Summary

It has been two years since John's marriage had fallen apart and he had moved back to Baker Street. Things between him and Sherlock are still very much undefined, and John is certain that he'll have plenty of time to figure it all out. This notion proves dangerously false: strange things are set in motion when Sherlock's long-lost “acquaintance” from university appears on their doorstep and a baffling burglary case frustrates Sherlock to no end. What is behind Sherlock's black moods and dwindling health? Where is Mycroft? Why would someone steal artefacts from the British Museum that have interested nary a soul for decades?

In the midst of this thickening fog stands John, who will soon have to take on an enemy much greater than even Moriarty.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Just like the curse*
*Just like the stray*
*You feed it once*
*And now it stays*
- Metallica, 'Until It Sleeps'

**A Diseased Fancy by J. Baillier**

**Chapter 1 - The heart-shaped bullet**

The light is cold. The misty, biting tang in the night air hits John like a slap on the face when he exits the cab. Sherlock lingers behind to pay - likely with Mycroft's credit card. Usually he relies on John to handle such minutiae.

John tucks his hands into his pockets. The ride home had been long, and the initial adrenaline-filled exhilaration was already giving way to a bone-dragging weariness. It is three in the morning, after all.

Another murderer apprehended, another case closed. Another occasion during which they'd been more than the sum of their parts. The old, familiar giggle had started in the cab and a good part of the journey had been spent on verbal recaps of the best parts of what had transpired earlier that evening. For a moment, the world had been perfect - another wrongdoer in the loving arms of New Scotland Yard, another puzzle neatly wrapped, another dose of adrenaline hitting just the spot. During such moments it's almost possible to forget everything that had happened during the past two years - the wedges that had almost been driven between them.

A year earlier, almost to the day, the lies holding John's marriage together had begun to unravel. They had consisted of the child that turned out not to be his, and the wife who John only knew by the facade she had carefully constructed.

Their marriage had lasted only four months. While they had waged small wars between them Sherlock had quietly observed, looking like a man waiting for the shoe to drop. There had been something in Sherlock's demeanor that gave John confidence, something signaling that this was just a transient thing, that in the end everything would somehow be alright, life would go back to normal no matter what the endgame was.

While John lived through the drama, Sherlock waited on the sidelines, never attempting to seek such solace in others as John had done. Sherlock Holmes, alone as ever. As intensely as Sherlock always sucked the air out of any room he walked into, when it came to relationships he acted like a man declared unfit for duty.

After Mary had left for good, John and Sherlock had held onto each other like a two-man army.
Together they'd defeated the frankly quite pathetic heirs to Moriarty's name - John doing most of the muscle work since he'd been hell bent on revenge to the whole universe after his carefully constructed attempt at normality had crumbled like a sandcastle. Together, they had completely dismantled the last vestiges of the new criminal network riding under Moriarty's flag.

John's old bedroom upstairs became occupied again. There were cases, take-away, crap telly, John's occasional locum shifts, midnight violin sonatas, sulking and Mycroft's half-hearted meddling. It was as it had been before - John, at least, liked to think so.

The door opens with a click when Sherlock finally manages to find the keyhole in the dark. They practically stumble inside.

The darkness in the hallway is accompanied by the familiar, slightly dusty smell of home.

This is usually the moment when Sherlock grabs the rail of the stairs, glances back with a grin, waiting for John to fumble around the edge of the door for the light switch. It's a familiar choreography that promises tea, sleep and another night during which Sherlock isn't likely to be tempted to turn to his old tricks or succumb to one of his black moods.

Tonight is different.

Tonight the familiar gives way for the unknown.

Sherlock does not start for the stairs like he's supposed to. Instead he turns around and then crowds John in the hall, grabbing his wrist and wrapping his cold fingers around it.

John blinks and looks up, but it's too dark to make out anything but the outline of Sherlock's unruly curls in the low light. The only thing they have for illumination is what little the Moon is managing to fling in through the small window above the door.

John holds his breath.

Everything is now disorienting and a little alarming.

The grip on his wrist loosens and John almost sighs - he decides it's likely that Sherlock had merely heard a strange sound and had wanted to give him a heads-up. Or maybe Sherlock had just grabbed on for balance since they were both so tired. *Perfectly normal.*

John leans forward slightly, preparing to push past Sherlock and head towards the stairs himself, but Sherlock is clearly not amenable to stepping aside.

Those bony, cold fingers are suddenly on John's cheek, trailing down.

The touch is so gentle it leaves behind a strange sensation that isn't even an itch - more of an afterburn - neurons still firing, not able to decide whether to send out a signal of alarm or pleasure.

The fingers stop at John's chin, hesitant as though seeking something. A connection? A permission?

Sherlock has never shown much respect for the personal boundaries of others, but even when taking that into consideration, he is standing unusually close. John can't see him in the low light, but the rustle of the greatcoat and the sense of something looming nearby - Sherlock is so *irritatingly* tall -
offer plenty enough information. The most irrefutable proof, however, is the warm breath ghosting on John's lips - a breath not his own.

Not a word is being uttered out loud, but that whisper of air still somehow seems to be speaking of adventure and danger and please and not dead.

John finds himself panicking.

He needs time.

He needs time because this is new, this is huge, this is unknown territory and he's been caught unprepared and how does one ever even prepare for Sherlock Holmes? John's mind is barely comprehending, barely holding on, unsure of its own predictions of what's going to happen in the next fifteen seconds. Even though there's a very insistent part of him that is screaming god yes and finally, the part of him that's pointedly saying stop and think seems to be winning.

If John needs to stop and think, Sherlock surely needs to do the same?

It's too early is the next thing that manages to invade John's awareness.

Too early how? Too early after Mary?

What, exactly, are the criteria for early or late?

They've had years. Years before Mary Morstan had even appeared, and a full year has passed after she and John had parted ways. Had three months after Sherlock's suicide too been early to accept Mary's offer of coffee and a keen listener's ear?

Who gets to define these things? Why is it that for John, the timing never feels quite right for any of the most crucial choices he's ever had to make? Is it because it always seems to be someone else who pushes him to the edge of the precipice, and forces him to make an instantaneous choice?

John says none of this out loud, but Sherlock still senses his hesitation. He's probably read dozens of telltale signs of it, even in the dark because he observes, even when no good could come off it.

John blinks when his whirling mind finally settles enough so that he can, once again, register what is actually going on.

Whatever Sherlock's plan had been, it's now been dropped - along with the cold-bony fingers that have disappeared into the deep pockets of the dark blue coat Sherlock always wraps around himself like an armour.

Sherlock steps back and a ragged sigh escapes his lips.

John licks his own, which are somehow drier than the relentless hot Kandahar winds had ever managed to make them.

"He was right," Sherlock whispers not to John, but to some nameless memory that seems to be lurking in the darkness.

Sherlock then turns, all brusque angles and flapping hems and begins striding upstairs. He knows by muscle memory where each of the steps are, doesn't falter an inch. Autopilot.

Letting John always turn on the light had been just a ritual.

"Sherlock, wait." It's the first sensible thing that occurs to John he could say out loud, but his long-
John lingers at the bottom of the stairs.

Soon he hears the sound of shoes being tossed unceremoniously onto the floor, then a set of determined sock-softened footfalls getting quieter and quieter. A door slams. It's clear that Sherlock has made a hasty retreat into his bedroom.

John hopes that they will never speak of it again but in a way they do, without saying a single word. The next morning the air is practically screaming with the undone, the unasked and the unfulfilled.

At least that's how it feels to John, when he finally stops procrastinating at the bottom of the stairs, straightens his spine and walks into the kitchen.

Sherlock is reading the paper, cup of coffee half-drunk next to him on the table. "Morning," he says without looking up.

The coffee maker still houses approximately half a cup, which John pours himself without bothering to look for milk in the cluttered fridge.

John takes up a standing position beside the fireplace, too uneasy to sit down. He cradles the coffee between his palms, reveling in the warmth of it.

Sherlock looks... unaffected. Business-like.

"Are you... alright?" John asks him.

If John is to try to address what had happened mere hours before, he probably ought to be more precise, lift the proverbial cat out of the proverbial bag, but it's not like he hasn't informed Sherlock as to how bad he is at these sorts of things. What curbs his tongue is that a part of him wants to believe that there's nothing at all to discuss, that it had just been some strange thing happening in an alternate reality. Post-case nerves. Exhaustion.

One certainly does not go rummaging around the emotions of Sherlock Holmes lightly or without finesse, unless one wants to get verbally and perhaps even literally disemboweled.

Sherlock's eyes snap up to meet his. He looks calm and composed. "Quite, yes, of course. Why would you ask?"

John scrutinizes his face as carefully as he can from such a distance.

Sherlock doesn't seem to be hiding anything. He has just claimed that he's alright and he certainly looks the part.

It's not unusual for Sherlock to be slightly cold and aloof in the morning. He can be quite whiny and brusque when he wanders into the kitchen this early, but usually he isn't dressed in a suit. Usually it's just a sheet or a ratty T-shirt combined with pyjama bottoms.
"Are we going somewhere?" John asks, suspecting that Sherlock's battle-ready attire might mean an early start to a fresh case.

Sherlock raises two fingers on both his hands as an elegant substitute for a shrug. He snaps his newspaper into submission, hiding his face behind the pages.

John sits down in his usual chair.

Maybe they don't need to talk about it after all. Perhaps things are best left as they are, unstirred.

It's fine. They're fine.

It's all fine.

Still, no matter how many times John tries to reassure himself, the silence in the room still feels like nails on a blackboard.

Chapter End Notes

It's always a terrifying, exciting and exhilarating thing to kick off a new series. This will be very different to what I've been doing lately (or ever!) but I've rarely had as much fun as I did penning this thing. The whole story already exists in draft form, allowing me to give you an approximate chapter count at this point.

The tags, the character list and the sturdy literary influences behind this story will be revealed gradually (to preserve the mystery :) The rating will, however, remain the same throughout the story, and no content warnings will appear later.

I feel I need to express my gratitude at this point to several entities:
- Mrs B, mah frug elaboration bae n:o1
- Mr B, who wrangles summaries as skillfully as he wrangles badgers.
- All the ladies in the online writers' circle I am privileged to be a part of. Your help, your humour and our strange conversations are becoming rather invaluable to my writing process.
- A&T for taking me to a strange Swedish place that kicked this whole thing off the ground.
In the vault

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To John’s relief, there are no further unsettling incidents. The flow of their life meanders back into old, reassuring routines.

Weeks later, John finds himself marveling at how quiet and easy life has been during the past month. The logical reason for this is currently horizontal on the sofa, staring at the ceiling.

Usually Sherlock's presence cannot be ignored since he brings with him a nervous, giddy energy that's contagious, but lately he's been merely existing.

Sherlock looks fine, but the fireworks are missing. He doesn't latch onto the cases Lestrade keeps trying to bring to him. He doesn't argue with the idiots populating his blog's comment section. He doesn't try to hack John's blog. He doesn't come up with new experiments and old ones seem to have been abandoned. Mycroft has been calling every once in a while as is his habit, and Sherlock doesn't even yell at him.

On the other hand, he doesn't seem to be in one of his black moods either, because those tend to be quite loud and melodramatic. Instead of painfully frustrated, bored or thoroughly fed up with the universe he seems.... resigned.

If John tries to engage him in conversation he will comply politely. He spends a lot of time in his bedroom. All in all, Sherlock just is, just exists without making much of a racket, which certainly isn’t typical of Sherlock at all. All of this just feels off some how.

John grabs better hold of his grocery bag and then tuts his way past a news kiosk as he takes in the tabloid headlines.

'BBC Breakfast accidentally shows Olympic rower topless'

'Shocking revelations about Mussolini's love life in new book by controversial Brown University historian Professor George Gammell Angell'

'Mermaids or giant squids? Strange creatures being washed ashore all across the country'

Typical tabloid drivel. John doubts even Sherlock would find anything of worth in those articles.

After glancing in both directions, John hurries across the zebra crossing and towards the familiar sight of 221b Baker Street.

The view to the front door it is partially blocked by a familiar man - Lestrade.

"Hello, John," the Detective Inspector greets him, shifting his weight and then stepping aside to allow John access to the door lock.
"Mrs Hudson and Sherlock not in?" Lestrade asks, "I couldn't get anyone to answer the door."

John's lips press together into an angry line. Typical. "His Highness is in, but obviously coming downstairs is beneath him again. Mind you, he was still asleep when I left for the shops."

This is another new habit of Sherlock's that keeps raising the hairs on the back of John's neck - the man actually sleeps. A lot. "Mrs Hudson is in Benidorm with some friends from her reading group," John adds.

Lestrade grabs the keys John is trying to maneuver between his fingers since John has his arms full of groceries. Lestrade opens the door for them and they head upstairs, exchanging amicable small talk as they go. Once they've shed their coats, John begins opening the kitchen cabinets to find space for canned beans.

It doesn't take long before the door at the end of the hallway opens, and Sherlock wanders in clad in his blue dressing gown, yawning and running a hand through his curls.

"There you are," John says.

Sherlock grants them both a dismissive glance and plants himself on the sofa. After recovering a block of rosin from somewhere on the cluttered coffee table, he begins idly running it against the horse hairs of the bow.

"Case?" John asks Lestrade while making tea for the three of them, trying to sound excited. Maybe if he manages to light the spark, Sherlock will then snap out of this thoughtful, polite silence and get back to being annoying and barking mad and fascinating and brilliant again.

"Plural, although I won't bother you with more than just the one. There's so much weird stuff going on that we've had to cancel some people's annual leave. You can imagine how well that went down."

John huffs with sympathy and doles out the mugs.

Sherlock continues scraping his bow hairs and seems to be watching a small bird flutter its wings against the window. Usually he'd probably name the species in both English and Latin but this time he says nothing.

"Weird things, you say?" John asks.

