rather, to his…spirit, I should say.” The put off wrinkle on his nose
combined with his very melodic, polite tone reminded John of a spoonful of sugar that was just that
little bit too heaped. “If you recall, his apartment had been emptied out entirely. It was enough of a
cue that it had contained something of importance.”

Sherlock was facing the room again, Sam on his left, Mycroft on his right. John turned a little to
check and sure enough, Dean was still by the kitchen entrance, coffee forgotten.
“It wasn’t difficult to conclude that this thing of importance was connected either to his own secret ghostly existence or to his affairs with Crowley,” Sherlock said. “But he hadn’t taken care to remove any evidence from Moran’s flat across the street.”

The words sprang out of John’s mouth. “It’s as if on some level he wanted you to figure it out.”


“He gave you clues before, remember? He always gave you clues.”

“Yeah, okay,” Dean said impatiently. “He wanted to have Sherlock catch him, he had a…I don’t know, subconscious death wish. Can we go back to the bit that involves the King of Hell who wants to get his hands on my brother’s heart? Literally.”

Sherlock continued speaking as smoothly as if his and John’s interlude hadn’t taken place. “I found it very hard to believe that Moriarty would show Crowley such consideration. Or anyone else for that matter. He was not a team player. When I observed the two of them together the other night I was more convinced than ever that he’d removed all clues from his home not in order to protect Crowley…” Sherlock stopped, his dramatic timing as impeccable as ever. “But in order to prevent me from seeing something. I’d eliminated the ghost link as a weak one. His criminal network was practically unravelled and he wouldn’t have cared too much about that anyway. The only reason that remained had to be connected to whatever he had plotted with Crowley, but it was something of his. Something of Moriarty’s.”

Sherlock stood in silence, tugging at his shirt cuffs delicately.

“And?” Dean urged him.

Sherlock gave him a bewildered look as if Dean was a student who had come in mid-semester asking questions about the subject of the course. “That’s all. For now. I prefer not to theorize until I have more data.” He turned to Mycroft. “We don’t have long.”

“My advice is to wait,” Mycroft said. “It’s not a trifling advantage you’ll have, Sherlock. Don’t forget who you’ll be up against, even if he won’t be there.”

John felt a small glow of pride at having had a conversation with Sherlock the night before about their involvement in the upcoming quest. (A part of John insisted to call a spade a spade and found ‘a suicidal mission’ the more accurate term, but John was an adventurous soul.) The topic of the real enemy had been touched upon, but before that they’d come to an understanding. It meant that a moment ago John hadn’t been surprised to hear Sherlock use ‘we’ as well.

“You know I’m going with them, right?” John had asked last night after a prolonged, comfortable silence during which he’d stretched his feet closer to the fire.

“Obviously,” had been Sherlock’s reply. “Just like your inability to keep yourself emotionally detached, your sense of loyalty hasn’t changed, either. Then there’s your appetite for danger…”

John had found himself seamlessly recovering his fine tuning where it came to knowing how long to keep quiet and wait Sherlock out; a moment later, Sherlock had added, “I’ll be joining you. I’m in debt to your new friends and I hate owing anyone anything. Besides, they won’t have much of a chance without me.”
“They’ve somehow managed to survive without you so far.”

Only one of the small lamps had been left on, the rest of the light in the room provided by the fire. Sherlock’s irises were close to translucent at the angle, glinting at John not in vanity, but in sober belief. “I’m not questioning their ability to survive. Just their intelligence.”

John had opened his mouth to genuinely protest, at the very least in Sam’s defence, but Sherlock had gone on, voice rising to drown John’s pre-emptively. “I don’t think I need to convince you about the brilliant mind of James Moriarty. Combined with the undoubtedly cunning one of his last business partner—Hell or not, you don’t climb up so high without having some brain, John—Sam and Dean will meet a whole new monster.” Sherlock had paused, squinting at the fire. “A hybrid that will easily cost them both their lives.”

John was pulled back to the present by Sam’s voice, quiet and grave in its assuredness. “We’ll wait.” His eyes went to Dean, then back to Mycroft. “Find us anything you can, but if we’ve got nothing by midday, we’re leaving. This isn’t only about me anymore.” He straightened up, much to John’s surprise who realized he’d expected him to hunch until he bowed over with his next sentence. “Other people are in danger. So your brother’s right—we don’t have much time.”

Mycroft looked at Sam dispassionately, but his nod was firm.

Sam nodded back. “And, um…thanks,” he said.

Mycroft’s foot was already over their threshold when Dean spoke. “Hold on.” He took a step towards the door. “Look, I know you want to zip it, but I got to ask.”

Mycroft turned around slowly, facing Dean who accepted that as his cue to continue. “Back in the lab, when you told Crowley about the angel tablet—you knew Cas would show up. How?” Dean went on hastily. “I don’t want to know about any of your ‘confidential sources’, okay? Hell, I don’t even want any details. I’m asking, because I need to know who’s going to be out there with me and my brother. A friend or someone who might do a Houdini act on us just when we need him most.”

Mycroft looked at Dean with an inscrutable expression, his eyes very much like small glass marbles. John noticed Dean’s profile cloud a little, but he reined in his natural response.

“It can get really hairy out there,” he told Mycroft, half-persuasive, half-warning. “I’d much rather watch my brother’s back—and yours for that matter, because no offence—” Dean turned to Sherlock, “you fight well, you’re quick, you throw one hell of a punch, but it ain’t going to cut it when there are three monsters coming at you from all sides and it looks like that’s how it’s going to be.”

“Can we count on Cas?” Sam asked plainly, stepping to stand a little behind Dean’s back, the two of them presenting the united Winchester front to Mycroft.

He took his time looking from one to the other, still not giving anything away. It occurred to John that poker had lost a great player in Mycroft. Then again, as John had discovered very recently he’d missed something glaringly obvious about Mycroft’s recreational time, so who knew what he got up to. For all John knew he played strip poker. He would have had a drastic advantage anyway, just by wearing around fifty items of clothing, but maybe some games Mycroft played to lose.

Mycroft’s current acquiescence sat strikingly on his face after its prolonged blank expression.
“I can’t advise you on how to proceed with your…friend,” he told Dean, words coming out of him pretty much the way John imagined they would if these were some secret, super important diplomatic talks. “I can tell you this, however: for as long as you are useful to Castiel, you can rely on him completely.” A moment after the end of his sentence Mycroft abruptly pivoted on his heels and started walking down the first flight of stairs.

Dean rushed out to the landing. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?” he called.

“Make of it what you will, Mr Winchester,” floated up Mycroft’s reply.

Dean turned just as abruptly, face puzzled and annoyed. His gaze remained unfocused for a few moments, then he trained it on Sherlock. “Do you know what he means?”

“Hmm.” The sound was musing, leaning towards the affirmative but Sherlock didn’t elaborate. Dean watched him, mouth opening with his breath. His lower lip pulled down, revealing a straight line of perfect teeth. Evidently even waiting didn’t allow Dean’s features any placidity. “Well?” he shot at Sherlock.

“Well what?” Sherlock shot back. “Obviously I need to know more.” He walked towards the other end of the room and positioned himself in his armchair, crossing his legs. “Tell me everything,” he addressed all three of them, a little like monarch addressing his subjects. His next words were directed at Dean. “Don’t leave out any details, but don’t give yourself over to your typical flights of fancy.”

“What do you need to know?” Dean informed Sherlock, while John and Sam were sitting down.

“Please. You’re incapable of even speaking plainly.”

“Don’t hate on my sparkling personality, dude, it’s really unattractive.” Dean sprawled a little, evidently having taken Sherlock’s words as compliments. “We can’t all be robots like you.”

John smiled and tried to catch Sam’s eye, once again in vain. Sam rubbed his palms over his legs. “What do you need to know?” he asked Sherlock.

“I told you. Everything.”

It took nearly half an hour for the three of them to present Sherlock with what John proudly thought was a pretty comprehensive picture of Castiel as of late. Sherlock didn’t interrupt to ask more than a few questions, spending most of the time with his steepled fingers resting against his lips. His verdict at the end didn’t surprise John with how beautifully it fitted as an explanation.

“It’s obvious he is being controlled by another agency,” Sherlock said. “I’m surprised you missed that, given that he even provided you with the name of the person in charge of it.”

Sam’s features seemed to iron out, his expression illuminated. He looked at his brother. “Naomi. She must be some top rank. Like an Archangel, maybe?” Dean just shook his head at him—not a negation, but a communication of disheartened concurrence—then looked at Sherlock again, chin moving to indicate he was listening.
“Mind control,” Sherlock went on, “that Castiel seems to be trying to overcome. He was successful once—”

“When he helped me,” Sam spoke again. Sherlock nodded, eyes turning to John. “You said Castiel had seemed disoriented.”

“Yes.” John remembered well his own desperation. Sam had been on the brink of death. “Like I said, he showed up out of the blue and kept saying he couldn’t kill Sam.”

“No,” Sherlock dragged. “You said that he’d kept saying he couldn’t let Sam die.”

“But he did save his life,” Dean pointed.

“Well, clearly he wasn’t supposed to,” Sherlock told him. “You are all there. Sam is bleeding, seconds away from death. Someone else is also seconds away: Crowley. Naomi, whoever she is, is giving your angel direct orders at that very moment and they are to let Sam die. We can easily deduce that the prospect of your brother falling into Crowley’s hands is likely to turn Castiel into a killing machine.”

“No,” Dean shook his head. “No, Cas won’t do that. He helped Sam.”

“Sam was shot, the wound rapidly turning to terminal. John had prayed to Castiel and he didn’t appear.”

“What are you saying?” Dean asked, tone challenging.

Sherlock’s gaze flipped from cool to suddenly curious. “Are you really not aware of the implications or you’re just being obtuse and don’t want to see them?”

Sam spoke before Dean had the chance to retort. “Cas showed up when Dean prayed to him. It was because it was Dean. He…he wouldn’t have come otherwise.”

John stared at Sherlock, mentally pleading him to choose his words and tone with some sensitivity.

“Of course!” Sherlock exclaimed and John sighed inwardly. “Your brother whistles and Castiel arrives,” Sherlock went on with his typical excitement of a child who was showing how well his pieces of domino fitted together.

“Okay, Sherlock,” John hurried to say. Sherlock shifted his gaze to him then closed his mouth, face turning puzzled and just a little wary. John spoke again. “Forget about who came because of who…”

“Whom.”

“Sherlock!” John’s palm burned from its sudden collision with the table top.

A few seconds of ringing silence followed his outburst, Dean’s and Sherlock’s eyes on him. So were Sam’s at long last, but this time John could do without their attention.

He took a breath. “Tell us about Naomi,” he asked Sherlock. “Do you know what she wants?”

“No, I don’t.” The sincerity in Sherlock’s voice equated to personal involvement in John’s ears and
made the rings around his head loosen a little. Sherlock spoke to Dean and Sam next, looking equally between both. “You still don’t know how Castiel escaped Purgatory. I have very little knowledge about that place, but I gather it’s extremely hard to leave. It’s not a difficult leap to conclude Naomi must have had something to do with Castiel’s escape from there.”

No one said anything for a few moments, then Dean sighed heavily, head dropping between his shoulders, elbows propped on his thighs. “All right. Naomi’s the bitch who’s got Cas’s number.” He didn’t change his position, just turned his head to the right to look at Sherlock. “Her puppet broke free, though. Say whatever you want, Cas saved Sam. Twice. The first time when that demon burned his ink—”

“It was their mental bond that brought Castiel to your brother’s aid,” Sherlock said, irked. “I’m no expert, but it seems logical that this kind of powerful bond would override whatever conditioning had taken place, hmm?”

“Exactly,” John said. “Then Castiel stood up against her orders again, even without the bond. He saved us all back then, Sherlock. He definitely saved Sam’s life.”

“Then disappeared, re-appearing recently again, even more disoriented. Obviously he’s being constantly reconditioned. Angel or not, his brain’s all scrambled up.”

John knew a thing or two about brainwashing and conditioning; thankfully, his was limited and theoretical knowledge, but it was still more than the others had.

“Can’t we tell Cas?” he asked. “Talk to him, explain. Maybe even ask him how to get to Naomi. I mean, if he knows, it might give him a chance to, I don’t know…fight it better.”

Sherlock’s tone was patient. “You’re thinking about human warfare. This is a whole new species, John. What if he doesn’t have to be physically present for the conditioning to take place? Don’t forget he was having that conversation with Naomi right there in the warehouse, while he was with you.”

“He did keep saying, ‘No, Naomi,’” Dean spoke. He was still hunched over his own legs. Again not changing his position, this time he turned his head to the left, looking at Sam. “I told you, Sammy. Cas looked all…” Dean’s lips closed, trembling in search of the word and giving him an air of vulnerability.

“Deranged?” John offered. Dean’s quick glance wasn’t full of sunbeams, but he nodded his agreement.

“Well, then.” Sherlock shrugged. “How will telling him about it help in any way? You’ll only risk him doing something really dangerous. Accept that at any given moment Naomi is right…there.” Sherlock touched both of Dean’s temples with his last sentence, making Dean cross his eyes at the approach of Sherlock’s hands. “Assume she’s in his head all the time,” Sherlock said, retreating, “listening and issuing commands.”

Once again Sam’s voice gave John a pause; it was as if its prolonged disuse made its softness more palpable each time. “If that’s true,” Sam said, “we need to find a way to break Cas out. Um, metaphorically speaking.”

Dean straightened up, frowning. “That would mean playing Doctor with his brain, Sam,” he said. “Do you know how to do that? Or know any angel hospital we can go visit?” Sam looked prepared
to argue, but Dean turned his back on him, talking to Sherlock. “You wouldn’t have any more clever
cards up your sleeve, would you? Do you know how we can…I don’t know. Snap him out of it?”

Sherlock waved a hand, the gesture extra sophisticated with the disturbing topic as its background.
“How would I know if your brother and you don’t?” His face suddenly dropped, his eye roll
emphatic. “This is why I hate this. It’s…Heaven.” Sherlock pronounced the word as if he was
saying, ‘sewage’. “I have no idea what its parameters even are. What is its population? What is its
history in crime and deviancy? There are no useful statistics and hardly any material evidence about
its existence.” All the S’s of the last word made Sherlock’s teeth flash; he had leaned forward with
the passion of his short speech and now slumped back again. “What we know with certainty is that
Castiel’s mission is to acquire the Angel tablet. My brother using its mention of it to summon him is
evidence enough, but then there’s also the rest. Castiel’s instructions are clearly to prevent the tablet’s
acquisition by Crowley at any cost. You can draw your own conclusions from that.”

“Cas won’t kill Sam,” Dean said, firm.

“He very well may.”

“No. We can trust him. Whoever Naomi is, she doesn’t have a full grip on his melon. He’s playing
for our team.”

“How do you know that, Dean?” Sam’s whole body had turned to his brother with his question,
presenting John with Sam’s back and Dean with someone who was expecting an answer that went
beyond the mere, ‘I just know.’

“I just know,” Dean told him, scowling. As usual, Sam had tucked his hair behind his ears. It meant
that from his seat John could see the curve of his jaw change as the bottom one pushed forward. Sam
tilted his head. John could just imagine the dangerous, cool fury begin to burn in his eyes.

“What are you hiding?” It had taken over Sam’s voice, too, coolness and danger both. “Tell the
truth.”

Dean’s demeanour underwent a hundred and eighty degrees change. “Nothing, okay? Nothing.
Jeez.” He tried to give Sam a ‘happy family’ magazine spread smile. “Don’t get yourself worked up
‘bout nothing, kiddo.”

John had no idea how anyone could go into their thirties and still operate under the assumption that
they were good at lying when they were so appalling at it.

“It’s Cas, Sammy,” Dean continued, spreading his arms, face lit up with conviction. John cast
Sherlock a quick glance and found him gazing at Dean with equal measures disbelief and
fascination. John suddenly remembered the skilful pool hustling and the scam the other night. It
rearranged the pieces into a whole new picture: Dean could lie, very well. He was just bad at lying at
Sam.

John didn’t know if Sam was aware of that. He couldn’t tell what was happening in his friend’s head
—Sam went on looking at Dean’s purposefully open face, then he just nodded a couple of times.
There was nothing agreeable in the gesture. John hoped it was just his melodramatic imagination, but
Sam’s powerful shoulders appeared smaller and smaller, as if his back was the folds of an accordion
closing.

It was Sherlock who broke the tension this time, speaking to Dean, tone flat.
“My advice is to keep a close eye on Castiel. While I understand he is an invaluable asset in—”

“He’s not an asset. He’s our friend!”

“Fine. Keep a close eye on your friend, then.”

“I don’t need to. He won’t harm us.”

“God!” Sherlock erupted, throwing his arms in the air. “Placing blind, pig-headed trust in people could be really suicidal in your line of work, do you know that?”

“It’s Cas!” Dean’s whole body had turned to Sherlock now, confrontation sizzling around its outline. “You don’t know him!”

“Oh, and you do?” Sherlock asked, childishly spiteful. “You said it yourself. He was ‘torn up’ about killing your brother, wasn’t he?”

“But he didn’t kill him.”

“Maybe he will, next time. Didn’t you tell me right here, at this very table, the first night we met that angels were soldiers, first and foremost?”

Dean opened his mouth to argue, but his answer didn’t fly out of him this time.

It was Sam who spoke instead. “He’s right.”

John still couldn’t see Sam’s face, but he just knew that at present, whatever was happening in Sam’s deep, stormy soul brought forward his ability to be dispassionate and logical. Sam’s next words confirmed to John that he had meant Sherlock was the one who was right. “We’ll have to watch Cas.”

Dean swivelled, turning towards Sam. John wondered how he hadn’t got a whiplash yet.

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t trust him, all right?” Sam continued, evidently reading a lot in his brother’s expression. “I’m just saying…” Sam’s chest rose and fell visibly. “Maybe I shouldn’t be left alone with him and Crowley in the same room.”

A pregnant silence followed this time, all eyes on Dean. John could see his acquiescence just as clearly as it’d been written all over Mycroft’s face earlier. There was a harsh, jerky motion of the head to accompany it, though, that would have been completely unbecoming for Mycroft, but suited Dean the way a leather jacket and a glass of scotch did. “Damn it,” Dean muttered. “Fine. We’ll stick together and when we get close to the angel tablet—”

“—if we do,” John murmured.

“Yeah, thanks for the motivational speech.” Dean’s eyelids fluttered closed and he shook his head slowly, suddenly looking drained. When he lifted his eyes to Sam next, however, his face had been transformed by confident determination. “We’ll figure it out when we’re out there. Okay, Sammy? One freaking potentially explosive step at a time. How about I get us a drink and we check those files now, see what we got to prepare for?”
“It’s nine o’clock in the morning,” John said; it looked like these days his brain supplied words to his mouth entirely bypassing any consultation with John.

“Well,” Dean said, getting up. “It’s nine o’clock at night somewhere back home.”
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

It was always my intention to loop the story back into 'Supernatural' season eight and allow readers to exercise some suspension of disbelief and imagine OGAM fitted into SPN canon. I wasn't sure whether I'd manage so I kept quiet, but you'll notice more links to canon in this chapter. I hope the finale will show my effort in that respect as successful—and in the rest as well. Wish me luck! Thank you everyone who has followed the story to here.

Some visuals to the chapter can be found over here.

Sam’s night wasn’t long, but it didn’t seem to fly by either. It trundled through some mysterious dimension where time itself was merely an insignificant background noise. He struggled to keep his eyes open, then struggled to keep them closed: Katie’s peaceful, dead face like a snapshot permanently pinned to the insides of his lids. Next to him Dean tossed and turned, sighing and once or twice thumping his pillow into obedience. They spoke at random intervals, knowing at what stage of sleep the other was, if any, without even having to look at each other. It was good to talk shop with Dean. He had the uncanny ability to comfort Sam while not coming within shouting distance of an actual conversation about emotions. Sam found himself starkly aware of the fact that he’d been reunited with his brother for only about a week, after missing him for months.

If Sam had let himself, he’d have started walking straight to Malvern Mansion as soon as he’d stepped out of Speedy’s. He’d felt as if he was at the stake, flames singeing his hair and licking his body, instincts screaming at him to do something to relieve the pain. But once again he’d been able to capture and separate the different sides of him, then organize them in a manner that allowed him to function. He remembered well what he’d gone through when Castiel broke the wall in his head. Death had put it there to prevent Sam’s soul from splitting into millions of hysterical, damaged splinters with the trauma of Sam’s time in Lucifer’s Cage. The crumbled wall had left Sam existing in a sub-reality where the core of him walked around and met his soulless and tortured counterparts. Only instead of integrating them, Sam had had to kill them in order to come back to consciousness.

Right now he didn’t feel much different. He wasn’t as cruel as to murder the part of him that felt everything with excruciating strength and intensity. (It wasn’t likely anyone would be able to get rid of it by will power anyway.) Sam merely caught it and isolated it, locked it away. He kept the key, but stepped back in the shadows, letting the soulless counterpart do a lot of the thinking. After all, Sam had never been a better hunter than back in the year and a half he’d spent without a soul.

The arrival of the first morning shadows was welcome; even more so was Sherlock’s text message telling them Mycroft was upstairs. Sam was all in favour of any developments, anything that allowed him to sink his teeth into it and tear it to pieces, then make his armour out of them. From the moment he’d walked back into Baker Street last night, it was as if someone had stepped into his line of vision with a massive clapperboard in hand. The sound had been deafening. The last few months had been zoomed out, turning monochromatic and losing detail; suddenly, the job was all there was once again, only this time Sam focused on it as if his sanity depended on it. Something told him things
were going to come to a head real soon and real big, not just about the angel tablet. He could compare it to what he felt when he used to have his psychic visions. There were none now, but the all encompassing certainty infiltrating every cell of his being was the same.

He was ready.

He spent the morning upstairs preparing in more practical terms. One of the things they did was to get all their gear out and make sure each piece was ready to do what it was supposed to do. The weapons and ammo section of their collection was small but impressive, compiled by all of them: Dean, Sam, John, even Sherlock. However, once again their most significant benefactor was Mycroft Holmes. He'd provided them with the kind of stuff Sam and Dean would have needed days to amass. Much of it had to have come from the local underground hunting community and Sam was very pessimistic about their odds of finding friends and not foes there. True, lots of hunters marched to their own beat, but what had gone down in that warehouse was bound to have sparked some controversy.

Sam was glad they didn’t seek help from other hunters. He would have had to watch his back all the time but mostly, he just couldn’t have another person die on his watch. It wouldn’t have mattered whether they’d chosen to get themselves involved. Sam had moved to a plane where he wanted no one’s involvement at all. If he could, he would have taken off by himself. But there was still a flicker of survival instinct left in him and he’d never been one for stupid, pointless sacrifices. Being alone spelled out certain death, aiding Crowley in the process. If Sam was going to die, he was going to make damn sure that at least it counted for something unequivocally good. That meant going into battle with a party and having plenty of arrows in their quiver.

The rest of their collection included items that in the Middle Ages would have had them all burnt as witches. There were ingredients for all kinds of rituals. There was also African dream root to communicate with spirits or walk into people's dreams; some hoodoo Van Van oil to change bad luck and enhance the power of protective charms; a big pouch of Goofer dust to keep hellhounds away. (Something to help them find a hellhound would have been more useful—the Gates of Hell weren't going to get shut by themselves.) The list went on.

Amongst the things Mycroft had sent was a big bottle with a thick, beautifully dark, crimson colour liquid that Sam was unsurprisingly the first to identify. Not that the other three had struggled—each of them had their own personal connection with the substance—but its specific source was something only Sam knew intimately.

“Demon blood.” Dean’s tone left no doubt about his heartfelt, grim feelings on the matter.

Sherlock lifted the bottle to his eye level and shook it lightly, simultaneously blowing a curl off his forehead. “I told you my brother was prudent,” he said.

“Yes, well, he’s overdone it. We’re not using that crap.”

Sherlock examined a sample of the demon blood under his microscope in the improvised chemistry lab he’d set up in the kitchen. Dean hovered near-by but quickly left when he realized there were not going to be any practical implications of Sherlock’s endeavours. “Dude,” Dean called from the living room as an afterthought, “I’m not sure I wouldn’t have hunted you a few centuries back. It’s like a freaking alchemy cave in there.”

Sam made sure the bottle with the demon blood stayed with the things they were taking with them. There was no place for sentiment here—demon blood could be useful in many other ways than the
one Sam and Dean always thought about first.

One thing soon brought a spontaneous smile on Dean’s face: at eleven o’clock his favourite Colt miraculously arrived boxed up together with his Purgatory axe. No doubt once again this was thanks to someone’s long arm stretching across the pond. After Sam’s first encounter with Mycroft John had shared that he was still in illegal possession of his Sig Sauer. (Dean salivated over it for five minutes this morning until Sherlock flung the file he was reading across the table and told both Dean and John to shut up or leave the room.) John had expressed his opinion that he got to keep his gun thanks to Mycroft.

“Least he could do,” had been Sam’s succinct reply. After all that same gun had come to good use with John killing a man to save Sherlock’s life—pretty much on the same day the two of them had met.

Dean ignored the axe, but held his Colt in his hands, fingers running over the engraved slide. He lovingly palmed its familiar ivory handles and took aim at various points in the room, the last one at the back of Sherlock’s head. It wasn’t clear whether Dean hadn’t realized Sherlock could see him in the mirror or had deliberately done it because of that.

Sam thought that if they had stayed longer, Mycroft might have found a way to import even the Impala to British soil. He understood Holmes’s involvement. Some days, having a brother was all Sam seemed to understand, in its entire enormity.

The rest of the morning was spent in reading the files of the victims who’d died in the last year in Malvern Mansion and in a long session on supernatural monsters and the various ways to kill them.

Around mid-morning Cas joined their ranks once again. Dean had cleared his throat and said, “Cas, do you want to get your ass over here? We’re planning to head out soon.” Sam didn’t think he was the only one bothered by the fact that Castiel materialized in the living room immediately. Sherlock’s theory of an angel soldier programmed like a missile acquired even further credibility. Not that Sam had much reason to doubt it. Once Sherlock had laid it all down it’d fitted the bill perfectly. It was embarrassing that they hadn’t seen it earlier. It was obvious, all of it: from Naomi, the mind puppeteer, to Cas overcoming his ‘conditioning’ with great effort only when Dean had prayed for him in despair. Question was: could that missile kill? Sam didn’t like their odds to successfully complete their mission if they had one open enemy to face and another secret one ready to stab them in the back. He’d tried and tried to convince himself Castiel was still on their side, have faith that if the time came, Cas wouldn’t lift his hand to deal Sam a fatal blow. Ironic, how of all things faith came into it. But it was not something you could inject yourself with; you couldn’t force it to fill you in. Force was inherently against faith’s true nature. What hope Sam had stemmed from the memory of Cas coming to heal him in Barts and the fact that he’d found the strength to refuse letting Sam die in the warehouse. But what if Naomi had ‘fixed’ these ‘bugs’ in Castiel’s programming? What if she’d tightened his screws even more to the point where there wouldn’t have been any hesitation about killing Sam to get the tablet? For that Sam needed hard evidence.

When he thought about Dean in the same situation, he didn’t. He just knew Castiel would never kill Dean. The discrepancy was not new to Sam, but the harrowing sense of being further isolated even by those few who were close to him was.

They were going to be the meat in quite a sandwich out there: Crowley and Cas on both sides and in between a plethora of supernatural creatures some of which they couldn’t even identify. Those files of Mycroft’s were like the hunter’s test book: a bunch of horror stories from which they had to extrapolate details and figure out what monster was hiding behind each kill. Halfway through them,
it became abundantly clear they’d never even heard about such a cluster of fucked up.

“Man,” Dean said, scratching his stubble. “Only time I saw anything like that was in freaking Purgatory. It’s like someone did have a private monster zoo in there.”

“You think it’s Crowley?” Sam asked. “Like when he was hunting down all the Alphas?” The association hadn’t been hard. But back then Crowley hadn’t needed just any monsters—he’d wanted the Alphas, the first one that started each species. Ironically, it was related to Purgatory, too. Humans went to Heaven or Hell, everyone and everything else to Purgatory. Crowley had wanted access to those souls. What a shitfest that had turned out to be, with Castiel making one wrong call after another, letting the Leviathans out of Purgatory, the whole drama coming full circle with Dean ending up there.

Dean must have had the same train of thought because he shook his head. “Nah. What would Crowley need them for?”

“Ern…” John said, hesitating. The fingers of his right hand rolled and tucked into a loosened fist, the gesture so intimately John, it stunned Sam, giving him a brief pause.

“Is it possible that whoever put all those monsters there did it to protect the angel tablet?” John asked Dean. “Like a special ops corps. Only not human and you know. Mindlessly vicious.”

“What a comforting thought,” Sherlock murmured. He’d been listening to the conversation stretched out on the couch. Dean was in the leather chair and John was sitting in his own chair which put him behind Sherlock’s head and made Sam think of the set-up in psychotherapy. The parts were cast quite well, too: John was a doctor and Sherlock was Sherlock.

Sherlock’s input had been practically nonexistent. His eyes had remained in half-mast most of the time, not once lifting to Sam who’d been standing by the fireplace.

“Yeah, okay. But isn’t it possible?” John insisted.

Sherlock hummed in agreement. “The more important question is why are they limiting themselves to Malvern Mansions? There are villages around. Yet there are no reported incidents in the area, not in the last year, not before that.”

“Yeah,” Dean said, sitting up. “That’s exactly what I told Sam earlier. Those cockroaches gotta eat. Vamps and ghouls don’t wait around for their lunch to go to them. They’re predators. They hunt.”

“Something’s keeping them in,” Sam repeated the theory he’d offered Dean an hour ago.

Dean spread his arms. “Then what John’s saying makes even more sense. They’re not supposed to leave, because they’re guarding the tablet. That’s one hell of a hold on them, though. I don’t like it, Sammy.”

John pursed his lips thoughtfully, looking at Dean across the table. “Maybe they are sort of…using each other for food? I mean, you said yourself that you’ve never seen so many of them in one place.”

John’s ideas did have merit. But even if he was right, it still wouldn’t have made him appear less delicious for some of those creatures or a chew toy for the rest. Both he and Sherlock were going to be as much help as a liability out there. Sherlock might have a super brain that allowed him to turn into a hunter’s encyclopaedia for a day, but John didn’t. Even if Sam and Dean could offer them
everything they’d learned from very young age, it still wouldn’t have come to them instinctively out there, the way it did to Sam and Dean after decades of practice.

It was like letting civilians out on the arena and releasing not the gladiators but the lions, then pretty much every other predator known to human. Sam had made that point earlier during the crash course on supernatural creatures and how to kill them. There’d been a brief, heated argument after which John had stopped talking to him. Sam felt some distant discomfort for the way he’d behaved towards John, especially after Dean pulled him aside.

“What the hell, Sam?” he told him in harsh whisper. “You sounded just like Dad when he was way out of line.”

Sam was too busy acknowledging Dean was right to dwell on the wonder that was his brother’s personal growth. (A few years back there still wouldn’t have been a bad word spoken out loud about John Winchester’s parental skills.) Dad used to push them so fucking much. For not being prepared enough; for not being quicker, smarter, sharper; for not respecting what lurked out there; for letting themselves forget about it even for an afternoon. Of course now Sam knew Dad had lived in the perpetual terror of finding them dead or having them taken away and never returned…Or worst of all, watching them die. “It could cost you your life, Sam,” he used to drive in, hard, always. What he told Dean was far worse, only Sam had always noticed the opposite: how much better Dean seemed to take it, his “Yes, sir,” always filled with intent to try harder; void of any of the resentment Sam felt.

“It could cost you your and your brother’s life,” Dad used to tell Dean. Sam had been placed once in Dean’s arms and that had been it—he never left. His brother was never free of him again: the tiny bundle that revealed itself to be a monstrously heavy stone deceptively wrapped in baby blankets. If there had ever been a chance to remedy that, this was it. Not just giving Dean his freedom back, but giving him his life back, too, in a world free of demons and angels.

When it got to eleven o’clock and there was still nothing from Mycroft Holmes, doubt began to gnaw at Sam about their immediate course of action. Holmes had sounded pretty stern in his opinion that they should wait for his next package. Sam had put midday as a line to keep an eye on before they left; something to tell him he was doing this, whatever it took. Midday was the distinction between taking the time to prepare and stalling. Was it worth pushing that line further in order to wait for whatever Mycroft was trying to get for them? Who was Sam to decide how long a delay was long enough? Who said how long Crowley would wait for them to show up, before he got impatient and killed someone else just to press his point?

Last night they’d done their best to have people covered, put them under protection with or without their knowledge. It didn’t take long. The full extent of Sam’s social isolation whooshed through the air and crashed into awareness within five minutes of him and Dean putting their heads together. In general, Dean wasn’t much different. His was the sociability of the jester: lots of interaction, lots of loud interaction; approaching zero real and lasting connection.

Yet a few notable exceptions separated him from Sam like the Nile its two shores. Cas was hardly in need of their protection, though and Sam was quite sure that after surviving the ultimate field of death that was Purgatory Benny knew how to take care of himself. Behind its lock and key, Sam’s bleeding soul was still vociferous enough to be heard in its questions about whether Dean had called Benny to warn him to watch himself. (Crowley was after Sam, but Dean hadn’t wanted to take any chances with the people he cared about.) It was an interesting conundrum, another part of Sam had reflected dispassionately. The night before had shown that Crowley kept an uncomfortably close eye on them. Did a warning protect the person or marked them as a target by exposure?
The truth was that most of the few people they’d called family or friends were dead. Last night the message for Sam hadn’t been just a line of coordinates. Crowley had communicated to him that he had him by the balls, because he knew who the few remaining alive were. He’d used Katie as some kind of a sick taster for Sam, striking literally and metaphorically close to home. Yet the message underneath was clear: ‘I can strike even closer.’ Sam had found himself in the peculiar role of someone in custody who had one phone call at their disposal and discovered they only needed one. He’d used it wisely—Craig and Jenny weren’t friends, but they were some of the best goddamn hunters out there and they owed Sam for saving their unofficially adopted son. They were keeping an eye on Amelia. Sam had made sure his communication with them was untraceable, too, so that was something.

Everyone else he wanted to protect was within physical reach of him. He didn’t care what that said about him. He didn’t care that some four months earlier adding Amelia’s name to Dean’s would have exhausted the list of people Sam Winchester had a meaningful relationship with. (He couldn’t let himself care, either, because the thought opened the crevice of speculations about what would have happened if he hadn’t arrived here those months ago. It was a crevice that could suddenly widen hungry and ready to swallow him into a pit of doubt and guilt.) He didn’t care that losing his brother equated to losing his own soul again or that his social atom was so small and deformed it defined him as someone with hardly any identity, grossly dysfunctional to boot. It all translated to one thing right now: less people to care about, less people to lose. Better still, less care, less pain.

It was the height of injustice to experience only the drawbacks of caring about a person yet that was how the Winchesters rolled. Any close relationship inevitably opened you to being hurt—that was readily available to Sam and Dean. But the wealth of positive experiences, supposed to be worth the vulnerability was denied to them. As usual they were each other’s exceptions, but apart from that they weren’t really involved in the lives of those very few people they held dear. After never writing back, Sam assumed his relationship to Amelia had come to an end, no communication channels open. It wasn’t the kind of thing where you could just stay friends; Sam had known it all along and so had Amelia. What she hadn’t known was that he was a hunter, so he couldn’t as much as call her to let her know she was being watched. For her, it was better that way anyway.

Lisa and Ben didn’t even know Dean. Cas had wiped both of their minds squeaky clean and the year of his life Dean had spent having them as his family was not even a phantom for them—it had simply never existed.

As for here, Baker Street… It was merely a house of cards; ephemeral.

***

At five minutes to twelve an envelope arrived from Mycroft. The fact that it was delivered by a man who looked like he was on a payroll in Barack Obama’s personal security service told Sam enough about the importance of the items included.

The envelope contained four black and white photographs in A4 format.

“These are from security cameras,” Dean said after he’d taken one to the window to examine it better, Cas on his heels.

“Yes,” Sherlock confirmed. He was studying the other three, Sam and John on both his sides. On the one on top, there was a grainy image of what looked like an ancient parchment with a portion of a map on it. The image had obviously been enhanced digitally, but nothing could help the fact that a
“There are some uses in the paranoid world we live in,” Sherlock murmured. “Cameras everywhere. Obviously Mycroft couldn’t track down the real artefacts Moriarty had at his disposal, but he’s managed to find some of their content captured on camera.”

A groan from the window made them all lift their heads sharply. Cas was shielding his eyes with his hand, his trench coat creased at his shoulders with the tension in them.

“Cas?” Dean peered under Cas’s palm anxiously. “You okay?”

Cas let out a sigh ending on a quiet moan and stepped away, lifting his gaze.

“It’s the images on these photographs,” he said, face twisting. “They are angel protected.”

“So is it like…?” Sam began, taking a step towards him. “They’re causing you physical pain?”

Cas’s deep blue eyes met his, the distress in them genuine. “I’m experiencing something similar to what the Prophet does when he reads the text on the demon tablet. Only I am not supposed to reading this, so the pain is considerable. The symbols are…” Cas hesitated, looking up with some frustration. “I suppose they are the visual equivalent of a terrible, powerful sound resonance.”

“You can’t read them at all,” Sherlock said.

“I cannot even look at them without suffering damage.”

Sherlock stared at him, eyes gleaming. “Clever,” he said.

“Yeah, top score.” Dean glared at him, then returned his attention to Cas. “Can this kill you? Just being around it?”

“No. It is a mere copy; an image after the real artefact. That would have posed a serious threat to any angel in its vicinity.”

“So who’s done that?” Sam asked. “Who would have the power to do it?”

“Any archangel.”

“A demon?” Dean asked.

Cas considered the question, then sighed. “This is an ancient, complicated spell, Dean. I am not entirely certain about its origin, but I know that on some rare instances, our Father shielded something from us in a similar manner.”

“Hang on,” John said, voice a little croaky. “You said Kevin experienced something similar when he translated the tablet, and that’s with the word of God, right? Is that…” John pointed at the photographs in Dean’s hands then looked between him and Cas, face turning awed. “Could that be the actual word of God?”

“No,” Cas said. “I would recognize the word of our Father. What I managed to get a glimpse of were symbols in ancient Enochian that spoke about a ritual.”
Sam had a pretty good idea what that could be. “It’s got to be the one that has to be done to get the angel tablet…The one Crowley needs me for.”

Instead of replying Cas reached for Dean’s wrist and used it to lift his hand that was still holding the pictures and tried to look at them again. It reminded Sam of using a kitchen utensil to pick up something hot. On cue Cas hissed and averted his gaze, fingers digging into Dean’s skin.

“All right, take it easy,” Dean told him, using Castiel’s hold to lead him to the couch. “No more looking at the pretty pictures for you.”

Cas sat down, letting go of Dean and turning up his face to him, expression reminiscent of the old Cas: child-like uncertainty, as if waiting for instructions.

Dean looked at Sam, eyes widening dramatically, then spoke to Cas again. “Why don’t we figure out what we’ve got here?” he said consolingly. “And you, um…have a rest, huh? We don’t want your noodle deep fried.”

Cas opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it and nodded mournfully. He shuffled in his seat, sitting straight like a student at his desk, then fixed his gaze at a point ahead and just sat there, looking as if he had powered down for the time being.

“All right,” Dean said, joining the rest of them. “What do you got?” he asked Sherlock, looking down at the pictures hanging in his right hand.

Sherlock lifted them and swiftly swapped their places, bringing the one from the bottom on top. It showed even less than what was visible on the one with the map, the snapshot grainier and darker, but Sam had no trouble recognizing its content.

“More Enochian,” he said. “But the rest is a ghost summoning ritual. Let me see that.”

He tugged the picture out of Sherlock’s hand and walked over to the window. Dean joined him in a second, their fringes brushing as they studied the writing.

“I know that one,” Dean said. “That’s the one Bobby told us he’d used to summon Crowley’s son’s ghost, remember?”

Sam remembered very well and Dean was right. But something was different.

“See the spell here?” Sam said, pointing at the corner of the picture.

“You mean the part that we can’t actually see?” Dean asked. “Yeah!”

Sam shook his head quickly. “You can see the first two and a half words here. I’m not hundred percent sure, but it looks like this other ritual—I remember seeing it in one of Samuel’s books.” The memory was clear, Sam’s heart beginning to race with growing certainty. He spoke faster. “The Campbells had found this in some old chest or something, like, hundreds of years old. Apparently some hunters gone bad used to hold these fights between supernatural creatures. And get this: they used that spell to make them stronger; kind of like putting them on modern day steroids, I guess.”

Dean’s eyebrows flew up. “Are you telling me that whatever ghost shows up after this will be like the Chuck Norris of ghosts?”
“Pretty much.”

Dean’s mouth hung open a little and his whole face dropped at this new blow. “Awesome,” he said. “How the hell are we supposed to gank it?”

“No, no, that won’t be a problem,” Sam said. “Basically we do what we normally do. Torch the bones or whatever he’s attached to. Question is, how we’re going to get past it at all.”

“Forget getting past it! How are we going to figure out where the body was buried or what the hell was used to summon the son of a bitch?”

Sherlock’s voice arrived to them like a cat strolling in. “I’m sure it won’t be difficult to deduce.”

Sam felt a prickling of annoyance at Sherlock’s careless arrogance, but then Sherlock lifted the last photograph, his honesty deflating Sam. “I can’t make anything out of this,” Sherlock told them both. “You should have a look.”

This was the clearest image and the one where most of the writing was preserved by the angle of the camera. It looked like it was taken by a digital camera, too, unlike the rest that were all from CCTV cameras. The snapshot was again taken from some distance, but the zoom had been used, then the image cleared up digitally. Sam wondered vaguely about the contexts in which all these had been taken—he couldn’t quite imagine Crowley and Moriarty having a coffee together in Starbucks, although anything was possible. They were both the kind of clowns who’d do a lot for a show.

He voiced his question out loud and in response had Sherlock shrug at him. “Under the right circumstances you can take a close picture of anything and anyone.”

Sam felt the upper part of his face rearrange in a derisive disbelief. “Yeah, I don’t think that can happen.”

Instead of an answer Sherlock produced his cell and started flicking his fingers over its screen. Dean was by his shoulder in a second, peering in curiously, just like John was on the other side, pressing against Sherlock’s left elbow. But as soon as Sherlock found what he was looking for he stretched out his hand, phone display turned to Sam at eye level.

Sam gazed at it, mind completely blank for a moment about the meaning of what he was seeing. He walked over to Sherlock who smoothly flipped the phone in his hand; his finger glided over the screen showing a few pictures in a row.

Dean took a step back. “Why do you have pictures of my brother on your phone?” he asked, scanning Sherlock as if he’d just revealed himself to be a notorious pervert.

Sherlock’s chin dipped and tilted, giving him a demure air.

“Research,” he said. His eyes shifted from Dean to Sam. “It seemed fair.”

“When did you take these?” John asked. He was the only one who appeared casual and unguarded.

Sherlock’s gaze flicked to John then returned to Sam. “You remember the buildings?” he said.

The row of buildings with classy architecture and reddish colour had tickled Sam’s mind and now with Sherlock drawing his attention to them Sam felt the memory pop up in his head like a beer cap.
“That was when I talked to your brother,” he said. “In his car. The street was called...I don’t know, some Mansions.”

“Montagu Mansions,” Sherlock said.

The memory unfurled, rich and far more powerful in its emotional associations than in factual details. The overcast sky giving everything an odd hue. Katie talking to Sam, asking him out, nervous and friendly. Sam following Mycroft from Speedy’s in a taxi, thinking Mycroft would finally give him some connection to Sherlock’s ghost.

The car’s open door. Holmes’s intimidating presence. The sterile leather inside, the umbrella, the cold gaze. Mycroft spinning him all that bullshit about killing Sherlock’s ‘ghost’. Threatening him, mentioning Dean. The rain, pouring down and Sam walking, then running back to here.

John, bringing a towel, making tea; asking but not pushing, eyes deep gray and open in the copper dark, hushed light that made Baker Street feel as if it was the last outpost in the world. The two of them going to that little pub; having a drink, John talking about Mycroft, about Sherlock’s suicide. The mostly empty streets after the rain. Walking back home.

Sam realized he’d met John’s eyes in the couple of seconds that must have passed. He blinked rapidly as if he’d encountered a wall of the finest dust, then looked away to Sherlock.

“So this is what?” he asked.

“This is the proof that I was able to come close enough to you to take as many pictures as I wanted.” The corner of Sherlock’s mouth twitched, his eyes going momentarily too slanted. “It was no small feat considering I was the primary focus of your research at the time.”

The bulb went on in Sam’s head, but he almost felt reluctant to speak—it was so hard to believe, he half-expected Sherlock to scoff and accuse him of shooting in the dark.

“The taxi driver,” Sam said. “Man, was that you?”

Sherlock nodded, expression changing again to begrudging admittance. “It wasn’t that difficult,” he said. “I did have the advantage that you were completely distracted by my brother.”

Dean smacked Sam’s shoulder lightly. “So what, he took a picture of you—” Dean gave Sherlock another suspicious look up and down, “a whole bunch of them—and you didn’t recognize him?”

“He, uh...” Sam pursed his lips to a dot, frowning at Dean half-accusingly. “Wore a lot of make-up,” he finished.

“I’ll be damned,” Dean said, looking between Sam and Sherlock.

The four of them stood around for a few seconds, their silences layered, then Sam shook himself off mentally and returned to the window, lifting the picture he was still supposed to be examining—they were still supposed to be meeting Crowley.

He went over the image meticulously, but as much as he would have liked to, he was unable to offer any input on what it represented. Some of the writing was in Enochian, the rest a whole lot of symbols that meant nothing to him. Cas came out of his ‘pause’ to try and look at it, everyone hoping
that whatever that was, it wasn’t ‘angel-proof’. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case.

“Son of a bitch,” Dean said with feeling after Cas retreated to the couch again, his last gasp still ringing in the air. “We’ve got nothing.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that.” Sherlock had sat in his leather armchair and now spoke with a hint of smugness.

“Have you got it?” John asked, lifting his head abruptly from his work. He’d retreated to the table and quietly taken to copying the content of the first picture into his little black diary.

“As ever, I am touched by your faith in me, John,” Sherlock said. “But even I can’t ‘get it’ without being at least a little familiar with the basics of the Enochian language. But we can deduce a few things. The most significant being that we now know these are a set, or a part of one—the fact that Castiel is unable to read any of them tells us they are all connected. Then he recognized the writing as ancient Enochian.” Sherlock’s tone had turned questioning at the end of his sentence and he was now looking at Cas for confirmation.

“From what I was able to perceive, yes,” Cas replied. “I fear that even if my…noodle wasn’t in danger, I would have still found the translation of the text a difficult task. Like all languages Enochian has changed over time. This would be what Elizabethan English would sound like to a five-year-old human child in present day.”

“Can you find a dictionary we can use?” John asked. “Are there any dictionaries?”

“Not anymore.” Cas’s reply was both delayed and distracted. Sam met Dean’s gaze, their quick silent exchange not adding up to anything more than shared wariness.

Like a pinprick, the thought made Sam flinch inwardly then it was already turning into an echo: he hated having to watch Cas as if Cas was some celestial version of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde.

“The symbols in ancient Enochian don’t really have singular meanings,” Cas said slowly, frowning a little. “Although that could be said for a lot of them in the language that is used in Heaven now. Naturally, by definition all Enochian is ancient. But what was used at the birth of the language was a system of symbols that very much relied on interpretation.” Cas’s chapped lips pressed a little in some bashful uncertainty. “There might be a way to interpret it,” he finished.

“There is one,” Sherlock corrected him. “James Moriarty was successful.”

“How do you know for sure?” Sam asked.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” Sherlock was digging into his suit jacket inner pocket now, producing his magnifier. He got up and walked around his chair to the window behind it, where Dean was looking at the picture with the map. Sherlock pulled it out of Dean’s hand unceremoniously, then began examining various portions of it with his magnifier.

“Sherlock?” John prompted. He had left the table and walked over to their end of the room, standing behind the couch.

When there was still no response from Sherlock, Dean pinched the top of the picture and shook it. “Hello? Earth to…Mars?” Sherlock lifted his face to him sharply, keeping the magnifier in front of his right eye and making Dean visibly start.
“He, ah... he doesn’t get that,” John told Dean. “The reference.”

Sherlock turned to him, expression more puzzled and turning a little petulant already.

“You’re kidding,” Dean said.

John shook his head as he spoke. “Nope. Not much of a clue about planets or space. Or most of what you and I would consider common knowledge.” He suddenly smiled with incredible fondness at Sherlock who’d rolled his eyes. “What are you going to do about Heaven and Hell?” John asked. “Delete them?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” Sherlock said after a protracted pause. He finally shifted his unblinking gaze from John back to the picture in his hand, magnifier on it again.

Dean shook his head. “Jesus, you’re worse than Cas.” His eyes roamed the curls on top of Sherlock’s dark mop of hair. “Such a child.”

Sam cleared his throat, taking them back to the topic at hand. “How are you so sure that Moriarty was able to interpret the Enochian?” he repeated.

Sherlock lifted his gaze once more and sighed. “You have a map here,” he said, “and you have an appointment that involves coordinates. There is writing in Enochian, so ancient that we can safely assume concerns the angel tablet. As I said, all the data on these photographs is connected. My brother sent us these. James Moriarty was a genius who had a quid pro quo situation with Crowley.” Sherlock’s eyebrow lifted at Sam. “It’s pretty obvious, don’t you think?”

Sam had waited for him to finish only out of politeness. He hadn’t even needed to stop and think about any of that; of course it was obvious to him, too, blindingly so. What he’d wanted to know was whether Sherlock had seen something solid to make him know Moriarty had worked this all out correctly.

Sam felt another pinprick of emotion, this one relished as if it let some flammable gas out: Sherlock was a fucking arrogant dick and a show-off.

“Moriarty was deciphering the map and the notes for Crowley,” John said duly.

“Yeah, that’s great,” Sam said flatly, eyes on Sherlock. “That’s not what I asked. Do you have anything that proves Moriarty really figured this out?”

Sherlock turned slowly to face Sam, right hand returning the magnifier to its previous place then going into the pocket of Sherlock’s custom-made, fancy pants. “I don’t need to. I have a brain and I use it. In my case that is enough.”

“Sherlock,” John said softly and quite predictably, too, making Sherlock look at him.

“How about you use your brain to remember your whole ‘Moriarty was hiding something from me,’ theory,” Sam insisted, making Sherlock’s gaze fly back to him in a rare squint.

“If I offer you my assistance with the basics of Enochian,” Cas spoke, standing up and turning to Sherlock, “will you be able to interpret the text?”
“Very likely,” Sherlock replied, swaying a little and looking both nonchalant and smarmy. “At least what we have on the photographs.” He lowered his gaze to the pictures in Dean’s hands. “The rest I’ll have to deduce.”

Sam walked over to the window, adding to its crowdedness. “That’s not going to be of any help and could be even dangerous,” he told Sherlock. “If this is another ritual, sometimes one single symbol can change it from a summoning one to a killing one.”

Sherlock lifted the map to the light again. “Let’s not speculate without seeing what we really have,” he said.

Sam had heard enough. He pulled the pictures out of Sherlock’s and Dean’s hands, making everyone look at him askance as if he’d just snatched a little boy his ice-cream. He was instantly pissed at this demonstration of double standards—clearly it was no big when others did that, but not him.

He suddenly realized that the numbness from last night had been retreating subtly and dangerously, like a tide leaving the ocean bottom stretch out vast and bare. He took a breath, focusing on what was right in front of him. “We don’t have time to be seeing what we have,” he said.

“Sam.” Dean’s tone was careful. “We just got this. Couple of hours more or less won’t make a difference.”

“Won’t they?” Sam knew he sounded quarrelsome despite his effort to keep his voice neutral. “And how do you know that, Dean?”

Dean’s expression managed to simultaneously stroke down Sam’s bristles and make him want to bare his teeth at his brother.

“Come on, man,” Dean said. “Look at these. We gotta try and figure out what they mean before going to Crowley. It could mean the difference between life and death.” He spread his arms a little, his shrug casual, soothing. “Maybe it can even get us the angel tablet. You know we’ve got this covered for now. Everyone’s safe.” Dean’s chin dipped with the emphasis on the last word. The position made his gaze rounder, more earnest: a tamer talking down a wild animal.

The world seemed to spin under Sam and he felt as if he was hurtling down towards the Cage again. This time he could grab hold of something, though, so he did: they had a job to do. They needed to find Crowley, finish him off, shut the Gates of Hell and get the angel tablet. End of story. There was no use in rash actions; no use in arguments. No use in letting the best hunter Sam knew waste his time on trying to wheedle his little brother, because his little brother acted like a five-year-old who couldn’t keep it together.

Suddenly there was a gust of air next to Sam and he dumbly discovered it wasn’t some supernatural occurrence or creature materializing out of thin air. It was John who had shifted, his eyes also on Sam, waiting for his words as if Sam was the one who should be trusted with the decisions and whose decisions could be trusted. Sam looked back to Dean quickly. The green of his eyes was like the grass in a summer meadow today, all warm breeze and carefree childhood memories; precious few shared moments from a lifetime ago that Sam wasn’t sure he had the right to anymore.

Okay. They had four photographs and Sherlock Holmes was a genius.

“Let’s check this out quickly,” Sam said. “Show me the picture with the ghost ritual again.”
Sam was forced to conclude that Sherlock existed in a bi-polar state when presented by a mental challenge: a whirlwind of frenzy, or an almost trance-like mode. For two hours there were only a few moments of intermission during which they were able to follow his progress and he theirs. The rest of the time Sherlock spent frantically writing stuff and crossing them out, pacing around the room and sending things flying to the floor, inadvertently or deliberately. He groused sarcastically about Cas not supplying him with enough ‘data’ then five minutes later pointed out the door to him for talking too much. He shouted at some people on the street for making too much noise, took off his jacket then put it back on three times in one hour and employed his arms and hands to converse with John in a way that Sam thought gave a whole new spin on the repulsive idea of the straight jacket.

Then half an hour ago he sat cross-legged on top of the coffee table, closed his eyes and ceased moving like a toy that had abruptly run out of battery.

“No point in that,” John told Dean who bowed a little and waved a hand in front of Sherlock’s face. “He’s probably in his Mind Palace,” John added. “Although I’m not sure whether he’ll find anything there. He didn’t exactly study Enochian at Uni.”

Dean brought his face closer to Sherlock’s as if looking for some evidence of John’s words. He straightened up and turned to John, mouth open at the ready with the question, but then he closed it, lips turning in a downward bow. “D’you know what?” he said, lifting his hands in a gesture of surrender. “I don’t want to know. Of course he’s got a freaking Mind Castle, whatever that is.”

“Palace,” Sam corrected him automatically and got a cross look in reply. He shrugged. “Let’s give him some time to…um.”

“He just needs to think,” John told him. Their gazes met, bouncing off each other immediately. John turned to look at Sherlock, the pose making three-quarters of his face obscured from Sam.

“Okay,” Sam said in a moment. He wondered whether he should be glad that John was back to speaking to him. The fact that he had to ask himself the question was enough of an answer, but much like with his inability to conjure up faith in Castiel’s unwavering loyalty, making himself feel this or that was beyond his will.

It wasn’t that he didn’t care about John. He did, he was aware of that. But last night Sam had sat in here, in this same room where he’d spent pretty much every day in the last few months, looked at John and it had felt like looking at photographs offered to an amnesiac with helpful notes on their backs explaining his relationships with both the man and the space. Turned out Baker Street had acquired the oblique definition of home for Sam, but Sam only realized it when it had become a foreign place again. Too focused elsewhere to remember John or too reluctant to let his gaze linger, Sam had been catching glimpses of him all day today: the expression of passable fish impersonation, the serious, sincere attention in John’ eyes, the no-nonsense settings of his lips and chin. Once or twice John’s teeth had glistened pearly-white with the kind of smile that transformed his somewhat plain features as if a breeze went through a garden of colourful pinwheels.

It was all at once John and a stranger. There was a distant emotional echo telling Sam John had meaning to him and he was wise enough to trust it, but determined enough not to follow its source right now.

It was John who had first suggested that the picture flummoxing everyone wasn’t a separate thing, but went together with the other one which contained the ritual for getting the angel tablet. “Maybe
they’re a pair,” John had said, looking at the pages in his diary. “One is the actual key to decode—no, to interpret the other one.”

Castiel’s expression had turned vacant and in a few moments he’d disappeared without a word, reappearing some thirty minutes later with a piece of burlap that looked like it was going to fall apart if one more person touched it. Sherlock took it from his hands carefully and disappeared into the kitchen straight away.

Cas had explained his absence this time, the room filling with his rich, gravelly baritone. “This was amongst Michael’s possessions. It is believed that before he was cast out Lucifer had already begun the acquisition of artefacts that could one day give him power over Heaven and Earth. Michael tried to reason with his brother and when he saw it was no use, he managed to take some of what Lucifer had amassed and hide it from him. We are all told that as a story, but only a few know whether it is true.”

He turned to John who’d been looking up at him, completely enthralled. “Your words reminded me of it,” Cas told him.

John licked his lips quickly, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Good. Good. Erm…So what exactly is this?”

“It’s a key to the key, John,” Sherlock spoke from the kitchen entrance. His gaze was sparkling in a way that made Sam glad that Sherlock was coming after all…and gladder still that he was doing it as an ally.

Thanks to the key to the key they had made great progress: they now knew the exact location of the angel tablet and some of its history. Lucifer hadn’t just had artefacts; he’d had crypts where he’d hid his prized possessions, the most important one the angel tablet. (Lucifer being behind this explained the powerful anti-angel proofing.)

One such crypt existed under the chapel attached to the south wall of the main building that was Malvern Mansion. The tablet was supposed to be in it. Last night when they’d checked Crowley’s coordinates their research showed some the chapel was built on consecrated ground. Sam had thought it might have some significance and turned out, it did. Something in their favour—this was going to be a demon-free zone, at least as far as most demons were concerned. Sam didn’t want to think about all the other creatures that met no barrier in consecrated ground.

The other thing they found out was why a ritual needed to be performed. The text spoke of the chapel walls, all made of rectangular small stones that looked like the tablet. The real one was supposed to ‘come to light’ when the ritual took place and even then, it couldn’t be touched. It was after Sherlock had said that to them that he’d sat on the coffee table and gone into hibernation, only his eyelids giving away that there was something pretty active happening in his skull. Sam let him sit there for half an hour during which they prepared for leaving.

When they were ready to go Dean tried rousing Sherlock by talking to him, with no luck. He reached for Sherlock’s shoulder, but his hand froze an inch away from it.

“Do you want to wake him up?” Dean asked John. “I don’t want to touch him and I don’t know, give him a seizure.”

Sherlock opened his eyes at John’s second, “Sherlock, we need to go.” He didn’t move from his lotus position, though. His head had turned to John first as if he was the signpost for Sherlock’s
bearings even in the middle of his own home, but then he looked up behind John’s shoulder, meeting Sam’s eyes. Sam thought Sherlock had to suffer from some rare eye disease: it wasn’t natural for any irises to have such a mixture of electric green and blue, set off further by a couple of specs in intense amber.

“Whoever performs the ritual will need to walk in with you,” Sherlock said, “then have you sacrificed at the altar, I assume by having your heart taken out of your chest. The text is rather explicit...In both senses of the word.”

“Jesus,” John breathed out. “Is there no other way to—”

“No.” Sherlock’s gaze moved to John and stayed there, even though his next words concerned Sam more than anyone else; here or anywhere else. “The tablet can be touched only with bloodied hands.” Sherlock proceed to quote, “Blood from the beating heart of the man, who defeated the Devil.” He paused for a moment, something shielded fluttering across his features. “I imagine Lucifer thought he’d set up an impossible challenge. Arrogant.”

Cas spoke behind Sam. “There could have only ever been three outcomes of the battle for the Apocalypse. Lucifer knew that. If he was victorious, no one would have been able to open the crypt but him. If Michael defeated him, Lucifer justly believed his brother would never dare take the tablet; and an archangel like Michael would have been impossible to capture.”

“And if Lucifer’s vessel managed to kick his ass,” Dean began, “like Sam did…”

Sam knew how that one went. “He knew the vessel would have had to jump down the pit with him.”

Dean looked at Sam with a mixture of pride, incredulity and some tiredness. “He never believed a human could overpower him from the inside.”

“He never believed that you’d be the one to come topside again,” Sam added quietly.

“And he was aware that if Sam was raised from the Cage,” Cas continued, “it would be without his soul. The sacrifice at the altar wouldn’t have worked. It would have been Sam, but not all of Sam. The most important part would have been missing.”

Sam realized everyone had gathered close, ready to go. He felt their eyes on him and only then did Cas’s last sentence arrived to him again, hitting him like a train coming out of nowhere.

He didn’t remember his soul being put back in him, but it couldn’t have been much different than what he felt now. A lump started forming in his throat as if his soul wanted to be something material, a reminder that he could cry it out or swallow it down, but never ignore it. His eyes found his brother’s.

*Lucifer never even spared you a thought. He never thought you’d come to that field or that you’d bring yourself to the brink of death so you could speak to Death himself and get my soul back.*

All the while they were having this conversation Sam could sense Dean’s reaction to it as clear as if the thick black smoke of a demon had been curling out of Dean. Dean’s hooded eyes were a match for his next words.

“You got that son of a bitch while he was camping in your head. You shoved him down. He’s *not* going to bite you in the ass from the grave.”
Cas shuffled forward; his face was beautiful in its kindness and his eyes were filled to the brim with regret and compassion as they moved from Sam and rested on Dean. An angel’s eyes, the way their mom must have imagined them.

“Sam’s destiny has—” Cas began gravely.

“Screw destiny!” Dean’s nostrils flared up, forbidding and furious. “Sam is Sam, no destiny. He’s not a fucking vessel and he’s not a toy in some ritual. No one’s having my brother’s heart!” Dean waited for Cas to speak, his gaze challenging. Castiel’s lips just softly pressed together and he gave Dean a small, sad nod. Dean settled the rucksack with his gear better over his shoulder and rolled his neck. He looked around, gaze fleeting over each face in their small party. “All right,” he said gruffly. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

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Somewhere along the course of the day John had managed to lose all connection to everyday life; so much so that he hadn’t even noticed doing it. But in the space of a few heartbeats, the ordinary world around him abruptly returned to him: the noise of afternoon traffic outside, a horn sounding in the quiet of the room; the dust floating in the air where light cut through it at a particular angle; the utter tip that their living room had become. His heart brimmed over with terrible wistfulness and it was already panting under a heavy load. John felt as ready for what was coming as he could ever be. He was somewhat in denial, somewhat steady and not a little thrumming with nervous excitement. But with the wistfulness arrived fear too, just as mundane as the sound of that horn. There was an angel by John’s shoulder, an instant away from taking John to the unknown; what was known about it, sounded like a mythical, deadly battlefield, and John was just a man who used to have a blog, served in Afghanistan, formed rare, strong attachments with questionable subjects and tried to get on with his life.

His eyes took in 221B Baker Street’s living room and suddenly, he was accosted by one of those stupid, fleeting, fatalistic senses he’d had once or twice in the field back in the day. Without thinking, he looked down at his feet, the background of the antique, dark red threadbare carpet like a farewell sunset. John felt Castiel’s touch on his back and kept his eyes wide open.
When John lifted his eyes again, there was a sunset all around and above him, spanning over miles of sky and so vivid and spectacular that for a moment it filled up his head just as it did his vision. He tore himself away from the sight to find his companions all present and checking out their surroundings, the majestic light and clouds not drawing just his attention, he was sure.

Castiel was supposed to have ‘landed’ them about a mile away from Malvern Mansion. There was no sight of a building near or far. They were standing in a field that seemed to be some sort of a summit. John could see a village at what must have been at least twenty miles distance. It was down to the east and there were woods sloping down to the west, a mere few minutes away. The mansion was probably hidden from view by them. To the north and south there were just barren hills stretching as far as the eye could see. John shivered at a gust of cold wind and wrapped his black jacket around himself more tightly.

Castiel was the first to speak, pointing towards the nearby woods. “We should go that way,” he said, addressing Dean next. “We are further away than planned, but I considered it too dangerous to have us appear in the middle of the forest.”

Dean was squinting at the trees. “Good call,” he said. His gaze turned to Sam, making John look to him as well. In his peripheral vision he’d caught Sam’s form shift next to him during the exploration of their surroundings. Sam had just lifted his head to the sky and now stood immobile, feet slightly parted, arms resting still by his body, his chest wide and strong. The angle and the air’s unnatural pink and golden hues transformed his familiar, pleasant features into something mystical and mesmerising. But contrary to the surreal appearance of both man and nature, John experienced an indestructible sense of reality. He inhabited the world they’d just materialized in with every cell of his body. He knew his purpose in it; he was bound to the few people on that hill like he had hardly been to anyone. He understood who Sam was and why his heart had to be protected. His soldier’s blood simmered with a sense of momentum and he felt truly ready. His eyes went to Dean, awaiting instructions.

“We stick together,” Dean said on cue, eyes roaming their faces one by one just like he’d done it less than a minute ago in a whole different reality. “Keep your eyes and ears open for anything weird; the air as much as shifts, you stop and talk, okay?”

John nodded and felt Sherlock’s sleeve brush his left arm with the motion carried down by Sherlock’s own nod. His hair had a russet sheen to it and the sunset magnified the alien slants of his features. He appeared completely at home.

Dean nodded back then took out his gun. “Come on,” he said, taking off to the west. “Let’s get a move on before we freeze our asses off.”

They reached the first line of trees in less than a couple of minutes. Dean had set a very brisk pace, undoubtedly wanting to avoid being caught by darkness while they were still in the woods. The difference was instantly noticeable: all colour disappeared, leaving only muted milky grey light around them. John was grateful they were surrounded by pine trees. With October so warm across
the British Isles, even here all leaves would have still likely been on the branches and would have obscured any light almost completely.

Their progress was much slower now, the sounds of their own feet making them jumpy. Nothing and no one came at them. Maybe it was the kind of disturbing quiet before the storm or maybe it was logical. Crowley couldn’t know from which direction and from how far they’d arrive so he couldn’t have spread forces everywhere to ambush them: King or no King, demons lived in Hell not on Earth and Crowley did have limitations in his number of soldiers. He was probably lying in wait in the mansion. After all, they were going there anyway.

The stretch of woodland turned out to be shorter than John had expected. They came out of it after a quarter of an hour and John had his suspicions confirmed about the location of Malvern Mansion. It was there in plain sight, only a second stretch of trees to go through to reach it. But John could immediately see that where the building was situated shouldn’t have been his first point of concern.


Sherlock hummed in agreement. “The name is rather misleading,” he said. He turned to Dean. “I suppose the size of the building complicates things?”

Dean’s parted lips pressed, making the two deep dimples on top of both corners of his mouth stand out. “What the hell?” he said. “I thought it was supposed to be a small joint, not freaking… Disneyland. How’re we supposed to cover all that if it’s crawling with monsters?”

Google Maps and Google Earth had not so mysteriously failed to display any images of the place and no pictures could be found anywhere on the internet either. There was the stereotype of a mansion as a big, stately house and then there was this ‘joint’. It proudly boasted two floors, two wings accompanying its main part, a small tower or maybe a turret to the right—John was never an expert in architecture—as well as two small, semi-detached buildings to the south. The entire thing had to be at least two hundred meters long and to John’s eye it looked as if it covered fifty acres. It was much smaller than his perceptions of it, he knew that. The thought of all that grandness serving as the prowling land of supernatural monsters was entitled to colour them.

“Okay,” Sam said in a beat. “We know the chapel is attached to the south wall. We only need to figure out if that means the south wall of the wing or of that building attached to it.”

“Oh,” John said, unable to help himself. “Is that all?”

“Let’s just keep calm,” Sam said. “We just gotta make sure we don’t go to the rest of the building—”

“Unless of course we have to,” Sherlock interrupted.

Dean gave him an expressive, quizzing look. “Why would we have to?”

“Because there is supposedly a ghost in there,” Sherlock replied, eyes fixed on the building. “I don’t think whoever summoned it would have left the object he or she used conveniently placed in the south part of the building.” He looked at Dean. “Do you?”

Dean gazed back at him for a few seconds then did a sharp, pecking motion with his head and neck. “Son of a bitch,” he said. “All right, let’s not jump the gun here. First we need to get there. Whole.”

Castiel’s voice was in perfect harmony with the dark, imposing outline of the old castle. “I suggest
“Come on.” Dean headed down towards the trees. “We’re losing daylight. Literally,” he added in a
mutter.

They were swallowed by the trees again in a few minutes, these ones growing more sparsely. They
moved in silence, still vigilant, but once again there was no threat to them in any form. The only
thing it did to John was make his adrenaline level go up. Soon they came out to a very big clearing,
quite like another hill. From its top the upper part of Manor Mansion was visible less than half a mile
away beyond the last part of the woods.

They marched down over bumps of uneven ground, hurrying through the open area. John did his
habitual full scan the way he’d done it in the desert during his service. Supernatural or not, some
things were born from centuries old experience: it was dangerous to assume that just because you
were on open ground, no danger was lurking close.

There were hints of light indigo in the sky, the clouds still big and shapely, but mostly in shades of
grey now; some of them turning to dark onyx and some moving faster than others, almost black.

John blinked at what he was seeing and tripped, since he was walking forward while looking back
and up. Unease flooded him. “Erm, guys,” he said, coming to a halt. He pointed at the few thin black
clouds that seemed to be rolling in their direction a little too fast for John’s liking. “Am I imagining
things or do those look a bit strange?”

He turned around to his companions and his gaze landed on Sam’s face; thus, John was able to
watch his fears confirmed from the first row. Sam’s jaw streamlined with its push forward.
“Demons,” he breathed out in synchrony with his brother growling the word. “At least a dozen of
them too,” Sam added, hand doing a succession of quick, smooth motions, a glint of silver appearing
as a result. John produced his designated angel blade in a blink of an eye as well. His head whipped
back to look at the fast approaching demons: now he could see the number of thick black wisps of
smoke in aerodynamic flight.

For an instant they all stared at them then Dean’s voice released them from the spell. “Here we go,”
he said. “Run!”

They all galloped towards the mass of trees in front of them. Sam’s examination of the map together
with the rest of his research suggested that more than just the chapel was built on consecrated
ground, so John dashed forward, hoping against all odds that they’d manage to go through the last
stretch of woods and onto the grounds before the first demons caught up with them.

No such luck. Just as they dove in the woods people with black eyes started materializing all around
them, launching themselves at John and his companions. John was glad they had at least the element
of surprise on their side in that they’d all drunk what seemed like ten times their body weight in holy
water. There were hisses echoing in the air as soon as the demons touched them. The first few who
laid their hands on John let go of him with their faces twisted as if they’d touched a hot stove. John
used the precious moment of distraction to plunge the angel blade in their chests, each time feeling it
go through like knife through butter, hardly any resistance at all.