Lestrade sips his tea. "We thought it was the usual summer crap - teens getting rowdy now that the holidays are on, knocking down gravestones and so on, but now they've taken up actually digging up graves at cemeteries. Stupid pranks, but we've had to post officers at the bigger graveyards because the Great British Public is getting their knickers in a twist. Then there's the corpses being washed ashore, but thank God they found out quickly that they're not actually people, just big jellyfish or squid or something. Bony jellyfish. Like I said, weird shit's how I'd describe it all."

"I do hope you're not here to try to entice me just with upended gravestones," Sherlock comments, stretching his fingers by intertwining them and then bending his wrists outwards.

"We've had a break-in at the British Museum," Lestrade says and swallows the last of his tea.

Sherlock's mug sits untouched on the coffee table. He doesn't look all that interested yet. The fact that they're discussing the crown jewel of British museology is certainly a point worth noting, but there's nothing that warrants the attention of Sherlock Holmes yet.
John isn't convinced, either. "People break into museums all the time, looking for artefacts to sell on the black market," John points out.

"Planned robbery seems likely, yes. The priceless stuff, the things that are worth stealing are for the most part on display. This is different. These thieves ventured down to the lower, restricted levels and the thing is that we can't figure out what they took, except for one thing that doesn't sound very valuable. There's this guy, a project curator we talked to at the scene, who had a theory on what exactly had been taken, but now we can't find the guy. The address he left those officers doesn't even exist and his girlfriend told us he'd left town in a hurry after talking to us. He's the one who reported the theft to the BM's security team and was there when the local boys from the Holborn Station showed up."

"Likely one of the culprits, having some fun on behalf of the Met's finest. Pokes into the investigation and when things start heating up, he takes a runner?" John suggests, stealing a glance at Sherlock, hoping for some support, but he doesn't even seem to be listening.

"That's what we thought, too, that he was an obvious suspect." There's a moment of uncomfortable silence until John speaks up again. "Why would they even assign your unit to this if there's no body, just a break-in? I thought you only handled serial crimes, armed robberies and homicides?"

"That's actually part of why I'm here. The case assignment came from someone higher up, and when we were combing through the scene his brother shows up all of a sudden," Lestrade says and nods towards Sherlock.

Sherlock nearly drops the bow he's still holding. "Excuse me?"

"The Head of BM Security got worried that the man has been taken hostage or might be involved in some bigger scheme to target something more valuable next time so they contacted the Yard. After that someone at Serious Crimes command decided that we ought to be the ones handling it. I've half a mind to think your brother had something to do with it."

John smiles secretly behind the mug he's holding against his lips. Finally something manages to perk Sherlock up.

"He just appeared out of nowhere, asking a few questions, not interfering in any way, just walking about and taking a look. Didn't say what was going on, and I know enough about him not to go prying into his business."

John smiles.

"What did the thieves take, according to your man on the run?" Sherlock demands and places his bow gently on the coffee table.

Lestrade digs out a tattered notepad from his coat pocket and leafs through it. "Something called the.... Celery Fragments?"

Sherlock suddenly looks confused and frustrated. He stands up, fingers pressed onto his temples. He paces a half circle around the room, until his hands drop to his sides and a strange expression, a mixture of alarm, fascination and urgency, appears on his features.

"The Celaeno Fragments?" he asks, eyes fixed on Lestrade.

The Detective Inspector checks his pad. "Something like that, yeah."

Sherlock strides to his bedroom. John worries that he might have had a change of heart and has opted
to sulk in his room for the rest of the day after all, but Sherlock reappears mere minutes later, buttoning an emerald green dress shirt. He has also donned black trousers and matching socks.

He heads straight to the foyer to grab his coat. When John and Lestrade don't immediately join him in his preparations to leave the apartment, he turns and glares at them both. "The day is wasting, hurry up!" he commands.

In John's eyes, Sherlock seems right at home prancing around the high stone hallways of The British Museum. While the three of them are escorted down to one of the basement levels by the Director of Conservation, John briefly wonders what would have become of Sherlock's life had he favoured and adjusted to the world of academia instead of becoming a freelance detective. Would he have been headhunted to some ambitious pharmaceutical company or selected for the tenure track at some famous university? Certainly his lectures would have been... interesting, if not very easy to follow.

Soon they're standing in a small storage room full of labeled crates and boxes. Some of the labels are scribbled with archaic freehand. Many of the boxes look as though they haven't been touched for decades. John would have expected more modern storage facilities. They had walked through many well-lit, orderly storage halls during their trek down but the room they're now in feels like a dumping ground for forgotten, uninteresting things.

John inquires where and when the stolen artefacts have last been on display. The director looks confounded. "Display, Dr Watson? They've never been displayed in an exhibition here as far as I know. Not many individuals even know we have them."

"I certainly didn't," Sherlock points out disapprovingly, and John considers this odd - surely Sherlock would not expect to be aware of all of the thousands upon thousands of artefacts in the collection of the one of the world's largest museums?

Sherlock then directs the conversation towards the missing curator. "What is his field of study?" Sherlock asks, and the director tells them that the man is question is a Sumerian specialist.

"These shards are Sumerian, then?" John dares to extrapolate.

"Fragments, not shards," Sherlock points out as though such semantics hold significance.

The director digs out an old index card from a large cupboard nearby and presents it to Sherlock.

Sherlock shows it to John. It contains the words 'Celaeno Fragments, origin? 3 pieces, box B-3276.'

"We have a lot of artefacts, the origin of which is unknown. For more culturally significant pieces photographs are taken and care sought in finding out about their history. All we have on these particular ones is this card. The digitalization of our collections is far from complete, and these fragments, which were nothing but ceramic pieces, must've not rated very highly on the priorities list."

"If you don't know their origin, where does the name come from?" Lestrade asks.

"You'd have to ask the curator," the Director of Conservation replies with a slightly frustrated tone. "Maybe it's where they were found."
"Or they could have been mentioned in some historical text," Sherlock points out.

"As I said, the card offers little information," the director replies.

"Who reported the theft?" Sherlock asks, whipping out a magnifying glass and running it across the index card he has snatches from the fingers of the director. He snaps a picture of the card with his phone.

"The curator the police talked to, William Channing Webb." The director receives the index card back from Sherlock and replaces it in the archive cabinet

"Did he comment any further on these artefacts, on what their significance is? Why would anyone have taken them and nothing else?" John asks while Sherlock putters around the dimly lit storage area they're standing in, sticking his head between the boxes and running his fingers along some of the dusty crate covers.

The director purses his lips. "Nothing else as far as we know. Taking these could have been just an attempt to distract us from what they were really after."

"But why choose these things? You'd have to know your way around to even come here, right? Why these things and not some other old pieces of crockery that would have been easier to grab? I bet you've got loads they could have taken instead of these ones, since there are halls and halls of Greek ones on display upstairs." Lestrade asks the director impatiently.

"I wish I could tell you."

John picks up a book from a nearby shelf. Its pages are adorned by photos of Egyptian-looking wall reliefs depicting pharaohs, gods and strange creatures. One page contains an enlargement of a vertical set of hieroglyphs.

"Rw nw prt m hrw'," whispers Sherlock's voice near his ear suddenly, startling John - he had not noticed Sherlock creeping closer to read over his shoulder.

"Are you having a stroke?" John asks and Sherlock awards him with a disapproving look.

"That was an approximation of that headline," Sherlock says, pointing a finger at the hieroglyphs, "The Book of Coming Forth by Day, if you'd prefer an English translation." He then steps aside and proceeds to rummage around the box which the director had told them had housed the stolen artefacts.

"Why am I not surprised he can speak ancient Egyptian?" Lestrade snorts while exchanging a mildly amused glance with John.

They stand by the doorway, arms crossed and watch Sherlock memorize every inch of the room. At least that's what it looks like he's attempting.

John eventually sits down in a nearby chair. The director bids them farewell when no further questions are directed at him. Lestrade begins a long-winded phone conversation with the forensics unit, which has discovered little in terms of physical evidence at the site. Not even the crime scene examiner's thorough sweep had produced much trace evidence that could be helpful. Whoever had stolen the artefacts had likely taken care not to leave any trace.

When Sherlock finally sticks his hands into his pockets, rocks back on his heels and looks as though he's done, John clears his throat. "You never asked the director about Mycroft being here."
Sherlock looks thoughtful. "I doubt he'd have known why my brother chose to meddle. Mycroft wouldn't have told him even if he'd asked. Nor would he have told the police," Sherlock points out, stealing a glance at Lestrade who is now frowning at something the person on the other end of the line is saying.

"You reckon this disappearing curator had something to do with the theft?"

Sherlock squints towards the rafters distractedly until glancing at Lestrade, who's still on the phone and has wandered to an adjoining room. He's likely now out of earshot. "The decision to report the theft to the authorities may have been a rather ill-informed decision on the part of the Head of Security. He was likely not aware of the full significance of those artefacts. As for the collection curator, if he knew more it may have been a risky decision to report - the risk of which may now have actualized."

John smiles deviously. Hearing Sherlock's intuitive leaps and budding enthusiasm feels like a breath of fresh air after the recent atmosphere in their flat. It's good to get out of the house, shake out the cobwebs. "You found out something, then? Something about the artefacts?" He expects Sherlock to launch into a triumphant lecture on everything he's been able to glean from the crime scene and the archives of his Mind Palace, but no such show appears. The exhilaration recedes from Sherlock's features, replaced by something dismissive and distracted. "There are no answers here. My brother might have some, but he's hardly going to be forthcoming," Sherlock says and takes off towards the maintenance elevators.

John hurries after him. Lestrade notices they're on the move and ends his calls.

"Celaeno doesn't sound like any historical site I read about for sixth form history," John says while they ride up to the entrance level floor. "Is it a place or a person?"

Sherlock never answers him.

Chapter End Notes

I am flabbergasted and most delighted at the reception received by chapter 1. I'm glad so many of you are enthusiastic on embarking on this journey into darkness, with me as your nefarious tour guide...

I've used a bit of artistic license here with the British Museum staff structure.

There are six clues of varying difficulty hidden in this chapter as to which classic horror author has greatly influenced this story. I will reveal the name of that very author in the notes of chapter 3. Rest assured that familiarity with his works are definitely not necessary in any way for enjoying this story. I will, however, begin pointing out in the Author's notes of chapter 3 where certain story elements and names come from (because I certainly want to give credit where credit is due :)

I will also be making use of bits of ACD canon, but more on that in the next chapters.

The Book of the Dead is an ancient Egyptian funerary text, used from the beginning of
the New Kingdom (around 1550 BCE) to around 50 BCE. The original Egyptian name for the text, transliterated as "rw nw prt m hrw" can be translated as Book of Coming Forth by Day (source: Wikipedia). I have no idea how to spell that bit of consonant-overflowing nonsense, but I'm sure Sherlock could.

I am deeply indebted to 7percentsolution and Emma221b for British Museum pointers, NSY command structure -wrangling, general Britpicking and grammar whoopass.
The thing on the doorstep

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Five days later the theft remains unsolved, and Sherlock is frustrated. He's always had a tendency to become distracted and withdrawn when he's thinking, and as he'd announced to John several times, there's nothing for him to go on. Strangely enough, to John's knowledge he hasn't tried to pick Mycroft's brain about why the older Holmes brother would be interested in the robbery of some old bits of clay from a museum. Surely that could be an avenue to pursue? John has tried to bring up the subject but this only causes Sherlock to become evasive to the extreme.

John has wondered why Mycroft would push this case in Lestrade's lap but not approach Sherlock about it. Did he want his brother involved or not? And why wasn't Sherlock already trying to blackmail, aggravate or outwit the man into spilling the beans?

Perhaps it's best, for the sake of John's own peace of mind, not to try to figure out the both of them. He's got enough on his plate with trying to appease just the one Holmesian harbinger of gloom he's currently living with.

One afternoon, as John is chopping up vegetables, Sherlock makes an appearance after languishing in his room for days. It's drafty in the kitchen, so he wraps the bedsheet he's wearing tighter around his torso. The sight reminds John of the mummies of the British Museum egyptology section.

Sherlock doesn't stop to talk to John, just wanders into the kitchen, humming something that doesn't resemble any of the violin pieces John has ever heard him play. Sherlock grabs a piece of raw, green bell pepper from the kitchen counter between his fingers and eats it while running a finger across a long expanse of wall tiling as though checking for dust.

"Morning," John says sarcastically since it's actually late afternoon. "Would you care for some omelette?"

There's no reply.

"Excuse me? Hello? How about some more raw vegetables, then? Or some actual human conversation?"

Sherlock has shuffled into the living room. He picks up a magazine from the side table and peers at its cover. "What rubbish is this and why would you buy such a thing?" he raises the magazine so that John can see the cover.

"I didn't, actually. It's some monthly supplement that comes free with the Telegraph."

Sherlock opens the magazine on a random page. "'The heart is the best compass'?" he reads out loud.

John snorts, smiling. It's exactly the sort of platitude he'd expect to find in some celebrity interview piece the supplement seems to thrive on. "Just a figure of speech," he tells Sherlock.

Sherlock clearly isn't seeing the humour. He holds the magazine by its corner as though it's toxic and drops in back onto the table. There it stays, spread half-open. "The heart is most decidedly no compass. If people spent less time in the realm of the irrational and used their brains in a more constructive manner instead, perhaps I wouldn't have to be constantly disappointed by the idiocy all
around us. The heart is just myocytes and electricity, and it deserves little attention. Using emotions as a prime directive leads to nothing but disaster."

John breaks an egg into the pan he had painstakingly managed to scrub clean in the sink filled to the brim with other dishes.

He has a hard time trying to decide whether to engage in this abstract argument or not. Judging by Sherlock's tone it's unlikely John could offer any opinions that Sherlock would consider worthy of consideration. It's clear Sherlock is in a distracted, foul mood, perhaps deliberately trying to pick a fight. Sherlock arrogantly emphasizing his preference of cold calculation over such plebeian constructs as emotions is a good way to rile John up, since it reminds him of moments when that very thinking has ended up causing both of them pain.