All around him there was continuous fighting. John kept stabbing, and punching, and stabbing again
and yet there was always still someone coming at him. He caught sight of Castiel’s fearsome face as
the angel smacked both of his palms against the foreheads of two demons, causing blinding light to
burst out of their eyes. A skinny, tall man wielding an angel blade was fast approaching Castiel from
his left. John lunged forward and managed to stab him in the stomach; the demon lashed out knocking John to the ground. Dizzied, John saw him come at him with a roar, but the same blinding light erupted from his eye sockets and he crumpled to the ground, revealing Castiel’s bloodstained form behind him.

Yet more demons seemed to be landing everywhere, the sound of their arrival like something heavy whooshing through the air but landing noiselessly. As always everything was turning into a blur: the demons who managed to flung John around, those who were killed by someone else coming to John’s aid, those he killed to protect himself or one of his friends...At one point he swung around only to come face to face with an enormous man who knocked the blade out of his hand, then grabbed John’s head on both sides, his huge palms blocking all sound. His eyes turned that revolting black John already knew too well and a grotesque smile revealed the demon’s gums and rotting, crooked teeth. Somewhere at the back of John’s mind the sound of a neck being snapped bloomed in half-anticipation, half-numb horror, but the demon’s vicious nature was against him. The extra moment he took to leer at John cost him his life: the bloody point of a silver blade pierced through his throat and he released John with a horrible cry then nearly toppled him over when he fell straight forward. John managed to move out of the way and only then did he look up to find Sherlock’s coat already twirling as he was turning to face his next assailant.

Panic had just begun bubbling up in John’s chest about the eventual outcome of their doomed battle when there was a shift in the air as if a shock wave rippled through it. It took him a few seconds to realize new forces had joined their ranks. Angels by the look of it, throwing demons about, stabbing them and doing the burning thing to their heads. There were at least five of them: John caught a glimpse of two men and three women, all dressed in dark, formal suits.

“Go!” A shout arrived to his ears. “Go, Castiel! Go!” It was one of the women, a very young, dark girl, yelling at all of them. John realized he’d been standing unoccupied for probably a few seconds. His feet must have responded to the command before he’d fully processed it—he was rushing down between the trees again, side by side with Sherlock, following the dancing smudge of Castiel’s beige trench coat, Sam and Dean closely behind.

He could hear the sound of battle all the way until they were out of the woods and even then it was still ringing in John’s ears, which were struggling to distinguish between reality and an auditory sensory memory. They kept running and running, the massive building of Malvern Mansion finally close. They stopped only when they stormed through the main doors, Sam and Dean shutting them then quickly salting the threshold.

In the next few moments everyone but Castiel was found in some stage of slumping. John almost doubled over, legs like rubber. He was aware it was a moment of vulnerability for all of them; any enemy that had been biding their time would have attacked them more easily at this particular point, but John couldn’t care less. All he cared about was breathing, even if these were to be the last few breaths of his life.

Through the mist in front of them, his eyes moved from Sherlock to Sam to Dean, chest expanding anew at the discovery that although none of them looked immaculate they were all unharmed and standing on their feet. His gaze dropped down to scan his own body, pain beginning to sing in a choir from various points all over it, when he felt Castiel’s touch on his forehead. In a flash of pure white light all hurt and exhaustion disappeared.

“Jesus, that’s handy,” he croaked—the angel touch didn’t seem to reach to the psychological consequences of John’s experiences so he was still quite shaken. “Thanks, Cas,” he added, feeling infinitely more optimistic for having an instant ‘fixer’ at hand. A few thoughts rushed through him,
inevitably: what it would have meant for the lads out there on the field to have someone like Castiel with them; what was God’s design if he kept his angels and their mercy to Heaven with all that suffering bestowed on humans, seemingly so pointless. So random, too, because John had had to see off some good people both as a doctor and as a soldier, had had to imagine the anguish of their loved ones left behind.

His gaze fell on Sherlock just as Castiel was touching his forehead. The best man John had ever known was back from the dead, but not because of a divine intervention. Sherlock hadn’t been returned to John—he had returned. Whatever was coming for them at least John would always have that: one single, very human miracle.

Castiel stood with his back to the rest of them. He turned his head sharply to the right then to the left, before looking at Dean over his shoulder. “Let’s go,” he said. “We need to proceed on foot. The whole place is angel-proofed. It’s fortunate I still have some of my powers.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Dean said. “Hold on.” He dropped his bag on the floor and crouched down rummaging through it. “We need to figure out what we’re doing first. Get our flashlights out—it’s going to be pitch-black in here in minutes. And you saw what happened out there. We got the demon pawns out of the game, now it’s monster time.” Dean straightened up, torch in hand, bag over his shoulder. “We can’t just go in. We need to have a plan first.”

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow at him. “Don’t you think the time to come up with that would have been before we arrived here?”

“All right.” Dean took a step that put him right in front of Sherlock. “Here’s the plan for you. You shut your pie hole unless you’ve got something smart to say. Our kind of smart, not what you think is smart,” he added, the finger in the face making an appearance. John wondered whether Dean did that a lot in general or Sherlock brought the gesture out like he tended to bring the best out in people. Sherlock’s response was to roll his eyes and look away, but at least he didn’t engage in pointless bickering.

“So?” John said. “What are we going to do?”

“We just saw that Crowley’s come here prepared,” Sam said, taking the big hallway in. The last throes of daylight coming through the windows were still enough to give them an idea about the place or rather about how big and squallid it was. A long time ago this had been a grand home, but now it was a half-empty ruin. John suspected that over the decades—if not over centuries—marauders had taken anything worth taking. Whatever was left was covered in impenetrable layers of dust.

“Change of plan,” Sam continued, startling John back out of his reverie. “We’ve got to find another way to get to the chapel. We can assume he’s got monsters lined up for us all along the direct way to it.”

“If he’s the one controlling them,” Dean pointed out.

Sam’s face seemed to do the equivalent of a mental shrug. “Even if he isn’t,” he told his brother, “some monsters actually have brains, Dean. You know vamps are smart—they’d have figured out our game and we’d be walking right into their trap.”

“All right,” Dean said. “We find another way. You got anything?”
Sam produced the picture of the map out of his bag as well as his torch, but he didn’t use it. “According to this, there should be a secret passage underground—”

“Of course there is,” John murmured.

“It should take us outside,” Sam went on. “Close to the back of the chapel. I say we try for that.”

Dean frowned at his brother, confused. “Try how? You said there’s no door there.”

Sam did a real shrug this time. “I thought we could smash through the wall.”

Dean’s face slowly cleared, eyebrows lifting. “Oh,” he said.

“It’s where the altar is,” Sam told him apropos of nothing. His next words reminded John that with some people you should never assume the lack of inner logic to what came out of their mouths. “So there won’t be a risk of smashing the angel tablet by accident.” His eyes bore into Dean’s as if trying to coax him to agree to the plan. Dean held his brother’s gaze with the same intensity and then it was suddenly gone. He nodded casually a few times, lips pursing in approval.

“Well, it’s not like Crowley doesn’t know we’re here,” he said. “We might as well make an entrance. Come in with a bang, right, Sammy?” He smirked at his brother, honest to God saying, “Heh-heh,” and reminding John irresistibly of a film character: a modern day Han Solo. Or yes, indeed, an old swashbuckler.

Obviously Dean’s effort was wasted on his brother. “Tough crowd,” Dean murmured at Sam’s blank face then repositioned his bag over his shoulder. “Okay, let’s do this.”

John had had the question at the back of his mind from the moment he’d heard Sherlock’s words about Sam’s heart and felt that now was the time to finally ask it.

“Then what?” he said. “What are we going to do if we do manage to smash into the chapel? How are we going to get the tablet?”

Both Sam and Dean turned to him, their backs to Sherlock and Castiel. Neither spoke, the two exchanging fleeting, sideway glances without moving their heads. “We, uh…” Sam spoke at last. “We’ll figure it out once we get there.”

John smiled his special smile reserved for crazy people.

“You can’t just walk in exactly where Crowley wants you without a plan.” He looked at Dean, certain he’d find an ally in him. “It’s like walking straight into a death sentence.”

Dean’s hardening eyes gave him an unforgiving air. He hesitated before speaking, sounding miffed, although John wasn’t sure it was at him. “That’s how it works,” Dean told him. “That’s what we do. You just have to go in sometimes, guns blazing, then hope for the best.”

John spread his arms, anger igniting in him. “So you basically make it up as you go along.”

“Not always,” Sam said quietly after a pause. He met John’s eyes briefly, then looked up above John’s head. “I’ll try to use my blood, see what happens. Maybe if I go in by myself, make a voluntary sacrifice, it can work.”
John was just about to enquire what his plan was about bloody Crowley, when Sherlock spoke from behind. “The text made no mention of that.” He was clearly poised to continue, but remained with his mouth open, silent. John felt both excitement and disquietude at the sight of Sherlock’s face shrouding itself from deciphering.

Dean swivelled to look back at Sherlock. “Well, the text wasn’t full,” he said gruffly. “And you could have read it wrong.”

Sherlock dipped his chin. It was hard to see well anymore, but John was sure the stare Sherlock gave Dean was quite alert.

“I haven’t read it wrong,” he said.

Dean sighed again. He was clearly about to speak when Castiel took a couple of steps to him, invading his personal space worse than Dean himself would have anyone’s. “We are wasting time.”

Dean looked at his feet, hand cupping his forehead, then releasing it with a downward swipe. “Right. Here’s how we’re going to do this. Stick together; hold hands if you have to, but don’t part. Cas, you lead the way; Sam’s right behind, then Sherlock and John, and I’m—”

“I think we should go to the first floor now,” Sherlock said.

“Why?” Sam asked.

“You are expecting a ghost of enormous proportions,” Sherlock told him. “The most logical choice would be a deceased owner of Malvern Mansion. I understand that the bond between a spirit and a place of importance to it is rather strong. I’m not sure how exactly this would work, but I imagine to an angry ghost that has just been summoned out of its eternal sleep”—Sherlock’s ironic tone more than made up for the fact that his face wasn’t brightly lit—“every stranger here would seem like a hostile intruder. In addition, the opportunities of finding personal items through which the ghost could be summoned would be abundant here. They need to contain traces of DNA, I believe? Now, where could we find personal items with traces of DNA in anyone’s home…?” In the dusk the motion of Sherlock’s arm was still quite clear. John was pretty sure he’d pressed his finger to his mouth in a mocking display of wondering out loud. “The bedrooms are on the first floor, together with the bathrooms,” he continued flatly. “If you and your brother weren’t so preoccupied with your emotions, even you would have been able to appreciate that the first floor is far more likely to contain the sort of item we’d be needing probably quite soon.”

There were a few moments of silence after Sherlock’s monologue. “He’s right,” Dean told Sam at last. Sam responded with an indefinite motion of his head. “What do you want to do?” he asked his brother.

Castiel stepped in between the two of them. “We mustn’t waste any more time,” he told them, sounding bossy and irritated. It was as if there were two angels by the name Castiel John had met. This one was Mr. Asshole as Dean and Sam would have probably called him.

“All right, Cas, back off,” Dean said, equally irritated. “You want to get the angel tablet so bad, you go ahead. I want to get it too, but I prefer walking out of here in one piece. We’re not turning this into a suicidal mission. Sherlock’s got a point. If that big ass ghost is what Sam thinks that ritual’s made it, you can just walk right through it, but we’ll all be minced meat. We gotta have something to send it packing.”
He shone his torch at Castiel’s chest, the light enough to illuminate both of their faces. His gaze suddenly turned penetrating the way Sherlock’s was most of the time, only in Dean it was with a different kind of intensity. His next words arrived with a different emotion to them, too, although John found it hard to place it. All he knew it was heartfelt. “Do you really care that little about what’s going to happen to us?” he asked Castiel. “To me? To Sam?”

Castiel’s rich blue eyes had the colour of the ocean after the sun had set. They rested on Dean’s face unblinking; not a muscle twitched on his face, all transformation focused in the gaze. When Castiel spoke the change of his demeanour was palpable. “Of course I care,” he said. He looked at Sam who John realized had once again pulled his trick of being the biggest person in the room and making everyone forget he was there. “How do you plan to proceed?” Cas asked him.

“How about we go up and check for EMF? If it was used to summon up a ghost the object gotta give out a reading.”

“Yeah, all right,” Dean said, perking up. “Good thinking.” He paused. “But once we go up, we split. I’ll go right with crazy over here and you, Cas and John go left. It’s a big place, we gotta move fast, no lingering. We scan quickly, we keep our eyes open. If you find something that’s making the EMF rock and roll, torch it. You know the drill.”

Sam nodded curtly, face focused. “I say we meet at the landing upstairs after fifteen minutes. That way if someone doesn’t show up we’ll know to go looking.”

“Yeah, of course,” Dean said, forlorn. “No cell phone coverage, is there?” He checked his phone quickly. “Damn it.”

“Um, Castiel,” John said. “Do you—Can you hear us here? I mean from a distance?”

“No, only from close proximity,” Castiel replied. “I am not sure whether I’d pick up any call of distress if it was made from the other end of the building.”

“But you would feel Sam’s, ah…call of distress?” John insisted. “Because of the bond?”

He wasn’t sure why everyone looked at him as if he’d invented the wheel. It was common sense.

“Yes,” Castiel said, eyes going to Sam.

“Okay, change of plan.” Dean pointed at Cas. “You’re coming with us. I’d feel better if you were watching out for Sam, but since we’ve got no other ways of communication, you’ll be our special walkie-talkie.”

“I don’t know what that is,” Castiel said, face a little worried. Dean laid a hand on his shoulder heavily. “Doesn’t matter. You hear my brother’s in any trouble, you go to him. Don’t look back, just go. All right, Cas?” There was an unspoken ‘please’ at the end of Dean’s sentence and Castiel’s nod responded to it.

“Good,” Dean said. “Thanks.” His gaze moved to Sam and for a moment John caught a glimpse of the real strength of Dean’s reluctance to part with him—as if trying to tear a really thick book across its pages.

“Watch out,” Sam told his brother quietly. Dean nodded, then looked at Sherlock who’d listened to the conversation from the shadows with his hands deep in his coat pockets. “It’s your lucky day,
sunshine,” Dean told him, turning his back and heading for the big staircase leading to the first floor. “Follow me.”

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Sam and John moved through the rooms quickly, Sam brandishing his EMF meter. Much to John’s relief it hadn’t as much as beeped. He knew this was bad news as far as the mysterious object of the ghost summoning was concerned, but the meter also registered other supernatural activity. Staying quiet meant that they might not have found the object, but the ghost hadn’t found them, either. Or a host of other creatures.

“Would the meter respond to a vampire?” John asked in half-whisper. “Or other monsters that are… well, made of flesh?”

“Vampires, no,” Sam replied, scanning a big bookcase in the third room they’d gone in. John was staying close and keeping watch—they’d come to that unspoken arrangement from the moment they’d split from the group. “It doesn’t get a read on most monsters,” Sam went on. “It does on shifters, but mostly it’s vengeful spirits, spectres, shojo…that kind of thing.”

“What’s a shojo?”

“It’s a sea spirit. You can bind it with a spell box and it makes your wishes come true. Until it all goes wrong, of course.” They’d returned to the corridor. Sam stopped and flashed his torch to the left into a niche, then without looking at John motioned at him to follow. “It’s an alcohol spirit.” He scanned the niche, the meter remaining silent and dark. “You have to be drunk to see it.”

“Are you serious?” John’s smile dwindled and died quickly when Sam turned around and cast him the briefest glance with his, “Absolutely,” then walked past him without further reaction. John squashed the sadness he felt and hurried to keep in step.

The combined light of their torches illuminated their way and the space around them. They were walking along a high and wide corridor, doors to rooms lined up on their left. Most of the doors were open revealing spaces that once again evoked film sets to John’s mind. (He found it ironic that as long as Sam and his world were involved even a very material, historical Scottish mansion created allusions to cinematography. Evidently on some level John still struggled with accepting some things as real.) There was the dust and the ubiquitous thick spiders’ webs. There were the old paintings, some hanging straight or crookedly on the walls, some on the ground. There were the pieces of furniture, long past their glory, some of them unrecognizable in their decrepit state. There was the unmistakable smell of old, the product of time and chemical reactions between a number of things, half of which disgusting.

They reached the end of the corridor without any incidents. John was beginning to have to exercise effort in order to keep himself on his toes—the adrenaline that the eerie quiet and the lack of any activity had spiked up earlier was gone. He knew this state and it was a dangerous one. Engaging with your comrades would have counteracted the lulling of your senses, but if anyone managed to look unapproachable without being rude, it had to be Sam now. He’d just looked at his watch and turned to walk back, once again barely establishing with a quick glance that John was there.

Never to give up easily, John followed him, speaking again. “Is it possible the meter isn’t working?”

“In theory, yes. But it’s working.”
“How do you know?”

“It was working back in Baker Street. It went through the roof to half the items in the box Holmes sent us.”

Knowing they’d re-join the rest of their party soon, John pressed with the question that still occupied his mind the most. “What are you going to do about Crowley?” His eyes travelled across Sam’s wide, dark back and he continued, insistent. “He is waiting for you there; you know that, right? He has to be.”

“We’ll see when we get there.”

John hadn’t planned a confrontation at all; he wouldn’t have thought he was even close to his boiling point, but perhaps it was time to recognize that his temper was not the most predictable thing. His hand shot out and grabbed Sam’s arm, John using the contact as leverage to catch up on their distance then pivot and face Sam, blocking his way.

“Wait…wait,” he said. Sam stopped, looking down at him expectant. John just turned his head stubbornly, emotion blocking his words.

“What?” Sam said.

“Can you stop doing that, please?” John told him in a harsh whisper. “I may not be your brother, but I know you enough to tell that it’s not like you to just…barge in somewhere without any idea what you’re going to do.”

“Maybe you don’t know me that well.”

John stomped on the pang of hurt he felt again, pressing his point. “Fine. I don’t know you that well. But I know you’re not a shoot first, ask questions later sort of a bloke. You think, Sam. Far too much sometimes, remember?”

Sam looked to the wall on his left, his profile turning to stone. “Not this time.”

“Why?” John asked. “What’s different this time?”

A tremble ran through Sam’s whole body as if he was a horse unable to contain itself. He made a rolling motion with his neck and kept looking away. “Crowley.”

“Okay…” John waited for a couple of seconds then added softly, “How?”

He had pointed the light from his torch to the ceiling to avoid flashing it directly in Sam’s face—the last thing he needed was for Sam to feel himself interrogated. It meant that he couldn’t see his features very well, but contrary to what Sam might have thought, he didn’t need to. He knew the specific way Sam’s mouth pursed when it was trying to relieve the tightening of his throat. He was seeing it now.

“Going in, in some sort of Kamikaze mission isn’t going to…” John had started his sentence, but now found himself at a loss about how to continue without being an invasive dick. He started again, his gaze on Sam’s face begging for just a moment of real eye contact. “I’m sorry about Katie,” he said, hoping the kindness he felt was coming across in his lowered voice. He didn’t know how to convey his message without sounding didactical or insensitive. Worst of all, he felt as bad as he did.
when facing Sherlock at his most detached, and Sherlock was the uncrowned champion in that discipline.

Well, saying plainly what you wanted had to do sometimes.

“Can you talk to me?” John said. “Please? This is mad. You can’t just shut down. You can’t go right in, walking into Crowley’s hands. Sam.”

Sam finally met his gaze, the obstinacy in it getting a rise in John straight away.

“I’m doing what needs to be done,” Sam said. “There’s no point crying about it: Crowley’s made his point clear. When we get there you’ll all stay back, all right? I’ll figure this out.”

“Are you even listening to yourself?” John’s voice echoed through the corridor. “I can’t believe I need to—Why do I keep having to explain this to people?”

The question was rhetorical, probably confusing Sam. But there was nothing unclear about the memory of Sherlock’s, “Alone protects me.” It seared through John as if a part of him had momentarily forgotten Sherlock was alive. He had the same thing to say to Sam that he’d told Sherlock back then, only now there was no exasperation behind it.

“You can’t do things alone. You have your brother and you have your friends, Sam. We’re right here. You know, by choice. That’s how you do things. Not alone, but with those around you. That’s your only chance to come out of this alive.” John felt spit dampening his lips with the passion he spoke. He took a deep breath, realizing he was finally looking in Sam’s eyes. He lifted his torch a little to cast more light on his own face. “That’s the chance for all of us to make it out of this alive. It’s all we’ve got, you know.”

Another memory arrived out of the blue, yet with impeccable timing. Murray dragging John’s wounded body to safety. John’s entire being boggled once again at the fact that he was still here today, alive, thanks to someone being by his side on a hot July day years ago and making a choice to help him.

“Not just here,” John told Sam. His lips shook a little with his eagerness to convince. “We’re just… all we have.”

They stood in silence for what felt like an eternity, shadows rolling over Sam’s face like the clouds had over the emotive Scottish autumnal sky.

Suddenly, Sam squinted at the distance over John’s shoulder, spine going taut immediately. John swivelled quickly and saw a figure approaching. It didn’t move in a threatening manner and in a second, John realized the fact that he was able to see the lightness of its clothing meant it was most likely Castiel—the rest of them were all wearing jackets and coats in various shades of black and blue.

“Sam,” Castiel called and John’s chest loosened for an instant, before tightening again. Why was Castiel here? Sam wasn’t in any danger. Or was he? Was John missing something? Perhaps Sherlock and Dean were the ones in danger. The good old sensation of having a bucket of cold water dumped on him accosted John, making his heart speed up.

“Cas?” Sam’s voice was urgent too. “What’s going on?”
Castiel was now several steps away from them, the light from his torch dancing with the movements of his hand. His features came into a clearer view: their solemnity turning into something fierce in a blink of an eye just as John registered a sound. His brain found its source, interpreted it, then flushed out a plan of action through its circuits all within the space of two seconds. The moment Castiel was within reach John took out his gun and shot him in the heart.

He heard Sam’s audible, shocked intake of breath, but didn’t turn around, eyes following the figure dropping on its knees then keeling sideways onto the floor. Sam was down beside it in a beat, shining light over its peaceful features. John stared at the back of Sam’s head, doubt and terror freezing him. He knew that what he’d done had seemed logical to his adrenaline spiked up brain, but what if he’d miscalculated? What if he’d missed something vital? What did he know about any of this anyway?

Sam switched off the EMF meter, the return of complete silence blanketing John with coolness and calm. He observed Sam lift the eyelid of the body’s right eye and shine his torch to it. No response in the pupil; the iris was no longer blue, but an indefinite muddy colour with a glaze to it, like a polished gemstone. The spotlight continued to explore the figure until it stopped at its hand. There was a silver blade clutched in it.

Sam didn’t get up, just shuffled to look back and up to John. “Quick thinking,” he said softly.

John discovered he didn’t even need to clear his throat. “Good thing you got me to load my gun with silver bullets. I reckoned if it was Castiel, he wouldn’t have died anyway.”

“Would’ve put quite a strain on your relationship, though,” Sam said, standing up and giving John a little amused eyebrow action.

John tucked in his gun safely at the back of his jeans. “We’re not that close anyway,” he said. “It was worth the risk.” He returned Sam’s small smile briefly, then looked around him down at the Castiel-like creature. “So that’s a shapeshifter.”

Sam hummed, gaze travelling over the figure. “It means it saw Cas from close enough. We don’t know how many others there might be.” He switched on the EMF meter again, the beeping sound that had alerted John and probably saved both of their lives filling in the air dutifully. “Come on,” Sam said. “Let’s make a move.”

Chapter End Notes

For anyone who might be interested in my post OGAM-verse unusual side project, it can be found here—I’ve been updating it sometimes daily. I call it ‘A Gift-in-Progress’, but it’s actually my effort to say thank you to the lovely frozen_delight who won my help_syria auction.♥ She has a thing for Sherlock/Dean and to quote Sherlock, "How can I refuse?"
Even before they reached the landing where they were all supposed to meet Sam knew that Dean, Sherlock and Castiel wouldn't be there. His and John's encounter with the shapeshifter was hint enough, but the terrible screeching sound coming from nearby was a dead giveaway that something had gone wrong.

“What was that?” John shouted when they were running again, the sound so piercing it had made them stop with their hands pressed over their ears.

“A banshee,” Sam called back, passing their rendezvous point and running down to the corridor at the end of the landing. He was very grateful for the fact that the first floor was made up of two mirroring sections. After exploring the first Sam was confident he'd be able to find his bearings in the second even in darkness.


Sam stopped abruptly at the start of the corridor, John smacking against his back a couple of seconds later. There were a hundred scenarios where they never made it past the first door if they stormed through blindly, so Sam forced himself to hold still against the hysterical need to rush to Dean's aid.

“Banshees are death omens,” he told John. Under the combined work of both their flashlights the corridor revealed itself to be empty, but there were noises of commotion coming from its far end.

“Eat people too,” Sam added as he darted forward again, John on his heels.

The screeching had grown more distant, but that only made Sam's heart sink. If banshees were evil they took people; traditionally children, but who knew what things had mutated here.

“Sam, watch out!”

For a split second Sam was disoriented, such was the feeling of danger coming from any and all directions in the blackness. A whooshing sound from the right—the kind something massive jumping through air made—had him drop on the ground without thinking, rolling away. He caught a pair of bright red eyes in his peripheral vision and then a big, foul-smelling form landed on four legs where he had been standing.

Three gunshots echoed in the air making the form emit a guttural, low noise; it jerked and all but flipped in the air until it finally arrived back on the floor in a heap. Sam couldn’t tell when he’d moved—the next thing he was aware of was retracting his knife from the creature's chest, the blood standing out almost black against the silver of the blade.

“What’s that?” John asked above him, a little high-pitched, his gun still in his hand.

Sam illuminated first the head then the body of the monster. “Some kind of…gorilla werewolf,” he
said, unsure. The silver had worked to kill it; coupled with the wolf-like head it had to be a werewolf. The torso was that of a massive gorilla, though. “Never seen anything like it,” he added, mind racing while his eyes ran over the creature again. Whatever this was, it had already been in bad shape from an encounter with a hostile party. “Come on,” he told John and plunged down the corridor again, all of his hunter’s instincts on red alert.

The noises of fight were already loud when Sam saw faint light coming from the open door of the room before last. He skidded as he took a right turn into it. There were hardly any pointers about what was happening, but Sam would have known his brother even in pitch black, especially when he was being cornered by a massive black dog on a slow prowl. Moonlight was streaming through the window next to Dean, giving an eerie white shine on the dog’s fur. The moonlight seemed to bounce off its outline, making it impossibly transparent, too—

Sam knew what the creature was without ever seeing one with his own eyes. He’d heard the descriptions slurred out of Dean’s drunken mouth once or twice in his post-Hell months; he’d seen drawings in books. But beyond that, in his heart he recognized the monster that had left his brother a dead, lacerated mess in Sam’s arms, while Dean’s soul had been dragged to Hell.

This was Crowley’s bitch, here to kill everyone else and drag Sam to her master. Bathed in the blood of a Hellhound, flashed through his mind and in a split second he knew what he had to do. It might be too dangerous, but if Sam survived not only would he have saved his brother, but also moved a step closer to completing the first trial of the demon tablet.

He was on the floor for the second time in less than a minute, clutching the handle of his blade as it hid under his jacket. “Hey,” he shouted, his voice rising in the high ceilinged room like a foghorn of fury. “You looking for me?”

The dog’s head had whipped around immediately and Sam was faced with a shimmering black shape, the eyes the only thing that seemed material—they were two slits glowing in red. A growl came as if through a tube then it turned to deep, savage barks. Dean’s “Sam no!” was barely heard above them just as the hellhound bounded towards Sam. He watched it in a string of warped milliseconds, biding his time, biding; firm against the onslaught of his survival instinct, screaming at him to pull out that knife.

He did as the hellhound’s last leap landed it right over his stretched out body, its snarling deafening. A huge paw lifted above his chest; Sam grabbed the beast by its powerful throat and plunged the knife in its belly, tearing upward through flesh. He gagged and sputtered, head turning away as the black goo of the hound’s blood poured over him. He squirmed upward on his back, but not in time, the hound dropping on him like the dead weight it was. Then Dean was there, rolling it away, hauling Sam up to his feet and dragging him toward the window. Sam stumbled, overcome with the smell and tried not to fall forward. Dean supported him; a moment later they were bathed in ghostly moonlight, Dean’s frantic hands running over Sam’s chest, before taking hold of his chin and turning it left and right, examining his face and throat.

“I’m all right,” Sam wheezed. “I’m all right.” He grabbed Dean’s wrists and tugged them apart, making Dean open his arms with a hiss. Sam’s stomach dropped at that and at the terrible stench wafting out of Dean as well. Maybe the complete and utter ruin of his upper body clothing was responsible for it, but Sam couldn’t tell what wounds hid underneath.

“’mokay,” Dean muttered to his unspoken question.

“You sure,” Sam asked, lowering his face to stare intently at him. Dean nodded. “Yeah. That’s just
spleen juice and some…monster vomit.” He quickly discarded his jacket and shirt, then reached behind with both hands and took off his t-shirt over his head. For a moment they just stood there looking at each other, numb, then the rest of the world crashed into awareness, making Sam’s heart drop again. John! Cas and Sherlock! He realized the room had been quiet for some indefinite time just as he spun around to look for his friends. Soft steps made him pull out his gun quickly.

“It’s us,” John called and a moment later appeared by the window, a slightly roughened up Sherlock by his side. Sam’s gun holding hand dropped by his body and he took another deep breath of relief. “Where’s Cas?” he asked, looking around.

Dean shook his head. “I think he said your name and just froze, then when I looked again he was gone. We were fighting some Leviathans, and thank God there was only one left by the time Cas checked out. Dude, I swear, this is like a freaking ‘Who’s who’ in Monsterland. There are crocottas —”

“What are Crocottas?” John asked, continuing quickly. “Oh, hang on. Was that the one that calls you on the phone?”

“Yeah,” Sam replied distractedly, simmering with unease. That had been a shifter back there, not Cas. Or…? “Uh, no,” he corrected himself. “Not just the phone, could be ‘live’ too. It mimics the voice of your loved ones to lure you into a trap and then sucks out your soul.”

John’s silence was loud enough for Sam to take notice. “What?”

“Maybe… I don’t know. Is it possible Castiel was called by one of them?” John frowned to himself. “You said angels have grace. Do they have souls?”

“All right, one at a time,” Dean said. “Cas is a big boy—no crocotta would be a match for him, soul or no soul. But you got a point, in which case we know he’d go to Sam’s help and he can be trusted.”

Sherlock’s eye roll was timed quite well: it occurred exactly when everyone looked at him after his loud tsk.

“These are inferences and rather poor ones at that,” he said, then turned to Sam and John, not waiting for any reply from Dean. “Did you find anything? The object?”

“No,” Sam said. “You?”

“Nothing,” Dean said. “The EMF did the boogie a couple of times, but not for an object. Once for the crocottas —”

Sherlock sniffed derisively.

“What?” Dean snapped at him.

“I’m just expressing my gratitude for that little device of yours. You were walking right into that creature’s trap.”

“Oh, like you weren’t!” Dean’s sudden change of expression irresistibly reminded Sam of what his brother used to look like when they bickered as children. “John! John!” Dean called in a high-pitched falsetto in what Sam understood to be an attempt at mimicry.
Sherlock turned to John. “The creatures sounded like you and Sam, both quite convincing,” he said coolly. “At least I stopped and didn’t try to throw myself into a pitch black room just because my brother was calling my name.”

John’s snort would have startled pigeons into flight. Sherlock narrowed his eyes at him, but didn’t speak further.

“So,” Dean turned to Sam, giving Sherlock the finger. “We got the crocottas and then the EMF spiked up again when we got to the… I don’t know, man, I think it was a vanir. It looked like a wooden art thing, engraved with writings, and then it came alive and right at us. Chased us to here.” Dean made an expansive gesture with his right hand, then quickly flinched and tucked it closer to his body. “I torched it; it went up in this… sparkly smoke.” He sniffed the air. “Nothing’s left of it.” He shook his head in resignation at ever succeeding to get all the sub-variations of supernatural species. Sam hadn’t come across any lore that said vanirs went up in sparks and left no traces of smell. Either this was a sub-species or his suspicions that the monsters here had mutated over time were being confirmed.

“I mean, I’m scared to go down that underground tunnel,” Dean was going on, eyes turning rounder. Sam knew very well his brother was nowhere near really scared, but for him to voice it out was tantamount of giving a warning shot that he was getting there. “Leviathans, crocottas, banshees…” Dean ran a hand over his mouth. “I’m waiting for the witches next and oh yeah—the freaking genies!”

“A genie is…” Sam began duly turning to Sherlock and John, but saw John nod. “I remember that one. Hard not to with all the popular culture references to it.”

“Well,” Dean said, “try not to forget they’re nothing like the fat blue goofball from ‘Aladdin’. They feed off your juice; actually drink your blood and all the while you’re stuck in your perfect dream world they shoved in your head.” Dean grimaced in indignation. “As for the witches, those are just nasty. They pull all kinds of crap on you, half of which is deadly. One moment you’re talking, next you’re spitting pins.” Dean shuddered. “All right, enough with the recap.” He turned to Sam. “You came across anything?”

“Just a shifter. It looked like Cas. John shot it.”

“Don’t forget the wolverine gorilla,” John prompted. “Sorry, werewolf gorilla.”

A jolt went through Dean. “What? Those are here too? Son of a bitch!” He couldn’t contain himself anymore and made a few steps back and forth, hand going through his hair. “I saw those in Purgatory, Sam. Never seen one out here before.”

John pointed towards the other end of the room that was barely illuminated through another window. “There’s another one dead over there,” he said. “It was in better shape than the one that attacked you,” he added to Sam.

“Well, let’s hope they were only a pair,” Sam said, head turning to the right where the corpse of the hellhound was visible on the floor. “Dean…” He could feel himself frown, fingers rolling with tension. “You were able to see it? The hellhound.”

“Yeah.” Sam knew he hadn’t imagined the ominous curtness in his brother’s reply.
“Wait,” John said. “I can see it too. Sherlock?”

Sherlock nodded once. “What does that mean?” John asked. Sam could practically hear his throat go dry. “Is that another death omen?”

“No,” Dean replied. “But you’re supposed to see a Hellhound only when they come to collect on your deal. They’re invisible to everyone else.” He walked over to his flashlight that must have been knocked out of his hand and was now on the floor, beam pointing to the wall. Dean picked it up and crouched down to the hellhound. Sherlock joined him, John and Sam on the other side.

“Can I touch it?” John’s question had just died on his lips when Sherlock reached out and ran his fingers over the dog’s neck then rubbed them together. The body still seemed to shimmer, or rather the part of it that was hit by moonbeams. The rest was a very dark shape that looked as if it was made of half-transparent particles, which appeared to ripple from time to time. Sherlock stretched out his hand to John, palm open and empty, eyes not leaving the hellhound’s body. John put his flashlight in his hand, but Sherlock was more interested in examining his fingers first, before pointing the light down.

“Anything?” John asked in a few seconds.

“It seems real,” Sherlock said, turning to Dean. “Does it look the way you remember it?”

“Yes. Well, back when it came for me it was bright as day, but yeah: same cuddly.” Dean shifted his weight onto his other leg, hand going to one of his jeans back pockets. He produced a small piece of paper, opening it and smoothing it out over his thigh. Even looking at it upside down Sam was able to see the few symbols on it were in Enochian.

“What’s this?” he asked.

Dean’s lowered gaze seemed very deliberate to Sam. He didn’t reply, either; he just quietly murmured to himself, “Here we go,” and spoke very clearly. “Kah-nuh-ahm-dahr.”

A few seconds of complete silence followed his words with nothing as much as a whisper across the room. The spell kept running through Sam’s head as if he was unconsciously trying to commit it to memory. The words joined together one by one, then it was the next dot’s turn: the smell of hellhound blood...and Sam knew what Dean was doing.

Just like he knew it wouldn’t work.

“How long have you had this?” Sam asked looking up, anger effervescent in his voice. “Dean?”

For a second he thought his brother would just pretend he hadn’t heard him; twist his way out, because no matter how many times Sam had proven to him that only epic crap came out of his stupid strategy of avoidance, it was like drawing water in a sieve with Dean.

“Couple of days,” came the reply. Sam was completely thrown for a loop by the plain serving of the truth; then the outrage came, making stars dance in front of his eyes, until finally hurt’s skeleton hands crawled over Sam’s shoulders, sliding down his chest. The result was that he just crouched there, gobsmacked, but judging by the way Dean’s face solidified into defensiveness, he’d had no trouble interpreting every nuance in Sam’s silence.
Sam sprang to his feet, nearly knocking John off balance. Sherlock glided around to stand by John’s side, leaving Sam and Dean facing each other over the body of a dead Hellhound.

“How could you not tell me, Dean?” Sam burst out. “How the hell could you keep this a secret from me?”

“Because I knew you’d want to do this.” Dean spoke with gravitas, as if he was not four but forty years older than Sam.

“So what, you decided I can’t?!” Sam was shaking his head, disappointed and incredulous, the feeling lemon-bitter and sour, both. “You’ve got no right to make that decision for me, Dean!”

“Of course I’ve got the right!” Dean was matching the loudness of his voice now. “I’m not going to watch you die again, Sam.” He sounded almost threatening. “I’ve bargained all I can. No one wants a second-hand soul, no one would deal if you died—”

“Who says I’m going to die?”

His words stopped Dean who watched him for a few moments, breathing heavily. His jaw bunched up, his frustration with Sam battling with a host of emotions that Dean was struggling to articulate. Sam saw a clearing, something mellow flashing for an instant; and it was all he needed. His brother didn’t trust him to do the job—that was fine. It wasn’t anything Sam wouldn’t have expected if he’d stopped to think about Dean’s shifty expression the other day when he’d returned from the basement flat without Castiel. Cas must have given him the spell for the first trial and it had just stayed there, in Dean’s pockets. Not a word to Sam. Dean’s idea of protecting him, probably.

Didn’t matter. Sam just had to slide in, disarm Dean with manipulation if he had to, then do the goddamn trials and for once not let his brother shoulder one for him.

“Look,” he said, his hand coming in front of him, splayed wide. “I know you think this is going to end bad, but it doesn’t have to. I can do this.” He could feel his eyes itch with the effort to beg out trust and exude certainty. “We can do it together, all right? I’ll do the trials, but I need you behind me on this, Dean—”

“And I need you to be safe,” Dean cut in, levelled and firm. “That’s all I need.”

“Safe? We’re never safe, Dean. When have we ever been safe? This is what we do. It’s our job, remember? I’ve been told this since—” Sam stopped himself in time before he went on a guilt trip trajectory. Dean didn’t deserve it and besides, he was already looking at Sam as if the matter of who got to live and who to sacrifice himself was done and dusted. “We’re going to be all right,” Sam said, calm and coaxing. “We’ll find a way.”

Dean was shaking his head. “It’s different this time.”

“How?“

“Because this isn’t just our hunt of the week, Sam.” Dean was so composed that Sam failed to entertain even a momentary illusion it might be for a show. “This is God we’re talking about. He’s the one who put this game together, his three-obstacle course. We’ve been down roads like this before. With Yellow-Eyes. Lucifer. Dick friggin' Roman.”
This was the real deal. His brother had thought this through and made up his mind, wasn’t even fucking kicking against it. “We both know where this ends,” Dean said. “One of us dies. Or worse.”

Rebellion rose again in Sam. It didn’t matter whether it was against Dean deciding on his behalf or against him pulling the protective crap on Sam again that meant Sam got to be the one left behind.

“So, what?” he asked Dean aggressively. “You just decided it’s going to be you?”

But Dean didn’t take the bait. He looked at Sam and it was pure Dean, amplified by care and acceptance. “I’m a grunt, Sammy. You’re not. You’ve always been the brains of this operation.”

“Dean—”

“No, hear me out, okay? You’ve always seen a way out. You’ve always chased towards the light at the end of this ugly-ass tunnel. I don’t see it. I don’t know it’s there.” Dean’s expression transformed to resolution. “But I tell you what I do know—it’s that I’m going to die with a gun in my hand. Because that’s what I have waiting for me—that’s all I have waiting for me. I want you to get out. I want you to have a life. You, with a wife and kids and, and grandkids, living until you’re fat and bald and chugging Viagra. That’s my perfect ending.” Dean paused, something melancholy fluttering over his face, vociferous and tragic enough to be seen even the dark. “It’s the only one that I’m going to get,” Dean said with finality. “So yeah, I’m doing this and I’m doing it alone.”

Reality returned to Sam again, before he’d even become aware he’d blotted it out, leaving just himself and his idiot of a brother. The scantly lit room of a Scottish mansion was still their scene. The Hellhound was still at their feet, like a big straw for Sam to clutch at. John and Sherlock were still there, too, listening avidly.

Sam swallowed. “So it’s a suicide mission for you,” he told Dean softly.

“Sam...”

“I want to slam Hell shut, too, okay?” Sam spoke in a rush. The coldness of the room seeped into him without petrifying him, just cooling him down into assuredness. “But I want to survive it. I want to live, and so should you. You have friends up here, family. And you’re right—I see light at the end of this tunnel. And I'm sorry you don't; I am. But it's there. And if you come with me, I can take you to it.” Even if it means leaving you there; alone but alive and free.

Dean still had that grown-up expression. “Sam, be smart.”

“I am smart.” Sam seized his chance to get some things straight for Dean. “And so are you. You're not a grunt, Dean. You're a genius! When it comes to lore, to...” Years of justified adoration unfurled in Sam like a forest of exotic flowers opening up in synchrony, but the feeling wasn’t euphoric. Often, there was nothing dramatic about the truth. “You're the best damn hunter I have ever seen,” he told his brother. “Better than me. Better than Dad.” Sam took a breath, feeling feather-light and so damn right, it almost made everything good. “I believe in you, Dean. I can do this without you, but I don’t want to. So, please...Please, believe in me, too.”

When Dean slapped the piece of paper into his hand Sam wondered how he’d ever doubted there would be any other outcome of their conversation.

He breathed in and closed his eyes, not needing to see the symbols. “Kah-nuh-ahm-dahr.”
Hot lava seemed to sizzle through him, making him drop on his knees abruptly and moan with the pain. Behind him he could hear Dean’s urgent, “Sam?” then sensed movement on his left. John, Dean’s voice stopping him: “No! Don’t touch him.”

The pain was manic; edgy and deceptive in its promise that it’d be gone any second now, but pulsing on and on as if it was trying to burn his blood into liquid gold. Sam grunted, propping himself on his hands and suddenly his blood was turning into something: bright light made the veins in his right hand glow, spreading up to take over his lower arm. For an instant every cell in Sam tried to disintegrate, while he fought to remember who he was, what he was—

“Sammy!” Dean.

Abruptly all noise and light disappeared, taking away the pain. Sam was left panting and staring at his very human, barely visible hand, the white spot of the paper with the spell right next to it. He flexed his hand experimentally—nothing. There was an echo of something different in him, like the merest scratch at the back of the throat promising a nasty cold, only a scratch running through his DNA.

“Sammy, you okay?” Dean was by him now on his left, John close and silent on his right.

“I'm good,” Sam said automatically, getting up. Both pair of eyes searched his face, their concern rushing words out of Sam’s mouth. “I'm okay.” John checked his pulse and Sam was by the window once more, examined by a doctor this time. He looked at Dean, flinching inwardly at the regret, doubt and self-flagellation he knew were already happening behind closed doors. He took a deep breath, face relaxing with the purification of new oxygen. “I can do this,” he said.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong,” John said, unconvinced. “Just an elevated pulse.”

A fluttering noise right behind Sam made him turn sharply and come almost nose to nose with Castiel. He took an instinctive step back, but not out of fear—Cas's face was open and filled with as much emotion as Sam had ever seen on it. Castiel's hands shot up, grabbing Sam by his shoulders and making him look down at where he was held; that was something Cas did even more rarely than emotions.

“Sam. You’re alive.” Cas sounded almost awed in his relief.

“Yeah, um. I am.” He shook his head, frowning. “Why?”

“What’s going on, Cas?” Dean stood by Sam, flashlight illuminating the scene a little better. Sherlock and John shuffled in closer, too, or rather John. Sherlock stood right behind him, eyes glinting left and right between all their faces. Sam wondered whether the guy ever blinked.

Cas had taken off his hands from Sam's shoulders and stepped back, too, expression turning serious. “I was tricked. I saw you dead outside the chapel’s door.” He paused. “Your heart was missing from your chest.”

“Jesus,” John murmured. “Was it a shapeshifter?”

“No shapeshifter is powerful enough to have access to an angel’s mind,” Castiel told him, returning his gaze to Sam. “I felt your pain,” he added simply.

Sam shot Dean the most inconspicuous glance he could under the circumstances. He knew one
creature who had access to an angel’s mind: another angel, of the higher echelons. Was it Naomi? Couldn’t she just command Cas to leave if she wanted him out? Maybe she didn’t trust he would obey. Why would she want him out?

Only one answer came readily in the absence of more data. Sam didn’t like it at all, but Occam’s razor wasn’t there to make people feel good. It was Naomi and she’d done it, because she wanted everyone else out of the picture. If John hadn’t been quick that shifter would have killed him. With Castiel out, Sherlock and Dean would have died, too—Sam and John had arrived to help them in the nick of time. In one instant all of Sam’s support would have been gone, leaving him alone with Naomi’s soldier.

It took a second to figure it out, but Sam still spoke kindly to Cas—his genuine gladness at seeing Sam alive earned him that. “I’m okay,” he said. He found no bitterness about Castiel giving Dean the spell from Kevin, either. It wasn’t the first time Castiel had been entangled in their stupid lies. “My own experience shows that keeping secrets isn’t very wise.” Sam had no right to blame Cas for his and Dean’s mess.

He caught him up instead. “We just did the first trial.”

“Yes.” Cas nodded gravely. “I felt that too.”

“You did?” Worry was already worming itself up to Sam’s features, threatening exposure. What if Cas told Dean about the excruciating pain, or about how annihilating the light coursing through Sam’s veins had felt?

Cas nodded, holding Sam’s gaze. “The might of it was considerable, Sam. The energy rippled through every atom in a radius of ten miles.” He didn’t continue. Either he hadn’t tapped into the pain or he’d kept his word that he wouldn’t ‘eavesdrop’ on Sam’s experiences. Or he was being discreet. Sam was okay with any of those explanations.

“Oh, that’s freaking awesome,” Dean grumbled. “Is he okay?” he asked Cas, without looking at Sam.

Castiel’s eyes flicked to Sam then returned to Dean. “The word of God is in him,” he said cryptically, then at Dean’s stormy expression hurried to add. “Right now I don’t perceive anything permanently damaged.”

Dean looked so far from reassured, Sam could see them standing around all day having a pointless conversation.

“How about we make a move?” he said. “Crowley’s still waiting and so’s the angel tablet.”

“Okay,” Dean said in a beat, flat and defeated. “Let me get my bag and we can get going.” The rucksack was close to where Dean had found his flashlight. Sam was just wondering whether there were any spare items of clothing in there or he’d have to give Dean his shirt, when Dean settled the bag over his shoulder, hands wrapping around his body and rubbing at his bare upper arms unselfconsciously.

Next to John Sherlock unfroze. He took off his coat, giving it to John without a word, then shrugged out of his suit jacket and handed it to Dean. “It should fit,” he said evenly. When Dean just stared, he added in a dry rumble, “It would be rather anti-climactic to have ‘the best damn hunter’ die of complications from bronchitis, wouldn’t it?”
Dean took the jacket and put it on, rolling his shoulders. It seemed a bit tight there as well as around his biceps. He tried to close it at the front, but left it open in the end. He would have looked like a bad boy rock star: the spiked hair, the cuts and bruises, the faded jeans, not to mention the jacket over the naked torso, his anti-possession tattoo peaking out of a lapel; the final touch provided by the silver string and the dark cord around his neck, both having amulets hanging from them. Would have, if it weren’t for the slightly dork-like look on his face the result of his features being unsure which direction to take. Sam was sure there was a ‘thanks’ muttered in there that didn’t sound especially cocky, either.

John handed Sherlock his coat back. “Good thing you picked up boxing again,” he said. It was his eyes’ turn to glint in the dark; the subtle mischievousness in his voice grounded Sam, making his lips twitch and his spirits lift.

Sherlock shot John one of his enigmatic glances. He was wearing his black shirt and with his coat being dark as well, he was melting into the background in a way that was both useful and a little unsettling. He lifted his own backpack and slid it over his right shoulder, the gesture unhurried and elegant. “Shall we?” he asked politely as if he was suggesting they retreat to the cigar room after a lavish dinner.

Well, they were in a mansion. Sam had to boggle at his life sometimes.

There was something terribly sincere and a little reckless in the way Dean huffed, flashing a crooked grin at Sherlock out of nowhere. He wiped the corner of his split bottom lip with the back of his hand.

“Let’s,” he said, already moving.

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Their journey through the ground floor was moderately uneventful with just a few vampires coming at them. There was also the ghost of the girl, of course: wavy hair all the way down to her waist, hardly older than fourteen, dressed in a yellowish frilly nightgown. She followed them around with a sullen expression, but the worst she did was to float directly through them and make them shiver. Sam tried communicating with her without much success, then John had a go, until Cas whispered something in her ear, making her brighten up a little, nod and then flicker off.

Dean was way more crept out by her than by killing vampires and Sam didn’t want to think how John and Sherlock were re-evaluating both him and Dean in this new set of circumstances. (Well, John really; weirdness-wise Sherlock was right up there with them.) There was a moment during the fight with the vampires—Sam launched himself at the one going for Dean’s throat and fought him off his brother, then went on fighting and losing, the bloodsucker having the advantage of the better sight in the dark. This went on until Dean stumbled back from somewhere with a wire, wrapped it quickly around the vamp’s throat and the two of them pulled at both ends until it decapitated him.

“Sammy, we totally Gordoned that bastard,” Dean threw in his direction, while Sam stripped quickly and used one of his t-shirts to wipe his neck and chest clean from another creature’s blood. That was exactly the kind of thing he recoiled from imagining how John would interpret. He didn’t reply to Dean, just put his clothes back on, pushed his fists in his jacket pockets, bunched up his shoulders, and hoped against all odds the gestures still made him virtually disappear. (That trick used to work when Sam was a small teen in his big brother’s hand-me-downs; it didn’t mean he felt less of a freak. Neither then, nor now.) He always found it disconcerting to be reminded that under certain
circumstances he was a step away from the monsters he hunted—such as the incident Dean was referring to when Sam had single-handedly beheaded Gordon Walker using a barbed wire.

Their EMF meters remained silent, giving out the briefest beeps and winks only once in a while, probably due to some residual traces left from a spectre or a shifter. The equipment was totally dead to anything that could potentially serve as a summoning object. They waved them near things that could contain some microscopic traces of DNA such as a few cushions or a pair of gloves Sherlock identified as riding ones, but the meters’ response was zilch. Sam’s consolation was that at least they were inspecting the place while moving towards the hidden underground passage.

“Whoever summoned the ghost could have hidden the object, right?” John asked.

“Yeah,” Sam confessed reluctantly. “It still has to be here, though, to keep the ghost tied to the place.”

“I ain’t seeing no ghost,” Dean contributed, his flashlight travelling over a few wild animals’ heads on a wall. “And I’m pretty sure my nipples are extra perky only because it’s freaking cold.” He headed towards the far end of the room—the biggest room yet and the one with most of the furniture and items in it preserved, if in a bad state. “There’s no scratching in the walls, no flickering lights.” Dean turned to face Sam. “Maybe it didn’t work. You know, they tried to do that ancient steroid ghost trick, but they didn’t have the right mojo.”

Sam scoffed. “Yeah, because we always have it the easy way.”

“Don’t be such a—Whoa.” Dean’s eyes widened and he lifted his active EMF meter. They looked at each other, on guard and excited, then Dean’s face fell as his gaze went to a point behind Sam’s shoulder. “Great. Rapunzel’s back.” Sam didn’t need to turn around to know he was talking about the girl. “Cas,” Dean called. “Come and do your Jennifer Love Hewitt thing.”

“I don’t understand that reference,” Cas replied in a moment, absorbed by feeling around inside what appeared to be a sewing basket.

“The ghost girl is back,” Sam translated.

“I can’t force her to leave,” Cas said, still not lifting his eyes from his ‘treasure’. He’d been great help in combat, but none in their search, being far too engrossed with random examples of humanity in its daily life. “She likes it here,” he added. “I promised her we’d be gone soon. She is just checking how long we’ll be.”

“Dude, we gotta do something,” Dean all but hissed at Sam from very close. Sam frowned down at him in suspicion—it looked like his heroic brother was manoeuvring himself to hide from the girl’s view using Sam’s chest.

Sam twisted his neck to look at her. She held his gaze and he wouldn’t swear on it, but her lips pursed discontentedly.

“I don’t know, Dean,” he said. “Does she look tormented to you?”

“She doesn’t look happy!”

“She’s a teenager,” John said, having just joined them after inspecting a big half-empty cabinet with ornaments. He handed Sam his EMF meter back. “Not a peep.” Sherlock swam in from the
darkness, too, pale and a little pouty—the parallels with Rapunzel were not lost on Sam.

“She’s giving me the jitters,” Dean said, preparing himself to continue, but Sam shoved him towards the oval niche on their left. “Just…come on. Ignore her.”

The trouble was that with her around they couldn’t say whether the meters were reacting to her presence or to an object. There was a clear reading on an old book, a broken pince-nez, a rag, three paintings and another sample of taxidermy in the shape of a small dog. It was a pure breed and a fine sample of its kind: a Yorkshire terrier.

“Man, I hate those.” Dean regarded the dog with distrust, face suggesting he had an aversion to all Yorkies. His beam travelled over it, making the lighter browns in the fur turn reddish even under the dust. The dog seemed to be staring at them. It was a little cute, actually, although Sam was never going to voice that out.

“Hey, weren’t they supposed to stuff only the animals they hunted?” Dean asked. “You know, back in the day. Who’d want to have that little fleabag immortalized?”

“This is unusual,” Sherlock confirmed. “But then again people do become inexplicably attached to dogs and cats and…” He waved his free hand, the gesture serving as an end to his sentence. “She was obviously the apple of her owner’s eye.”

Dean moved his light to Sherlock’s face, making him step back with an annoyed twitch and lift his hand to block the invasion of brightness into his pupils. “How do you know that?” Dean asked, continuing in more hushed tones. “And I’m going to pretend you didn’t just notice it was a girl.”

“I notice everything.” Sherlock said matter-of-factly. “For example, the fact that there are at least three portraits of her owner where she’s depicted by his side.” His next words came out a little bitchy. “I’d forgive you your typical lack of observation if we weren’t standing in front of the third: this one of the unhappy family.”

John pointed his flashlight to the medium size painting on the wall above and behind the dog. Sure enough, the man who Sam had seen on a few portraits upstairs was portrayed standing and holding the same dog, a slender woman by his side.

Dean moved closer, reading out loud, “Archibald Boyle, 5th Earl of Argyll; Countess of Argyll.” He tilted his head a little. “What, no mention of Toto?”

“Why do you call everyone Toto?” Sherlock asked, genuinely perplexed.

Dean just cast him a pitying glance over his shoulder then returned his attention to the painting. “If we make it out of here,” he said a little distractedly, “we’re all having a girls’ night in and watching ‘The Wizard of Oz’.”

“That’s not a chick flick, Dean,” Sam told him, despairing of his brother’s ignorance. “It’s a classic series of books that—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know what they are.” Dean gave out a little snort of amusement. “Hey, check it out. It’s true what they say: owners and their pets do look alike. Look at those gingers.” He moved his light back to the poor dog that Sam privately decided looked far better dead than alive, its fur filthy but otherwise immaculate. The painter had obviously been one for realism, portraying the dog in all its shedding glory and the woman looked too bug-eyed for words. Dean was right, though: there was
some similarity between the Earl and his pet.

“Who’s the gay dude anyway?” Dean asked. Sam started to scowl, then rebuked himself for his double-standards. They were all thinking it. The fan of realism had portrayed the husband as so gay his camp wrists could have served as a crest on a rainbow flag.

“You know the answer,” Sherlock said. “Can you at least try to be less lazy?”

Dean swung around, but rather than biting his demeanour was easy-going. “Hey, we’ve got you to do that for us now. Usually it’s me and Sam trying to work out shit while something’s trying to kill us. Or eat us. It’s a vacation for us with you around.” He wriggled his eyebrows at Sherlock, before continuing, more serious. “Is this one of the owners of this place? You think he’ll come after us?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said and it was his turn to have a go at the childish face. “Will it bother you to be chased by a gay ghost?” He swirled dramatically in his coat and walked around to look closer at the dog from its other side.

“No,” Dean replied to his back belatedly, and a little lamely. He stomped over to Cas; a second later a quiet murmur was heard from their end.

They left the room empty-handed apart from having the possible identity of a possible ghost. Sherlock had seemed to take interest in a broken musical box, but offered no explanations as to why and put it back in its place.

At long last they reached the entrance to the secret underground passage only to discover that while Malvern Mansion had exceeded itself in size, this here was kind of underwhelming. The passage was neither so secret nor exactly underground. The entrance turned out to be a simple stone slab on the floor, clearly marked with a big rusty iron hoop. Once they lifted it, it revealed a wooden creaky ladder of about ten steps. They had to walk down on them one person at a time for fear it would give out.

“Not that we’ll hurt more than our pride,” John murmured to Sam while the two of them and Cas watched Sherlock descend. “This looks like it’s leading to a cellar. I had a mate in school and they had the same thing in their house. I used to love going round to his; we were always playing there.” John smiled. “I actually found it scary. I was about six.”

“Are you complaining this is not scary enough for you?” Sam asked, his lips also stretching a little in a wry smile. Maybe his concerns about what John would think of him here had been premature.

“No,” John told him, preparing to climb down. He was a few steps down when he stopped looking up. “But I wish Malcolm Carr were here to see me now.”

“All right, move your asses down here,” came Dean’s voice from below and John’s blond head quickly disappeared.

“Humans are always so fascinated with their childhood,” Cas said, meditative. “It’s a shame you have so little self-awareness while you are children.”

Sam was going to ask how he knew that when it hit him: this wasn’t the real Castiel. It was a vessel. Another one of his vessels had been a child, albeit briefly—the daughter of the man he was possessing now. Jimmy Novak, who’d offered himself to become a vessel again, knowing what it meant to have an angel ride you—“An angel inside of you, it's kind of like being chained to a
comet.”—knowing that he was going to die the moment Castiel left him; choosing to never see his family, but keep them alive and free. Castiel was so much Cas to Sam, most of the time he completely forgot this wasn’t remotely close to his true form. This form was Jimmy Novak, who had once been a child, too, unaware of himself; unaware that one day he would say ‘Yes’ to one of Heaven’s most complicated angels. A rare angel who was kind out of choice; a rebel who was not content to be a good soldier, but who believed in free will. All that was crushed in Castiel right now by some top level, shadow puppeteer bitch.

Sam realized he and Cas were completely alone just as the last drop of fear and mistrust he’d felt drained out of him. It wasn’t about faith after all. It was about understanding. He met Castiel’s interested gaze and gave him a small, sad smile. “True,” he responded, then made his way down the steps.

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Sam didn’t manage to duck this time. One second they were creeping through a dingy, drippy tunnel, the next a pair of blue dots appeared out of nowhere. Eyes was the last thing his mind supplied to him in full lucidity, frantically struggling to add one more thing, a crucial one; then a palm cradling an icy blue flare was pressing against his forehead and he was paralyzed, inside and out.

***

John felt a mighty spasm run up him, full-bodied and cold, then loop back down instantly, stopping half-way through—a sudden weight in John’s stomach as if a python had curled up in there. His brain finally caught up with his surroundings, the images smeared and dancing, but still recognizable: Baker Street. He felt immediately lighter. The angel—John knew that had to be an angel now—had zapped them back to safety at what must have been a perilous moment.

His vision still very blurry, he turned to the tall, dark form next to him and another load of bricks seemed to lift off his chest. John blinked a few times, while goggling and pulling faces, then rubbed at his eyes. When he looked up again he found Sherlock peering down at him, looking as disoriented as John felt. There was no one else in the room. The python slithered back in the pit of his stomach, but then there was noise from the kitchen and Sam’s voice reached him, “John?”

John turned around, swaying. Sam was there in a second, solid and so very warm, supporting him. He could feel Sherlock move closer behind him, too, his body exuding more warmth. Another jolt ran through John, this time like happiness made of caramel.

“Finally,” Sam murmured, hazel eyes lit up.

“Dude, you do not look good.” From behind Sam Dean was making his plump lips even plumper with his half-sympathetic, half-not-so-secretly-gleeful pout at Sherlock. He passed Sherlock a cup of tea; John noticed Sam was holding one out for him.

He took it gratefully, still feeling very out of it. His eyes sluggishly moved down from Sam’s concerned, colourful face—so much colour everywhere, after the darkness of the mansion—then John was lifting the blessed cup to his lips and taking a big gulp from what tasted like the best tea he’d ever had.

He groaned a little. “Thanks,” he said, blinking rapidly again. “What happened?”

“How about we sit down first?” Sam nodded towards the sofa. John turned, eyes going to Sherlock,
who still seemed absent. Dean sighed, took the cup from Sherlock’s hand and gently pushed him in
the direction of his armchair.

“What do you remember?” Sam asked when they were all seated together around the coffee table.
John was already feeling better to have them arranged into the set up that had become something
familiar and comfortable over such a short time.

“Um, we were in that cellar tunnel,” he began slowly. “Then an angel showed up and brought us
back here.” He had felt petrified for a moment at the sight of the white face and the hairless head
covered in weird drawings as if a marker had drawn all over it. Of course, it would have helped if
John had known it was an angel. Eyes had shone in the dark, like two dots on some electronic
equipment, only not coloured in the traditional red, but in intense blue. Then the angel had touched
John’s forehead, eerie blue flares running over his palm like some pocket size electric storm, and
John was back home, safe.

Sam and Dean exchanged a glance.

“What?” he said, gooseflesh rising on his skin despite the merry fire in the fireplace.

Sam’s eyes were at their kindest. “You lost a whole month,” he said carefully and without a moment
hesitation John believed it. It felt like he’d lost a month; it still felt so surreal, he’d have believed he’d
lost a year.

“How?” Sherlock asked, making John’s vision clear at last at hearing him speak.

“That wasn’t just an angel,” Dean said. “It was… I guess he was a messenger of God.”

“Their power is immense,” Sam continued. “To them a month is a fraction of a second. You could
say your one actually did quite well.”

“Our one?” John asked, then went on in a hurry, mind finally stirring to some proper action. “How
long have you been here?”

“Three to four days.” It was Sherlock who’d replied, leaving Dean’s mouth to catch flies. “Look at
their eyes,” Sherlock told John, confident despite the barest hint of a slur. “The dark circles and the
bags, or rather how they’ve diminished. Only sleep can do that, nothing else. Look at their shoulders,
too, the way they’re holding their bodies, especially Dean.”

Dean closed his mouth at last, lips trembling and eyes growing big; he tried to look himself up and
down. The right corner of Sherlock’s mouth tugged upward, a little conceited, announcing he was
firmly on the way back to being himself.

“They’ve slept in big, comfortable beds for two to three nights—I would assume ours. Then there’s
the amount of dust that has gathered in here. Mrs Hudson would have dusted anew on the day they
arrived, unless she’d dusted the previous day which still gives us only a day difference. I’ve
accounted for the slower accumulation of dust with the windows permanently closed at this time of
year. If that wasn’t enough, there are also the beer bottles.” Sherlock looked down to his right, but
only the person sitting in the chair would have seen the bottles or one looking there on purpose. “It
was child’s play to do the maths,” Sherlock finished.

“Dean.” Sam was looking at his brother with what John had privately labelled his prissy face. “You
promised you’ll put those in the trash.”
Dean rolled his eyes, then looked from John to Sherlock back to John. “So you’re okay? His record hasn’t been scratched. Sadly. But how’s your head?”

All John knew was that he was relieved beyond words and very woozy. He nodded. “Fine.” He turned to Sam again. “What happened to you two? During that month?”

Sam and Dean exchanged a look again. Dean took a breath. “We stayed there and finished the job.”

John gaped. “The angel tablet?”

Sam’s face had the same solemnity as his brother’s, but was glowing from within, too. John had a peculiar sensation that he was seeing Sam for the first time. He realized he was; this was what his friend looked like when he wasn’t constantly churning in the vortex of his own head. Light. Free. Hopeful.

“All of it, John,” Sam said, then the hundred-watt smile came on the way John had seen it all those months ago when Sam had first smiled at him from the top of a ladder like some heavily dimpled demi-God. “The angel tablet, the Gates of Hell—all of it.”

“How?”

“God finally came down to help.” Only the cracks of fire filled Sam’s pause. “It’s done. The Gates of Hell, shut. Heaven in peace—”

“Lots of supernatural freaks still out there, though.” Dean cut in, trying to sound grim, but failing a little on account of his eyes sparkling. “So we were thinking…” He checked mutely with his brother. “We could stick around for a while? Show the local sons of bitches who’s boss.”

“What do you think?” Sam was looking at John as if John could actually hand him some sort of a letter of redundancy.

John was too overwhelmed to think anything, but for his reply he could bloody well offer what he felt. “Yeah,” he told Sam, feeling his eyes crinkle at the corners. “That’s, ah…good idea. Very good.”

“Just try not to involve us,” Sherlock said with such affectation of boredom, it was lucky John couldn’t move. He would have embarrassed himself and everyone in the room by giving Sherlock a massive bear hug, blotting irreversibly the whole ‘reserved British army man’ archetype. “We have real cases to solve,” Sherlock continued, eyeing Dean imperiously. “So our help is at your disposal strictly when it’s a matter of life and death.”

John tuned out Dean’s reply, eyes closing on their own volition. He felt exhausted and weightless and happy. There were a million questions at the back of his mind, but a sense of peace conquered all their voices: there was time. Days and weeks, months and why not even years to find all the answers. Time felt material for a moment; something almost gloopy. Then it was abstract, less than even a vague concept; a lulling nothingness—

John jolted and opened his eyes, dampness and darkness filling his senses while his heart tried to break through his ribcage. The world was utter chaos, crushing his skull in an attempt to turn his mind to miasma and finish John Watson once and for all. He marshalled all his willpower to try and center himself. His hand twitched and his fingers brushed against something cold, but warmer than
John’s head was clearing slowly but surely. There was motion he began distinguishing in front of him: white. A white human figure, moving to a dark figure suspended from the ceiling.

**Sherlock.**

*Sherlock!* John cried voicelessly, the sound tinny in his own head, weaker than what it would have been like in a dream, but the helplessness was the same, only terribly magnified. Mind clearing up further still and eyes adjusting to the darkness, John could see the figure touch Sherlock throat, run a finger down it, the colour of the white hand close to a match to that of Sherlock’s skin. John couldn’t see Sherlock’s face—his head was tilted back—but he could just about make out the dark trickle that appeared on Sherlock’s exposed throat. The man just stood there, perfectly still; then, as the trickle thickened, he brushed a finger over it, hand pulling away for a moment. He stood with his back to them yet John’s mind provided the image of his front and he knew what was happening: the creature’s finger had gone to his mouth.

John felt a rush of pins and needles in his limbs, but trying to move them was again reminiscent of the most futile efforts to run in a nightmare. There seemed to be something more insistent in his right hand, though; John’s eyes moved away from the horror show in front of him and fell on the spot where his fingers were touching Sam’s. He dared not blink for fear he’d be transported somewhere else again, so he just stared and sure enough, Sam’s fingers twitched. John’s eyes moved away from the horror show in front of him and fell on the spot where his fingers were touching Sam’s. He dared not blink for fear he’d be transported somewhere else again, so he just stared and sure enough, Sam’s fingers twitched. John’s gaze tried to jump to Sam’s face, waves of pain threatening to make him black out as punishment for his haste. When his vision cleared again, he slowly met Sam’s dazed but conscious eyes and it seemed like Sam was trying to indicate to his right with them. All John could see there were more shadows. Everything in him heaved fruitlessly—it was like trying to lift a mountain. He returned his attention to Sherlock, praying for all his worth that Sam would follow his gaze and come up with something, anything to help.

More tingling, all over John’s body now, his brain jumping up two gears, just as the panic in his chest did: the bald, sheet-white man with the tattooed head—John had no effort recognizing it was him now—produced something that looked like an empty blood bag. He moved closer to Sherlock, bringing his face to Sherlock’s neck, then to the dip of his collarbone. His chest expanded with his inhalation and fear and white hot disgust nearly disoriented John again. The man lifted the needle at the end of the tube connected to the empty blood bag, his hand aiming for a spot on Sherlock’s throat. John didn’t need to be a doctor to know too well the purpose of.

“Oh no, you don’t!” came a growl from the creature’s right and suddenly Dean was on him, stabbing him in the back, cutting through his spinal cord. Dean’s face was in the shadows, but the clean, vicious sharpness with which his hand twisted the knife to ninety degrees was a better reflection of John’s feelings than any facial expression could offer.

The white man dropped on the floor and stayed there, convulsing. By the time John’s gaze had lifted back to Sherlock, Dean was cutting the ropes which held Sherlock’s arms suspended in the air.
“Sammy, you okay?” Dean called over his shoulder. Sam let out a whimper, his fingers crawling over John’s. A moment later Sherlock’s quiet groan arrived to them.

“Hey,” Dean said, hand seesawing through the ropes. “Hey, hey, hey.” He caught Sherlock’s slumping form, manoeuvring him back against the wall behind. “You’re fine, I got you. I got you.”

Sherlock moaned, more loudly this time. Dean ducked to look at his face. “Sherlock, come on. Come on, man, snap out of it.” His hands, planted on Sherlock’s cheeks, shook him a little; then Dean’s relieved voice was a whistle reminding John’s lungs to start working again. “Yeah, that’s it. Here we go. You back with me?”

“Where…Where am…” Sherlock’s voice was barely audible, but it was enough to make John finally let his eyes slide shut.
Chapter 45

Despite never being a frozen chicken John would have still likened the experience of coming off the genie’s ‘mojo’ to defrosting. It took about a quarter of an hour for him to be able to stand on his feet steadily and have use of his hands. During that time Sherlock regained full consciousness and so did Sam, leaving Castiel the worst of them all, oddly enough. It seemed that angels had something akin to an operational system and it was greatly affected by the genie’s attempt to crash it. Castiel looked as disoriented as John remembered him from the warehouse. In addition, although appearing to have recovered most of his mental faculties, his head kept lolling and his hands twitching. John watched Dean clasp them abruptly between his own, unnerved and impatient to have everyone back in full working order so they could ‘get the hell out of here’.