Before John manages to come up with something suitable to reply, a faint swishing sound disappears down the hallway - created by the edge of Sherlock's sheet dragging along the floor.

It seems that the phrase 'misery loves company', is a very false notion when it comes to Sherlock Holmes.

The sun is setting, its last rays streaming through a thin grey fog as John pays his cabbie and exits the car in front of the sandwich bar downstairs from their home. Usually he takes the tube, but his locum shift at the clinic had been so busy it had made his head throb. At least the shift had only been a short one.

He'd decided to splurge on a cab in lieu of the Tube because he didn't have the energy to face the barrage of sounds and smells in the tunnels. His shoulder is aching in unison with his head and all he wants is a shower and a nap. The evening is still young but he feels like donating the rest of the day to someone who needs it more than he does.

He's secretly hoping not to have to talk to Sherlock tonight.

He knows he needs to address this, whatever this episode of Sherlock's is, but he still thinks there's a fair chance this is something that will pass once he starts making progress with the case. Part of the reason he's putting it off is that there's a nagging fear at the back of his mind that it has something to do with not just Sherlock, but the both of them. The 'us' that really doesn't even exist.

John is shaken out of his reverie when he realizes that someone is lingering by their front door, a map of London twisting in their hands.

It's a man roughly in the age bracket of thirty to thirty-five as far as John can tell. He looks a bit haggard, dressed in nothing but jeans and a worn grey T-shirt commemorating something called the "Master of Puppets".

London receives hordes of tourists dressed in such garb, but usually they're younger - mostly American college students on a grand summer tour of Europe. This man looks rather British and carries himself elegantly and confidently. To John it seems like he'd be much more likely to wear a suit than this outfit. He's got a little more than a five-o'clock shadow going and a thick, unruly mop of brown hair not unlike Sherlock's but instead of lush curls it's straight. He doesn't carry a bag. Apart from the map his belongings seem to consist of an iPhone that's sticking out from the back
The man looks up from his map when John approaches him.

"Can I help you?" John asks.

A hesitant glow of recognition dawns on the man's face when he takes in John's expression. "You're John Watson? From the blog?"

"One and only."

"Am I in the right place? I'm looking for Sherlock." the man asks.

This gives John pause. Years of living with Sherlock has taught him to listen carefully both to what's been said and how it's been said.

'Sherlock'. Not 'Sherlock Holmes', 'Detective Holmes' or any other official version.

Just 'Sherlock' - rolling off the man's tongue as though that collection of letters in that very order has passed his lips many times before. He'd spoken the name as though there was a history there, with a trace of a gentleness in his tone. John has not met many former acquaintances of Sherlock's but this man's approach is at least very different from the manner in which Sebastian Wilkes had spoken of Sherlock.

The man does not volunteer his name, which is inconvenient. Is it because he suspects John might be able to guess it? Does he assume Sherlock has told John about him?

John decides this is fascinating. He feels a lot less tired than he did before. Maybe this is how Sherlock feels when presented with a new mystery? For John the allure has always been tied to Sherlock, not the cases themselves.

At least the man doesn't look like he's armed or angry. God knows Sherlock has enough enemies as is without old ghosts starting to pop by.

John decides to swallow the bait. At least it'll be infinitely better than sitting in the apartment accompanied by just Sherlock's heavy-hearted presence, trying to pretend everything's fine.

"He should be at home. I'll let you in," John says with a smile.

The mystery man wordlessly follows John upstairs. John sheds his coat and puts the kettle on, listening carefully for any audible signs that Sherlock actually is in the flat. At least his coat hangs reassuringly in the foyer.

The shower begins running.

Their visitor looks at John expectantly, and John nods towards the bathroom. "He'll be out in a minute. Or thirty, more like it. His preening routine usually takes a while."

John proceeds to the kitchen to brew their guest some Darjeeling from the fancy tin in the middle shelf. When a steaming mug of it has been delivered to its intended recipient, John goes to rap his knuckles on the glass of the bathroom door. Sherlock at least deserves a warning that they have company. Modesty rarely rates very highly on his list of priorities so a heads-up may spare their
visitor from a sighting of Sherlock in just a towel or less. On the other hand, Sherlock has become more mindful of wearing proper clothing at home lately.

John's knock gets answered with a clipped 'yes?' from Sherlock through the bathroom door. The shower has stopped running.

"I hope you've got your trousers in there. There's a client."

Their mystery visitor stands up from the kitchen chair he'd chosen to sit in, looking like John has made some sort of a mistake. "Not a client," he corrects, but doesn't offer an alternate explanation. Maybe he'd prefer to meet Sherlock alone since he doesn't seem very enthusiastic about telling John anything?

Though this strange visitation has perked John up considerably he is still tired and this is still his home. He's not going anywhere.

"Nice place," the man comments, letting his gaze linger around the kitchen and the sitting room. His eyes then seem to fix on the skull on the mantlepiece. He doesn't seem the least bit of surprised to spot such a an artefact. "He's still got that old thing, I see."

John nods and they partake in biscuits John has discovered in a tin. He hopes they've not been used for some experiment.

The mystery man moves from the kitchen to sit in an armchair after John's suggestion that he make himself comfortable while waiting.

The bathroom door opens just as John is about to pluck up enough courage to enquire after the visitor's name.

Sherlock walks out of the bathroom, dressed in one of his better suits. He must've had it in the bathroom with him. John decides to take this as yet another sign that he's trying to maintain some sort of a strange distance.

Sherlock freezes on the spot when he rounds the corner, arrives in the sitting room and gets an eyeful of their guest.

He look as though he's seen a ghost.

"Victor?" Sherlock gasps.

Chapter End Notes

Time to reveal what sort of foul horror I will be inflicting on poor John and Sherlock.

The six clues hidden in chapter 2 were "In the vault", "emerald", "William Channing Webb", "Celaeno Shards", "Professor George Gammell Angell" and strange human-like sea creatures being washed ashore.
As some very clever readers suggested, these clues point to **H. P. Lovecraft**, a classic American horror writer. Born in 1890 and died 1937, he was a contemporary of Arthur Conan Doyle's and one of my absolute favourite authors. Nowadays many attitudes present in his works that could mostly be seen as typical of that era, have caused many literary critics to frown, but his contributions to horror literature are undoubtedly immense. Lovecraft mostly wrote short stories, along with which a 'mini-novel' called "At the Mountains of Madness" are among his best-known works.

As I've pointed out before: knowledge of Lovecraft's works are definitely not required in order to enjoy this story. Apart from Lovecraft, we've got things from original ACD canon popping up - mostly from "The Adventure of The Gloria Scott".

**Reference list for chapters 2 & 3:**

"*In the vault*" is a well-known example of Lovecraft's short stories.

"*Emerald*" points to a Sherlock Holmes/Lovecraft crossover story penned by Neil Gaiman.

**Professor George Gammell Angell** is a character created by Lovecraft. A professor emeritus of semitic languages at Brown University, he appears in Lovecraft's famous short story "*The Call of Cthulhu*".

**William Channing Webb** is another Lovecraft character. He makes his first appearance in "*The Call of Cthulhu*". In that story he is a professor of anthropology at Princeton University and 'an explorer of no slight note'.

Strange humanoid sea creatures being washed ashore are something that relates to several of Lovecraft's stories, a good example of which is called "*The Shadow Over Innsmouth*".

Lovecraft was not the only author during those times who favoured the genre of cosmic gothic horror. He shared ideas and characters with many of his peers and together they created something that has been referred to as "The Cthulhu Mythos" or "Yog-Sothothery". August Derleth was one of these colleagues. The Celaeno fragments are a creation of Derleth's - a fictional transcript of some books and scriptures that can be found in the fictional Great Library of Celaeno. The spelling of the word tends to vary between 'celeano' and 'celaeno'.

Apart from the title, which is borrowed from a Lovecraft novel, there's only one thing in chapter 3 that could be seen as an intertextual thing; the Metallica album "*Ride The Lightning*" contains a pretty well-known Lovecraft-themed track called "*The Call of Ktulu*".
For I must own
That I shall miss you
When you have grown.
from "A Cradle Song" by William Butler Yeats

After Sherlock's reaction, tea is forgotten quickly by both John and their visitor. As though through an unspoken agreement, Sherlock takes over the sofa and the man now named Victor adopts John's usual armchair. This allows them to face one another, but from a safe distance. John lingers in the empty floor space where the kitchen ends and the living room begins. He shifts his weight.

Sherlock is dressed in his aubergine shirt, buttons straining in that way only he could possibly pull off with an air of eloquence instead of looking silly, and a pair of impeccably pressed dark grey trousers. He looks imposing and distant in that outfit. Sherlock in a suit usually makes people a bit nervous.

Not Victor.

Surely they'd been friends? The sort of simmering hostility that had crackled between Sherlock and Sebastian Wilkes is completely absent here. Instead the air is thick with something else. John wonders how they would have looked like standing side by side, laughing at a joke like any pair of good friends. Judging by the fact that Victor is only slightly taller than John, he must be considerable shorter than Sherlock. Warm, blue eyes. Laugh lines that seem faded, as though they haven't had much use lately. He looks like someone whose line of work mostly entails intellectual labour. Not very muscular. Slim, but not thin.

All in all, Victor is a handsome man who carries himself in a collected manner.

Sherlock seems the opposite of carefree at the moment, too. Hardly surprising, judging by how he's been lately.

Rare are the occasions during which he gets to see Sherlock as he is right now: bewildered. Alarmed. Curious but aloof. Anxious to the point of looking taut like violin string; not steepling his fingers or running his thumb across his fingertips like he usually does when needing to employ his usual nervous ticks. Instead the fingertips of his right hand are gently pressed to the notches between the fingers of his other hand - his hand are positioned as though he'd aborted an attempt at prayer.

All in all, Sherlock doesn't seem exactly delighted at the identity of their guest, but is making no attempt to evict the man either.

Their visitor now looks equally - or perhaps even more - apprehensive, opening and then closing his mouth twice as if to start a conversation, but then refraining from it. There's something he wants to say but doesn't know how to broach the subject. This is not unusual - Sherlock's reputation usually precedes him and people can be so pre-emptively intimidated by his intelligence that they can't seem to get a sensible word out. Judging by Victor's overall conduct this doesn't seem likely. It must be the
gist of the topic that's causing him to pause, not the fact that it's Sherlock he's trying to talk to.

John decides to break the ice. "Victor who?"

It's Sherlock who draws in a deep breath and opens his mouth. "John, meet Victor Trevor." He glances at John, biting his lip, not even stopping to look at him long enough to gauge his reaction. He seems too distracted by Victor to monitor John. It's actually the first time he's even looked at John since he'd walked into the living room and discovered Victor sitting on their sofa.

Victor Trevor. Just a name. No denomination. No explanation as to who this is to Sherlock.

John is certain he's never heard the name before.

Victor lets his gaze sweep all over Sherlock. "You look --- really good, I guess. Well, I mean."

Sherlock usually treats such compliments with an air of superiority and a dismissive flick of his hand unless they're coming from John, but this time a strange mixture of emotions briefly plays on his features.

The faintest splash of colour appears on his cheeks only to be replaced by steely determination a second later.

Had Sherlock been about to actually blush?

John puts down his mug, hoping with every fibre of his being that Sherlock doesn't decide to evict him from this conversation. It's way too revealing, way too interesting to pass up.

Sherlock bites his lip and then straightens his spine. John recognizes this look - he's about to turn his unrelenting gaze to Victor now, to take in all the little details in preparation for a cutting deduction. Sherlock's pupils dilate as his eyes dart across Victor's visage. When he seems done with this once-over, he folds his hands onto his lap as though coiling in on himself, and says nothing.

Sherlock never stays silent at these moments. This is where the verbal evisceration is supposed to start, where the Sherlock Show takes off.

It never comes. Sherlock is wringing his hands and looking like he'd very much like to be teleported to the other side of the planet.

How is it possible that Victor can instantaneously replace his Sherlock with this apprehensive, timid creature who seems to not know even how to exist in his own skin?


Sherlock practically flinches as though he's been reminded of something unpleasant, and his gaze hardens.

Neither of them are paying any attention to John whatsoever, so he plonks himself down to one of the kitchen chairs. The armchair Victor is sitting in is facing the same direction so John can't see his face, but he's more interested in Sherlock's reactions anyway.

"How?" Sherlock asks slowly and John thinks he's trying hard to keep his tone neutral.

"The coroner's report says arrhythmia. He had a coronary bypass two years ago."

"You know they can't prove that. No one can prove arrhythmia unless the patient was hooked up to an ECG monitor when it happened," Sherlock points out.
"It's over, he's gone and I'm not going to go spinning up some mystery around it - I'm not here to hire you. Like you always used to say, hardly relevant. " Victor smiles slightly as though remembering something pleasant. "Always so clever," he says and there's a tender, regretful note in his tone. It's obvious who he's referring to.

Sherlock stands up and wanders to the window.

Realization hits John like a hammer. No one has said it out loud and it's likely no one ever will, but it's clear, so clear from the loaded, oppressive atmosphere in the flat, the way Sherlock suddenly appears much younger than his years and the way he's behaving.

This is an ex, John tells himself in his head.

Sherlock's ex.

Imagine that.

Victor clears his throat and Sherlock turns to face him again.

"That's why he chose you as his apprentice," Victor says and there's an accusation bubbling at the bottom of it. "Clever. Much smarter, far better than his own son."

Aha. They're discussing Victor's father, then. John is glad to have finally caught up.

Sherlock's gaze narrows. "You came all the way here to talk about that? Aren't there grief counselors and priests available for that sort of thing? As you said, he's gone." Sherlock doesn't sound very venomous but it's clear he is not keen on entertaining the subject of Victor's father.

"I'm not here to walk down memory lane. That ship's sailed. I know it has. I'm here because he left you some of his things in his will and I need to know if you want them."

"You could have asked on the phone," Sherlock points out. "Or a letter. Some people still write such things. My phone number and address are on the website."

The website you no longer care about, John wants to chip in but bites his tongue. Sherlock had often gone extensive periods of time without updating it but the state it's now in is the internet equivalent of a condemned property.

"And so is my e-mail address. Could have just sent a message. No need to come all the way here from-- from wherever it is you actually live now."

John is almost surprised that Sherlock hasn't deduced such things about Victor by now.

"Falmouth. Cornwall. I run a DVD rental."

John almost chuckles. Out of all people he could have imagined Sherlock possibly having a romantic history with - if there even were any - did not include a metalhead video shop bloke from Cornwall. Sherlock never fails to surprise.

Still, the strange contrast between the air Victor carries himself with, and what John has now learned of him remains. There is nothing working class about this man. Both Victor and Sherlock speak and carry themselves in a way that practically screams public school, horse polo and tea with the queen.

"I assume you still have one of those ghastly creatures," Sherlock says and proceeds to make a graceful landing on the sofa again.
"Current one's called Sparky." Victor suddenly turns to John, wearing a mischievous grin. "That's how we met. My bull terrier bit him."

"Still have the scar to prove it. That dog should've been put down."

"Harsh words from someone who once had a dog they loved to bits, too."

"I was a child, then," Sherlock says quickly and dismissively, eyes downcast.

John's head is spinning with all this new information. He'd never have pegged Sherlock as a pet-owning sort of person. Clearly there's a lot he still doesn't know about the man. A flabbergasting amount, really, if just one of his old acquaintances is able to produce this many revelations in less than thirty minutes.

"So, you want the stuff or not?" Victor stands up, probably with the intention of forcing their business into a conclusion and leaving.

John is almost disappointed - he wants to hear more, know more.

_this is Sherlock's ex_, his brain helpfully reminds him again. Irrefutable proof that Sherlock hasn't always been married to his work. Incontrovertible evidence that he has at least once in his life needed and wanted the sorts of things he's spent years fighting not to. A sign that he has acted on those impulses at least once in his life.

"Why would he leave me anything?" Sherlock asks accusingly, "He made it quite clear that I was never to cross paths with either of you again."

Victor tugs at the edge of his T-shirt. "During the past fifteen years I've barely spoken to him. Why he'd do something like this, I have no way of knowing. Regret? Not wanting the stuff to fall into the wrong hands? He probably figured you'd know what to do with the books."

John frowns. Books falling into the wrong hands? How dangerous could a bunch of books possibly be? Maybe they were valuable - rare antiquities? He doesn't want to open his mouth and ask - he feels enough of an intruder as is. He has approximately 867 questions he's dying to ask, but he can't ask any one of them in front of Sherlock, because he's just realized that Victor might not have a very realistic idea of how much of his romantic past Sherlock has actually shared with John.

Come to think of it, Victor has now practically dragged Sherlock out of the proverbial closet without even realizing it.

Sherlock is gay, then. Or at least bisexual.

_Sherlock's ex-boyfriend_. John still has a hard time trying to connect that thought to reality. The adamancy with which John has been holding on to an image of Sherlock and romance not even existing on the same plane of reality is crumbling like the Berlin wall. It's probably high time it did.

"Have them delivered," Sherlock says dismissively.

Victor blinks, sighs and walks to the door. He briefly turns to face John. "Nice to have met you, John."

John's mind is suddenly clawing for an excuse to stall, to stop him from leaving. The air hangs heavy with unresolved things, and John suddenly realizes that whatever is going on between him and Sherlock, or between Sherlock and the rest of the universe, there's a chance that Victor might have some answers. He doesn't really want to accept advice because he fancies himself quite the Sherlock
expert, but with this he's fumbling in the dark.

A significant part of his interest is common curiosity. Maybe Sherlock's love of puzzles is rubbing off on him, and what would be a more intriguing puzzle than the man himself?

"Likewise," John says, trying to sound casual. "I was thinking of ordering in. Are you staying in town? Care to join us for dinner?"

Sherlock looks both alarmed and expectant. John turns to him and raises his brows, using his most stern glare in order to prevent Sherlock from sinking this suggestion.

Sherlock's gaze narrows but when John crosses his arms, not budging an inch, Sherlock withdraws from the staring match. "Chinese," he announces and then turns to face Victor. "I assume it's still your favourite?"

Some 45 minutes of awkward smalltalk later, Sherlock descends the stairs to pick up their food from the delivery guy and John is left momentarily alone with Victor. Sherlock and Victor had been going through what they know about the current comings and goings of their old university acquaintances. John is pleased with himself - his assessment of Victor belonging to the same social standing as Sherlock had been spot on - they'd both spent their teen years in exclusive public schools, and Oxford had then followed.

Curiously absent from the conversation are facts of what Sherlock and Victor themselves have been up to since they'd last seen one another. And not a word has been uttered to illustrated their past relationship.

Victor helps John set the table. John catches the man watching him as though he's measuring John up. His gaze isn't judgmental - curious would be a more apt description.

"So, you two, then?" Victor asks almost sheepishly. "At least before you got married to... Mary, was it?"

At first John is confused that Victor knows this much about him, but then he realizes that the wedding photos from 2013 are still up on his blog. They've already established Victor reads it.

John has had a hard time reconciling which parts of his history with Mary he wants to embrace, if any. Leaving those photos on the blog had been a sort of a let-sleeping-dogs-lie type of solution, but in some respects they might be sending the wrong sort of a message.

John wants to come up with a sensible answer that would embrace the ambiguity, all the unspoken things, wants to say that it's complicated, that they're still figuring it out, that he's still trying to figure Sherlock out, that they're fine, really, and it's nobody's business.

All that actually comes out of his mouth is "um".

"It was kind of hard to tell from his blog. Or yours," Victor then hastily adds.

"I'm divorced," John says, which had sounded like a much better explanation when it was still just a half-formed thought in his head.
A strange look crosses Victor's features and he looks like he's about to ask something, but then Sherlock marches up the stairs, arms full of plastic takeaway boxes.

A shot of desperation tingles down John's spine. He wants to barrage Victor with questions, because Victor seems to be able to somehow get past Sherlock's defences and turn off the vile bristle he uses to keep others at bay.

*What do I do with him, why is he like this, how do I fix this, have you seen this before, how do I get through to him, are you here to reclaim him?*

John leans on the kitchen counter for a moment, frustrated at himself.

Sherlock busies himself by opening the plastic containers and peering sceptically into each one.

Soon they're gathered around the kitchen table which John had quickly decluttered from Sherlock's chemistry equipment. The food offers a liberating distraction.

While they eat, John notices that Sherlock is still looking at Victor as though he weren't a real man doing something as normal as shoving pork chow mein into his mouth with rather unrefined chopstick technique. He's looking at the man as though he's a ghost that's come to unhinge him.

"When you met you were studying at Oxford, then?" John asks after swallowing a mouthful of hot-and-sour pork belly which leaves just the right sort of scorch on his tongue.

Victor points his chopstick at Sherlock. "He was reading chemistry, I was studying English. My father was a professor of organic chemistry."

'Father', not 'dad'. Clearly upper class, John decides.

"Star student, then?" John asks, smiling and nodding his head towards Sherlock.

Sherlock looks like he'd very much want to discourage continuing this conversation. John can't figure out what might be so embarrassing about simple facts about his university studies. Unless his whole educational history was something he did not like to dwell on. Certainly it had seemed that way with what Sebastian Wilkes had had to say about it.

John is aware that Sherlock had never finished a degree - Mycroft had told him that much. John had chalked it up to Sherlock probably deciding that all the professors were idiots.

"God, he was brilliant. Is, I mean," Victor says and it sounds like a genuine compliment, not just the afterglow of a crush. "Father picked up on that after Sherlock quite loudly deduced that the headmaster was having an affair with his secretary at a Merton cocktail party for new students - Father was a Mertonian, that's why he was there, too. Not a very smooth move, but I think it made Father realize Sherlock cared about the truth more than he cared about people's feelings. Cold logic was certainly something he valued."

"He still does those sorts of things all the time," John says, a little embarrassed when he realizes he's talking about Sherlock as though he wasn't sitting right there next to him.

Sherlock looks unemotional as he uses his chopsticks to twirl a chicken piece in the puddle of sauce that's formed at the bottom of his plate.

"Father had been thinking about returning to his old teaching position at the Miskatonic in the States where he'd done his postdoc, but I think he sort of saw Sherlock as a potential heir and stayed."
"You put way too much weight on your own interpretations," Sherlock points out dismissively.

Victor sighs, looking regretful. "A year ago he showed me his will and told me that whatever he had left in that room he had always kept locked up was to go to you - still didn't want me to have anything to do with it. He'd gotten rid of a lot of stuff over the years, a bit before he started subscribing to all these foreign newspapers and cutting out news reports. We thought he was developing dementia. Around the time the tumour was found, he burned all of the clippings and declined treatment. It was like he wanted to get out of the way of something."

Victor's tone has changed. That last sentence had sounded like a warning.

Sherlock now looks annoyed, perhaps even a little defiant.

Victor puts down his fork. "I didn't want that stuff at home. At first I didn't believe there was much to it, that there was a sane reason why he'd keep it so secret and only share it with you until things really started getting bad. At first I had thought that maybe he was keeping it all from me because he was trying to blackmail me into doing better, to try harder, that sort of thing. It felt cruel since I knew I could never compete with you. I don't know if he saw it in me, either."

Sherlock opens his mouth, looking like he's about to correct Victor on something but again, he refrains.

John stares at the wall. He's dying to understand, dying to know, but he doubts Sherlock is amenable to discussing the full details of this with him since he certainly isn't willing to talk to Victor.

Sherlock pushes away his plate. "Why have you come? To remind me of all of it?" he asks pointedly, cementing John's impression that there's much more to this, that there's something they've been merely skirting around.

Victor dabs his mouth with a napkin and then sticks his hand into his pocket, producing a keycard. "This allows you access to a rental storage locked. Use it or don't, up to you. Like I said, I didn't want that stuff at home. I never wanted it. That's what he didn't understand. I didn't want it, but I didn't like being kept from it either. I just wanted to understand."

Victor stands up and glances around the apartment. "Consulting detective. Looks like you made something of yourself."

There's an unspoken thing in that sentence, in the bitterness in Victor's voice - you did, but I didn't. I never had that chance.

John wonders if it were differences in ambitions, a rivalry of sorts that had driven a wedge between the two of them. It seems possible, judging by Victor's bitter words about his Father favouring Sherlock somehow.

On the other hand, Sherlock does not chase fame, glory or fortune - he's more interested in the substance of what's going on. The puzzles, the mysteries.

John still feels like the questions bouncing around his head are outnumbering the answers he's gotten.

John thinks Victor is about to leave but the man heads towards the bathroom instead. On his way he spots Sherlock's violin, and a nostalgic smile lights his eyes. "You still play?"

This is the first thing all evening that manages to produce any kind of a positive reaction in Sherlock. He ascends from his seat in the kitchen, fetches the instrument and soon a dramatic rendition of Nirvana's 'Heart-shaped Box' echoes in the apartment.
John has never heard Sherlock play anything but classical. The confident turn of notes sounds as though it's not the first time Sherlock has chased that particular melody with his violin. Maybe he had played it to Victor?

John doesn't try to coax out anything more about their history. He contents to watching Sherlock and Victor together.

Victor doesn't seem to have come to rekindle old flames. He seems quite self-contained, a little bitter. He doesn't flirt, doesn't pry anything further about Sherlock and John's lives beyond asking some basic questions about their cases.

John shares some anecdotes about Sherlock and a flicker of familiarity flashes in Victor's eyes when John describes some of his usual antics.

A little before Victor excuses himself, John quietly observes the two of them from where he's standing in the kitchen.

Sherlock almost shyly pushes a lock of hair behind his ear. It's as though the presence of Victor has transported him back to some earlier version of himself - more innocent, more careful, more awkward, not knowing what to do with his long limbs.

After Victor disappears into the bitingly cool London evening some twenty minutes later Sherlock straightens his spine, plays some Brahms while walking around the living room and then stretches himself across the sofa.

John gives him a mug of tea, which he accepts, looking pensive.

"Was it nice to see him?" John dares to inquire.

"He seems to be doing alright," Sherlock points out quietly. It's not exactly an answer.

"I bet running a movie rental in some sleepy village wasn't what he saw in his future during those college years."

"Was being a detective's assistant with a shot-through shoulder what you saw in yours?" Sherlock points out.

"Touché, although I'm certainly not your assistant," John points out. "Are you going to see him again?"

"I don't think so."

Sherlock doesn't seem like he'd like to discuss the matter of Victor any further, so John rocks back on his heels and pats Sherlock's shoulder absent-mindedly on his way to the bathroom.

John doesn't get to witness Sherlock's fingers creeping up to the very spot he had just touched. There they linger for a moment.
This chapter was betaed by the luminously clever Emma221b. She and the incomparably brilliant 7PercentSolution also provided some vital editing help with the previous chapters. I couldn't do this without you lovelies, so please have some additional Victor details and Grunge!Sherlock in this chapter as your reward X-)

I've tweaked canon here a bit for dramatic purposes: it's been established in the series that Sherlock did, in fact, graduate from university. In this story he dropped out. More on that later.

Reference list for this chapter:

Falmouth is where the ship Gloria Scott in the eponymous ACD canon story set sail, heading for Australia.

Sparky the bull terrier is actually a double reference! According to ACD canon, Sherlock and Victor met when Victor's bull terrier bit him, and there's a bull terrier named Sparky in Tim Burton's film "Frankenweenie".

Miskatonic University is a fictional institution of education in the fictional Massachusetts town of Arkham - an iconic location of many Lovecraft stories.
To the bone

Chapter Notes

This is a tough chapter. Serious trigger warning for homophobia.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

- Port Noir

It's wrong to say I was a part of the tree
A branch maybe
But I broke off, you see
- Port Noir

The Dyson Perrins Laboratory, Oxford University, September 1998

Sherlock is shaking. He's shaking because his life is crumbling to bits before his eyes and as much as his brain claws for a solution, something to stop this tidal wave with, it's like waving a stick at a tornado.