To John’s still somewhat stunted senses Dean appeared like a cartoon character moving between points on fast-forward. He kept talking to Sam, while checking on everyone in turn and periodically stabbing the still convulsing creature. But first, he rubbed his knife in a piece of clothing with sinister looking dark patches on it—it turned out it was soaked in vampire’s blood. From the brothers’ exchange John found out this particular monster’s name was ‘djinn’. Dean had been on the brink of death once, captured by one, so now he’d managed to shake off the illusion of his perfect world with hardly any effort and had sneaked back to the dead vampires while the djinn had been arranging Sherlock in his horrid set up. Sam had had the considerable advantage of knowing his brother’s actions and he’d been trying to indicate to John—obviously with little success—that Dean was back.

“Why don’t you just kill him?” John asked Dean, looking at the djinn. The body had stopped convulsing, but there was the occasional twitch to indicate the creature was still alive. John was glad to hear Sam was the one to reply: apparently their provisions were sadly lacking on lamb’s blood, which was the instant terminal tool in this case. Dean had found out that vampire blood disabled djinns and eventually killed them.

“There wasn’t exactly full of farm animals,” Dean was rubbing Sam’s still cramping arms vigorously while he spoke. “So we had to improvise. Benny told me djinns had always avoided him. He’d noticed they weren’t going for other vamps, either, so I figured it had to do with the blood.” Dean sniffed, straightening up with a light smack on Sam’s knee. “We got one and stabbed it with a knife dipped in Benny’s blood. It didn’t die, but it went into a seizure so we did it again and again, until...”

There was a moment of silence after he trailed off, only the sound of water trickling filling the space. Light was coming from all five torches, four of them on the ground pointing upward. Dean just stood there, something bleak in his full profile—he’d turned only his head to the side as if he was listening to someone whisper his memories to him. He was illuminated at odd angles, making his handsome features appear like those of a much plainer, anonymous stranger. John shivered, reminded of war and of the subjectivity of the term ‘monster’. Whoever raised a hand against you was one. In the claustrophobic mayhem of conflict, inner and external, it was the safest frame one could build around
oneself if one wanted to survive in the long run. Dean had been remarkable, really, in striking up a partnership and then friendship with a vampire. Then again, Sam probably didn’t see it that way.

Sherlock cleared his throat bringing John back to the present again, this time his return more than welcome. He expected Sherlock to speak, but Sherlock just lifted the collar of his coat and wrapped his scarf around his neck, careless about its state. Earlier Dean had found it on the ground and passed it on to him without a word.

“All right,” Sam said after running his gaze over all of them. “We ready to go?” He turned to his right. “Cas?”

“I’m fine,” came the quiet, flat reply. “Or I soon will be. We should leave.”

They all picked up their bags and torches. Dean’s eyes went to Sam, gaze sweeping up and down, thorough and intent. Sam let his brother do his nurse-like survey on him for a few second, before giving him a nod.

They made their way down the tunnel, keeping very close to each other. For a while Dean tried to both cover the front and the rear until Sam stopped, snappy, making his brother collide with him. Thankfully, they quickly agreed on Sam leading the way while Dean provided back-up. Watching the cat-like grace and attentiveness with which Sam moved made John trust his assessment that Sam’s reflexes had been completely restored.

After only ten minutes they reached the end of the passage without any incidents. The ground angle had changed as soon as they’d left the djinn behind, becoming slightly but consistently steeper.

“Thirty degrees,” Sherlock murmured when their torches showed them a door ahead instead of another creaky ladder. It looked really heavy, iron and oak, but Castiel just walked to it and pushed it wide open without any effort, his expression still drawn in and a little vacant. At least he was in possession of most of his strength—between the angel proofing taking away some of his powers and the djinn scrambling his brain, John had begun wondering whether Castiel shouldn’t have been the one in the middle of their formation. He himself was feeling pretty much hundred percent, but the great surge of energy and clarity he felt as he walked out in the open told him there’d been room for improvement.

The door had opened to a few stone steps that took them to ground level, where they found themselves in what looked like the very small, square yard of a church. Two old gravestones in the middle indicated it was probably the correct assessment, with someone buried here a long time ago indeed, judging by how much the weather had managed to deform the stones.

The night was utterly quiet, not even an insect buzzing. They all spilled out, breathing in the cold air and exploring their surroundings. Most of the clouds had disappeared, leaving the sky to pan out above them in an abundant tapestry of stars. John lifted his face and against all common sense gazed at the stunning view, mind blank, then shut his eyes for a few moments, inhaling. When he opened them again the moon shone even brighter. John was surprised to see it wasn’t full. Back upstairs, the light streaming from it through the windows had seemed so strong—a blessing to help John find Sherlock, then deal with the werewolf gorilla.

“All right,” Sam said, making John lower his head. They were all facing the back wall of Malvern Mansion, rising silent and dark in centurial indifference. Sam pointed to the right of their exit. “I don’t think we need the map. That’s gotta be it.”
Sharing a wall with the mansion was a much smaller building, not more than eight feet high and twenty-five feet wide. Its back wall was also facing the garden and even without coming close John could see the stones were covered in symbols.

Sam and Dean moved to it at the same time, Castiel on their heels. John cast a glance behind and saw Sherlock straightening up after having examined the two resting places.

“Anything?” John asked.

Sherlock hummed. “The lady of the manor,” he said. “The wife of our potential ghost. I assume the second grave was that of her husband.” He turned to Dean. “He is your ghost. The grave has been disturbed very recently.”

“They moved the bones,” Sam concluded, his brow furrowing. Dean sighed heavily, but refrained from the selection of colourful expressions John was sure presented themselves as commentary to the news.

“Well, nothing we can do about that now,” Dean said in a beat. “Let’s check out what we’ve got here.”

The stones at the back wall of the chapel were weathered as well. On a few of them John could barely distinguish any of the symbols. Castiel ran his fingers over the ones where the writing had been best preserved and John found himself gasp at the golden light that rippled in concentrated circles from beneath Castiel’s touch. It reminded John of what had infiltrated Sam’s veins back in the room upstairs, when he had completed the ritual for the Gates of Hell trial. John experienced the same dissonance: the sense of awe at something divine and formidable, yet an underlying fear as well —back then for Sam and now for all of them. Castiel’s crestfallen face told John his gut instinct was right.

“We can’t enter the chapel from here,” Castiel said. “This is still incredibly powerful—it would be useless to try to demolish through it.” His nose almost touched the stones as he brought his face closer.

Behind his back Sam and Dean exchanged a meaningful, long glance, communication passing between them for anyone to see, but only them to know. “You sure?” Sam asked.

Even here Castiel’s eyes managed to shine in midnight blue as he nodded firmly.

Sam turned to Dean. “Makes sense,” he said. John wondered how he could remain so calm and conversational at the discovery that all their effort to get here had been for naught. “Remember when we couldn’t open any door or window back in that house?” Sam went on. “You know, with the creepy ghost; what was it…a janitor?”

Dean frowned at Sam who continued, a little impatient, hands becoming involved in his effort to stir Dean’s memory. “The guy who’d gotten all the corpses out from the morgue to be at his birthday party?” Understanding flickered across Dean’s features, just as Sam finished. “Those dumb asses were there, the ones with the TV show.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dean said over him.

Sam shrugged. “The house went on a supernatural lock down. If ghosts can do it, it should be no problem for Lucifer, or whoever carved these, to seal the wall completely.”
“Do you know who that was, Castiel?” John asked.

Castiel ran his hand over the stones again. The light didn’t seem to diminish in brightness or strength where the symbols were all but erased by the elements. It was very beautiful, moving like water with golden strands in it.

There was something almost stunned on Castiel’s face when he spoke. “It’s…I cannot really say.”

“Seriously?” Dean asked.

Castiel hesitated. “Yes. Or…I may be wrong, but I believe those were left here by someone more powerful than Lucifer or any archangel. Maybe…maybe God’s scribe himself.”

“What, the Metatron?” Sam asked, a little high-pitched in his incredulity and rising excitement. “But that means the angel tablet was here way before Lucifer’s time.”

“What if that tale you were told wasn’t true?” Dean told Castiel, voice rushing. “What if Lucifer didn’t put this here, but Metatron did—following the big boss’s orders?” Dean turned to Sam. “You know, keeping the tablet out of douchey angel hands.”

Castiel’s face would have fitted well on an overcast sky. “Our Father loved us all. He would have never hidden his—”

The ground beneath them shook, cutting Castiel off mid-sentence. John was still flailing to preserve his balance when there was another tremor, this one accompanied with a blood-curdling sound coming from somewhere in the mansion: a cross between a growl and a screech, deep and low as if it was coming from an organ the size of a ship. Something weird shifted in the atmosphere that John had no time to identify.

“What the fuck?!” Dean shut his mouth abruptly when next to him Sherlock gasped, grappling at his sleeve with his left hand, right one going for John’s arm. “What?” Dean barked, wide-eyed.

He received no answer. John felt his own mouth open a little at the sight of Sherlock’s parted lips and his riveted gaze, firmly fixed on the scripted stones. The ground trembled again, making John grab hold of Sherlock’s arm, too. His “Sherlock, what?” was lost in another unearthly, drawn out sound.

“Dean!” Sam’s hand dropped on Dean’s shoulder. “Dean, it’s the ghost! Look!” Sam breathed out, mouth open in a big circle, and in that instant John realized what had changed—the temperature had dropped by at least ten degrees. His gaze fell to the ground and he noticed the frost that hadn’t been there a few seconds earlier.

“All right!” Dean’s voice managed to rise over the increasing noise. “Get the iron out!”

The ground shaking under his feet made John fumble for a moment for the iron poker at the bottom of his bag. He gripped it tightly, holding his torch between his front teeth while he secured the backpack over both his shoulders with only one hand. He bumped against Sherlock’s immobile form in the process and called his name to get his attention, but in vain. Sherlock’s eyes were no longer gleaming with that unique blaze of revelation, but were oscillating in a way that always left John nervous and indecently anticipatory, hoping he’d be able to follow on the coattails of that look. For now he focused on getting into Sherlock’s backpack, still slung over Sherlock’s left shoulder. John
took out the poker, trying to push it into his right hand until Sherlock’s fingers finally clasped at it.

John cringed at the terrible sound that kept coming in waves as if from an angry whale. He was no expert on ghosts, but Sam and Dean had bought Moriarty was one. Judging by the strength with which the ground beneath them shook, this one was the kind of ghost for which a forest of iron tools was needed to hide them.

“We gotta get inside!” Dean gestured brusquely. “To a small room, salt ourselves in, then we figure it out!” Something eased in John at the reminder that ghosts couldn’t cross salt lines.

Next to him Sherlock swayed so much, John had to prop him with his shoulder—thankfully the uninjured one. Sherlock’s next words managed to make him forget about any ghosts.

“The syringes with dead man’s blood!” Sherlock shot at Sam and Dean. “Do you have any left?”

Dead man’s blood had delayed vampires and incapacitated them enough to make them an easier target. John doubted he would have otherwise managed to kill a creature that was not only seeing well in the dark, but was much faster and stronger, too.

Sam and Dean goggled at Sherlock, mouth trying to splutter a few things at the same time, at least in Sam’s case. Castiel had also joined them, now looking at Sherlock with his head tilted, mesmerised. “Do you have them?” Sherlock repeated, expression turning fierce in demand.

“No, we used them all back then,” was Sam’s reply, while Dean shouted, “Why?”

Sherlock ignored them, turning to John. “Do you have any syringes in your first aid kit?”

John just shook his head, lost and speechless. He’d used the one he’d had in the kit when it had become clear the vampires were more of a nest than a pair. On Dean’s advice, the first aid kit syringe had been filled with dead man’s blood. Good thing, too, because it had ended up in the neck of a vampire mere moments later.

Sherlock made a throaty sound of frustration and tried pacing around over the ground that was swimming under his feet. John followed him, reaching to both steady himself and prevent Sherlock from falling. “Sherlock, what’s going on?”

Sherlock just shook his head, curls bouncing madly. His right hand’s fingers carded through them, while he stopped, attempting to keep his balance, face showing his brain was furiously at work.

The temperature seemed to drop further. A major shock made them all wave their arms about, seeking purchase.

“All right!” Dean thundered, grabbing Sam by the front of his jacket. “Inside. Now. Everyone!”

Sherlock’s face smoothed out like a piece of silk pulled tight at both ends. “Oh!” He clasped his hand. “Yes. Yes!” The tremors and the sounds had ceased abruptly just on time to give him the scene, on which he presided statue-like, only his eyes alive with exultation. It lasted for not more than a couple of seconds—no one even had the chance to enquire after Sherlock’s revelations, because this time it was as if the air itself shook.

Sherlock was turning to Castiel. “I need you to come with me!” Not waiting for Castiel’s agreement, Sherlock addressed the rest of them, a little breathless. “You have to make sure the ghost doesn’t
come after us. Distract it, do whatever is necessary, but—”

“Hold on, hold on!” Dean gave John the fleeting impression that he was going to clap his hand over Sherlock’s mouth. “We’re not doing anything until you tell us what the hell, man!”

There was a very brief, explosive battle of wills, all packed in eye contact, then Sherlock’s throat was at work again, with a swallowed grunt-like noise providing the outlet of his impatience. “Over there, on some of the stones—it’s the ritual!”

“The ritual?” John repeated dumbly. The one about Sam’s heart? Or the one about the Gates of Hell? Something else? There’d been so many rituals lately, it was all becoming a bit of a jumble for John.

“The ritual, yes!” Sherlock rushed to continue: “Moriarty did play Crowley! Oh, it’s beautiful! It’s so simple, you just have to—”

The whole of John’s vision filled with thick fog that seemed to take on his insides, too, to the last crevice. He felt something crush his chest, his skull, all of him as if he was a walnut in a nutcracker. He couldn’t even cry out. His lungs fought to expand in blind panic...

Then he was breathing in again in the clear night air, both Sam and Dean panting above him, their fire irons lifted. John realized he was on the ground. He gaped at them, before scuffling to get up on his feet, breathing unevenly. “What was that?” he croaked.

“The ghost.” Sam picked up John’s poker from the ground and pressed it into his palm, making John’s fingers close around it reflexively.

“Son of a—Son of a bitch!” Dean’s last word came out as a squeak; John could see mostly the white of his eyes. “That was one pumped up, freaking ghost! Jesus fucking Christ!”

“Come on,” Sam said, already trotting toward the door of the underground passage. “He won’t be gone for long.”

“No, we barely poked it with those things,” Dean replied following him. “Man! That ain’t even funny.”

They rushed back down the tunnel, but not fifty steps in and John saw his breath come out in white puffs. His muscles seized with the cold.

“Come on!” Dean broke into a fast run. “We gotta find out how to salt and burn that monster or we’re not leaving this place alive!” He kept talking without looking back, his words echoing in the high, narrow space. “Sherlock, you got anything? Sammy?”

“Let’s just get to a room first!” Sam’s voice boomed behind John.

They’d just come close to where they’d been attacked by the djinn, when it was Sherlock’s voice’s turn to fill up the space. “Wait!”

They all halted just as the ground started trembling again.

“I’m going this way with Castiel.” Sherlock pointed in the direction of the niche where the djinn had kept them.
“Why?” John asked, realizing he was already making steps that way.

“No,” Sherlock said. “You stay with them. It’ll be quicker for me and safer, for all of us.”

“What’s going on?” Sam asked, still calm but pressing. Sherlock opened his mouth to reply when his eyes grew huge, shifting to somewhere behind Sam’s shoulder. John turned his head.

An enormous, immaterial form was coming through the far end of the tunnel, both gliding towards them and yet just being there, as if appearing at each spot, closer and closer. It was the man from the portrait from what John could tell, but he had no desire to try to tick the differences. As far as ghosts went this fitted everything he had expected: semi-transparent, fog-like grey with blue undertones, eyes glazed, unblinking and bloody creepy. His upper face seemed frozen, making the animalistic twist of his mouth all the more sinister. The size of the ghost made it easy for John to see why after being attacked by it, he’d felt close to his maker in a matter of seconds.

“Come on!” Sherlock shouted to Castiel, already turning to take off into the darkness. Eyes going to Dean, Castiel remained on his spot, so undecided that he appeared petrified.

Dean cast the swiftest glance back and forth between the approaching ghost and Sherlock, then John could swear he heard the sound of his teeth gnashing, before he spoke. “Damn it! Go with him! Cas, go!”

A second later blackness had swallowed Sherlock and Castiel.

Poker at the ready, John stood between Sam and Dean and watched the ghost eat up the little distance left to them in the same eerie fashion, encroaching to the point where it was all John could see. He rolled his neck and gripped his weapon tighter.

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They fought the ghost all the way to the first floor, yielding their ‘swords’ at it and managing to make it disappear for precious seconds, until it was back again. John doubted one poker would have done the trick—it seemed that only when the three of them managed to strike through it in synchrony that it was gone for more than thirty seconds.

“This way!” Sam dashed down the wing he and John had explored earlier. Their steps thudded in discordance, disturbing the dust and the quiet and making everything feel somehow even more starkly real. John’s heart was in his throat, equal parts adrenaline and fear. He was operating short-term only which helped him keep to his sanity. The thoughts of ‘What next?’ and ‘What about Sherlock?’ would have probably made him useless and a danger to himself and others. Get to the room, get to the room, his mind kept chanting its manic mantra.

Sam led them unerringly straight to the smallest room they had encountered. Only after John had dived into it did he remember it. He had even commented it was likely the chamber of the maid because of its modest size and the proximity to what looked like a master bedroom, but only for one female occupant.

Sam and Dean salted the threshold and the windows quickly and with practiced motions, not needing a word to distribute their workload. John added to their team effort by being at his most alert, the iron poker like an extension of his arm. Finally, they all slumped against the same wall.

“We are so screwed.” Dean was the first to speak, taking it upon himself to caption their misfortune.
“All right, what do we have?” Sam said in a few seconds, tone practical. “We got iron, we got enough salt. No broken windows in here.” He walked over to check the two windows in turn—both small, both undamaged indeed—then looked out of them. “No trees outside, so he can’t try to break through.”

“Are you saying ghosts climb trees?” John asked, eyebrows crawling to his hairline.

“No, but even the normal size ones can learn how to move objects.” Sam ducked his head, scanning the great outdoors again. “If there were heavy branches, they could have used them to break the glass. Even a crack would be enough to let him blow away the salt.”

“Great.” John was glad his tone was only half-sarcastic—Sam didn’t deserve it—the other half taken by tiredness. This was turning into a proper nightmare, only the scenes changing. For a split second John felt a surge of irrational panic that they would never, ever leave this place; not dying, but always running and fearing that they would. He pushed away from the wall to walk over to Sam, slaying his fear and clenching his jaw. One step at a time. Ghost first. Sherlock next.

“Do you know where Sherlock and Cas went?” Dean asked him, staying by the door with his fire iron lifted at the ready just in case.

“To where the djinn kept us?” John said.

“Yeah, all right—I’m asking do you know why.”

John took a moment to reflect. Sherlock always said that talking out loud helped him with his deductions. (Ironic, considering how often he deliberately kept tight-lipped until he had his answer perfect like a pearl in a shell.) “I don’t know why he needed Castiel, but I assume it was to do with what he read on that wall.” He ran the scene in his mind. “He was asking about the syringes. I don’t know what that was about. Something about Sam’s heart maybe?”

“What?” Dean asked, turning sharply. “What does he want to do to it?”

“I don’t know,” John confessed. “I’m just…you know. Thinking out loud.”

Dean watched him in silence, although John was sure he wasn’t the object of his thoughts. “Your friend is the most secretive, annoying dick I’ve ever met, you know that?” Dean informed him at length, making John smile all the way to his eyes.

“Yes. But he’s also a genius.”

“Okay.” The word came out almost husky from Sam’s mouth, but the dark focus on his features was unmistakable. “I wonder if there’s a spell that can reverse the original one and downsize that son of a bitch. Not that it’d make any difference if we don’t know what they used to summon him, but at least we could trap him somewhere and keep him there.”

“First time I heard of that Hulk-like mojo, Sammy,” Dean said, lips pressing in regret. “You got anything? Remember anything from Dad’s journal? Or Bobby ever said anything about it?”

Sam didn’t rush with his answer. John watched him go through the ‘files’ in his head, meticulous and thorough. Sam’s fingers absently tucked a strand of hair behind his right ear, the gesture innocuous, but revealing a surprisingly grim face at its wake. “No,” he said. “Nothing.” He bowed his head, the
cogs obviously still turning. “I guess we can try reciting the spell backwards?”

“Are there no other ways to kill a ghost? None?” John asked. He just couldn’t believe they could perish almost on a technicality, simply because they couldn’t find one object. It seemed like a huge example of the opposite of fair play. A needle in a stack of hey came to mind.

“The remains,” Sam said. “But whoever summoned him took care of that.”

John mulled this over, then opened his mouth, hesitant. “Can we...maybe try and talk to it?” He knew he was repeating himself in terms of solutions—this had been his suggestion with Castiel, too—but he could only draw on his own experience. Funny how it took a train crash meeting with the supernatural to make him appreciate just how central communication was to everything and how much value he still placed on it.

Instead of an eye roll from two guys who’d been around the block a dozen times, John saw them exchange a whole lot in a long glance: uncertainty, doubt, hope, curiosity, encouragement and not last, some of the audacious—okay, a little insane—attitude that set them apart from most of humanity.

“You want to lead the negotiations?” Dean spoke, making John confused about whether he was addressing him or his brother. Dean’s next words gave him the answer. “You got some history that can help.”

Standing so close to Sam, John could feel him transform at the words, reminding him of one of those big, mystical stones they found around the world. One from the Stonehenge circles perhaps, although he didn’t quite see Sam Winchester as one of many in whatever incarnation.

Meanwhile Dean had turned his head to check the door, his body language suggesting that both the weight of his comment and Sam’s reaction had gone right over his head.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sam asked, quiet enough for the question to read blank. It still drew Dean’s attention back to him, but his shrug was quite casual.

“All I’m saying is this ain’t your first rodeo making friends with monsters. Madison. Ruby. Your friend Amy.” Dean looked away again, adding over his shoulder, “This one’s not a girl, but you can still make him listen, right?”

A flash of hurt had passed over Sam’s face, before his expression turned blade-like, but oddly resolute. “Fine. I’ll talk to it.”

Dean nodded. “You let me go in front first, all right? Then you can talk to anyone.”

John cleared his throat. As intense as the dynamic before him was, he could feel his priorities rearrange out of sheer emotion. “Um, maybe we can do it quickly?” he said, glancing between the two, but leaving his gaze on Sam for his next words. “Because it’s been five minutes and the ghost hasn’t shown up. Sherlock and Castiel are still down there.”

“Good point,” Dean said, lifting his bag from the floor. “All right. How are we going to do this? We can try to summon it,” he told Sam, lips turning musing. “There’s plenty of his stuff lying around, we just gotta pick up something with some traces of DNA.”

“Weren’t there some gloves downstairs?” John asked.
A mighty howl from somewhere below his feet answered him, longer and more spine-chilling than any of the ones before. It was followed by yet another strange shift in the air that John couldn’t put his finger on. He looked at Sam, a loud crash making them both jump. Another one echoed immediately as if a heavy piece of furniture had fallen from very high in two stages.

Dean swore and threw the door open, charging out, John and Sam right behind.

It took John’s brain only a second to supply him with the answer to the mystery change in atmosphere. Everywhere there were sources of light: torches along the corridor, fireplaces in the rooms they ran past, light coming from downstairs, too. John could really appreciate how big the mansion was, as his feet gulped the space to the big staircase leading to the ground floor, but he wasn’t all that grateful. Whatever was going on was hardly the work of some anonymous fairy godmother wanting to make their quest easier by illuminating their way. Fire smelled like a pissed off ghost to John and he wished he could jump four steps at a time when he considered what the noise of demolition could have meant.

They stopped in the big foyer downstairs, their backs towards each other in the tested formation that allowed them to cover the full scope of 360 degrees. There was nothing to tell them which way to go, so for a few seconds they just shuffled together, brandishing their pokers at any shadow and there were many of those now. John switched off his torch and shoved it clumsily into his backpack, happy to finally grip his weapon with both hands.

Next to him Sam started with a soundless gasp. John whipped his head to look, his own breath stuttering in his throat and making him almost choke.

Sam was facing the long arched passage that stretched for almost a quarter of a mile—the one leading to the underground tunnel. From its far end Sherlock was running towards them, his coat billowing behind him like a black puff of smoke. A second later Sherlock’s plight became obvious—the ghost materialized in the distance, roaring and chasing after him like a giant contrasting light grey cloud.

They all catapulted themselves in Sherlock’s direction, but he waved his hands to stop them, face and hair wild, but wilder still was the towering vicious figure catching up and threatening to swallow him up.

“Dean!” Sherlock bellowed as he ran. “Toto! Toto!”

John had no idea what Sherlock meant and he couldn’t care less. He kept running behind Sam, frantic, eyes prickling in trying not to let the ghost out of sight for even an instant. In his peripheral vision he saw Dean stir away from their party and go to the left, fast and smooth and not losing any momentum.

“Sherlock!” John yelled, making Sherlock turn and swing his poker right through the ghost’s middle. It disintegrated as if its form consisted of the finest wisps of candy floss, but unlike when the three of them had attacked it, it only took a few seconds for it to show up again some hundred feet behind Sherlock—even more furious than before. It emitted a guttural screech and flew forward, hands outstretched greedily in what John would have found a dark parody of a monster chasing anyone, if glass didn’t begin shattering all over the place. John kept running, hunching and covering his head instinctively and finally, finally Sam was colliding with Sherlock, John close behind.

They all faced the monstrous creature. John suppressed a sputtering coughing fit, the first couple of
sounds managing to come from far, far away through the drumming in his ears.

He braced himself for the impact, chin lifting to look up at the ghost’s livid face, now oddly both more transparent, yet more detailed and human: the chubby cheeks, the deeply set small eyes, the missing teeth, even the shine on his contorted lips, reminiscent of spit.

Then it stopped so abruptly that John felt his depth perception completely messed up for one long moment, unable to say if there was a foot or fifty between him and their attacker. It seemed like the ghost was listening to something, attentive, head inclined to his right, then he threw it up to the ceiling and in another surreal imitation of a grotesque horror film scene he roared—then disappeared.

John could feel his jaw drop in shock. He looked to Sherlock, noting with immense relief that he was indeed unscathed, then turned to Sam, the floor disappearing from under his feet at Sam’s face.

“Dean,” Sam uttered, then he was sprinting in the direction where his brother had gone; the same one to which the ghost had just looked.

Lungs and muscles burning John was running again, mind abuzz with questions and fears. Sam was hurrying forward, obviously heading to the biggest room where they’d seen ‘Toto’. They were rushing from one space into another, fire everywhere just like upstairs; it was like moving through the galleries at the National Gallery. How Sam knew the shortcuts John had no clue; he just followed him, praying Sam wouldn’t take two swift, sharp turns in a row and disappear.

His disorientation was profound, it turned out, because he was completely unprepared to once again smack face first into Sam’s back. Sam had stopped at a door, his chest heaving. John realized they had reached their destination: torches were lit up everywhere here as well, two fireplaces alive with flames at both ends of the room. He fully appreciated it was a grand one—the place could have served as a bloody ballroom, stretching in length a lot more than in width, four doors allowing entrance and exit: two at its far ends and two on both sides in the middle. They were currently standing at one of the doors at the long end and to their right, next to one of the sideways doors in the middle of the room, Dean was standing brightly lit and unharmed, his feet planted a little apart. On the floor between them was a small bundle of flames and charcoal that John found no difficulty to deduce was the unfortunate Toto.

John’s assessment of the scene had taken a couple of seconds at the most, during which Sam just stared at Dean, face its own source of light. Dean grinned, shaking a small, empty can of accelerant and moving his eyebrows at his brother in a perfect daredevil wriggle.

In the space of a heartbeat two things occurred: a very big hound, all too recognizable, leapt over Dean from the door behind him, knocking him down on the floor; then, in front of their terrified eyes, it clasped its jaws on his shoulder and bounded off with him to the far end of the room as if Dean was not more than a stuffed soft toy. Dean’s cries of pain arrived belatedly to John’s stupefied brain, making him dart after Sam who was already sprinting across the room.

“Dean!” Sam hollered. “Dean!”

“Sam! Sam!” Dean was shouting over him, their cries clashing in horrible resonance.

The hellhound was at the other end of the room and out, dragging its prey with it, the doors slamming shut after its exit. Sam arrived in a matter of seconds, body-checking the doors that didn’t even budge. He attacked again and again, slamming his palms and his fists against them, Dean’s name coming out of him as if a volcano had erupted in his chest. Helpless and dizzied, John stayed
quiet by Sherlock’s side and watched Sam beat at the door and kick it, throw himself at it and bang against it, all the while yelling his brother’s name over and over again.
Chapter Notes

I don't want to overwhelm everyone with a page worth of 'thank you' notes at the end of the story so I thought I'd spread what I need to say over the three posts.

I would like to thank you all for reading. It is the plain, simple truth that without my readership this story would have never turned to what it is now and that would have been a sad, sad thing—it's been one of the highlights of 2013 for me. I was lucky enough to have plenty of readers leave me feedback in the course of the year so I won't be able to list everyone who ever dropped me a line or left kudos, but I want you to know that your input was truly appreciated. I mean it. If I'm at all able to finish this marathon, I share my success with every single person who found a way to let me know they were out there, reading and loving my story. Thank you!♥

I am especially grateful to my LJ cheering squad: nausicaa83, dioscuraeantwins, rifleman_s, frozen_delight, indianchick, hoppytoad79 and darkrose_9 for their relentless support week after week.

And now, onwards!

For a long, long moment Sam lost all sense of time or context. He had turned into an arrow, tangent desperate and singular, whooshing madly from one point to another, never hitting a target. His knuckles were bleeding and his hands were bruised—his whole body was—yet all the doors in the room remained sealed. At some point he must have slowed down, because he found himself breathing heavily with his eyes closed, forehead pressed against one of the unbreakable doors.

Blackness overtook him, his mind threatening to tear itself to pieces, frustrated and desolate. The anguish upped and upped, violent…

Then the tint of blackness changed to something familiar and despicable and Sam was on his knees by Dean’s bag. His fingers fumbled inside, shaking, fingertips numbed, but then he found it. The world literally swam in front of his eyes at the enormity of what he was about to do, but there was no real contest between anything and saving his brother.

He lifted the bottle with demon blood to his mouth, head tipping back to stop himself from gagging.

John’s stunned face flitted across Sam’s vision, before disappearing into the recess of his mind together with Sherlock’s pale one. Sam swallowed down three big gulps, panting a little afterwards, unable to continue without a pause.

His insides sizzled and before he knew it, he was throwing up. He gasped for air, then forced down another gulp just to have the same thing happen, this time accompanied with the feeling that a giant needle was trying to turn him inside out.

Sam wiped his mouth, eyes mindlessly going to the smudge of red at the back of his hand.
His body was rejecting the demon blood. The trials. “*The word of God is in him.*” Where was Cas?

John was crouched next to him, talking with concern, his eyes glass blue under all the fiery light in the room. Sam wished he could speak back, but even breathing was hard. He struggled not to slump into a heap on the floor, mind and body still reeling with his outburst. He felt as if both his wings and his antennas had been snipped, leaving him an impotent insect, stranded like a dot on an enormous map. He had nothing, *nothing.* Wrung out, flattened here while *Dean—*

A quiet clicking sound from somewhere nearby made him lift his bleary eyes. John and Sherlock whipped their heads at the same time, indicating to Sam the direction from which the sound had come: the door the hellhound had used to pounce on Dean. The three of them watched it rattle as if by a light breeze, then something eased and the door opened just a little with a creak.

Sam was on his feet, ready to storm out, when the back of a hand in a black glove halted him. “Try the other one.” Sherlock spoke. “The blood trail should be clear enough.”

He was right. They were rushing through corridors and rooms again, but pretty quickly Sam didn’t need to follow the abhorrent tracks—he knew where the hellhound had headed, had suspected it all along.

The doors of the chapel, when they finally appeared in plain sight, brought a vague association to Sam’s favourite Indiana Jones movie. Indy had to pick the Holy Grail amongst an array of cups. All around them now, the lit up torches and fireplaces hinted at past splendour; but just like the real grail had been virtually invisible amidst the many ornate, golden cups, the sacred treasure here was hidden behind a plain wooden door.

Sam didn’t even slow down before bursting through it.

A small space, six to eight yards at the most with a strong smell of wax from the many candles secured on ledges and crevices. Stone walls, a lot of stones looking like the demon tablet. The altar was right across the door, the only thing made out of carved wood. In front of it, Crowley: loathsome and anticipatory, a smirk on his lips.

All the data was arriving like attachments to the main message. At first Sam’s eyes could see nothing else but Dean, gagged and bloody, hands and feet bound. His back was propped against the wall behind the altar. The hellhound was next to him, mouth dripping all over his thigh. Another beast was by Crowley’s side, eyes glowing like coal and fixed on Sam.

“Hello, Moose,” Crowley said jovially, petting his hellhound’s head.

In three steps Sam was by him, taking his angel blade out. Shock flashed in Crowley’s eyes; the hound’s paws were instantly on Sam’s shoulders, teeth bared and throat growling.

“You didn’t think I’d come here alone, did you?” Crowley told him, his British accent stronger than usual. “My lot can’t walk ‘round here, but my pets, as you can feel…” He trailed off, looking pleased with himself.

Sam only reached around the hound to slam the blade against Crowley’s chest. “Here,” he said. “Let my brother go!” He pointed behind to John and Sherlock. “Let them all go and you can have my heart.” On the ground Dean wriggled and made muffled sounds of protest. Sam couldn’t look at him. He had to keep his eyes on Crowley, had to have this *done.*
Crowley tucked the blade somewhere inside his habitual black coat, eyes lit up in a way that had something flirtatious to it. “Sam,” he said, right hand pressing against his chest theatrically. “Give a guy a warning. I never knew you to be such a top.” His eyes went to his ‘pet’. “Here, pup,” he said and Sam had to step back to preserve his balance after the hellhound pushed itself away from him to sit back by his master’s side.

“I’ll sign one of your contracts if you want,” he told Crowley, voice thudding a little in the chapel. “I’ll take…my own…heart out.” Sam panted with emotion, pointing to Dean. “Just let him go.” Dean jerked frantically again, choking, his ‘No,’ coming loud and clear even through the gag. Sam swallowed. He could hardly speak or breathe or think. He could only push. “Let them all go. It’s me who you want.”

Crowley regarded him at great length, his dark eyes insidious in their open curiosity at such close proximity.

“No,” he said.

Sam had no time to recover when Crowley clicked his fingers, the index one pointing behind Sam. “I want to talk to cheekbones.”

Sam turned to find Sherlock shift in his spot, turning slightly to the right towards John, eyes on Crowley. “About what?” he asked, baritone unhurried.

“About some secrets you may or may not keep.” Crowley lifted his gaze to Sam, hand indicating Sam should step aside. “Do you mind? Your mutant chest is blocking my view.”

Sam moved away automatically, mind still drawing a blank at this unexpected turn. He’d seen this as a simple exchange: take Dean, trade his life for Sam’s heart. Somewhere in his head bells were tolling that they were both still alive, they all were, each moment of delay promising a new cluster of strands, one of which could take them out of here, all safe. He just had to keep his mouth shut and his eyes wide open. Judging by John’s alert eyes and the way he licked his lips then pressed them closed tightly, it was the same strategy he’d picked for himself.

Meanwhile Sherlock spoke again. “What secrets would those be?” He was looking at Crowley in a way that was beginning to betray more than a little engagement. Crowley seemed to like it.

“If I knew, they wouldn’t be secrets now, would they?” He paused, face growing serious. “I’m not stupid. I know Jimmy wasn’t a team player. He made a real song and dance about you.” He studied Sherlock, calculating. “I’ve got an offer for you…but how do I know you’re the real deal?”

“You want proof that I’m the child savant.” Sherlock’s eyes widened dramatically with the last word. “Who says I’m even interested?”

Crowley’s condescension rivalled Mycroft Holmes’s. “Really? You’ve seen what it’s like outside. My dog will rip Dean’s throat out in a second and the other one will have at Sam. Then it’ll be your turn. All I have to do is snap my fingers and I’ll disappear into thin air. What do you fancy are your odds at survival?”

Sherlock seemed to rock almost imperceptibly left and right, like a little boy. He was chewing on the corner of his bottom lip, eyes flickering to and fro: Dean, the altar, the hellhounds, Crowley. “All right,” he said. “I’ll play.”
“Sherlock,” John said in quiet warning, making Crowley finally rest his eyes on him. “Nice to see you, too, poppet.” Just like back in the lab, his eyes wandered all over John with some real interest. “You are a funny one, aren’t you? What is it about you, eh?”

John gave him a withering look, face shutting off.

“No wonder you’ve made friends with Moose,” Crowley said. “You’re both so sensitive.” He turned to Sherlock. “Go on, junior. Dazzle me.”

“Would the ghost fiasco do?” Sherlock asked, subtle mockery in his whole demeanour. “I realize now that you and Jim must have shared quite a few traits. A somewhat pompous sense of drama, for instance. The theme with the pet? I was slow to spot it. Of course, where I was really slow was to realize that Jim Moriarty would have never left even the last detail unattended. The dog’s fur was covered in dust so I didn’t look twice. Dust can be wiped…it can be applied, too. Naturally Jim would have thought about that.”

Despite their tight spot, Sam found himself caught in Sherlock’s revelations. Dean and John were all eyes to him as well, not to mention Crowley, who wasn’t fooling anyone with his nonchalant pose. Sherlock commanded his audience, Sam had to give him that.

“As soon as I caught a glimpse of the ghost everything was clear,” Sherlock continued. “The portraitist was dead on with all the unappealing details. So his depiction of the dog must have been accurate as well. All those patches of fur missing yet there the exhibit was, her immaculate coat making her a prime candidate for any kennel club competition. From where could the extra patches of fur have come?” Sherlock tilted his head to look around Crowley down at Dean. “Dogs and their owners look alike. The taxidermist used some of the Earl’s hair to compensate his beloved pet’s shortcomings in that department. We have the sentimental bond, we have the DNA.” Sherlock offered Crowley his pout of pity. “You could have tried with something less obvious.”

“Yeah, but this was more fun.” Crowley squinted at Sherlock. “Okay, maybe this should conclude the entertainment portion of our evening. I’d hate to dawdle.” He shrugged, a little camp, his teeth flashing with his smile. “What am I saying—I love dawdling! Got something else up your sleeve?”

Sherlock’s eyes all over him were not unlike the kind of scan to which a member of top security personnel would subject a visitor. He took a breath when John spoke in low voice. “Can you maybe stop showing off now?”

Sherlock frowned and replied, leaning a little to the right while his gaze remained fixed forward. “I spent over a year with only Mycroft for company.” His mouth was twisting towards John, too, in an absurd attempt to provide privacy for their conversation. “I’ve missed having an audience.”

“You think you could have picked someone who didn’t just threaten us with death?”

“An audience is an audience. You wanted to know how I figured out it was the dog, too.”

John turned to him. “I was happy to wait for you to tell me at home!”

Sherlock frowned again, uncomprehending. “I am doing all this so we can go home.”

“Oh, this is delightful,” Crowley crowed. “It’s a never ending angst-fest with those two.” He did a half-assed flick of the wrist to indicate to Dean. “Carry on,” he told Sherlock. “So far you’re winning.”
Sherlock’s lips stretched briefly into the proverbial fake smile. “It’s not that hard.” His eyes bore into Crowley’s and he started speaking seemingly without taking a breath.

“You wear excellent bespoke tailoring yet the fitting of your suit suggests some weight loss. I assume it’s not by choice or you would be wearing something new. It’s not a sudden drop—at your age it would show on the skin of your face and neck.” Crowley gave out an offended gasp, but his stance was far from relaxed. “So it’s a tendency,” Sherlock continued, “and yet with your level of care at personal grooming you still haven’t found the time to visit your tailor and make the necessary alterations—or better still, order a new wardrobe.” Sherlock’s expression turned beguiling. “Trouble in Hell?”

Crowley scratched the skin beneath his ear. Sam noticed it was already a shade darker in red. “Nothing I can’t handle,” he told Sherlock, his confidence calm rather than cocky. Sam was sure it was for show. He feverishly hoped Sherlock was playing for time or just playing. One of his dangerous games, but with a better outcome than the one Sam had had in mind when he’d set foot in the chapel.

Sherlock was still keeping his laser gaze on Crowley, making Crowley roll his shoulders, probably unconsciously. The tension in Sam’s stomach, conversely, dropped down a notch at the sight.

“What do you want?” Sherlock asked.

For a moment Crowley looked like an animal. A jackal perhaps: neither too weak to be pathetic in its claims, nor too big to just stake them. An animal no one should underestimate.

“I want to know if Moriarty played me for a dime,” he told Sherlock. “I want to know if this ritual and everything he told me about the angel tablet is going to go down the way he said.”

Sherlock’s tongue rubbed over the spot on his lip he’d worried at earlier. Sam realized that for the first time since he’d met him, his eyes lacked the crystal clarity that sometimes made you want to throw rocks at him to try to shatter it. Now, there was something murky in there.

Crowley was watching him, his own gaze at its shrewdest.

Sherlock took a breath. “What’s in it for me?”

John turned sharply, eyes trying to puzzle out Sherlock’s face. Sherlock cast him a swift glance, eyebrow haughtily lifted as if he was asking, “What?”

Crowley smiled, but his face didn’t soften. “Your brother never asks that question. He’s all about the public good.”

“I’m not my brother.”

Crowley hummed meditatively. Sam had to give credit to Sherlock for facing the scrutiny as if he was daily subjected to it from the likes of the King of Hell. There was something open and just a little bored in Sherlock’s face, an unspoken urge for Crowley to stop being an idiot and draw his conclusions already.

“You are like him,” Crowley said, face betraying his amusement wasn’t bottomless. “The same arrogant sod.” He paused. “But I believe you.”
“So. Can we get on with it? I’ve been stuck here for far too long.”

“Why did you even come?” The question was thrown in a banter-like manner, but Sam had no illusions what a significant point of the test it marked.

Sherlock looked fleetingly uncomfortable, then puffed up his chest. “John.”

“Ah, yes. We all have our pressure points.”

“Now you sound like my brother. I thought you were a salesman. You don’t seem to have a good grasp at the concept of the job.”

“I’m the King of Hell!” ‘Hell’ came out like a bark; on cue, Crowley’s hound let out a deep one, too.

“Yes, you are.” It wasn’t clear whether Sherlock meant it snidely or in good faith. Crowley seemed to decide not to press the matter.

“Here is my proposal,” he said. “You tell me if Moriarty played a fair game and you can walk out of here with your consort. I can’t offer you more, because I’m playing blind here. You might have nothing for me. I will still keep my word.”

Sherlock scoffed. “Don’t tell me you really think you’ll end up empty-handed. What are the odds that Jim did play fair and square, hmm?”

Crowley narrowed his eyes at Sherlock. “So you do know something?”

Sherlock’s face would have won him fifty extra years on his life from that witch poker player.

“Counter offer. I tell you what I know, then we all leave, alive and unharmed.”

Crowley’s brow crinkled. “Why do you care about these two cowboys?”

“I haven’t finished. We go back to London, then I don’t want to be bothered by you or any of your…employees again. John and I.” Sherlock corrected himself, then looked at Sam, face blank.

“Once we’re in London, the Winchesters are fair game.”

Sam was finding himself in a curious déja vu: much like it had been with Castiel, he was circling around the issue of trust needing more than just faith. The difference was that unlike Cas, no one was poking around in Sherlock’s brain. He was answerable only to himself. The knowledge did not help Sam’s confusion about his true motives one bit.

His eyes went to Dean on their own volition, seeking a touchstone. On the ground behind Dean there was a big candle; just as Sam looked it hissed and a thick drop of hot wax rolled down, dropping on Dean’s tied up hands. Sam’s gaze jumped to Dean’s face and he realized that he was meeting his brother’s eyes for the first time since he’d walked in. Dean held his gaze, the warning and the plea fierce in his eyes, then he pointedly drew Sam’s attention back to the action.

Crowley seemed to be thinking over Sherlock’s suggestion. John had ducked his head and was now watching him under a hooded brow, his chest rising and falling rhythmically.

Crowley spread his arms. “Well, I’m ever so sorry to have to decline.” The bags under his eyes suddenly appeared puffier with the unexpected flash of anger on his face. “I’m not running a fucking
John must have sensed something dangerous, too. “Sherlock,” he said quietly, tone firm and eye intent on catching Sherlock’s.

Sherlock ignored him, meeting Crowley’s predatory eyes. “Final offer. I tell you what I know. John, Sam and I walk out of here, same conditions. Dean Winchester stays as your compensation for the time being.” Sherlock’s eyes flitted to Dean. “Sorry, Dean.”

“No!” Sam’s voice ricocheted in the small space. Trust had left the building. Even if this was some of Sherlock’s clever ploys, no one was taking chances with Dean’s life. Sam pointed at Sherlock, incandescent with outrage. “This is not for you to decide!” His fist curled by itself and he made a jerky motion forward.

Crowley’s ‘guard’ leaped noiselessly and Sam found himself with his back against the wall, heavy paws on his shoulders again. Red eyes gleamed at him viciously and the hound’s bark was deafening, making him turn away from the sound and the gaping mouth, scrunching his face. The dog was heavy, forty pounds easily, its bark rabid and insanely loud. Sam’s head felt like it was going to burst.

A sharp, brief whistle and silence resumed abruptly.

“Some people’s manners, eh?” Sam barely heard Crowley’s comment over the ringing in his ears. He turned his head the other way to Dean. The hound growled immediately and Sam felt piercing pain in his right shoulder. It took a moment for the dizziness to lift and he realized he was bleeding from the claw tearing through skin and flesh. He closed his eyes, feeling Dean’s gaze on him and bit back his pain. He tried to school his features into calm, then opened his eyes and slowly rolled his head to face forward.

Crowley was watching him, something mellow and patronizing on his face. Sam wanted to stab him in the eye.

“Down boy,” Crowley said and Sam was taking a proper lungful of air again. The hound remained on watch, but at least it wasn’t going to crush him to death.

“Now, where were we?” Crowley asked Sherlock. “Oh yes, your final offer. No can do, cheekbones. You and John, yes. But if you think—”

John did his mulish head tilt. “I’m not going anywhere without them.”

“John.” The name had dropped from Sherlock’s lips almost as imploring as it had been the night Sherlock had revealed to John he’d faked his death.

Just like back then, John was having none of it. “No, Sherlock,” he said. “What are you doing… haggling with a maniac—”

“Hey!” Crowley interjected with a little whine. “You haven’t given me a chance to show my
John pointed at him, fuming. “Shut up!” He looked back at Sherlock. “This has gone far enough. I can’t believe you are even considering leaving them here in his hands.” He shook his head, taking a step back, eyes turning dark and disappointed. “What happened to you?”

“Nothing,” Sherlock said at once. “Nothing happened to me. I haven’t changed. This is who I am; who I’ve always been.” Sherlock had lowered his head, speaking to John with a mixture of frustration and something akin to hurt. “I told you, John. Your need to turn me into a hero has always —”

John looked away, barking a bitter laugh. Sherlock didn’t continue his sentence, just straightened up. John shook his head again, slowly, then sniffed. His gaze returned to Sherlock. “Do whatever you want. I’m not leaving without Sam and Dean.”

“John, this is a pointless sacrifice—”

“Boys, boys,” Crowley interrupted. “You’re turning into Moose and Squirrel.” He had the air of a director watching some pivotal scene unravel on stage for the first time. He finally moved, taking the four steps that put him right in Sherlock’s space. It only earned him the same lifted imperious eyebrow John had received earlier, but it wasn’t a great cover for the vulnerability that still lingered on Sherlock’s features.

“I can see that your lovers tiff might make you backpedal,” Crowley told him. “If I say yes—and that’s still a big fucking ‘if’, so don’t start doing cartwheels… If I let Sam walk out of here with you and if I consider letting Dean go, too, but only if I found that what you’ve got works in my favour… Well, we get to the million dollars question: How can I trust you?”

Sherlock had regained his composure.

“Look around,” he said, head moving forward with the words like a cat for a quick sniff. “Do you notice any angels? There were five of us at entry point as I’m sure you’re aware.”

“Yeah, I was going to ask about that. Where’s dear old Cassy?”

“It wasn’t difficult to predict how this would end, so I dispatched him.” Sherlock lifted his left hand to show a small, but visible fresh cut in the middle of his palm. It was only then that Sam realized only his right hand had been covered by a glove. “Treat it as a gesture of good will,” Sherlock added. "Actually, I took further precautions.”

“What further precautions?”

“I talked to his superior.”

Once again all eyes were on Sherlock, even Dean straining upward. Sam’s head was abuzz. ‘Superior’? Had Sherlock been playing a much longer game here? Whose game?

Whatever was on Crowley’s face must have reflected Sam’s thoughts, because Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Oh, for goodness sake, abandon your conspiracy theories. I only spoke to her to make sure she was out of the picture, too. I sent her into oblivion or wherever they go after that banishing ritual. I just thought it’d be easier for us to have our business negotiations if we weren’t under threat
of her popping over in person. I don’t care about Heaven or Hell, or about much of what’s in between for that matter.” Sherlock paused, weariness making a blink-and-you’ll-miss it appearance. “I just want to be done with this. Frankly, I’ve had enough of this supernatural nonsense to last me for a lifetime.”

“All right, chill your boots.” Crowley was watching Sherlock, cautious. “If what you’re saying is true, then you’ll be able to spill on the charming lady.”

“What for? You obviously know her.” Sherlock sighed, put-upon. “Her name is Naomi. I didn’t catch a surname. Accent neutral, but I would guess British by birth—at least her ‘meatsuit’.” Sherlock did the air quotes pointedly. “Blue eyes, light brown hair, formal wear, mid-forties, five foot nine. The description fit?”

Crowley let out a laugh, throwing his head back. “Yes. She is a local lass.” He paused. “You’ve made yourself a nasty enemy there.”

Sherlock’s blink was slow and languid, his gaze falling on Dean. “Trust me. This ain’t my first rodeo.”

“And how do I know you’re not in cahoots with Naomi?” Crowley asked.

“We can always skip together to the spot and check whether the sigils are there, smeared with my blood.” Sherlock didn’t bother to wipe the dripping irony off his tone. “Or maybe you’ll want a DNA test?”

Sam’s heart really dropped. This was too big a bluff for Sherlock to try to pull off. He had blasted Castiel and Naomi out of here. It was getting increasingly difficult to believe Sherlock was playing for anyone, but himself and John.

And why would he? When asked dispassionately, the question came with a ready answer. This was Sherlock Holmes. A machine, as some had described him, even with the whole ‘Don’t speak ill of the dead’. John was obviously ready to do anything for the guy, but people found their dearest in odd places, in different ways. It should speak nada about the other person’s character. For John, the sun might have risen and set with Sherlock, but it didn’t mean Sherlock wouldn’t cut his losses and leave two relative strangers to die.

No, it doesn’t mean it, a different voice spoke in Sam’s head. But when someone like John Watson puts his stamp of approval on you, it gives you more than credibility or status. It earns you the benefit of the doubt.

Sam’s eyes went to his brother’s again. Dean held them, mute strength oozing out of him to fill up Sam’s depleted resources. Sam looked away to the tableau in front of them. There wasn’t much else he could do anyway. He and Dean were guarded by hellhounds, Dean bound and gagged to boot. There had to have been tighter spots from which they’d wriggled out, but none came to mind; at least none where they’d done it without any help.

Sam couldn’t see Crowley’s face so didn’t know what his next word meant. “Okay.”

“Okay what?” Sherlock asked, deadpan.

“Okay. You spill. You, toy soldier and Samantha walk out of here either way. If I find what you have to say will get me the angel tablet, poster boy joins you and you go back to your ménage à
“quatre. But if I get nothing…” Crowley looked at Sherlock with half-lidded eyes. “Well, I’ve always wondered if that one’s kinky.” He gestured in Dean’s direction with his head. “I might just be able to find out.”

“Do you always talk so much?” Sherlock snapped, face scrunching spiteful. “How on earth did you manage to secure any deals?”

“And they say the English have a sense of humour.” Crowley extended his hand without any preamble. “Deal?”

Memories of Bobby flooded Sam; of Crowley trying to weasel his way out of their agreement. He and Dean had travelled all the way to here, Scotland, to find Crowley’s bones and bargain Bobby’s soul back with them. Sam had only one strand left now: that this wasn’t over and no one was dead yet. If it was a crossroads deal, he might have trusted Crowley. Not now, with so much small print and with the stakes so high.

“Sherlock, don’t,” John said. His hair had stuck to his forehead, glistening silver. Sam noticed how dark his lips were. “Don’t trust him,” John insisted.

Sherlock cast him a quick sideways glance, the flickering flames of the candles emphasizing his features in an ugly, wax-like way. He briskly gripped Crowley’s hand and shook it.

“Now,” Crowley said. “I’m all ears.” He crossed his arms over his chest, the pose not really typical for him. Sam felt some petty gladness at knowing the bastard didn’t feel all that secure himself.

“You gave James Moriarty one particular text to translate for you,” Sherlock said. “It was about the ritual for the acquisition of the angel tablet. Am I correct?”

“You are,” Crowley admitted after a beat. “Don’t know how you know about that, but it’s true.”

“I don’t just know about it. I translated it myself. The result fitted with what I already knew. The material I worked with spoke about the blood from the beating heart of the man, who defeated the Devil.” Sherlock paused, hesitant. Crowley was listening with utmost attention—Sam didn’t expect any wisecracks any time soon.

“I didn’t work with the full picture,” Sherlock confessed at length. “Moriarty must have told you how complex the translation was. Deciphering is a better word for it. You must have discovered that for yourself if you felt the need to engage his services.”

Sherlock paused, eyebrows lifted questioningly.

“I’m waiting for the punch line,” Crowley told him, “before I start throwing flowers at you.”

“Nearly there. I was not entirely convinced this was the accurate translation. Everything suggested it was: your effort to get to Sam’s heart, the material I had at my disposal. I had no reasons to suspect Castiel would provide me with false data on the Enochian. The missing part of the ‘text’, for lack of a better word, suggested it was irrelevant—perhaps even a blank, because everything…did…add up.” Sherlock’s last ‘p’ was a popping sound.

Next to him John was all rapt attention. Sam himself had no clue where Sherlock was going with this, but one thing he knew: so far his faith might have wobbled up and down, mostly plummeting, but this here was the real deal. A hundred percent truth. When it was about the mystery of a mental
puzzle, Sherlock radiated a different kind of energy, something Sam would have called pure.

When Sherlock spoke next, it was much like one would have done it in an ancient tomb. “Tonight I had the opportunity to look at all of it.” His eyes turned luminous, two windows of a house destined to have one single occupant. He straightened a bit.

“James Moriarty offered you the full translation, but not the correct interpretation. You don’t need the blood from the beating heart of the man, who defeated the Devil.” Sherlock paused. “You need blood from a defeated man who beat the devil in his heart.”

For a long moment there was no sound in the air other than distinctive ways of breathing: the hounds, Dean, Sam, Sherlock, even Crowley and John. Sam ran Sherlock’s words through his mind, remembering his jubilance at the beauty in simplicity. He could see why that was. As deception it was ingenious.

“No one could have disproved Moriarty,” Sherlock continued Sam’s train of thought out loud. “It’s next to impossible to say whether one of the symbols should be treated as an extension of what stands for the word ‘devil’ or the word ‘man’.”

Crowley contemplated Sherlock. “Is the spell the correct one?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“How do I know you’re not the one fibbin’?” The question was asked quietly despite the off-hand wording.

“For the same reason I know I have the accurate interpretation. I have no reason to lie. I have no interest in politics, human or otherwise. James Moriarty on the other hand…” Sherlock turned his head while tilting it, the pose giving him the air of someone with considerable intellectual superiority willing to indulge average people. “What do you think will happen to you if you put in there blood from Sam Winchester’s heart?” he asked Crowley, gesturing to the altar. “The tablet—assuming it’s still here and Moriarty didn’t know something neither of us does—is protected heavily against both demons and angels. It’s a small wonder you’re able to stand here without bursting into flames. Sam Winchester has demon blood in him and he has a bond with an angel. You fill in the blanks.”

Even through the mad spin in Sam’s mind the banner unrolled in its full glory: *Sam Winchester. Freak extraordinaire.*

Crowley continued to be less than talkative, but Sherlock didn’t seem to mind.

“Whichever way you look at it,” he said, “the worst that could happen if you sacrifice some blood from a human is…Well, nothing. Empty hands. But still attached to you. I’m employing a metaphor, of course.” Sherlock finished with some loftiness. “If you like playing the percentages, I assume this would be what people call a ‘no brainer’.”

“And I assume you won’t mind donating your blood?” Crowley’s voice was cloying syrup promising food poisoning. Sherlock looked at him, taken aback, all the excitement of his revelations sucked back behind his unmistakeable guardedness.

“I’m not playing at anything.”

“Then you wouldn’t mind giving me a hand,” Crowley said immediately. “Oh, that’s good, that’s a good pun. I have to entertain myself sometimes, if none of you would do it.” He looked around in mock accusation, before speaking to Sherlock again. “You poke at that little cut on your hand and donate to Crowley’s Red Cross.” Sherlock looked down at his hand, expression cagey.

“What’s the matter?” Crowley asked, face crude. “Thought I was just some git with a fancy title? I got news for you, mate. I don’t count just on my dashing looks to go through life. You thought you’d walk away safe and let me come back here with some plonker at my own time? That isn’t going to fly. You stay here. If the shit hits the fan, it goes on you, too. Let’s see how sure you are in your little theory.”

Sherlock opened his mouth, but stayed like that, empty of words. Crowley sniggered.

“What, shocked the fanny figured out you’d be perfect for the job? Your arrogance is worse than your brother’s and I swear, that queen gives me toothache.” Crowley took a breath, composing himself after his outburst. When he spoke next, he’d reverted to his sly, dapper persona.

“You are a defeated man who beat the devil in his heart. Even I can interpret that kind of shit poetry. You faked your own death. I’ll take that as a defeat. Jimmy would have loved you to join him, both in this life and the other. He thought your brain was the Kama Sutra of brains and I know you were tempted, too, you minx. But you chose to protect your loved ones. Well, if that isn’t a victory against the devil in your heart, I don’t know what is!” Crowley pointed to the altar, chest expanding for his command. “Over there. Now!” Both hellhounds growled threateningly.

“Sherlock…” John looked ashen, his small form heart-breaking in its taut helplessness. His eyes were fixed on Sherlock who was moving like a dark shadow to join Crowley at the altar.

Crowley took Sherlock’s hand, pressing roughly against the cut with his thumb and making Sherlock gasp. “Sorry,” Crowley told him. “I promise to kiss it better.” He squeezed Sherlock’s palm cupping it with his own. Sherlock’s neck was straining with the effort not to make a sound.

“There,” Crowley said, dropping Sherlock’s hand at last. He examined his own palm, then turned to Sam, eyebrow raised playfully. “Kind of like every Friday night.” His eyes went to Sherlock. “Last chance to change your story.”

Sherlock’s face was a match to the stones around: cold and encrypted. “This is the ritual. I told you the truth.”

Crowley cast him one final long look and lifted his hand. “Areagh-nar-marey, mana-sum-darate.” He smacked his palm against the altar.

White light erupted everywhere, engulfing the entire world. Sam felt as if a massive magnet was pulling him towards the center of the chapel while an equal force pressed against his chest, making him feel much like trying to walk in a storm. There was a sound of a whip being lashed, but it played ten times slower than the normal speed. Sam felt something drag his body up the wall, keeping him there, blind and deaf—

Then light and sound both ceased at the same instant and he dropped on the floor, blinking shocked. For a split second he thought he saw the wall behind the altar flicker transparent, showing the black night in the churchyard at the back, but then he blinked again and the illusion was gone.
He looked around.

Everything was exactly the way it had been apart from Crowley and his hellhounds, who had vanished without a trace.

Sherlock wobbled on his feet and adjusted his scarf around his neck, tightening it a bit too much with a sweeping, jerky motion. He cleared his throat, blinking rapidly. “Hmm,” he said. “I thought that went rather well.”
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

One last update left to make!

The warnings for the entire story can be found here. A reminder that the warnings say, "There won't be anything that can't be seen on one of the shows."

I would like to thank a few people who helped me make this story better.

My dear 'Bobby' nausicaa83 who was always ready with an answer to my 'Supernatural' mythology questions, doing research or just using her 'Bobby' brain. It put my mind at such ease knowing your expert eye was reading and I'm grateful to you.

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And now for the penultimate update!

Sam was not surprised that for the first few moments after the white explosion no one cared about what had happened. After the initial moment of shock the three of them instantly congregated around Dean to unbundle him: Sherlock at his wrists, Sam at his feet and John removing the gag, then rummaging inside his bag and producing his first aid kit. There was not room for much else other than grunts and looks of mutual reassurance.

“Water,” Dean croaked at John, fingers feeble as they indicated the kit then made a motion as if pushing it away. Dean then proceeded to cough and swear under his breath when sensation began returning to his limbs. John passed him a bottle of water, once again found in his backpack—Sam had left both his and Dean’s bags back in the big room in another example of the special brand of stupidity that overcame him in panic—then they all watched, weirdly hushed, as Dean gulped down a third of the water in one go. He lowered the bottle, panting, before extending a hand to Sam to help him get up on his feet. Once up Dean wobbled, but managed to find some precarious balance, pushing the bottle back against John’s chest, while his eyes met Sherlock’s. “How the hell did you do that?” he rasped out.

Sherlock accomplished the rare feat of preening bashfully. “Simple. Lying by omission.”

John’s eyebrows shot up. “So what you said to Crowley, that was actually true?”
Sherlock hesitated. “Insofar as this is undoubtedly Jim Moriarty’s work, it’s hard to determine what qualifies as ‘true’. I need more data. But yes, all the facts I gave Crowley were true.”

“Hold on,” Sam said. “So we can get the angel tablet?” He felt giddy at the prospect of leaving here not just alive and whole, but also in possession of something so hugely important. Add to it the completion of the first trial for shutting the Gates of Hell and it made for quite a triptych!

Irritation flickered over Sherlock’s features, dampening Sam’s spirits. “I didn’t say that.”

“Then what are you saying?” John asked, befuddled.

Sherlock sighed, slow and deep; it actually appeared to be genuine, making Sam wonder—a little ashamed that he only did now—about how Sherlock was feeling post-rollercoaster ride.

“There is an encryption on the back wall with a ritual,” Sherlock said. “That is the only fact we have.”

“No, it’s not,” John countered quickly. “Castiel said it was put there by someone very powerful, maybe by, um…” He looked at Sam, asking for a prompt.

“Metatron,” Sam said, John nodding. “Yes. So we know the tablet has to be here.”

Sherlock was already shaking his head, but Dean didn’t give him a chance to have his say. “Sammy, listen. Think about it: how could Metatron have left that out there, huh?” Dean spread his arms, flinching but still talking. “This place is nowhere near that old.”

An explanation popped up immediately in Sam’s head. “Whoever used this as a tomb to hide the angel tablet could have brought the stones with the ritual over from they used to be. We’ve seen all kinds of artefacts moved around after millennia.”

“You are both speculating wildly,” Sherlock informed them. “What is worse, your speculations aren’t based on facts, but on your previous speculations. Has anyone else bothered to remember Castiel’s exact words? He said that he couldn’t really tell who was behind the ritual, then suggested it was a powerful entity, but again with the provision that he could be wrong.”

“So?” Dean said.

“So all we know is that something occurred to make those stones outside impossible to be dated with any accuracy or to be identified in origin,” Sherlock paused before adding, “by an angel of the Lord, no less. I’m no expert, but my impression is that they do have a built-in…reader that allows them to be a bit more certain than that.”

Everyone took a moment to let Sherlock’s words sink in. Sam had to confess the guy was right again. There was not enough to prove this wasn’t a big hoax. A month ago he wouldn’t have believed it possible to be pulled off, but now he wasn’t so sure. From what he’d seen of Moriarty, the guy was just as fiendishly clever as he was insane and cruel.

John spoke first. “So this was all Moriarty? Is that it?”

“All right,” Dean cut in. “Let’s backtrack a little.” His finger drew a loose circle in the air, indicating the empty space around them. “Where are Crowley and the hellhounds?” He looked at Sherlock. “I thought you lied about the spell and you let Crowley think he got the right one.”
Sam was taken aback to hear his brother imply so casually he’d known Sherlock was lying through his teeth all along— well, in spirit; apparently he’d told Crowley a whole bunch of truths—as if trust was the default setting Dean had for Sherlock now.

“No,” Sherlock said. “Every fact I gave him was the truth. What I omitted telling him was that my blood was not what he would want to use.”

“Why?” The word tumbled from Sam’s lips in wonder, but his brain was already flying over the last hour, swooping in and collecting pieces of the jigsaw: Sherlock’s questions about the syringes, his departure with Castiel, the djinn’s lair—

“Because it was no longer purely human.”

Sherlock spoke the words with some reverence, although Sam suspected it was to his own ingenuity.

“There’s angel blood running in my veins,” he continued. "Albeit temporarily. Castiel’s more precisely. I saw through Moriarty’s ploy and devised my own. I remembered the empty blood bank the djinn had intended to use on me. A few drops of angel blood in my bloodstream could have very well sufficed, but I preferred a more substantial transfusion.” Sherlock’s eyes had been touring all their faces, lingering longer on John’s, but now he looked away, head moving like a balloon caressed in passing by the lightest breeze. “The risk was too big. I didn’t want to fail on a technicality.”

John went to wipe his mouth, hand staying over it as if he’d forgotten he put it there, while he quickly turned things over in his head. “How did you know Crowley was going to ask for your blood?” he asked.

Some of Sherlock smugness returned. “I didn’t. Initially, I was going to find a way to suggest it myself, inconspicuously of course. However, it didn’t take long to realize that once again the need to feel clever and special—” there was something self-deprecating on Sherlock’s face “— was going to be the reason for yet another man’s downfall. Or in this case, a demon.” He tipped his head in acknowledgement of the detail. “Kings and beggars, no difference.” Sherlock shrugged. “So I played the part of the blind fool who didn’t see that he was walking into his own trap. Crowley fell for it and didn’t even think this could have been my plan all along.” His eyes stopped on John, eyelids at half-mast, gaze underneath keen but unreadable. “Your support act was certainly bonus help.”

John huffed a laugh, looking away briefly, before locking Sherlock’s gaze. “Maybe I’m not as bad an actor as you thought.”

Sherlock’s face smoothed out, turning meditative. “I never doubted it,” he told John, the softness of his tone even more palpable in his low voice. “But playing grief convincingly is something I doubt even I would be able to do for a long time.”

John’s smile had folded completely by the end of Sherlock’s sentence, but his gaze hadn’t turned away or hardened. He and Sherlock remained silent, wrapped in their own world and each other, making Sam wonder whether those weren’t sometimes the same thing.

“So where’s Cas?” Dean asked.

Sherlock lips were rapidly thinning. “I’m sorry,” he said in an exaggeratedly concerned tone. “Are you sure you’re not suffering from a concussion? I said twice already that every fact I told Crowley was true.” Once more Sherlock treated John as if he was his solo audience. “It takes a lot of truths to
shroud a secret or a lie successfully. I took a leaf out of Jim Moriarty’s book.”

Sam noticed a small smile already tugging on John’s mouth’s corner, understanding passing between him and Sherlock. Sam remembered how Moriarty had tricked Sherlock: using a lot of truths about him to bury one big lie amidst them—that Sherlock was a fraud—making everyone believe it and bringing about Sherlock’s downfall. Thankfully, true to the accusation Sherlock had acted like a fraud and faked his own death. Talk about the butterfly effect, Sam thought: they would probably not be all standing here alive, if Sherlock hadn’t done that.

Or likely would have never stood here in the first place.

Meanwhile Dean had shifted to stand face to face with Sherlock, harshness in his movements. “Are you telling me you freaking blasted Cas out of here?” He looked at Sherlock in darkening disbelief.

“Oh God,” Sherlock uttered under his breath, his next words just a little defensive. “How else was I supposed to gain Crowley’s trust?”

Sam and John stayed silent, heads turning as if they were watching a tennis match, while the two parties’ voices rose exponentially.

“You could have thought of something else! How the hell did—”

“Do you realize what would have happened if Castiel had—”

“You don’t know what would have happened! And it wasn’t up to you to—”

“I knew that he was going to do whatever was necessary to take the angel tablet and I—”

“Cas would have never hurt Sam. Or me! Ever!”

Sherlock pulled sharply back, gaze wide on Dean’s furious face. Emotion and candlelight were making both pairs of eyes appear the colour of light amber.

It took a moment for Sherlock to compose himself. “It may seem strange to you,” he said coolly, “but my concern was not for you or your brother.”

So many things flickered through Dean’s features it was as if someone was channel surfing on them. Sam hurried to speak, keen to hear the facts that Sherlock held in such high regard.

“What did you tell Cas?” he asked him, keeping his tone neutral.

“To him, I lied. Or rather, I offered him a half-truth. I explained about the real meaning of the encryption and told him what my plan was. He was glad to donate some of his blood. Afterwards I asked for a reward for myself. I insisted I spoke to his superior. She was, of course, listening to every word.” Sherlock looked at Dean pointedly. “When she arrived, I didn’t waste time in pleasantries, but got rid of both of them. On my way over to you I encountered the ghost of the Earl. The rest is known to you.”

The silence was odd this time: both a little oppressive and yet somehow buoyant, like something had lifted up. Sam took stock of his surroundings. Some of the candles had been extinguished—he couldn’t say whether it was by the same force that had obliterated Crowley and his beasts—but there were still plenty of them casting light on the stones, sigils very clear on many of them. The chapel
was like a sheet of paper with rows and rows of doodles on it; a sheet that someone had folded into a box, leaving the writing on the inside. Was it a genuine artistic hand or a fake, malicious one? As Crowley would have said—Sam sincerely hoped he’d never hear him speak again, although he didn’t count on it—this was the million dollar question.

“Sherlock,” John spoke. “If this was Moriarty’s work, all of it…Was it just to get rid of Crowley?” John paused, tongue doing the quick run over his lips that betrayed he was nervous. Something rubbed the wrong way in Sam’s insides. “Or is it about you? Again.” John licked his lips once more, air shifting to openly tense.

In response a very particular line appeared between Sherlock’s square eyebrows; the kind of line telling Sam that John Watson was perpetually throwing Sherlock Holmes curved balls he had to go out of his perfectly straight, logical way to catch. “Why?” Sherlock asked.

“Because if it’s about you, I think we should leave this place right now. But if it was only about Crowley…then the ritual could still get them the angel tablet, right?” John’s eyes flickered to Sam and Dean, before returning to Sherlock, expectant.

Sherlock did the whole thing where he was swaying a little and looking around, while nibbling on his mouth. Sam was astonished how good a performance Sherlock had put on for Crowley.