He forces himself to look up, to look straight into the eyes of the man who's about to rob him of everything he cares about.

Professor Gregory Trevor.

His friend. His mentor. Victor's father.

Three things that are somehow incompatible in ways Sherlock had not foreseen. It doesn't make sense, and Sherlock hates nothing worse than illogical things. He had genuinely thought that this is how they were alike, Professor Trevor and him, but it seems that the professor is as prone to emotion clouding his judgement as any random idiot.

The professor is pale, his features twisted by rage as he stands on the opposite side of the impressive antique desk. "You fucking greedy little shit. Nothing was enough, you just had to go on and take it all."

The minutes that have ticked by while he's been unleashing his fury on Sherlock have felt like hours.

"I love him! How could that be so wrong that you think it ruins everything---" Sherlock shoots back, chest heaving. He hadn't meant to say those three words, not in the least, but he's too upset to effectively censor himself.

He hasn't even said those words to Victor. As a matter of fact, Sherlock can't recall ever saying those words to anyone, because those words are as dangerous as they are terrifying. They open up a soft spot, ripe for a proverbial arrow to sink in. They give his enemies leverage and they cannot be taken back.

They're ridiculous and sentimental but they're the truth, and Sherlock values truth as much as he
values logic.

The older man raises a finger to hammer home his point. Sherlock wants to bite it off.

"You're nothing but a child, Sherlock, if you think that love is soft, kind and makes everything alright!"

"Why am I good enough to be your apprentice but not good enough for your son? You owe me an answer to that, at least," Sherlock asks defiantly, shifting his weight.

"I don't owe you a word more. I thought you were smarter than this. I thought you were ambitious, that you had priorities. I taught you all that I know, put you on the path where you could achieve more than I ever would, and you repay me by neglecting your studies and seducing, defiling my son with your sick tendencies---!" The professor shakes his head, dropping his gaze down to the table as though he can't even look at his former protégé.

Sherlock opens his mouth to point out that Victor was the one who'd made the first move and that they'd only kissed, nothing more, because even that had felt so overwhelming that Sherlock had felt no desire to go further just yet.

"Intelligence mixed with love will only lead to ruin. Extreme intelligence and happiness mix like oil and water. It's selfish, it wrecks and destroys and burns and if this is how you want to use it for except for more sensible things then be it, but you're not taking Victor down with you!"

"I was under the impression that he was an adult capable of making his own decisions," Sherlock points out, crossing his arms tightly.

"Clearly he doesn't know what's best for him. Goddamned children, the pair of you! Clearly he has no idea what he wants if he's willing to do those sorts of--- of--- things with you! I'm not even going to say the bloody word! It's unthinkable and preposterous and I expected better of you, the both of you!" The professor looks spent, aged beyond his year. He slumps down into his chair. "Neither of us will have nothing further to do with you. I am aware that without me, you'll get nowhere in your studies, but this is a choice you made. You alone."

"We'll see," Sherlock snarls defiantly, "I suspect I can proceed perfectly well from here without you. As you said, you've taught me all you know. Which wasn't all that much, really," he adds petulantly. It's a childish thing to say but he can't entirely contain his searing desire to lash out.

This is so unfair.

"No, you won't necessarily need me, but you need my resources."

Sherlock bites his lip. This is the sucker punch he hadn't wanted to think about - no longer being able to access those texts, books, artefacts that were vital in trying to understand, to learn, to get forward. The professor is right, which is infuriating. Sherlock wants to wring the man's neck for mistaking him for someone with the wrong priorities, and punishing both him and Victor for something that has nothing to do with the work he'd been doing with this man. Denying Sherlock of this, all this knowledge, an opportunity to understand the very essence of the universe, for petty reasons is something that he will never, ever forgive.

Still, there is the problem of Victor.

Sherlock doesn't know whether to sit, remain standing or flee. He ought to leave, since the conversation has largely consisted of disapproval and venom flying at him. What keeps him from retreating is Victor. Even though they're both adults, Sherlock knows this man has substantial
leverage on his son.

It's the leverage all fathers in the elite social classes have - that of duty, tradition and a certain lifestyle that could be taken away at any moment. Among students from well-connected, affluent families sent to Oxford from public schools, the term disowned is much less archaic than the common rabble ever realized. Sherlock is suddenly grateful that his own family doesn't belong in those higher echelons of society. That doesn't mean they haven't tried to control every aspect of his life. He hates it, hates it, the way in which his life has been managed by others from birth - parents, Mycroft, psychiatrists, well-meaning educational experts. This was supposed to be his choice, his mission and now it's being taken away by this petty man.

"I'm sending him away," Professor Trevor suddenly says, sounding like he's being kind somehow. Triumphant, even. "Sandhurst. He's on his way as we speak."

"No!" Sherlock screams, slamming his palm on the desk and meeting the professor's eyes, defiance burning in his irises like wildfire. He needs the anger, needs to tap into that rage he knows he has, because if he doesn't hold onto that he'll lose control. He tries to remember all those things taught to him by the imbecillic, well-meaning, so-called professionals that his parents paraded around during his childhood with the goal of teaching him to cope, to connect, not to have meltdowns in public.

He needs control and he needs it now.

Somehow the thought of Victor is what keeps him somewhat functional. The realization that this is his one chance of doing something, of preventing this disaster, his one opportunity to make sure he gets to keep Victor, is what overrides the overwhelming sense of panic that is threatening to turn him into a sobbing, quivering mess.

He will not give this man the satisfaction.

The professor isn't done reiterating his point just yet. "I want it to be crystal clear to you that I don't want any part in my work for him. Continuing his diseased association of fancy with you will unavoidably lead to him getting mixed up as well. His lesser intelligence means he can have a decent shot at an easy, peaceful, normal life. A chance you and I were destined to never get. I'm not letting you take that away from him. You made such an ugly thing out of a beautiful friendship, let your primitive impulses rule you. He wasn't like this before you came along!"

Sherlock leans back and pulls himself up to his full height with a vile expression that isn't exactly a smile making a home on his features. Whatever punches he'd been willing to pull in order to attempt any sort of damage control have now been abandoned. If he's lost the game, then he intends to walk out after at least administering some lasting damage. "Gay as a maypole, you mean?" Sherlock snarls, eyes burning with fury, the depth of which he hadn't even known he could possess.

The professor stands up so quickly his heavy antique office chair upends. "Get out!" he bellows with a half-broken voice.

Sherlock turns on his heels and hurries out of the office, down the stairs, out of the nearest entrance.

He emerges, panting, in a grassy courtyard hidden away the bustle of South Parks Road. It's twilight and the courtyard is empty save for him.

He tastes bile and swallows, suddenly feeling like he's about to faint. He stumbles onto the grass and ends up leaning on the lonely poplar growing in the courtyard, leaning his forehead onto its coarse black trunk.
His heart pounds in his chest like a bird trapped in a jar.

The professor is right.

He can't do this. He's not built for this.

His brain isn't designed for this because he can't override this with logic, can't will himself to calm down, can't make himself see reason, can't prioritize---- How can people stand such things, this iron fist around his heart, this constriction in his chest, this crushing sense of loss?

How can they experience this and not be disencouraged from ever attempting to reach for such a pipe dream again?

Sherlock turns and lets himself slide down to sit on the grass, back against the reassuringly sturdy tree.

Only when he feels a trickle of something blood flow down his palm does he realize that he's been pressing his fingernails between the fingers of his other hand so hard they've dug into the skin and drawn blood. A nervous tick from childhood, one that he'd employed only when life and the universe and the people in it truly got the better of him and nothing else helped. He had been so distraught, so disconnected that he hadn't even felt the pain.

He digs a handkerchief out of his pocket, realizing he had left his bag in the administrative floor of the chemistry department. The bag had contained little else than books. He'd read all of them already anyway. He wasn't going to walk into that place ever again.

He snakes the handkerchief between his fingers to stop the bleeding.

Victor.

His breath hitches. Could there be something he could do, a snowball's chance to stop this? Surely it's not too late still? Victor can't have even packed yet because he can't be leaving! He'd fight his father, he has to! He couldn't just leave Sherlock like that, could he? Victor would fight for them, wouldn't he, like Sherlock had just tried to do?

With shaky hands Sherlock digs out his mobile phone from his jacket pocket. The phone a gift from his brother - one that has been mostly useless since he hardly spends a lot of time chatting with people. Like many of his peers, Victor doesn't have such a phone and relies on landlines instead. He selects the number for the porters' lodge of Victor's college - the only number he had ever bothered to program into the phone.

We can figure something out, we can fix this, please let it not be too late. He can't have left yet, he CAN'T-----

"Mr Trevor no longer resides with us," an uninterested voice soon informs him at the other end of the line.

Sherlock flings the phone across the courtyard and it hits the concrete with a disappointingly faint crack.

The tears come. Instead of a quiet trickle they're a gale of choking sobs. It's hateful and pathetic.

If love can reduce him to this sordid state, what good is it?

His chest is heavy, burning, constricting. It's fascinating, really - stress-induced chest pain, a subtype
of Prinzmetal's angina, also known as angina inversa, variant angina, functional angina, can lead to the Takotsubo syndrome, named after a Japanese octopus trap shaped like a heart in when it's ballooning apically, looking like a Greek amphora; also known as the Broken Heart syndrome-----

He wants to claw such a treacherous organ out of his chest and heave it away where it can't hurt him anymore.

Victor.

With sheer force of will Sherlock attempts to tear out that face from his mind, his memories. Discard it like a useless thing, shun it like an enemy because that's all that it could be now - a threat to his sanity and his composure. If they are never to see each other again then it's no use dwelling on it. At least that's what he tries to tell himself.

Control. Delete. Destroy.

The world still threatens to spin out of control. His skin is crawling, it's too much, too much to contain. The last time he'd felt like this he'd been a child.

They once gave him a dog to love. A wonderful dog. They gave it to him, even though they knew what would eventually happen.

Death. Loss. The carefully constructed safety of his life tearing apart. The currents of chaos threatening to whisk him away. They gave it to him, even though they knew what would happen. A cruel lesson in what forever gone means and how the beginning of it tastes.

Sherlock pinches his eyes shut and tries to focus on another childhood memory - his father's antique metronome on top of the piano. Its steady, hypnotic, mathematical ticking. The order, the organization and precision that had been the only thing that had been able to console him. When nothing else had helped and all the people were nothing but screechy monsters encroaching on his personal space, he would escape to the study to watch the metronome. The adults eventually began to worry when he began spending inordinate amounts of time listening to it, lulled into relaxation by its steady, orderly rhythm that the adults began to worry.

Patterns. Rules. Control.

Then he grew up and realized that it's not that easy.

He can't erase what has happened but he can certainly make sure nothing like this ever comes to pass again. Make a rule of it.

Never again. He'd never allow anything to penetrate his defences like this. Nothing and no one.

A frightening thing occurs to him: what if this isn't about just the phobic prejudices of an old man? What if the professor's is right, and the very nature of their work makes it fundamentally incompatible with normal life and relationships? The professor certainly seemed to have alienated everyone he had loved. Hadn't he been adamant about protecting Victor not only from Sherlock's influence but also both their shared work? If it was only this, the inordinate amount of pain caused by his heart breaking like a crystal glass hitting concrete, Sherlock might be able to handle it, have some hope but there's more to it, isn't there? The crux of the matter is that he never even had a chance to succeed, did he? The professor must be right - love will bring nothing but ruin, and if he chases it he'll self-destruct with devastating collateral damage. He's not built for this.

If his treacherous, suicidal heart ever tries to distract him again he will keep it in check. No one will be able to rekindle that pointless dream - the vain hope that he could be like the others with their
simple lives and simple minds and animalistic mating rituals.

What are the dreams he should chase, then? Those better, brighter, smarter, more lasting aspirations? At this moment, Sherlock can't come up with a single one.

*It hurts.*

*Control it.*

Never again. He will feel like this never again.

*Alone protects me.*

Two months later, Sherlock quits his studies and moves to London.

Three months later, he walks out of Mycroft's house, leaving behind all his belongings and takes to the streets.

Four months later, he tries heroin for the first time.

Ten years later, after his third stint at a Mycroft-organized rehab, he discovers that criminology offers the sort of intellectual challenge he might just be interested in. A Scotland Yard detective he meets by accident tells him to get clean so that he can help solve these sorts of mysteries.

Fourteen years later, he meets John Watson and can't look away.

Four more years pass and his now nearly two decades old vow holds, until arrives a fateful night when he has triumph and adrenaline coursing through his veins and John's name on his lips, and his imprisoned heart attempts a daring escape.

For a fleeting, futile moment, Sherlock dares to hope.

Chapter End Notes

I am very grateful to Emma221b for betaing and felinedicatorminion for British university pointers in chapter 4 and 5.

There are two short stories that happen before and during chapter 4. "*Magnet Tar Pit Trap*" (a retelling of chapter 4 from Sherlock's POV) can certainly be read at this point without it providing too many spoilers, but "*A Man In Amber*" contains so many spoilers that it is best read after the entire series.
The Big Yellow Storage's East Finchley location proves easy to find. Sherlock strides in, barely sparing a glance to the clerk sitting in the small office by the entrance. He wanders down the narrow main corridor, John in tow, until he finds storage room number C-56. The newly installed electronic door lock opens with a click when Sherlock swipes Victor's keycard in the electronic lock.

Inside, there are two large, sturdy cardboard boxes on the floor. Sherlock pries the lid off the topmost one. The box seems to be filled to the brim with books.

John steps closer to get a better look, but Sherlock hastily moves between him and the boxes, leaning down to take a closer look himself. After some rummaging around, he pointedly replaces the lid. He then announces that the boxes are clearly too heavy to haul around on the Tube, so he's going to negotiate delivery arrangements with the manager. After stealing an oddly worried glance at John, he disappears towards the office, all flapping coat and determination.