“I don’t know.” Sherlock tucked his hands into his coat pockets, then hissed and extracted the left one quickly.

“Let me see this,” John told him, reaching.

“I’m fine.”

“Of course you are.” John was already taking out some anti-septic wipes from the first aid kit. He continued to speak, eyes briefly lifting to Dean to let him know he was addressing him. “I’d like to look at the wound on your shoulder next. I’m sure you’re fine, too,” John added in one breath, the irony slipping in and out of the sentence seamlessly, “but it won’t do any harm.” Dean grumbled something unintelligible.

John’s eyes finally moved to Sam. “Your shoulder’s bleeding. How deep is the puncture?”

“Just a surface thing,” Sam lied.

John’s gaze froze on him for a couple of seconds and to Sam’s horror, he felt heat rise up his face. He prayed it wasn’t that bright in here.

“Right,” John said, proceeding with the treatment of Sherlock’s palm without further comment.

Dean twisted a little to look down at his shoulder where the hellhound had clasped its jaws. His face contorted with pain as he moved. Without lifting his head he looked up, catching Sherlock’s eye. “Sorry about your jacket,” he told him.

“It’s fine.”

Sam wondered if it ever stopped feeling peculiar to watch humour unfurl in Sherlock’s pale eyes. “The damage wasn’t through carelessness,” Sherlock added.
Dean rolled his eyes at him in what he probably believed was exasperation. Something warmed in Sam at seeing his brother let himself be fond of another person, albeit probably without realizing it. It always made Sam a little sad, too, time and time again realizing Dean had a naturally loving disposition that despite being severely thwarted by life experiences still managed to shine through.

On some occasions, towards the most surprising subjects.

“So,” John spoke from where he was bent over Sherlock’s palm. “What do you think, then? What are the odds of the tablet still being here?”

Sherlock took his time to reply. “There are too many variables, John, and you know I don’t like to theorize. If, if, if! If the tablet was here in the first place, if it wasn’t already removed by someone else before Moriarty came onto the scene, if his plan was primarily to do with me...”

Sam could really see Sherlock’s point. He didn’t even need to think separately of each string as an alternate reality: the complexity of scenarios was as visible to him as if he had a bird’s eye view.

There was one thing he was spotting for the first time.

He turned to Sherlock. “I think we should really talk to your brother about how he got those photos. Seems to me, it was all a bit too convenient to have them. Giving you just that part you needed to interpret the encryption wrong? What do you think?”

Sherlock hummed in assent, but didn’t elaborate.

“So what?” Dean said, frowning. “Moriarty wanted you to get it wrong? Why?”

“To convince us the ritual was real,” Sam replied. He cast Sherlock an awkward glance, feeling a little like walking on thin ice. “I guess Moriarty didn’t count on you deciding to come with us here. You know, and seeing the stones outside.”

“Or he did,” John said quietly, administering his last touches on Sherlock’s hand. “And that was also part of his game. Knowing you’d figure it out, knowing you’d play Crowley.” John didn’t even look up, finishing his speech almost distractedly. “Sorry, but nothing’s worth the risk of you falling into his trap again.”

Sherlock was gazing at the top of John’s head as if he was bowled over by John’s very existence.

“There,” John said, releasing Sherlock’s hand, in an echo of Crowley’s gesture earlier. He busied himself taking off his gloves, unaware of the unanimous attention on his person.

Sam turned to Dean, unsettled and hesitant. “What do you think we should do?”

Dean ran a hand over his face. “John’s right. If that’s just another stage of some moronic charade to prove who’s the smartest ass, we don’t want to poke anything around here.”

“On the other hand Crowley did disappear,” Sherlock said. “We are also still standing here. I would have expected a different outcome if Moriarty had set this up for me to unravel it first, only to fall into my own trap.”

“So you’re saying it wasn’t because of you?” John asked.
Sherlock shook his head, expression earnest. “I don’t know, John. If he had the tools necessary to put him in possession of an artefact that seems to give considerable power to the one who has it, logic begs the question: why wouldn’t he take the tablet, then set up his elaborate trap to get rid of Crowley? But.”

Sherlock lifted his gloved hand, pressing a finger against his lips. His face had rare placidity about it. “James Moriarty was no longer human. When we think of ghosts and men, we must remember something key: I and all of you have only been one of these things. I think as a man and I really knew Moriarty as one, too. Maybe power continued to interest him.”

Sherlock met Sam’s eyes, speaking out loud what Sam’s hunter’s brain had produced immediately as a counter-argument. “Or maybe he was the typical vengeful ghost, obsessed only with the person who tricked him and brought about his demise. Maybe his plan was to seek his revenge back in the lab and this here was his motion to get rid of Crowley. There are too many questions.” Sherlock drew a breath at the end of his monologue, eyes meeting John’s. “And for once, I don’t have any interest in finding their answers.”

John said nothing; his nod would have won him medals in the ‘indescribable’ category at any major body language competition.

This was it, Sam realized—the inevitable. He and John had met. They had gone through a lot, shared a lot in a short time. They had come here together, now four of them, looking out for each other, saving each other’s lives. But sooner or later they were always going to come face to face with the difference between their realities. This was the line: their priorities. The angel tablet meant something abstract to Sherlock and John, but to Sam and Dean? *This is our life,* Sam thought, eyes going to his brother’s face, the bone-deep scowl on it almost etched there these days. *This is our world.*

It was everything he and Dean knew; what gave meaning to their losses and to their sacrifices. It was what defined them.

“We could always come back,” Dean said slowly, not working the conviction much.

“No.” Sam shook his head. “How long do you think it’ll take Naomi to come down on this place like a hailstorm?”

Dean nodded, eyeing Sam, pensive, making alarm bells holler in Sam’s head. “You’re not staying here alone, Dean,” he told his brother, feeling his back go up like a hedgehog’s.

“Sammy, it’s too dangerous for you to stay here. Especially now that you’ve started the trials. I mean, something’s off here, man.” The scowl was gone in favour of Dean’s animated squints and scrunching of facial features. “You know it. Those monsters running rampant all over the place. The freaking hellhounds. Did you catch that Crowley didn’t think we could see them?”

“What?” Sam didn’t trust his memories from the first couple of minutes after they’d arrived, but he couldn’t think of anything Crowley had said or done to suggest that.

Sherlock spoke. “When his hound had its paws on your shoulders the first time, he said ‘my pets are here, as you can feel.’ Or something to that effect. The word *was* ‘feel’, though. It’s a lot more natural to say ‘as you can see’.”

“Yeah!” Dean nodded at Sherlock. “Exactly. Why are we seeing them, huh? Crowley thought we
couldn’t, so whatever weirdo spell has been laid down on this place, it ain’t coming from him.”

“There was also the wall and the blue light,” John spoke, then seemed to check himself. “Oh, um. Was that part of the ritual? Because it just seemed very odd, you know.”

“What blue light?” Dean asked. “What are you talking about?”

“The wall behind you, it sort of… it turned see through for a moment.”

“Yes, I saw that, too,” Sam said quickly. He ran a hand through his hair, unnerved by yet another element in the puzzle that gave no clue as to its solving.

John was nodding at him. “I could see some trees outside and there was this blue…frame, like the flame of a Bunsen burner—that sort of blue.” He turned to Sherlock. “Did you see it?”

“No. I couldn’t see anything, really; just white, barely some outlines here and there. It was quite an unpleasant experience actually.” Sherlock’s gaze unfocused and Sam wondered whether he was reliving it or pondering its implications. “It was as if there were leeches all over my body,” Sherlock murmured.

Dean looked at him, grossed out, but Sherlock was in a world of his own. “Well maybe…” he said to himself, then turned to Dean abruptly, taking a step closer, his tone laden with demand. “What did you see? Or hear? Anything!”

“Oh, ah, um,” Dean began, startled, his lips making some weird puffing sound at the end of his eloquent opening. His chin tipped in Sam’s direction. “I could feel Sammy, almost like a…Like this magnetic pull from where you were standing,” he finished his sentence with his eyes to Sam.

“Yeah.” Sam nodded. “There was something pulling me to the centre of the room. Or to the altar maybe? I don’t know, man, I lost my bearings big time. There was an equal force holding me back, though. I was actually up in the air, they were pretty strong. Anyways, right after everything stopped, I thought I could see through the wall as well. But you know, I thought it was—that I’d imagined it.”

“Anything else?” Sherlock insisted at Dean.

Dean opened his mouth, obviously racking his brain for an articulate description of his experiences. “I—Ah—It was just like a white blizzard, dude. I told you, I could feel Sam. And my head was like a freaking car tire being pumped up. That’s all. It was delightful,” he muttered in a beat.

“That’s strange,” John said, pushing his lips forward thoughtfully. “Because I could see you all quite well. There was just this bright light where Crowley had touched the altar and it looked like, it sort of…” John made a complicated gesture with both his hands as if pulling sharply a cover over himself. “Sucked him in. And his hounds. In just one second.” He shook his head, face a little incredulous, then tugged down at the seams of his jacket unselfconsciously.

“None of these phenomena comes with an explanation?” Sherlock asked.

It was Dean who replied. “They do, only not for here. Hellhounds, they don’t walk the earth! You can see them in Hell or, or in Purgatory, or in some other dimensions probably, I don’t know. Not here. Over here, you can see them only if they’re coming for your soul, and that’s an extra reason for us to worry. And I don’t know about the freak show we’ve had running all night, with the vamps,
and the gorillas, and the crocottas. And the freaking djinn!” He looked at Sam. “Maybe all those were Crowley’s army, hey?” He spread his arms a little, eyebrows going up. “He did confess about the ghost.”

Sam had an idea. “Listen, how about this? The blue light? Maybe it was something from the djinn. You know, like some residual stuff.”

“Yeah, but why show up now? And what does it have to do with making walls appear and disappear? I’m telling you, dude, that’s some fucked up shit.”

“I’m not leaving you here alone,” Sam told him flatly, refusing to let the main point being buried under all that other stuff, no matter what it might signify.

“All right, all right.” Dean’s concession proved he knew a lost battle and didn’t waste resources to fight it.

They had a mute exchange, then Sam elected himself as the spokesperson of the Winchesters. “You should go,” he told Sherlock and John. “Dean and I will stay here and figure this out.”

“No,” John said together with Sherlock’s, “How?”

“No,” John repeated. “What do you mean figure it out? You can’t do the ritual.” He pointed to Sam, then turned to Dean, finger still in the air, mouth still open. His next sentence was already on its way out, like a train coming out of a tunnel, but then suddenly there didn’t seem to be a track for it to continue. John shut his mouth, making a very deliberate effort to prevent his eyes from turning shifty.

In a flash Sam knew what John had stopped himself from saying and his heart filled with gratitude for the man’s sensitivity. Dean must have put two and two together himself—his face was brooding, but not hostile.

“And I can’t do it, either,” he told John with a clipped nod. “I was defeated all right. Not so big on beating the devil in my heart.” He met Sherlock’s gaze for the briefest instant, before looking down and away. It occurred to Sam that if there was ever going to be a person without a single spec of conscious or subconscious judgement on Dean’s actions in Hell, that man was Sherlock Holmes.

“So,” John said, determined. “You two are out and Sherlock is, too. That leaves me.”

“No.” Sam stepped to him with the force of his refusal to accept John’s suggestion. “No way.”

“Why not? Sherlock already said it: if Moriarty had put this together to blast him into oblivion, why are we all standing here? It must have been about Crowley.”

“You don’t know that for sure!” Sam could feel his face turn hot. “That’s the whole point. We don’t know! We don’t know what could happen.”

“Okay, but what can happen? Really?” John spread his arms, a smile making his teeth glisten. “Sam, it’ll just be my ordinary, human blood—no supernatural ‘mojo’. You know it’s either me trying it or you two staying here, going around in circles and risking the angels coming back to…smite you both in a blink of an eye.” John’s hand had flown out at the word ‘smite’, like scattering dust to the wind.

“No.” Sam could only parrot himself.
“He’s right,” Sherlock spoke, making Sam’s hopes to talk John out of it soar for all too brief an instant, before he realized Sherlock was endorsing John’s statement with his own.


“There’s no one else.”

“That still doesn’t mean it has to be you, John.” Sudden, staggering plea was exuding from Sherlock to the point where it made Sam squirm inwardly, uncomfortable to witness it. It took a moment to interpret what it meant. John knew Sherlock better than anyone, but the opposite was true, too. This was Sherlock fast-forwarding a whole discussion, its end making him beg.

Sam had got to know John himself. He knew who John Watson was and what he did, the kind of choices he made. The person who’d come here with them tonight, despite Sam acting like a dick back in the flat, was the same person who wasn’t going to be persuaded to leave now without trying to do what he thought was right.

“No, it has to be me, Sherlock,” John told his friend’s hopeless face. “None of you can do it. If we leave without even checking, we risk this Naomi person getting hold of the tablet. I have no idea what crazy politics are going on up there on…celestial level, and I really,” John squinted with the emphasis on the next word, “really wish your brother was here now. But I’ve heard enough to know that if this thing falls into the wrong hands there could be some fairly serious consequences. Not just for us. For everyone. For humanity.” John turned to Dean, face open. “Right?”

Sam stared at his brother, his turn to plead with him, albeit in silence. Dean lied; they both did. Often to each other, often to protect each other. Lie to him, Dean. Protect him.

“Yes,” Dean told John, grimness crowding out any mellowness that might have shown at John’s trust in him. “If you’re really thinking about doing this, you deserve to know the truth. Angels are dicks. I don’t know who Naomi is or why she wants the tablet, but I can promise you it’s not so she could throw humanity a banquet.”

“Dean,” Sam berated his brother in one word, then turned to John, taking another step closer and ducking his chin. “Okay, listen. We’ll leave here together. We’ll figure something out to seal the place until we can come back.” Sam bore his gaze into John’s in adamant need to convince. “All right?”

“Can you do that?” John asked, half-challenge, half-genuine question. “Can you find something so powerful it’ll keep any intruder away until you return?” He absent-mindedly picked up his first aid kit from where he’d left it on top of his backpack, fingers running over its worn edges. “Even if you do, Sam, what are you going to do next? Bring here someone else to do the ritual?”

“Yes! If that’s what we gotta do.”

“How are you going to make this person take that risk?”

“We’re not going to make them!” Sam’s voice boomed with his next words. “It’ll be their choice!”

John nodded once. “Right,” he said. “Just like this, then?”

Sam turned to Sherlock. “Tell him to stop this.”
“I did.” Sherlock seemed to reply to Sam’s question *pro forma*, judging by his preoccupied frown.

“So this is it?” Sam rounded on John. “We’re all just supposed to step back and watch you risk—”

“You’re not supposed to do anything!” John was turning loud, too, from zero to hundred in a second.

“Sam,” Dean tried to speak over both of them. “Sammy…”

“Shut up, all of you!” Sherlock waved his hands a little as if trying to get someone’s attention from a distance. “Stop talking! All these speculations, and heroic gestures, and emotional—” He spluttered, unable to even finish, his hands swiftly continuing to conducting a cacophony in the air. “I can’t *think!*”

His command certainly had the desired effect, with the added bonus of everyone looking a little frayed around the edges.

“All right.” Sherlock took a deep breath, eyelids fluttering closed and pressing down tightly for a couple of seconds, the gesture almost pained. He exhaled; his eyes opened abruptly, their focus stark. His hands made a ploughing motion forward, opening his arms wide. “Move,” he told them.

It took them a few seconds and an impatient glare from Sherlock, before they shuffled out of the way, clearing space for him. “Now,” he rumbled. “What do we know with absolute certainty?”

He began pacing up and down inside the limited space, talking quickly, voice undulating. “Chemistry is impossible to argue against. My blood, even with the added components that came from the angel blood, was not enough to have the ritual obliterate me from here. What else? It didn’t matter that the blood wasn’t Crowley’s—he was still the one who vanished. Not just that!”

“Crowley’s hellhounds took a hike with him,” Dean spoke from his spot by the door.

Sherlock halted with his back to him, looking over his left shoulder. “Exactly!” His eyes flashed in approval at Dean. He pivoted on his spot to face them all. “The hounds’ disappearance means that it is possible to eliminate another being without it being directly involved in the ritual. Yet we are all still standing here right now. From this we can infer that Jim Moriarty was able to mislead Crowley with the translation and make him walk into a trap, but he couldn’t change the actual ritual in a way that would have ensured *everyone* in the room disappeared.”

Sherlock resumed his fast pacing, talking more to himself than to his audience. He was pulling quite a few faces as well, too fast for Sam to keep a tab on.

“Again, I’d hate to speculate on Moriarty’s motives,” Sherlock went on, “but regardless of them the facts are indisputable: we are all survivors, despite my very direct contribution to the proceedings earlier. Now, the next question is: why did the hellhounds disappear with Crowley? How are they connected to him? Both supernatural creatures, both coming from Hell. They are his in every sense of the word—he calls them his pets and he is their King—the bond is quite powerful. What else do we know?” Sherlock stopped abruptly once again, this time with his back to the altar. His eyes were fixed straight ahead, two mini-tornadoes, oblivious about the rest of the world. “Seven entities were present at the moment of the ritual,” he said. “How was each of them affected? We know Crowley disappeared, destination unknown. His two companions tagged along.”

Sherlock finally turned his gaze on them, more precisely to the right on Sam. “Of those who
remained, you were affected the most. A force, almost magnetic, pulling you from your spot where you are standing again right now, towards the centre of the room. Or maybe the altar—in this small space they are not that far. Dean felt it. I did, too, very strongly. Now, Dean and I both experienced discomfort of our own. In his case manifesting in the feeling of his head trying to explode and I compared my own experience to having leeches all over my body. What do leeches do? They suck out blood. What if…” Sherlock tilted his chin, the two words still hanging crisp on his lips. “What if it was a more literal comparison than I thought? The angel blood in me reacting, trying to leave my body. Dean. Years in Hell. Sam. Years in Lucifer’s Cage, and you have demon blood in you, and a mental bond with an angel. And now the Word of God is in you, too, apparently.”

There was something incredibly liberating in the way Sherlock was obviously regarding Sam as a sum of facts that promised conclusions, showing complete disinterest in who those facts made Sam.

“That was why you were the most affected,” Sherlock told him, speech slower, more measured. “The force was trying to pull you in and out of here, together with Crowley and his hellhounds. It was trying to get the angel blood out of my body, not unlike as if there were tiny metal particles reacting to a giant magnet. Dean’s sensations were proportionate to his past experiences as well. All those years in Hell, but no actual physical traces of them, just something right…” Sherlock had moved closer and now touched Dean’s forehead, calling out a visual memory in Sam of the same scene somewhere else. “Here,” Sherlock finished.

His hand dropped and his eyes moved to John, who was looking at him, lips a little parted, once again completely swept away. “You were the only one practically unaffected by the ritual, John. You are not a supernatural creature. You haven’t been in Heaven or Hell. You don’t have an ounce of any supernatural substance in your body.”

John’s puzzlement was endearingly humdrum. “So what does that mean?” he asked.

“It means that while I would still advise against it,” Sherlock told him, “all evidence suggests that if you were to perform the ritual with your own blood, the risk for you would be close to zero.”

“Then why do you advise against it?” Sam pressed.

Sherlock averted his eyes to him. “Because the risk exists. There are enough questions without answers and I hate the supernatural.” Sherlock’s voice shook with sudden passion, close to feral. “I hate that I don’t know everything there is to know about it and I have to rely on your expertise and limited powers of observation and deduction.”

Sherlock drew up to his full height, hands diving into his coat pockets, his demeanour turning a little stiff. “However, John is determined to try this.” Sherlock turned to Sam. “I think you should stay outside. Your presence obviously contributed to whatever took place, creating a disturbance.” He paused for a moment, adding as if it’d just occurred to him. It probably had. “It’ll be safer for you, too.”

Dean spoke gruffly. “I’m not leaving my brother alone outside.”

“Fine,” Sherlock conceded without any opposition or expression of opinion, verbal or non-verbal. “It’s probably better anyway. I’ll stay with John.”

“How is this not a risk for you?” John asked.

“It is,” Sherlock told him, his air candid. “But it’s even smaller than that for you. I need to stay and
be your brain. Your intellectual abilities are not exceptional at the best of times, even without your whole attention being diverted by some fearsome ritual.”

John looked on the verge of speaking back, but at the end just remained gazing at Sherlock in silence for a few seconds. He rubbed the bridge of his nose and pinched the tip, flexed his facial muscles, his eyes goggling randomly, then finally straightened up, all military stance.

“Okay,” he said. “Come on, then.”

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Like with most things in life, the hoopla preceding the event was much greater than the unfolding of the event itself.

Sam and Dean stood outside the chapel, several yards away for good measure, and through the open door watched the ritual take place in the whole of thirty seconds. There was no drum roll to mark a build-up; no dramatic zoom or slow motion. John nicked his thumb, head bowing over it while he probably watched the droplets of blood bead on the surface, then he pressed it down on top of the altar. The only thing to suggest that what he was doing was rather different than something ordinary like entering his pin code in a chip and pin machine was the double clearing of his throat, before he lifted the piece of paper with the spell.

(“I’d better write this down,” John had said earlier, producing his faithful pocket diary. His eyes had twinkled. “If I get this wrong, it’ll be worse than forgetting your future’s spouse’s name. You know, at the altar.”)

“Oh God, you’re making puns. Don’t,” had been Sherlock’s muttered comment, while Sam had given John his shiniest smile.)

“Areagh-nar-marey, mana-sum-darate,” John said clearly and with the distinct absence of sweeping winds or bursting light, a stone came to life on the wall behind the altar, bathed in a dark golden glow.

“Son of a bitch,” Dean whispered.

John and Sherlock lifted their gazes at the source of Dean’s awe, then John turned around, meeting Sam’s eyes across the space. Sam realized that for all the quickness and lack of fuss of the proceedings, his heart was trying to raise the bar on what constituted frantic beating. He nodded at John in encouragement, swallowing hard.

John stepped to the wall and stretched up, but the tablet exceeded his reach just a little. Sherlock took a quick step closer, arm shooting up on instinct, before freezing in the air then retreating. John stretched further, eventually having to stand on the toes of one foot to touch the tablet. It seemed to separate from the wall at the brush of John’s fingers, enough to allow him to slide them under its bottom rim.

Like with most things in life, catastrophe didn’t arrive with fanfares, either.

Blue, flickering lights, exactly like those of a Bunsen burner flame, appeared around the tablet. John froze. He tried to turn and look at Sam and Dean without letting go of the stone, but his awkward position didn’t allow it. The blue light turned swirly, spreading outward in all directions.
Next to Sam Dean made a choked up sound and catapulted himself forward.

“N-n-no, no, don’t!” he yelled just as John detached the tablet from the wall.

There was a black spot underneath that expanded to a substantial part of the wall in a split second making the scenery of the churchyard outside already distinctive even from Sam’s spot. It was framed by thick, dancing blue flames.

The last thing Sam saw before the door slammed shut was Sherlock’s head whipping back to look at Dean, his outlandish features stunned. That seemed in slow motion.

Sam had no idea when he’d moved. He only knew that he was attacking the closed door with Dean, pain flaring up in his hands and body at the same places he had hurt earlier when he’d tried to pry open another sealed room, only that one from the inside.

“Sherlock!” Dean’s fists banged against the wood. “Sherlock! It’s Purgatory! Sherlock! Can you hear me?” Dean slammed the whole of his lower arm at the door a few times, kicking it next. “Sherlock!”

Sam had already stepped back, his vehemence cut off at Dean’s words, dawning comprehension seizing him in horror. Dean stepped back, too, whizzing, lips parted and damp with spit. He stared at the door, the two lines on both sides of his mouth turning to sickly pale canyons. “It’s Purgatory,” he said through clenched teeth, body lurching forward a little as if Dean buckled under some invisible weight. “It’s a portal to Purgatory.”

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John could hear Sam and Dean try to come through, hollering, Dean’s words muffled but clear. He turned to the wall, dazed—the gap had grown wider still, taking up half the space already. It seemed to have moved forward, too, closer. John took a couple of steps back without thinking, Sherlock moving with him.

He lifted his eyes to Sherlock and found that he was actually unable to speak. From head to toe: brain, tongue, throat, stomach, thighs, toes—everything was locked down by shock.

Sherlock was still watching the wall, unblinking, his pallor so close to that of a corpse that it made John feel nauseated. For a moment, understanding, panic and fear mixed with adrenaline into a cocktail that threatened to make John overdose, his vision physically darkening. He battled against it with all his might, taking a very deep breath through his nose and exhaling, snapping at himself to get a bloody grip.

“John.” Sherlock’s deep voice filtered through, dispelling some of the weakness crippling John and drawing his attention away from the wall. John turned to Sherlock, then followed his gaze down to his own left hand, still clutching what turned out to be a Purgatory pass.

All the incomprehensible symbols in Enochian had reverted to being just dark, little squiggles etched in stone. Across the tablet in the middle, only a couple of words in English glowed in that rich copper colour.

‘Oops.
Jim x.’
“Give me the tablet,” Sherlock said, hand extending and eyes flicking to the expanding gap on the wall. John could see most of the scenery outside, black and silent, a hundred brutal monsters lurking in invisible wait.

He took a step away from both the wall and Sherlock. “No.”

“John.” Sherlock tilted his chin, face taut with cold urgency. “Give me the tablet. As soon as I cross through, the portal will close and the chapel door will open.”

John shook his head. He had a one track mind now, the rest of him turning numb under the overwhelming dread he remembered from his days in the field. “I’m not letting you go to Purgatory,” he told Sherlock.

Sherlock’s nostrils flared, top teeth digging into his bottom lip so hard John distantly worried the skin would break.

“It’ll be pointless for both of us to die and this!” Sherlock’s hand pointed to his right, arm flying up like a wing of a raven. “This will swallow us up in seconds. Now stop being an idiot and give me the tablet.”

John tucked the tablet into the back of his jeans, tugging his jacket down over it. “No,” he said. “We are not both going to die.” Hysterical laughter bubbled up in him at Sherlock’s stupidity.

Sherlock glided to him, bringing his face down to John’s, gaze melting with emotion like a beautiful sculpture of multi-coloured plasticine dropped in a fire. “You can’t do this.”

“Yes, I can!” The shout pulled up a plug in John’s chest and made him gasp for air. “I can do it and I will do it, because I am not…I am not going to watch you die again!”

John rocked with his laboured breathing, chest raw from sobs that were never going to come out. Sherlock’s face kept blurring and coming into focus, while John exerted himself to consolidate whatever strength and dignity he had left.

He swallowed a few times, hand going to his lower back to touch the tablet, while he looked to the left. The wall was gone now, the night framed by a vivid blue fire, encroaching on them more and more. There were a lot of trees outside, their branches barren and sharp.

John hoped it would be over in seconds. His body felt like a century old shipwreck under water.

He turned his back on Purgatory.

“Listen,” he told Sherlock through the noise of his ears. “Tell Harry that I love her and that it’s—It’s fine.”

“John.”

“I need you to tell Sam that this is not his fault. All right? I don’t care how you’re going to convince him or what tale you’re going to spin him—you have to do it, Sherlock. Promise me.”

“John.” Barely perceptible tremors were shaking Sherlock’s face as if there was a tightrope walker hiding in his chest, bouncing on his rope in preparation to jump.
“You need to find someone,” John told him quickly, cursing his voice for already turning coarse. “All right? Don’t be alone, Sherlock. Please. Find someone and go on being mad and extraordinary and brilliant, but don’t be…alone.”


John gazed at Sherlock, for a moment blissfully free of past and present and future; not dead just yet, but free of this mortal coil. Sherlock’s longer hair parted even more to the right now, the strands arranged in elegant waves, the curls at the end more obedient. His face had filled up a bit more, too, together with his chest. His eyes and cheekbones had lost the puppy fat softness they used to retain even when Sherlock was too thin. There were a few visible horizontal lines on his forehead and the vertical one between his eyebrows was a candidate for permanent residence as well—one of the telltale signs that the mind behind it never stopped hurtling through wormholes that might as well be science fiction for the rest of humanity.

John wasn’t going to find out how else Sherlock had changed or remained the same. There were not going to be winter nights by the fireplace. John’s fatalistic feeling had made its real call at last: he had laid his eyes on Baker Street’s living room for the last time. He wasn’t going to sink down into his armchair and hear all about Sherlock’s intricate ploys, interesting cases, and amazing deductions. There were not going to be years ahead to run around London together until they met some grizzly end—together—or until their joints flat out refused to indulge their escapades anymore.

John bowed his head, defeated.

When he had thought he’d lost Sherlock, he’d found a very selfish place in his soul. Fate had dealt him the cruellest hand, he believed: giving him just enough time with this extraordinary man for the connection to bloom strong, the bond to run deep—the subsequent pain of loss in proportion. But the time hadn’t been near enough for John to have the consolation of plenty of shared experiences. I got to hurt as if I’d lost an old friend, he thought, but I didn’t get to have the memories of an old friendship. I’d only just met you.

He lifted his eyes and met Sherlock’s tear-stricken face.

“You only just came back,” John said, voice breaking in dismay at the injustice. “I just! Got you! Back!” His body spun around with his shout in a centrifuge of impotent rage. “It’s not fair! It’s not…fair.” A breathless sob did manage to slip out after all.

Giddy and undone, John swayed on his feet, feeling the tug of the portal behind him like a big vacuum. No sound was coming from the night outside, but he blinked a few times and knew that even blurry, his eyes hadn’t deceived him. There was movement in the darkness—a nameless host of predators closing in.

He straightened up. Fair or not fair, John Watson’s number was up. At least fate was kind to him now. If he had to die, he couldn’t think of a better reason to do it. He wiped his eyes again and sighed tiredly, the sound a little mundane and oddly comforting.

He opened his arms. “Please?” he told Sherlock. “You were up there on that roof. I kept thinking of all the ways I could have said goodbye; all the things I never told you, or how I didn’t even hug you or shake your hand. At least I can do that properly now.”

Sherlock just stared at him, broken.
“Sherlock,” John called him softly, swallowing around a new lump in his throat.

Sherlock moved forward, slipping into John’s embrace. For a few seconds his body was a rigid, monolithic thing, only his heart hammering against John’s chest. Then Sherlock’s arms wrapped around John and tightened, his right hand clawing over John’s back, trying to fist the material of his jacket.

They held each other, just breathing heavily. John closed his eyes.

He could really feel the pull of Purgatory behind him.

He could also feel the barest brush of something by his waist under the jacket. His hand shot down at the intrusion and he took a step back, meeting Sherlock’s desperate gaze.

The portal tug was so powerful John wondered whether he’d even need to make the last step. He wasn’t going to take any chances about making it alone.

He looked down at his left hand gripping Sherlock’s stealthy one.

“Oh,” John told him and swung with his right, “and I always wanted to do that.”

Purgatory sucked him in like a feather just as the door of the chapel blew up.

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Sam coughed and waved his hands in front of his face, trying hard to see through the smoke and dust that had filled up the air after the explosion. They’d stood quite far back and it was even harder to tell whether their exercise had been just as futile as Sam had feared it would be. Dean made to move forward but dissolved into a coughing fit, doubling over and rubbing at his eyes.

Sam squinted through his own watering eyes and still couldn’t distinguish anything.

Then a tall, dark figure swam into view, moving towards them at an even, ethereal pace.

Sherlock reached them at last in several agonizing seconds during which Sam could only see the space behind Sherlock in its continuous state of emptiness.

“Where’s John?” he asked, already spiralling down into something he only wished was Purgatory.

Sherlock walked past between them without slowing down. “John is gone,” he said.
Chapter Notes

The story has an epilogue, but I haven't decided yet whether to post it separately or include it in the author's notes I'm thinking of writing. Or maybe not post it at all—I quite like the end of the story as it is. In that sense, consider 'Of Ghosts and Men' completed with this chapter. Thank you from the bottom of my heart to all of you who have come and will come on this journey with me. It was an epic year. I hope you find the final chapter worthy of it. I would really greatly appreciate your feedback in praise, concrit, kudos or any other form that comes from the heart.

Thank you again and I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gunfire all around him and John is paralyzed, brain overloading and freezing in its uncertainty which way to move to get away from the havoc. The repetitive rounds of the machine guns are so loud they seem to be emptying right out of his chest. Afghanistan? No! Purgatory! Why are there machine guns in Purgatory? Why can’t he see anything? Only darker and lighter flashes, repetitive, too. A dream? A hallucination? He is in Afghanistan and he has been wounded—No. He’s dying and he invented it all: Purgatory, ghosts, Heaven and Hell. Sam. Sherlock’s return from the dead. Sherlock himself. Sherlock Holmes was nothing but John Watson’s dream. The invention of a mind collapsing in on itself on the brink of death.

Light, dark, light, dark, louder and louder, just let it be over already—

John gasped, eyes flying open, his upper body lurching upward then falling back down for a crash, but meeting a solid, warm cradle instead. Two large hands caught him by his arms and a familiar, chest-soft voice managed to overpower the deafening noise. “Hey, hey,” said Sam by John’s ear, while Sherlock’s otherworldly face swam close into view, the big helicopter rotor above him turning fast enough to appear like a giant, dark halo above Sherlock’s head.

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Sherlock and Sam were very quiet throughout the flight, barely saying a few sentences to answer John’s dazed enquiries; it was Dean who mostly spoke. Apparently the three of them had carried John’s unconscious body through Malvern Mansion while fighting their way out. Unfortunately, the force that had shut down Purgatory hadn’t bothered to retrieve its natives, so the night had been long. Finally outside, Sherlock, Sam and Dean had found a quiet battlefield and a small elite squad of victorious, very human humans waiting for them.

“His brother had sent some back up,” Dean elaborated, head tipping to the left to indicate Sherlock. The two of them sat next to each other on the fold down bench attached to one of the helicopter walls. Opposite them Sam was on the floor behind John, supporting his weight, the four of them
taking up the entire space of the helicopter’s body.

“They had ganked all the demons that had kept showing up,” Sam said. “But they couldn’t get into the building. Must’ve gone on a supernatural lockdown as soon as we got in.”

The helicopter taking them back home was also courtesy of one permanently worried elder brother. Sherlock hadn’t made any comments on the matter, snide or otherwise.

John had more questions, his mind feeling like a stale pond, teeming with too much life. He only managed a simple, “How?” when it came to the miracle of his survival.

Dean didn’t seem to need him to be a master of words, voice rising to reply to John over the helicopter’s racket.

“When I was looking for ways to get Cas out of Purgatory I’d found this ritual that was supposed to open a portal to it.” Dean had looked away from John mid-sentence, squinting into the far distance, his dirtied chiselled features reminiscent of an artwork to John’s still semi-lucid mind. A bust or a portrait of a warrior perhaps: striking and beautiful and fierce, but oddly sad, too, as if his victories and losses were never just one or the other.

“Then Cas came back before I had the chance to dig into it,” Dean continued. “We were kind of desperate back there so we did the ritual in reverse, it often works like that, and we blew up the door in the process.” His clouded gaze lingered away for a few more seconds, before returning to John. “I didn’t think it’d work,” Dean confessed. “But I guess it was the real deal after all. In the nick of time too.”

John nodded in heartfelt agreement, the effort to do so gargantuan. He licked his parched up lips; Sherlock and Sam came to life at the same time, Sherlock managing to pass John a bottle of water first.