John, left standing alone in the storage room, creeps closer to the boxes and lifts the lid of the box again. He remembers Victor's words: 'I didn't want that stuff at home'. John reasons that the relationship between father and son must have been abysmal, if Victor was so adamant about wanting nothing to do with his father's belonging. Or do these particular items have some special significance?

John knows all about complex father-son relationships. Or perhaps his own hadn't been so complex after all - his father had been a violent alcoholic, which made him an unfit parent. Quite simple, really, in hindsight. Their mother had been caring, but incapable of detaching herself from such a pathologic relationship - even after it had put her children at risk. Harry had left home at age sixteen after one broken bone too many, moving in with her then-girlfriend. John had stayed until he got into university - someone had to look after Mum after their father had died a mere six months after Harry had left. A drunken addicent caused a brain bleed - the instantaneous damage had been so massive that he never even woke up after the emergency surgery. John hadn't gone to the funeral, nor had Harry.

Forgiveness is too strong a word. Perhaps it is better to say that John had come to terms with the fact that all sorts of people were free to create children as they pleased, while even the RSPCA demanded a background check and home visits before allowing a couple to adopt a rescue dog. Their mother likely had tried the best she could with the abilities that she had.

John wonders if Victor's father had been like his own, or if there was some other reason for the rift. It was doubtful Sherlock would ever volunteer to share such a story - if he even knew it. His answers to John's enquiries about his past were usually dismissive, paranoid and clipped so he was unlikely to be more forthcoming about Victor's past since he seemed reluctant to discuss the man at all.

John picks up two books from the top of the box at random.

A tome called 'Some Observations Upon a Series of Kalmuk Skulls' by Professor George Edward Challenger looks inconspicuous enough, and flipping through the book while holding the other
between his knees, he finds out that it's an old, beautifully illustrated anthropology treatise.

The other book looks more confusing. It's written in Latin and called 'Liber Ivonis'. It is printed on stiff and almost translucent paper with a font that is difficult to read and its covers are worn, made of light brown leather, and when John flips the book over he spots a discolouration that, according to his imagination, looks almost like a mole on skin. He's still peering at it, when Sherlock returns.

John looks up. Sherlock steps closer, and pries the book out of his hands with an almost scolding look. Then he realizes what John had been scrutinizing.

"That can't be---" John begins incredulously.

Sherlock nods with the edge of his lip curving up slightly as though he's about to share a titillating secret. "Anthropodermic bibliopegy," he says, like the walking talking dictionary that he is.

John hasn't heard the term before, but he knows enough Latin from medical school to deduce its meaning.

A book bound in human skin.

Come to think of it, John now remembers reading about such books in a tabloid article around the last Halloween. According to the article, such items are rare but do exist. A morbid memento Sherlock would undoubtedly consider fascinating.

Sherlock puts the book back in the box. "Stay out of my things," he says to John coldly - contrast to how he'd been behaving mere seconds ago. It's as though the old Sherlock had been back for a moment, but then he'd remembered himself and returned to his recent chilling aloofness.

Since these books hadn't been Sherlock's until a moment ago, John decides to take offence. If It wasn't fair for Sherlock to have dragged him along and then kept him in the dark. He'd largely stopped doing such things after the whole Mary debacle. Promised never to keep secrets from John again when it came to important things. John had believed him, but now he is left wondering if those long, slender fingers had been crossed behind Sherlock's back when he'd made such a vow.

"Hey- you're the one who asked me along. What's the point if you're now getting bolshie I'm here?"

"A request for help isn’t the same as a license to snoop. I thought you could be useful when it came to carrying them, but that was before I realised they are too heavy."

Why did John always have to be the sensible one who sorted out these problems, who forced Sherlock to talk, to sleep, to eat, to stop smoking, to get that cut looked at because it's starting to infect, to not jump into The Thames? Did his willingness to share his life with Sherlock make him a glutton for punishment?

Wordlessly, he follows Sherlock out of the building. They take the Tube back to Baker Street in silence.

The boxes are delivered three hours later. Sherlock orders them to be taken straight to his bedroom, where he then stays for the remainder of the day behind a locker door. The mug of tea that John deposits outside the room with a rap of his knuckles on the door, never gets touched.
"Do you know anything about radios?" Mrs Hudson asks two days later when she almost bumps into John who's leaving for work in the morning.

John rubs his nose. "Not really, why?"

"It's the one in the kitchen - works fine during the day, but keeps making this most awful sound during the night - like a pulsating white noise. I think it's picking up something it shouldn't be."

"I assume you've tried turning it off and on again?"

Mrs Hudson gives him a disapproving glare. "Honestly, John! I'm not all that old. Maybe best take it to a shop then to have it looked at, I guess."

John nods and zips up his parka. "Maybe it's some sort of interference from a LAN router or something", he offers. He doesn't know all that much about such matters, but it's a theory as good as any. At the clinic, when something's wrong, it's always the LAN router.

During his lunch break, John searches online for 'Celaeno fragments'. The combination of two words produces no results. A plain 'celaeno' typed in tells him that in Greek mythology, Celaeno, 'the dark one', was the name of several beings. The wife of Poseidon. One of the Harpies. An amazon. The daughter of one man or another. It's also a star, named after these Greek figures.

Certainly doesn't sound Sumerian, and surely the museum scholars would have recognized the fragments as Greek, had they looked the part?

Later that afternoon, when John is shopping for groceries at the Tesco Metro on Edgware Road, he spots a man with an umbrella standing in the produce section. He seems to be inspecting the cantaloupes, but is taking an awfully long time to pick one. When he man shifts so that he's standing almost sideways towards where John is, realization dawns.

John parks his cart next to the apples and turns to face the man. "Are you kidnapping people from Tesco's, now? Bold move," John remarks and crosses his arms.

Mycroft Holmes picks up an apple and sticks it in a flimsy plastic bag he's just torn off a roll with the air of a man who certainly isn't in the habit of something as plebeian as grocery shopping.

*Probably has everything delivered by a minion in one of those armour-plated black cars*, John decides.

For some reason Mycroft isn't looking at John directly. "I cannot fathom why you'd assume I am here to do such a thing. I am shopping, as are you, and we merely happened to select the same establishment. This store is conveniently located halfway between your flat and mine."

"Really."

Did Mycroft actually steal a nervous glance at a security camera just now?
They move to stand behind an almost ceiling-high display of salads.

"What's going on?" John asks, "Is this about the museum burglary you got Lestrade assigned to? I'll bet Sherlock would be been keen to pick your brain about it."

"That assignment was not my choice."

John isn't buying it. "You must've guessed that if Lestrade was on it, there was a high chance it would fall into Sherlock's lap as well."

"That case is irrelevant. If Sherlock wants to waste his time with a partridge in a pear tree he's most welcome to do just that. It's good that he's got something to keep him busy."

To John this sounds strange - usually the older Holmes very much prefers Sherlock not to meddle in his business. Yet here he is, in all likelihood pushing a case to Lestrade where they'll be likely to involve Sherlock, but not approaching Sherlock himself.

John doesn't know what to make of his claim that it wasn't his choice in the first place - if Mycroft didn't want Sherlock involved, wouldn't he have done something to ensure Sherlock would be kept away?

On the other hand... "You do know that saying something like that, trying to discourage him, will only make him do the opposite? And if it's irrelevant, why pick Lestrade---"

"What is Victor Trevor doing in London?" Mycroft asks acutely, fixing John with his gaze. "What is he after?"

John leans his palms on the handlebar of his shopping trolley. "His father died and he's sorting out some loose ends, I guess. Inheritance issues. I think his visit was a one-off. Not that Sherlock would think it's any of your business?"

Mycroft's mouth is a tight line. "Inheritance?" he asks, sounding incredulous.

John shrugs, growing increasingly irritated by the assumption that he is somehow accountable to Mycroft.

"I assume Sherlock is progressing with the case?" Mycroft demands when it becomes clear that John isn't volunteering further information.

"It's kind of hard to tell." Let the older Holmes have a taste of irritatingly cryptic answers for a change.

Mycroft's eyes narrow and his mouth's angry curves do not soften. He glances around and then heads towards the checkout, leaving John standing by the pasta shelves with his trolley.

At the frozen foods section, his hand hovers between the chocolate ice cream that he prefers, and the sophisticated coconut one that Sherlock has deigned to eat at least on one occasion. Most other varieties he simply pries the lid off, stares at for a moment and then usually forgets on the kitchen counter to melt.

He never knows what Sherlock wants.

John decides he's too tired to make a decision and abandons the concept of dessert altogether. While he gathers the rest of the items on his list, John decides not to inform Sherlock of his conversation with Mycroft. There is not a chance in hell it would improve Sherlock's mood to find out they've
been conversing since that, in Sherlock's books, always translates to conspiring against him. John needs all the goodwill he can get nowadays.

There's mould growing on the underside of the porcelain bathroom sink. Its colour is dark brown swirled together with green. When John peers closer he can make out a faint, odour reminiscent of something putrefied, and it's sprouting stringy appendages that almost look like they're moving in the draft coming in from the open bathroom door.

It must be an experiment of Sherlock's.

John stares at this novel reminder of how many Sherlock-related things he will probably never understand.

John is washing a frying pan, because if he doesn't, he's got nothing to make an omelette in. Come to think of it, he'll probably need to wash plates and some cutlery as well to actually be able to eat said omelette. God bless Mrs Hudson, who sometimes stealthily makes such mountains of dishes disappear and then reappear clean and shining.

Sherlock wanders to the kitchen, looking distracted.

"Everything alright?" John asks. "Any new theories?"

Sherlock leans on the doorframe and then proceeds to pick at a cuticle. "Some, yes, but none of them conclusive."

Sherlock's habit is to effusely explains his deductive trains of thought to John - even when he's only trying to formulate the early versions of such theories, but this time he doesn't elaborate.

"Dinner?" John asks in a manner he thinks is largely rhetorical. Sherlock is, after all, on a case. No food, until the case is solved or he nearly faints, in which case John tends to try and salvage the situation with a strategic chocolate bar.

"If you insist," Sherlock replies quietly.

"I'm not putting a plate in front of you so you can ignore it," John points out, cracking an egg into the not heated pan.

John's phone beeps twice in his pocket - two messages from Lestrade.

Greg L at 17:12 IF YOU CAN'T GET SHERLOCK TO ANSWER HIS PHONE, THEN AT LEAST WATCH THE NEWS

Greg L at 17:13 CASE CLOSED!

"Turn on the TV, please," John says.

"Why?"
"It's to do with the case," John says and this gets Sherlock moving.

He drags himself to the living room to fetch the remote and they manage to just catch the tail end of a news report.

"The police have closed off Chelsea Creek after the discovery of a body that has now been identified as British Museum curator William Channing Webb, the prime suspect in the theft of several artefacts from the museum earlier this month. He was discovered floating in the creek, what are assumed to be his possessions scattered around the area. According to the Detective Inspector in charge of the case, among these items are the three missing relics that were described by the museum as insignificant ceramics of likely Sumerian origin. Webb's fiancee has been arrested after a likely murder weapon was found in her apartment."

"There goes your case, then," John says.

Sherlock snorts. "Far from it. I'm going to solve it."

"What are you on about? They got the fragments back and the thief is dead."

Sherlock produces his classic everyone's-an-idiot-why-must-I-endure-it expression. "We don't have a motive. Granted, we have the likely culprit and the stolen property, but why is he dead and why did he take those things?"

"He's dead so it's not like you can go interrogate him," John corrects. "They probably worked together, him and the girlfriend if she knew about the artefacts. Maybe she got greedy. Or maybe she had other reasons to top him."

"Greedy over what? Those things are worthless to art collectors and everyone else who'd buy antiques from the black market, as everyone has been so kind to keep reminding us."

The news report is now showing a still image of what appear to be the fragments. They look exactly as John had expected - clay pieces the colour of terracotta, adorned with faded inscriptions made by indenting the surface. The letters look more like arrowhead writing than any proper Indo-European language. Not that John is much of a linguist. It could be a dirty prehistoric comic for all he knows.

John passes Sherlock a plate containing half a mushroom omelette and a fork. Sherlock begins picking at it while watching the weather report. He's wearing nothing but socks and his blue dressing gown, and John can see the goosebumps on his shins. "Want an blanket?"

"We should turn down the heating. It's scorching in here," Sherlock complains. Then he waves his fork at the tv. "Those shards they found with the man are fakes."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Whoever wanted them - if they're the sorts of people who have dealings with my brother-, they would not have killed Webb and left those artefacts behind to be discovered by the police. They killed him to gain possession of them, and they need the police off their tail. I'd venture a guess that the girlfriend is just collateral damage. It's child's play, really, planting a weapon with the victim's DNA in someone's apartment."

John smiles. Murders and staging innocent people are certainly not amusing, but listening to Sherlock never fails to entertain. He begins eating his own portion, sitting by the kitchen table.

Before he has managed to scarf down barely three spoonfuls, Sherlock ascends from the sofa and grabs his coat.
"Where are we going?" John asks after hastily swallowing down a piece of tomato.

"We're going to talk to the girlfriend," Sherlock announces.

"There's no way," Lestrade tells Sherlock after being informed that he and John would like to interview the murder suspect, "She's about to be transferred out of here. The case has been closed, but not by us."

"We'll see about that," Sherlock announces and marches to a nearby corridor in the south wing, John in tow. That's where the NSY interview rooms and holding cells are housed. These are already familiar paths for the two of them after the many NSY cases they've participated in solving.

An occupied light is on beside the door to the first room in the hallway. Two uniformed officers stand guard next to the door, accompanied by a woman in her forties with cropped, red hair. She is speaking to someone on her Blackberry. She isn't wearing an identity tag, nor is she in uniform. Her business suit is devoid of wrinkles, her shoes look expensive as far as John can tell, and she has the air of someone who doesn't take orders - it seems more likely that she is the one who gives them.

When the woman notices John and Sherlock, she quickly ends her call. Right then Lestrade also arrives on the scene, having hurried after them since realizing that Sherlock, as usual, is doing exactly as he's been told not to.

Sherlock attempts to ignore the woman and approach the interview room door, but she skillfully wedges herself between Sherlock and the uniformed officers.

Sherlock is now forced to acknowledge her. "I need to see the suspect," he says dryly.

"There is no need for your services, Mister Holmes. We are grateful for your assistance so far and will take it from here. I'm sure DI Lestrade will find much better use for your time and talents than this clear-cut case."

"To you that would be Consultant Detective Holmes," Sherlock articulates with gravitas.

"You have no official rank, so Mister Holmes it shall be."

"Who are you?"

The woman extends her hand, which Sherlock promptly ignores.

"Chief Superintendent Judith Glencoe."

Sherlock leans back and turns his head to face John with a knowing, calculated expression. "John? Would you be so kind as to put your mobile on speakerphone and call the NSY phone central."

John raises his brow slightly but complies. He holds out the phone in his hand so that everyone can hear.

"Request to speak to Chief Superintendent Glencoe," Sherlock orders, arms now crossed.

"There’s no one registered under that title," the dispatcher tells them. John ends the call.

A triumphant but unamicable grin has spread on Sherlock's face. "You insult my intelligence, Agent
Glencoe”, Sherlock says, voice dripping with sarcasm. “You honestly think I’m stupid enough to buy into a ruse like this? Why don't you spare both our nerves and tell me why my brother isn't here in person.”

“I am not familiar with your brother.”

Sherlock gives her a final indignant glare and then attempts to circle her to get to the door. Before anyone even registers what has happened, the woman has Sherlock pinned against the wall, with his hands raised behind his back in what looks like an extremely uncomfortable position. When he attempts to move, Glencoe simply tightens her grip around his wrists, making him yelp out in pain.

John instinctively tries to intervene, but finds himself being held in place by two men dressed in sharp suits who have appeared practically out of nowhere.

John grimaces, fearing that if Sherlock struggles further his shoulder joints might pop out of their sockets.

“You are not to intervene with the due process of this woman. If you do so you will be arrested, tried and convicted for obstruction of justice, is that clear?” Glencoe, or whoever she actually is, snarls and reinforces her point by tightening her grip.

Sherlock, now pale from the pain, steals a glance at Lestrade over his shoulder. “You’re going to let these people walk all over you, in your division?” he hisses.

Lestrade turns and leaves without a word.

“You’re just going to let an innocent woman go to prison?” John asks Glencoe. The two men in black seem to have decided that he’s not going to cause any further trouble so they release him. John glares at them.

“You’ve not interviewed her nor have you had access to the scene where the body was recovered. You don’t have all the information,” Glencoe says crisply. She then glances over her shoulder upon hearing the interview room door opening.

Soon all they witness a weeping young woman being removed from the interrogation room and escorted to the emergency staircase by the uniformed officers. Once they’re out of the door, Glencoe lets go of her grip on Sherlock, who rearranges his coat and shakes his wrists, glaring daggers at the woman.

“You tell whoever it is that you work for, that their message is received loud and clear. I’ll have nothing further to do with this case. It’s solved, it’s closed, over and done with.” Sherlock says, eyes narrowed to catlike slits.

“Glad to hear it,” Glencoe says and pats her skirt straight.

Sherlock heads for the elevators and John follows.

Once they're alone, descending towards the ground floor, John turns to him. “Was that truthful? You’re going to let this go?”

Sherlock clasps his hands behind his back, watching the numbers changing on the electronic lift display.

“Who do you think she works for? Home Office? MI6?”
“Can't say for sure. I do doubt her statement that she isn't affiliated with Mycroft.”

“Did you mean what you said, then, about letting the case be?” John asks, careful not to sound too hopeful.

“In a way, Agent Glencoe already gave me all the information I could have gained from talking to the girl. The case may be out of our hands, but the murder is but one corner of a bigger puzzle. What just happened confirmed that most likely his girlfriend didn't do it and likely knows nothing of these artefacts - word of those inconvenient facts getting out is not something that whoever is behind this would want to risk. The worst thing that could happen is that someone began raising the question whether this is more than just an ill-planned, amateurish burglary. They want it off the media quickly and cleanly. Luckily there are other means of obtaining knowledge - means that don't involve having to deal with this sort of idiocy.”

Chapter End Notes

Time for some reference notes again for the enjoyment of those so inclined:

"Some Observations Upon a Series of Kalmuk Skulls" by Professor George Edward Challenger is a fictional book invented by Arthur Conan Doyle.

*Liber Ivonis (Liver Ivonis, The Book of Eibon)* is a fictional book invented by author Clark Ashton Smith. It is supposed to be among the strangest and rarest of forgotten occult books. It was first featured in Ashton Smith's story "Ubbo-Sathla", and the book appears under several different names in a number of Lovecraft's stories, such as "The Haunter of the Dark" and "The Dreams in the Witch House".

Books bound in human skin: such books do exist but they are, indeed, rare. Lovecraft has also mentioned such a tome in his short story "The Hound".
John is hoping for a case that would make more sense and offer a better distraction than the museum one, but his wish keeps not getting granted. The doorbell doesn't ring and both of their blogs remain quiet.

It's good, of course, that Sherlock isn't throwing tantrums, demanding cigarettes or shooting the walls, but John is quite certain that it'll be the endgame here regardless, since Sherlock doesn't have much patience when he gets stuck or is being denied something.

This isn't a normal between-cases funk - this is Sherlock in high gear but getting nowhere. When he isn't huffing in annoyance at the stagnation of the case, or attempting to pound either of their laptops into submission, Sherlock entrenches himself in his bedroom, burying his nose in his new book collection, insisting that it's research. When John asks what that research could possibly be for, he gets no answer.

On a Tuesday night, Sherlock spends an hour pacing around the apartment, not sharing any of what must be his typical maelstrom of thoughts with John.

With a frustrated grunt Sherlock eventually plants himself on the sofa, and flicks through the TV channels, settling on a program where a group of teenagers are running from a chainsaw-wielding killer.

John smiles while eating the tuna sandwich he'd bought from a cafe on his way home.

Trust Sherlock to pick the channel with the most murders.

"The virgin always survives, you know," John jokes as he takes over his usual armchair and plumps up the Union Jack pillow with both hands until sliding it between his lower back and the chair.

Sherlock's gaze flicks from the TV to John. "Excuse me?"

"That's what they say about those sorts of horror movies. That the virgin never gets hacked to bits no matter how bad things get before the end of the film."

"Why?"

"They say it's some sort of a scriptwriters' tradition nowadays, but originally it may have been some sort of moral commentary."

"Who's 'they'?"
John wipes his mouth with a napkin. Sometimes he forgets Sherlock's propensity for taking sarcasm and jokes literally and then demanding to know more.

"Horror movie enthusiasts, I guess. I don't even know if it's always true."

"Interesting," Sherlock concludes and lifts his sock-clad feet onto the coffee table.

"You usually think pop culture is rubbish," John reminds him.

"More things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, and all that", Sherlock muses, "there are patterns and rules everywhere in the universe, laws that govern everything beyond our banal lives."

On Sunday John emerges from the shower to find Sherlock, unsurprisingly, pacing around the living room again, phone in hand.

"Still can't get a hold of Mycroft," he announces. "I've been trying for days."

"He must be busy running the country. He's got a job, you know. Not everyone can be at your beck and call all the time."

John can venture a good guess as to why Sherlock may have been trying to contact his older brother. He has finally caved in, after the frustration of an unsolved case has proven too much for his formidable brain to contain. Mycroft is likely the only avenue of inquiry left.

John briefly considers telling Sherlock of his recent, strange encounter with Mycroft. It had felt as though the older Holmes brother had been more interested in Sherlock's private matters than the case at hand, and John doesn't see any benefit to rousing Sherlock's annoyance at his life being discussed behind his back. He is certain that Sherlock trusts him - he has, after all, proven this trust time and time again, but they're not on even enough ground that John would be willing to risk that trust eroding. This recent feeling of walking on eggshells with Sherlock to placate his shifty moods has been making him very careful.

Things had been slightly better recently, but the distance is still there when they're not working on the case, or doing anything specific together such as watching a film. There's a tension in the flat that's unsettling and has even begun to interfere with John's sleep.

"He's not a tram line who runs on a schedule. If something important is transpiring, he will improvise and attend to it. And Lord knows he does enjoy poking his nose into my business," Sherlock says, wiping dust off Billy the skull with his forefinger.

"I think it's vice versa this time, since he didn't actually put you on the case," John replies.

Sherlock rolls his eyes. "He might as well have, given that it was actually him who in all likelihood pushed this case into Lestrade's lap." He slumps limply onto a kitchen chair and then runs a distracted fingers along a crack on the wooden table surface. "I just wanted to poke around a bit as to why he'd bother with such trifle. His assistant, who is for some reason calling herself 'Gloria' these days, is not letting me through, no matter what sort of an emergency I resort to trying to stage. Either she genuinely doesn't know where he is and is trying to keep that a secret for security reasons, or he doesn't want to speak to me. No idea why not."
John starts dabbing at an unidentified, multicoloured, oily stain on the kitchen table with a tea towel he hopes will survive the ordeal. "Of course not, since you're always so nice to him."

"What do you mean, 'fake'?" Lestrade asks, sipping the pint John has just bought him. It's been two weeks since the museum burglary suspect's body had been discovered, and Lestrade and John had finally found a slot in their schedules for a pint.

They're seated at the Hung, Drawn and Quartered near Tower Hill, two hours before John's out of hours service at the clinic is due to start.

"That's what Sherlock says. The whole thing stinks of a cover up. He doesn't think anyone would just kill that guy and leave the fragments in plain sight since they must've been the motive - so they have to be fake... He thinks what happened at the station confirms this, though I can't see how. It's as though he knows more about the artefacts than he's letting on, but I can't figure out how he could, especially since he pointed out he didn't even know the museum had them."

Lestrade nods. "No one has been able to explain what anyone would want with those, not to mention why his brother would care. It doesn't make sense."

"Who were those people who took over the case?" John asks, wiping some stout head off his lips with the back of his hand. It's probably for the best he knows as little as possible, but hanging around Sherlock must be grating on his sense of self-preservation.

"I assumed spooks, but they just pull rank- never try to pass for NSY. I tried to interfere before you guys showed up, but got a shout from one of my actual superiors telling me to shut up and comply. The short answer is that I don't know."

"Sherlock doesn't seem to know for sure, either. Maybe there's more to it - maybe Mycroft only saw the crime scene and had nothing to do with the murder investigation."

Lestrade gives him a disappointed look. "Or maybe that's what you want to believe so that Sherlock would let go of it and not get himself into trouble again."

John throws up his arms in resignation. "You got me. I guess. It seems to always drive him nuts, when Mycroft knows something he doesn't and isn't forthcoming. Not likely that he'd let this slide."

"Big brothers," Lestrade scoffs with a tone that reminds John that the man has a bunch of brothers of his own.

"You're not that curious about who they were?" John asks.

"I sure as hell would be, if I had the time to look into it. Our case resolve rate has gone to shit this year. It's like every potential crazy idiot has risen from the sewers. Can't remember it ever being this busy, really. Any case I can close, I'm happy to do so, especially if I don't even have to touch the damned prosecution paperwork."

"Is it just NSY, or--" John begins and Lestrade plonks his pint down on the table.

"Even countryside constabularies are getting snowed under by the craziest shit. Trespassers on
historicalsites, some sort of roleplaying fad where cloaked people are traipsing around graveyards. Plus people keep calling the emergency number about those weird things still being washed ashore. They’ve showed up on the Thames now, so we’re starting to get calls. We tell them to call animal control but they seem to think those half-rotted corpses look human enough so that they want the police."

"I saw something about that on the news. What are they?"

"Fuck knows. Look like big catfish, you know the ones with the whiskers'n'all? These ones have sets of antennas where the head would be. About five feet long, hard pink bodies like crabs and the fins sort of look like wings. Too badly decomposed to say without a lot more forensic work. Lord knows. Forensics are still looking at them, but not my division. Still. The bosses are getting twitchy. Tabloids are cranking up the stories about giant, human sized cat fish...." Lestrade takes a sip of his beer. "I've got a mate who runs a station in the Darwell policing neighbourhood in Sussex. There's a village called Brightling in that area where locals keep insisting there are some sorts of loud, metallic, lifeless voices, rumbling like an earthquake and screaming heard from the woods surrounding the village at nighttime. Makes all the dogs bark like mad. The locals are really up in arms but nothing's been found, of course. Load of rubbish, if you ask me."

"Sounds kind of cynical," John points out and rips open a small packet of crisps, which explodes, spreading the crisps all over his lap.

"Like they said during Jack the Ripper, Brits certainly have a tendency to leave behind all their sense and moderation when mass hysteria hits."

John hums in acknowledgement.

"How is the great hat detective planning on solving it, then?" Lestrade asks, snatching a crisp from what's left in the packet John has placed on the table.

"Mostly he's just locked himself in his room with a bunch of books."

"If the experts at the British Museum haven't been able to figure out what those fragments are, what are the chances he will? I assume that's what he's trying to do?" Lestrade asks.

John hums in agreement. "He seems to agree that they're worthless when it comes to selling them on the black market, and that the girlfriend is a setup." He sips his pint. "I don't know if it's a good or a bad thing, really, that he's so convinced there's motive for murder. . Before this case came along, I think he was sort of slipping into one of his moods." John bites his tongue, certain that Sherlock would not appreciate his mental health being discussed with outsiders, not even to trustworthy friends such as Lestrade.

It suddenly occurs to John to wonder whether there's an obvious explanation to Sherlock's increasingly secretive habits that he has been ignoring: drugs.