John managed to shuffle around until he was not so much a prostrate form against Sam’s chest, but sitting next to him. Dean’s attention was back on the pastoral snowy scenery far and below. Sam and Sherlock kept looking at John, powerful emotions darting through their eyes like swifts and making John experience an odd sense of his whole body pebbling under the weight of their gazes. So much feeling, both for him and in him—it left him feeling exposed, but somehow…more as well. John already knew why that was. He’d seen it in Sherlock’s desolate eyes when they were parting and Sam’s now echoed the same sentiment. But his own sense of vulnerability John couldn’t quite place. He suspected it was the by-product of being overwhelmed, but perhaps it came from the same source as the other thing. People like John weren’t designed to dwell on how much they mattered to others. In the scattered state he was in, that awareness stripped him down to his rawest core, managing to shake him and build him up all at once.

He was feeling so disoriented and unwell that he decided to let go and wait until he was actually able to not just get his answers, but retain them. It was Sherlock who informed him that he’d asked Sam the same question twice already. At that point John did what his whole being had been begging to do and succumbed to nearly comatose sleep.

He slept on and off for most of their journey back. During some of his brief wakeful moments he caught snapshots of the world around him, his ‘lens’ uncensored and capturing random details. The tender skin of Sam’s closed eyelids and his delicately shaped eyebrows—both stirring a faint echo of John once thinking Sam’s countenance was elfish, which in turn evoked the even fainter echo of two sad, smoking corpses in a back garden: two firebirds, two humans, brother and sister. Dean’s dozing
form, trying to stay upright, but slumping a little towards Sherlock’s straight, steady shoulder. Sam’s right foot neatly bracketed between both of Dean’s as if Dean didn’t put it past the Universe to scoop in and take his brother away from him even mid-flight.

Sherlock, bathed in the pink hue of sunrise, his eyes looking like two miniature nebulae, their calm profound.

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“I always think it can’t get worse,” Mrs Hudson was saying. “Just like now, with those horrible demons and whatnot coming here, trying to kill Sam…and then you two showed up and look at you all now.” She shook her head at Sherlock and Dean, who were sitting next to each other in the middle of the otherwise big, empty sofa as if someone had forgotten to tell them they were no longer airborne in that helicopter.

They were looking up at Mrs Hudson, both having just a little of the air of troublemakers being told off by their mother. “Oh, I don’t know,” their long-suffering landlady continued, “I just don’t know with you lot anymore…”

John checked out mentally, content to watch Mrs Hudson’s delicate, aged hands flutter through the air as she spoke, until they landed on her hips. He was able to look at her dark red dress and its loud pattern without feeling a drill trying to reach the back of his skull through his forehead, so he counted that as a major improvement. Mrs Hudson’s stern look of concern told him she was far from starting to put anything into the plus column yet.

He couldn’t blame her. They’d been a bloodied, bruised and bedraggled mess when they’d poured out of the pristine looking van Mycroft had provided for them for the last phase of their journey. Passers-by had frozen in shock or instinctively stepped away. Mrs Hudson had dropped her watering can upon rushing into the hallway, anxious to greet them. A couple of hours later and a lot of the outward traces of their adventures had been washed away or patched up. (John didn’t know whether he hated Mycroft or loved him a little for sending medics to their address. In truth John sometimes forgot that being a doctor didn’t automatically exempt him from needing medical assistance, or indeed equated to him always having to be the one to provide it for others.) Ironically, in a few days Sherlock’s bruised cheek where John had punched him was probably going to be the main visual reminder of what they’d all been through.

Of course John knew that in a few days Sam and Dean were not going to be around for him to be monitoring their recovery progress. But even if not here they would still be alive, which at present was enough to combat most of the sadness John felt at the impending parting. Sherlock being alive and not going anywhere certainly helped a great deal against any hints of self-indulgence in angst.

As to John’s survival…That was a more complicated affair. John was still processing the load of experiences that had tried to cram into his existence as if there’d been a deadline to do it. His head was the sky for some surreal fireworks of imagery: running through the mansion, Crowley, John performing the ritual, his parting with Sherlock, Purgatory swallowing him up and the explosion of the chapel’s door, the rides back home, and now being in Baker Street again.

Things weren’t helped by the blanks he still had in his memory. He’d been a hundred percent earmarked for dead. He had remembered exceptionally well everything Sam had told him about Dean’s time in Purgatory and there’d been no illusions as to John’s chances of lasting for more than a minute in the most vicious combat zone in all of creation. The transition to finding himself alive and
on the way home had been terribly abrupt to say the least, and after the initial flood of relief, John had started floundering around in his head for some bearings and hadn’t quite stopped.

“Mrs Hudson,” he said loudly, making her stop in the middle of her exchange with Sherlock. John had no idea what they were talking about, but was glad to see their faces were nowhere near argumentative—everyday-like was closer to the mark, making John wonder whether they were discussing something as humdrum as dinner. Dean seemed quite interested, his grave face finally having a metaphorical sunbeam on it, so the topic could have very well been some nice food.

John offered Mrs Hudson a warm, apologetic smile. He wanted to have a nice dinner later, too, all the more that it was very likely going to be the last for the four of them, but more than anything he needed to know things. “Do you think you could give us a minute?” he asked. “We need to talk.”

“Well, I was on my way out anyway,” Mrs Hudson said, picking up John’s empty cup of tea from the table in front of him and giving him a quick pat on the shoulder on her way to the kitchen. “I’m going to have to go to the shops now.”

John had had time to organize his thoughts. Geniuses like Sherlock could start with a thread from anywhere and create a whole tapestry around it, but John did have an average intellect so he started from where it was the safest: the beginning.

He turned to Dean. “How did you know it was a portal to Purgatory?”

Dean rubbed at his bleary eyes. “You should ask me how the fuck I didn’t know.”

An exclamation rang behind John, a cross between a hiccup and an “Oh!”

Dean started, straining his neck in the direction of the kitchen. “Sorry Mrs Hudson!” he called, shooting a half-embarrassed, half-accusing look towards Sam who was sitting in Sherlock’s chair. Evidently Dean expected his brother to have taken up the role of censorship on his mouth.

John suppressed a smile. “You were saying?” he prompted Dean.

“Well, I was a stupid dick—dammit!”

“I’m off, I’m off!” Mrs Hudson spoke on her way out of the flat. “It’s not like you can’t hear it all on the telly anyway. And I know you’re a nice young man, dear,” she told Dean. “It’s all nerves, you know.” John had half-turned to look at her and she directed her last remark to him, before turning around and disappearing out of the flat front door.

“Great,” Dean said. “Now I don’t know if I feel like a five-year-old or a middle-aged neurotic woman.”

“Oh, for goodness sake,” Sherlock moaned. He wriggled in his seat to put some space between him and Dean and turned to look at him, expression suggesting Dean should do well to see the error of his ways. “Listening to you, I’m beginning to have newfound admiration for John’s storytelling skills. As I didn’t have much to begin—you can draw your own conclusions.”

Dean glowered at him, then made a show of looking around Sherlock’s torso to address John.

“I saw the blue light and I recognized it immediately,” he said. Sherlock flopped back against the sofa, while Dean continued his narrative. “I went through that hole less than a year ago, not like I can
easily forget what it looked like. And the hellhounds were a dead giveaway.” He shook his head, turning to Sam. “How many times did I say this or that was like Purgatory? I mean, there were the gorilla werewolves, for the love of God, and I told you I’d seen them only in Purgatory!”

“Hang on,” John said, frowning. “Go back a little. How were we able to see the Hellhounds? I don’t get it.”

“Because it wasn’t just a portal to Purgatory that had already existed on that spot,” Sam told him, more animated than John had seen him since he’d opened his eyes on the helicopter. “Moriarty had created it, and that kind of thing isn’t like a surgical cut, dude! It had been there waiting for Sherlock, or Crowley or, or us—doesn’t matter. Covered up by some pretty serious mojo to make it look like the chapel’s wall.” His eyes met Sherlock’s. “I’m guessing one year. That was when all the deaths started.”


John suddenly realized that while the Winchesters seemed burdened and tired, Sherlock was in a positively good mood. John smiled at him even though his friend was still looking at Sam, who seemed at a loss about what to do with something that resembled a compliment from Sherlock Holmes. “Right, um. Yeah,” he said at last.

“So all those monsters kept crossing through,” Dean took over. He waved an irritated hand at the world at large. “I don’t know how it works! It—it must have created something like a field, I guess.”

“So we were basically at two places at the same time,” John said slowly. “Malvern Mansion, but Purgatory, too?”

“Looks like,” Sam replied, lips turning downward, his head lolling a little as if he was measuring the merits of a theory.

“It’s the only explanation that fits,” Sherlock said. “Besides, I wouldn’t dismiss the possibility of that ‘field’ being created on purpose.”

“By Moriarty,” John said questioningly.

Dean frowned at him then at Sherlock. “Why would he do that?”


He turned to Sam. “What happens to ghosts when you kill them?”

Sam studied his face for a moment. “He’s probably gone to Hell,” he said. “We don’t really know what happens to them, but Dean never met any ghosts in Purgatory. And the lore says that once they cross, they go to Heaven or Hell.”

“So Moriarty is in Hell,” John said.

“Well, Heaven might be full of douchebag angels,” Dean grumbled, “but it’s still Heaven so he ain’t there for sure.”
John felt his hands turn clammy.

“John,” Sam called his name. John lifted his gaze to his friend who was still right there across the table, yet seemed so far away he might as well have already been across the pond. “He’s not coming back,” Sam told him.

“You don’t know that. You can’t know that. He always comes back.” Wrecking havoc into our lives, into my life; first with Sherlock and now with you as well. Demons come after you. “He’ll be a demon, Sam. They leave Hell as we bloody well know.”

“Not if the Gates of Hell are closed.”

Sam had said it with such assuredness it was as if he was giving John his word in another binding ritual. His eyes had shifted to Sherlock, the solemnity of the promise laid down in front of Sherlock, too.

“If Moriarty becomes a demon,” Dean said hastily, breaking the momentum, “that’s when you need to start worrying. Come on!” He looked at all of them. “Will you listen to me now? What did I keep telling you? That there was no way he’d have made the ranks in a year or two. Turned out I was right—he was a freaking ghost!” Dean hesitated, nose twitching in a grimace of deep resentment. “Trust me on this, it’s a slow process. And he’ll definitely have to get his hands dirty.”

“There’s also Crowley,” Sherlock spoke. His eyebrows did the equivalent of an idle shrug. “We don’t know whether he survived. If he did and he returned to Hell, he wouldn’t be too happy to promote ‘Jimmy’ quickly, don’t you think?” His coolly playful gaze circulated between all their faces.

With every argument they’d made, each of them had laid rows of bricks in John, building one on top of the other, until his fear of James Moriarty was trapped behind a wall. John looked at his friends and it hit him that no matter whether that bastard was still out there somewhere, no matter what he’d tried to do and what he might still plan on doing, he had truly ever been and would always be just one man.

John took a breath. “So, is Purgatory closed now? I mean back there, the portal in the mansion. Is it closed for good?”

Sam and Dean exchanged a quick look. “We think so,” Dean said. “I mean we used the super glue.”

“What did you use?” John asked. “I just can’t believe you had what was necessary. That’s…really lucky.” John felt his face all but shrivel with the emphasis on the words.

Dean huffed a quiet bitter laugh. His gaze darted to Sam, then moved to the fireplace. He shrugged.

“‘Yes and no,’” he said. “The main ingredient that would have flipped us the bird under any other circumstances was the blood of a Purgatory native. We were golden on that front and the rest was, ah…” Dean’s lips remained parted and he seemed momentarily trapped, like someone who’d painted himself into a corner.

John was suddenly quite curious. “What was the rest?”

“A virgin’s blood,” Sherlock said, trying for bored, but coming across a little officious.
John ducked his head, eyes flicking back and forth between Sherlock and Dean, his curiosity making a sharp turn to amusement. It was unbelievable that someone like Dean who had managed to survive bleeding Hell and Purgatory felt awkward now.

Sherlock had been looking at the fireplace, too, but now half-turned to Dean. “The djinn had enough of my blood on his finger and that was before it had become ‘contaminated’ by angel blood.” He crossed his legs, his demeanour suddenly demure as Dean swivelled towards him. “Djinns are Purgatory natives,” Sherlock said, breathing out his next sentence, flippantly dramatic. “Two for the price of one.”

Dean stared at him as if he was about to read him his rights. John thought he should intervene quickly, noting Sam’s withdrawn, distracted expression. He’d also joined the ranks of those fascinated with the fireplace.

“Okay,” John said, stretching up and emitting a light growl. “What about the angel tablet? Was it ever there?”

Sam stretched as well, released from whatever spell the flames had exercised upon him. “I don’t know. But that key Cas got for Sherlock to decipher the ritual? It was Michael’s, the Archangel. Moriarty’s hand might have been long, but it wasn’t long enough to reach to Heaven’s secret vaults.” Sam looked at his brother, passion beginning to ripple through his features. “Think about it, Dean! If Lucifer knew the key to his hideout was somewhere out there, why would he leave the angel tablet where it was? Either it was never part of those stones or he moved it at some point, which means it’s somewhere out there in one of his crypts. We need to hit the books, try and see whether there’s any —”

“Yeah, all right,” Dean interrupted him. “Hold your horses, young padawan. Let’s stick to one suicidal mission at a time.” He rubbed both his palms over his face, keeping it hidden in their cave for a moment, while Sam’s features were overtaken by reluctant capitulation and disquietude.

The full reality of their situation landed noiselessly in John. He and Sam were two people who had lived extremely different lives and who marched under a drumbeat the other couldn’t hear, not really. John knew people who had wanderlust in their blood. He knew all too well the restless kind, God help him. Sam was neither, yet John would have had a better chance of capturing a firebird in a cage and making it happy there than of having Sam stay put. He gazed at his friend and felt him unfathomable. So simple in his needs: love, purpose and belonging; yet so complex in his deep, labyrinthine soul. Enormous and elusive, both.

John felt a tide crawling up to his eyes and became very aware of just how stupendously overdrawn he was on mental and physical energy.

He swallowed and firmly tapped the fingers of both his hands against the coffee table. “Right,” he said, rising. He looked at his watch. “I’m going upstairs for an afternoon nap.” He looked at the other three’s upturned faces and pointed at all of them. “So should you.” A couple of Custard Creams biscuits were left in the plate on the coffee table. John bowed and reached to take one, even though he didn’t really like them without tea.

On his way up his eyes met Sam’s. “Stay for dinner,” he said.

Sam’s wet hair had mostly dried in close proximity to the fire. Some of the strands formed into waves and others had their ends curl a little. Their thickness and abundance, and their nutty, caramel colour made the comparison to a mane inevitable. An enormous, elusive woodland creature. Smarter than
any hunter.

At John’s words Sam pulled his head back sharply and his hair glistened. “Yeah,” he said in a rush, brow knitting a little. “We were going to, yeah.”

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Baker Street seemed too tranquil at the break of dawn to be the place that Sam had grown to know so well, but then again it was Sunday early morning—the only time this city seemed to get any shuteye. The street was stretching left and right in the dispersing twilight without a vehicle or a person in sight as far as Sam’s gaze could reach.

It fell on Speedy’s front door, its lack of life evoking not peace but deep sadness. Sam felt the urge to climb into the waiting car and take off already, away from yet another place marked with a black cross on his mental map of the world. A reminder of one more life pointlessly lost, a lovely young girl, gone, because she’d had the misfortune of crossing paths with Sam Winchester. Door to door with a shadow of a grave, 221B Baker Street would have never managed to become a home for him.

He thought of the first trial and how he’d been able to feel the golden light whisper in his veins ever since—a doomsday embedded in his genes now. Sam prayed whatever he carried in him led him to a place of atonement.

John stepped closer, clearing his throat and drawing Sam’s eyes to him. A few steps away from them Dean gripped Sherlock by his coat’s lapel and tugged him unceremoniously to the side, far enough not to be overheard. The driver and his distinguished companion remained respectfully inside the car.

“Right,” John said, hands rubbing a little. Sam couldn’t say if it was cold or nervousness, or both.

They had avoided saying their goodbyes, more out of awkward uncertainty how to go about it than of reluctance. Not that they were eager to bid each other farewell, but neither of them was the type to wallow in misery in the face of the inevitable, and their parting had been inevitable all along.

John’s eyes shone with intent, blue like snow at sunrise. “Be careful, okay? Don’t do anything stupid.”

Sam smiled instead of replying, hoping it’d save him the need to speak, but John started shaking his head immediately. “No…No. Don’t give me your…” John’s fingers danced in the direction of Sam’s face. “Mona Lisa smile,” John finished, a little grumpy under his fondness. He shifted from foot to foot, eyes turning huge as they zeroed in on Sam. “Promise me you won’t do anything stupid.”

There was something so gentle in his tone, Sam found himself responding with utter sincerity. “I promise. Only what has to be done.”

John studied him, pursing his lips. “That’s…not half as reassuring as you think it is.”

They took stock of each other in silence, their exchange continuing on a different plane. Sam was content to let it happen without him having to articulate or explain. John knew. John would understand.

“Listen,” John said, licking his lips and looking behind his shoulder at Baker Street’s front door. “I know this will sound very trite and Sherlock won’t let me hear the end of it if he overhears me, but I’m still going to say it. This, here.” John pointed at the door without looking away from Sam. “It’s
John’s mouth clasped shut, his Adam’s apple suddenly bobbing. Sam looked up and away, anywhere but John, trying to give him space and maybe preventing himself from bursting into tears and turning into the laughing stock of the street.

The empty street, Sam reminded himself as his eyes welled up. The smile he gave John was quite trembling so there weren’t going to be accusations about Mona Lisa this time. John nodded curtly, swallowing, “Okay?” he said. “I mean it.”


He reached out and abruptly pulled John into a hug, his right hand folding into a fist and hitting against John’s shoulder blade. John’s left hand rubbed up and down Sam’s back, then pressed against it, palm wide. They reshuffled together to tighten their hold on each other for a few numb seconds, then let go at the same time, chests heaving with a sharp inhalation.

A discreet cough was heard behind Sam. “I’m very sorry to intrude,” Mycroft Holmes said, eyes impenetrable and smile like toffee, “but I wonder if I could have a quick word with John.”

John frowned and looked between Sam and Mycroft.

“Perhaps you should take the opportunity to say goodbye to my brother,” Mycroft told Sam, suave enough for anyone but Sam to realize a diversion had just been created for a few parting words out of earshot.

“Yes,” Sam said, giving John a nod and walking to Sherlock and Dean.

He wasn’t sure whether his intrusion was welcome, but it seemed so, judging by the two intense pairs of eyes that readily turned to greet him.

“So,” Sam said in a moment when no one spoke. He looked at Sherlock, finally being able do it without his guts churning. “I’m sure Dean’s given you the whole ‘We’ll figure this out together,’ speech so I won’t repeat it.”

“Yes, he was very thorough,” Sherlock said, shooting Dean a sideways glance. “I’m not supposed to even tie my shoe without calling for your assistance first.”

“Oh, will you stop being a snarky dick?” Dean looked ready to throw his arms in the air. “All I said was—all I mean is, I know your crazy schemes, but this is a big deal—”

Sherlock snorted. Dean’s jaw bunched up, but he powered through. “This is a big deal, and instead of jumping in on your own and trying to kill yourself before your due date—”

“Do we have to have this conversation again?” Sherlock hissed. “Good God, I bet you would have tried to throttle anyone who offered you help when you sold your soul.”

“Dean,” Sam said quickly. He was too weary for arguments, both his memories and the oppressing cloud of the future hanging low above him.

At first he’d opposed vehemently to John not knowing the truth about his miraculous salvation. But as soon as he’d heard the price that Sherlock had paid to keep that a secret, he’d accepted this was
not his truth to tell. Sherlock had been offered the standard package of ten years and he’d traded half of them to have John back not just alive, but free of any memory of what had happened to him in Purgatory. Dean had been beyond incensed about those lost five years, but deep down Sam had known he’d have done the same, even while he was arguing with Sherlock about telling John. Still, deceiving John had been so abhorrent to Sam that he’d found himself unable to say even one word of a lie to him. He knew he walked the grey area of abiding something by the letter rather than the spirit, but it was all he got.

He’d told Sherlock that if John ever suspected something and asked him outright, Sam would tell him the truth. Dean had summed up everyone’s feelings pretty well. “Let’s hope if it comes to that, the truth will be different.”

But now that Sam was leaving John behind to live oblivious in his faux Arcadia, his own deception felt like a crown of thorns he was happy to wear. Until the day he could do something about it and Sherlock was free from his deal. It was unthinkable to let John go through the heartbreak of losing Sherlock again, to let him go through what Sam had gone through, knowing where Dean was going and knowing it was because of him. In the last adventure Sam and John had had together, closing the Gates of Hell had acquired a whole new meaning for Sam. In a twisted way Sam was grateful to have so much more extra drive to finish the trials even if it meant his life ending with them. Short of Dean needing him, there was nothing to stop him now.

His eyes returned to Sherlock and Dean, still snippy with each other in hushed tones. Sam watched his brother’s shoulders slump just as Sherlock’s turned even more rigid and thought that few things united all human beings, endings being hard one of them.

Dean rolled his neck and rubbed at it; when he looked at Sherlock next, Sam really wished he could convey to Sherlock how rare Dean’s gaze on him was.

“I know what you’re doing,” Dean told him, soft and rough both. “Because I’ve done it myself. You’re right, I did it to my brother for pretty much the entire year I had. So you don’t want to talk about it, fine. You get a pass, I won’t talk about it. But I want you to know, I want you to hear me, okay? We will figure it out. We’ll get you out.”

“All right,” Sherlock said, his frustration oddly showcasing just how moved he was and how tense he was about it. “Now I’d like you to hear me,” he continued in a low voice. “I appreciate your offer. But I believe your not…inconsiderable resources will be best employed if you keep them focused on your—on yours and your brother’s survival.” Sherlock’s eyes flickered between Dean and Sam. “I’ve cheated death once,” he said very quietly. “I’ll do it again.”

Sam would have never found the words to describe to Sherlock what it meant having John back and what it meant having him back at such terrible price. He didn’t want to find them, yet a question zigzagged out of the maze.

“What if you don’t?” he asked Sherlock.

Sherlock turned a little, eyes going to where John was standing by the fence, listening to Mycroft with a small lopsided smirk. In the inexorable light of the new day Sherlock’s ethereal face and his seemingly translucent skin and eyes gave him the appearance of a supernatural creature more than ever. Sam wondered whether even after making a study of the guy and then going through the roaster with him he had come even close to knowing him.

Sherlock looked away from John, meeting Sam’s eyes. “Then I don’t.”
John stood side by side with Sherlock and watched Sam reach to open the car’s back door, ready to climb into it next to Dean. The driver and Mycroft were already seated at the front.

“Your brother’s doing them quite the high honour,” John had murmured to Sherlock a minute ago. “You know, escorting them to the airport in person.”

Sherlock hadn’t looked away from the car, but his eyebrow had arched. “If you want to call it that. I’d say this is more like wanting to supervise personally that they board their plane and piss off from his island, hopefully for good.”

Sam lifted his jacket collar against the cold wind, reminding John of the first glimpse he’d caught of him: a familiar shadow against a familiar wall. A ghost, but in truth just a man. A stranger.

A ghost to a man, a stranger to a friend.

Next to John Sherlock’s hands dived into his coat pockets, his elbow brushing John’s in the process.

Sam’s right foot was already in the car when he stopped and looked up. He started lifting his hand to wave, but halfway through he stopped, fingers folding in bashfully. John tipped his chin to him, gulping and fighting the urge to salute.

Sam gave him one long last look, smiled and dove into the car. For all the teeth, the smile had had all the markings of a sob and an epiphany graced John with its presence a little too late.

“Oh God,” he said under his breath. “He will do something stupid.”

Through the car’s back window John saw Dean give them both a lingering look, before moving his gaze to his brother’s profile and resting it there.

“Don’t we all?” Sherlock said and then they just stood in silence, watching the car drive off down the street, then disappear around the corner.

Chapter End Notes

Dedicated to my beta and friend disastrolabe. An exceptionally talented writer, an extraordinary, brilliant mind and a beautiful, beautiful soul.

"I got to hurt as if I’d lost an old friend, but I didn’t get to have the memories of an old friendship."
Chapter Notes

This was written back in the day with the rest of the story. At the time, I felt 'Of Ghosts and Men' was complete as it was and heeded the advice of my beta (who was coming from the Sherlockian corner of readers) that the Epilogue did not contribute much to the story but could be quite confusing for Sherlockians.

Lately, I've had some strong urges to revisit this 'verse. So five years later, the Epilogue has been dusted, expanded and polished, and I am offering it as a another conclusion for the story. To all old readers and new ones - I do hope you enjoy!

Many thanks to my faithful canon_is_relative for the beta. Some dialogue from Supernatural 8.13 'Sacrifice'.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sam

Seven months after starting the trials for closing the Gates of Hell Sam reached the end of his journey. Ironically, it was in another old church.

The irony didn’t end there. Crowley was present, just like back in Malvern Mansion, but this time bound and bloodied. Some of the blood was Sam’s. Turned out Sam’s blood came into play after all, only not in the way Crowley had needed it. The last trial was to cure a demon. For what seemed an eternity Sam had been injecting his own blood into the King of Hell. He had purified himself first, by confession, and here he was now, trying to exorcise the evil out of a monster. A petty, black part of Sam’s hated Crowley too much to want him cured.

He wiped his face, swayed a little, and thought that maybe he needed someone to exorcise that part out of him. There was no one. Not one of Sam’s other companions from seven months ago was here. Sherlock and John were far, far away, safe across the globe in a cosy living room that Sam recalled mostly through emotional memory, like a beloved story from early childhood that the mother he never had never told him. Sam hadn’t spoken to John in a while. He’d rather John kept the memory of their Christmas together in the Men of Letters bunker as his last memory of Sam.

Castiel was on a mission of his own. Finally free from Naomi, he had taken on closing the Gates of Heaven. They never found out whether Dean had been right in his conviction that Cas would never kill Sam for the angel tablet. What they knew for sure was something that had never really been a question: Castiel would not kill Dean. When they found the angel tablet at last, he almost did. Dean was spared but Cas still took the angel tablet and ran; only to return and ask for their help, today of all days.

Deep down Sam wished Dean hadn’t left with Cas. He shushed his snivelling inner child and let the adult recite again and again that this was for the best. It was right that Dean wasn’t here. It was an opportunity for Sam to do something big and unequivocally good only by himself; something that would compensate Dean and the world for all the invisible lacerations Sam Winchester’s existence
had caused them. Sam had his wish after all, the one he had made all those months ago in London: the force in him did lead him to a place of atonement.

A chance to redeem himself for his sins, the greatest one letting down the person who mattered to him the most. Dean himself had listed Sam’s ‘greatest hits’ earlier outside the church, marking the pages of his and Sam’s joint history with metaphorical bookmarks that broke Sam’s heart: Sam’s betrayal with Ruby, Sam letting Lucifer out, Sam not looking for Dean when Dean went to Purgatory…

He didn’t think Dean realized his offhand words were piling like huge stone blocks on Sam’s shoulders. Sherlock had said once that Dean could catch the buzz of a mosquito across the room, but miss the cry of an elephant in the middle of it.

Dean did come to the church today before deciding to go with Cas. Sam understood: Cas needed help more than Sam did. If Sam closed the Gates of Hell and Castiel closed the Gates of Heaven, then Sam could depart from this world in peace.

Because he knew where he was headed. After months of struggling through the effects of the trials, his body was a wreck. His own heartbeat was a fractured sound of annihilation in his ears. He had turned into a ruin, barely containing the immense power that had been ravaging him from the inside. He was almost nothing but skin and bone now, held together by some rough stitches that were ready to come undone as soon as he completed his mission.

It didn’t matter. Now Sam had work to do. If he had to, he’d drain the blood that was left in his gaunt body, but he would break Crowley. He would cure his demonic soul, tick the last trial off the list, and shut the Gates of Hell. He would free people from ever being possessed, free the world from that black poison of pain and torment.

And he would free Sherlock from his deal. John would never find out that for a while, there was a reality waiting for him just round the corner with a stopwatch in hand: the loss of his best friend, again. Sherlock, swallowed by a chasm where his body and soul were going to be torn to scarlet, agonizing shreds, all because of John.

If Sam completed the trials John would never have to live with that kind of knowledge. He would keep spinning happily in his mad orbit around his flatmate. His soulmate.

Dean had spoken more than once how shutting the Gates of Hell was not the only card they had up their sleeves to free Sherlock from his deal. ‘And we will get him out of it,’ Dean had said, only last week, face grim. ‘Yeah,’ Sam had echoed, all the while thinking, I will.

He was ready. He wasn’t even scared or lost, and even if he was—

His hand slid into his pocket, fingers closing around his cell phone. He took a quick look at Crowley’s dark shape, shackled and slumped in his chair, then made out for the door on unsteady feet.

The cool night air pinched and scratched against his oversensitive skin and Sam began to shiver, eyes swimming while he gazed at the screen, trying to thumb through the phone book.

There were four rings before John picked up.

“Hey.” Sam could hear the word echoing through the universe. His hearing and sight had been greatly affected, too. He was like a super dish now, picking up distorted signals from this world and beyond, all the time.
“Sam. Sam? Sam!” John. John sounded urgent. Sam realized it wasn’t just an echo he was picking up—he had repeated his ‘Hey’ several times. He took a deep breath and shut his mouth, goggling and trying to clear his vision and his head. The last thing he wanted was to freak John out.

“How are things?” he said, happy to hear his voice behave.

John was silent for a moment. “Good,” he replied, then cleared his throat loud enough for Sam to hear it as if John was right there next to him. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Lying to John in order to preserve the illusion of normalcy was Sam’s last meal: the privilege of those condemned to death.

“Are you sure? Where are you?”

John sounded so much like himself. Sam smiled through his welling tears. John being John meant the conversation would have to be a short one—Sam could not be sobbing over the stupid phone. That was okay. He had a demon to cure, Gates of Hell to shut. Die.

“I’m in this church in the middle of nowhere,” Sam said, using whatever last remnants of strength he had left to sound okay. “We’re working on something, demons again...Just wanted to talk to you.”

“No, yes, good. Good. Good, I’m glad.” Pause, the noise of traffic, but Sam was like a dish, like a goddamn dish, he picked up everything now.

“I was worried, you know,” John said, and Sam nodded.

Yeah, sorry. Been busy. Just, the trials mostly.” He could sense John was going to start asking questions, so he hurried to continue, “What are you up to now?” Selfish little question, Sam taking something only for himself.

“I’m on my way to Tesco’s. I was away for two days and there was literally only a piece of cheese left in the fridge when I came back. With actual mould. Oh. Sherlock had something disgusting in a bag in there, too. He said it was some skin and tissue he’d found in a basement in Camberwell. So he brought it home and he’s apparently studying it under the microscope. Could be a shapeshifter, he said. Do you think he could be right? It just looked like normal, decaying human tissue to me, to be honest.”

Sam would have to end this conversation even sooner than he thought, because there was simply no explaining why his voice was breaking on account of an empty fridge and its gross contents.

“Could be, yeah.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve got to go.”

“No, no. Please. Sam?”

“Listen,” Sam spoke hastily, heart dropping as the echo in his head began again. He took a deep breath, slapping his cheeks. John was speaking. Sam couldn’t quite catch his words. It was John’s voice, though, so that was all right. “Listen, listen,” he insisted.

John went quiet.

“I just wanted to say hi,” Sam told him, throat viciously tight, like the hold the Word of God over his ragged body. “And to say thanks. For everything. No, listen. Thank you,” Sam gulped. “And you take care, okay?”

John started speaking again, his worry and care transmitting across all the space that stretched
between them. Sam closed his eyes, lifted his gaunt face to the skies, and felt the drizzle murmur its caress into him.

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In the end, Dean came back to beg Sam to stop. He had found out that if Sam completed the trials, he would die. He told this to Sam like he thought Sam would care.

Sam had an answer for him. “Look at him! Look how close we are!” He pointed at Crowley. Crowley, who had been crying and nattering, on the verge of losing the battle for his demonic soul. Sam’s voice boomed, finding strength in the enormity of the outcome. “Other people will die if I don't finish this!”

“Think about it.” Dean sounded so goddamn reasonable. “Think about what we know. Pulling souls from Hell, curing demons; hell, ganking a Hellhound! We have enough knowledge on our side to turn the tide here.” Dean paused, careful as if he was taming a horse. Dean, the Sam whisperer. “But I can't do it without you.”

Sam gaped at him, incredulous. “You can barely do it with me. You think I screw up everything I try. You think I need a chaperone, remember?”

Guilt flashed through Dean’s eyes. “Come on, man. That’s not what I meant.”

Sam didn’t want to hurt his brother but he didn’t want to listen to lies, either. “No, it’s exactly what you meant.” He gazed at Dean, thought about his purifying confession earlier. “You want to know what I confessed in there? What my greatest sin was?” He had hoped his voice would carry him through, but it was already breaking. “It was how many times I let you down. I can't do that again.”

Dean said his name but Sam’s sorrow felt like hot lava in him, gushing upward, pushing words out.

“What happens when you've decided I can't be trusted again? I mean, who are you going to turn to next time instead of me? Another angel, another—another vampire?” It was not just his voice breaking; all that was left of him now were shards. He spoke through his tears. “Do you have any idea, what it feels like to watch your brother—”

“Hold on, hold on!” Dean stared at him crushed, stumped. “You seriously think that? Because none of it—none of it!—is true. Listen, man, I know we've had our disagreements, okay? Hell, I know I've said some junk that set you back on your heels. But Sammy...”

A lid clicked open in Sam at the way Dean said his name; a treasure box’s lid where Sam’s wish to live had been locked away for a long time. Sam’s arms were glowing blindingly bright, but the thin strip of light along the edge of that lid could not be missed.

“I killed Benny to save you.” Dean said, his own voice already shot to pieces. “I’m willing to let this bastard and all the sons of bitches that killed mom walk because of you. Don't you dare think that there is anything, past or present that I would put in front of you! It has never been like that, ever.” Dean’s face had become just eyes, terrified and filled with love so intent it opened up every box, reached every corner. “I need you to see that.” His eyes were brimming with tears, while he trembled with the force of his plea. “I'm begging you.”

Between one breath and the next, Death was waiting. Sam took another and let go of the brilliant
light pulling him beyond salvation and held on to his own flickering flame that wanted to live.

His big brother hugged him long and tight, bandaged the gash on Sam’s hand, smiled at him and told him that everything was going to be all right.

Sam might have let go, but the brilliant light did not let him go.

He collapsed, Dean half carrying him outside, the two barely managing to make it to the Impala. They dropped in the mud next to it where Sam gasped and choked, his own, personal Big Bang imminent and unstoppable. The last thing he saw before the world faded away was the heavens opening, angels falling down like giant shooting stars.

***

John

Seven months after Sam and Dean left London Sam called John in what John belatedly understood was intended to be Sam’s goodbye note. At that point John had frankly had it with the universe for picking him as the recipient of those.

Half an hour after Sam’s phone call John and Sherlock rushed out to the street, joining Mrs Hudson and plenty of others to watch the sky come alive with whooshing, beautiful meteors.

Only John was not enthralled one bit. He didn’t know in what way, but Sam’s call and this wondrous event had to be connected somehow, and something told him it was not in a way to make them all rejoice as if they’d seen the second coming.

“Oh, this is bad,” he murmured. “This is very, very bad.” He turned to Sherlock wondering whether some communication could have passed between him and Dean earlier. “What is happening?”

Sherlock hadn’t so much lifted his face upward but his eyes, wide open and focused. It gave him the air of someone who was taking the measure of the skies.

“Angels,” he said at length. “They're falling.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading my magnum opus, you are amazing, dear reader! If you enjoyed this and want to follow my writing and publishing adventures, you are very welcome to check out this blog here. ♥

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!