Surely it couldn't be that, since Sherlock had spent days and days without leaving the apartment, and surely even the biggest of his stashes would have run out eventually, forcing him to hastily ditch John to go shopping for more. He has done no such thing. Besides, during the whole Mary travesty John had seen him high, and the way in which Sherlock has been behaving lately doesn't seem similar at all.

John knows that Sherlock has been reading. A lot. At least judging by the fact that he now even takes his baths with a book in hand, and keeps bumping into both walls and John since he doesn't even stop reading while pacing.
What exactly it is that he's reading he never advertises to John, but some of those books are likely to have come from Victor's father's collection. At least they look suitable old and strange.

"Does make sense, though, that it would have been illogical for the killers to leave the artefacts behind." He shrugs. "As I said, can't do much about that now. I can't think of a reason why the powers-that-be would allow anyone to reopen the case." Lestrade takes off his tie and puts it in his pocket. "What if there's nothing to find? I need Sherlock for other cases, not stuck on a loop with one that's been closed," Lestrade grumbles. "What if he can't solve it and he refuses to take on anything else in the meanwhile?"

"It's Sherlock," John reminds Lestrade, "He'll solve anything."

"And if he does, let's hope he doesn't try and get himself killed in the process like he usually does."

When John gets home at eleven in the evening, the flat is empty. A window had been left open and a cold breeze greets John when he walks into the kitchen and puts down the potted plant he'd carried home.

The plant had been given to him by Mrs Henderson, an almost daily visitor at the surgery. She is an elderly widower teetering on the edge of dementia, still somehow lucid enough to look after herself passably. Most of the staff had diagnosed her as seeking attention because she is lonely, and often they couldn't harden their hearts enough to turn her away. Sometimes she complains of actual health issues but mostly she just wanders in, asking to talk to a doctor if the clinic doesn't seem too busy. She is happy to wait for an empty appointment, making the most of the copies of Women's Weekly in the waiting room and looking hopeful when anyone walks past her with a cup of tea.

John only locums, but he has still met her numerous times and Mrs Henderson seems to have taken a liking to him. For some reason she'd brought John a plant tonight, 'it's good for the oxygen, Dr Watson'.

The plant looks forlorn alone on the kitchen table, and since that space is often overtaken by Sherlock's experiments which aren't be conducive to the survival of any living thing in the vicinity, perhaps its best to relocate the gift.

Come to think of it, there have been no experiments lately.

John puts the plant on Sherlock's desk on a whim. He then notices a note on the floor - the draft from the window has probably blown it off the fridge door. That's where Sherlock tends to put his messages to John, scribbled on post-its with his cursive flourish.

**LIBRARY -SH**

John sticks the note in his pocket. He doesn't know whether it means that he should meet up with Sherlock in that very location, or stay put. Probably stay - Sherlock would probably have texted him if John's company was required on site.

There's a flapping sound coming from somewhere nearby.

John looks up and sees an owl perched on the ironwork outside the window overlooking Baker Street.
The bird is white and light brown in colour, and its heart-shaped face suggest a barn owl. John had seen many of them during an army training camp at the Mooltan Barracks in Wiltshire.

John quietly walks a bit closer, wanting to see the beautiful creature better. To his surprise it doesn't flee at the sight of his approach. Instead, it watches John intently.

There's something unsettling about it. Maybe it's the pitch black pair of alien eyes.

John closes the window and the bird still does not flee from its chosen perch. It grabs a better hold at the outer edge of the window ledge and keeps staring at him with an almost hypnotic expression.

John retreats to the kitchen, stealing glances at the creature.

It's now dark outside, but the street lamp gives out enough light that John can still see the owl well.

He opens the fridge to take out the milk, when he hears a faint crack from the window. He looks up, but everything is as it was before - the bird sitting there in the darkness, looking in.

Suddenly, it bangs its head against the window. This time, the sound is louder.

John wonders if the thing has some disease that's making it behave so oddly. Smart of him to have closed the window.

Another crack sounds, when the owl bangs its head against the window yet again. This leaves it swaying in a disoriented fashion.

John walks to the living room, and waves his arms in front of the window, trying to make it fly away.

The bird twists its head back, and cracks it against the glass once again, and now the entire window almost vibrates from the surprisingly hard blow. A splotch of feathers and blood is now stuck to the glass, and the bird sways and then begins falling backwards, having become so disoriented its talons have lost its grip.

John runs to the window and watches as the owl plummets down.

Its beautiful feathery head is now a swollen, bloody mess as it lies dead on the pavement. A bald man pauses by it. The golden retriever he'd been walking sniffs the bird and then quickly retreats, seeking shelter between his owner's legs. The man and his companion then continue down the street.

John pulls the curtains closed, and switches on all the lights in the living room, because suddenly the flat feels very lonely and dark.

Sherlock returns some hours later, empty-handed.

"Didn't find anything you'd fancy at the library, then?" John asks, continuing his third mug of tea and clicking through Lancet headlines on his laptop.

Sherlock begins shedding his coat. "I don't know what I was expecting of the collections of the local universities, but still. A pessimist is never disappointed, they say."
"Lord knows your needs are often eclectic enough so that even the best bookshops fall short so why not libraries, too?" John points out.

Sherlock grabs John's lukewarm, half-consumed mug of tea and downs it in one gulp.

"There's hot water in the kettle and bags on the counter," John says disapprovingly.

Sherlock grabs a clean glass from the cupboard and drinks two full glasses of water, one after another

John doesn't point out how unusual this is, even though he wants to. Drawing attention to Sherlock's lately much-improved nutritious habits is likely not conducive to them becoming permanent.

Sherlock makes himself some more tea and then takes his mug to his desk. He sits down and flips open the lid of his laptop.

He notices the houseplant. "What is this?"

"A patient gave it to me at the clinic."

"And why exactly did you see fit to clutter my desk with it?"

"I thought you might know something about that variety, flex those deductive muscles?" John suggests, leaving out the fact that it's probably the only flat surface nearby safe enough for the small plant. Sherlock often sends stuff piled on top of the coffee table flying when his intuitive leaps induce physical ones.

Sherlock runs his fingers along the plant's long, blade-like, dark-and-light green striped leaves. It has no flowers, and does not look very imposing. The leaves are left bouncing momentarily by the press of his fingers. "Tradescantia fulminensis. River spiderwort. Not surprised that you would bring home what is possibly the dullest of all flowering plants. Little history of medicinal use, non-toxic. Spectacularly boring."

Sherlock pushes the pot to the edge of his desk and returns his attention to his laptop.

John wanders to the living room window. He steals a glance down to the pavement. The streetlight has gone out for some reason. John can still make out that the owl is gone, but now there are other small shapes moving around in the darkness.

Cats.

There's at least a dozen of them, sitting or idling near their street door.

Speedy's isn't open, so it's unlikely that they've been enticed by the smell of food.

John wonders if they're after the owl carcass, but then again it's not there anymore, yet the cats have stayed.

John moves his gaze up the street.

It looks as though there are more cats wandering in. While John watches, dozens more take up position in front of their building.

He turns to Sherlock. "You didn't notice an unusual amount of cats around tonight, did you?"

Sherlock looks up and frowns. "Can't say that I did." He continues typing.
John looks down onto the street again. The cats are still there and they all seem to be waiting for something. John pulls the curtains closed again.

By the morning, they're gone.

Two days later, when John peers down while shaving, he realizes that the mould under the sink has expanded. A bit of toothpaste has found its way under there, and surrounding that splotch of white there are now black, flower-like extensions on which dew seems to be clinging. It looks very disturbing and John seriously considers getting rid of it, but he knows how much Sherlock hates it when someone messes around with his experiments.

Chapter End Notes

As always, time for a reference cheatsheet:

The title of this chapter comes from Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu".

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" - immortal words by The Bard. From Hamlet, of course.

Comparing Mycroft to a tram line is a nod to Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Bruce-Partington Plans".

The Hung, Drawn and Quartered is a real pub, located near Tower Hill.

Lestrade's description of weird, catfish-like creatures are reminiscent of Lovecraft's "The Whisperer In Darkness".

Weird, rumbling and screaming sounds coming from the woods bring echoes from Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror".

"When the stolid English go in for a scare, they take leave of all moderation and commonsense." - a quote from the autobiography of Sir Robert Anderson. He was the second Assistant Commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police from 1888 to 1901 and a major player in the investigation into the Jack The Ripper murders.

Some notes on owls: Since the dawn of man owls have been thought as having special powers - wisdom, prophecy and knowledge were attributes strongly connected to them during antiquity. The Roman goddess of wisdom, Minerva, was often depicted as accompanied by an owl. Her Greek counterpart, Athene, was also the goddess courage, inspiration, civilization, law and justice, mathematics, strength, war strategy, the arts, crafts, and skill - associated with owls. Not all agreed on their benevolence: Pliny the Elder described the owl as “the very monster of the night” and argued that “when it
appears, it foretells nothing but evil.” Towards the Middle Ages the relationship between man and owl changed dramatically, and owls become associated with darkness, evil, witchcraft and the night. Barn owl eyes are nearly or fully black, and I think those eyes give them one of the most alien-like appearances of all creatures. Even the name of the order of birds they belong to, Strigiformes, is connected to the word 'strix', which in Greek mythology was the name of a bird of ill omen - a product of metamorphosis that feeds on human flesh. In England barn owl sounds were used to predict weather, and people used to believe that an owl flying past a sick person's window meant death. As for modern lore: owls have been described as placeholder memories for alien sightings. In reality barn owls are, of course, stunningly beautiful, lovely creatures - as are all owls. They are useful in keeping vermin in check and do not threaten livestock. They are sometimes spotted even in London - as close to midtown as Ealing. A barn owl in flight.
"Look," John says, "I know the rent is dirt cheap, but there must be something we can do about the draft."

"Mm." Sherlock does not look up where he has his nose buried in Eckhoff's Encyclopedia of Combustible Chemicals.

"Last night it even changed directions. Last night I kept waking up to find my bedroom door was opening and closing of its own accord."

"Mm."

"You're not even listening, are you?"

Sherlock sighs dramatically and looks at John, who has picked up a sofa cushion and is patting it with his hand. The dust that puffs up makes John's nose itch.

"It's drafty. You dislike it," Sherlock dutifully rephrases.

"You don't get cold at night, then?"

"If I do, I have great faith in you bringing me an extra blanket. For a person who favours such practical clothing you are surprisingly whiny about a cold breeze. It's England. Get used to it."

"Practical as opposed to what?"

"Stylish."

"Prat. What should I do, then? Just ignore the fact that my door keeps moving on its own all night?"

"Call the repair people."

"We don't have 'repair people', we just have Mrs Hudson."

"Who undoubtedly knows how to dress properly for living in an old building."

John sits down on the sofa next to Sherlock and peers at his book. Sherlock closes the cover evasively, leaving his finger trapped between the pages to prevent losing his current spot. "Bit of light reading for a change?" John teases with a smile. The relief he feels at seeing Sherlock read something else than the old books recently gifted to him is disturbingly intense.
Two nights later, John doesn't bother to turn on the ceiling lamp when he pads downstairs to use the bathroom. He merely leaves the door open so that the glow from the hall light can seep in.

In the dim light, when he turns around to wash his hands, he notices a bluish glow near the floor. He leans down to see what's causing it.

The mould on the underside of the sink is the source, illuminating the area with blueish, almost turquoise light that seems to be pulsating. It's unnatural, foul and alarming.

John fights a shudder, marches to Sherlock's bedroom door and bangs his fist on it twice.

"What have I told you about not bringing radioactive stuff into the flat?" he yells through the door. John hears footsteps from inside the bedroom and then Sherlock opens the door the minimum it takes to allow him to peer round it. "Excuse me?"

"The stuff in the bathroom. Get rid of it."

"I haven't put anything radioactive in the bathroom," Sherlock replies indignantly, as though such a stunt was completely beyond him. "As a matter of fact, I don't recall doing anything in the bathroom that doesn't fall within the usual parameters of a bathroom's core functions." He sounds a little insulted and also genuinely baffled, but then again Sherlock always had a very good poker face.

John stares at him for a moment and then rolls his eyes. "Why do I even try," he asks with a huff and heads upstairs. Maybe Sherlock's collection of chemicals contains something acidic that they could use to get rid of the stuff.

Sherlock would probably consider it a fun experiment. Maybe it's something they could do together? The thought is so hopeful and consoling that John feels downright giddy.

"But John," Mrs Hudson says, "Look at that poor thing."

John frowns and joins Mrs Hudson in the living room to see what she is talking about.

Their landlady is pointing at the houseplant John had brought home days earlier.

Mrs Hudson picks up the plant and scrutinizes it with a frown.

"I've been watering it. I don't know what's wrong."

The plant's growth had stunted, and the leaves on one sector of it have turned curly and almost black in colour, the veins in the middle of them that had been moss green before now a foul yellow. John had even tried sloshing a bit of houseplant fertilizer liquid into the pot but to no avail.

"I've never heard of anyone who has managed to kill a spiderwort. Hardy things, these," Mrs Hudson says and puts the pot back on the table. "Did Sherlock spill something foul on it?"

"Not as far as I can tell."
Mrs Hudson tuts. "Please promise the two of you will never get a pet."

John bites his tongue because he's almost tempted to remind her that once, he had very nearly ended up with a baby who would have been a regular visitor in this very apartment.

He says nothing, because he doesn't like to dwell on it. The emotions sometimes catch him off guard like this, making his throat dry and his chest constrict until he manages to moor himself back into the moment. It's all gone, all in the past, nothing can be done now, but it still hurts. John swallows.

He doesn't ever want to lose important things like that again. Not if he can help it.

"It's root rot, I'm sure. If the roots are rotten, it needs to be thrown out. Nothing good'll come of it."

Mrs Hudson declares with an air of finality.

John grabs the pot and upends the plant into the kitchen rubbish bin.

Things seem to go back to normal. At least on the surface. At least to the extent that life with Sherlock ever approaches such a concept.

The mould stops glowing and John decides he doesn't want to touch the damned thing even just to get rid of it. It doesn't look as though it's spreading anymore.

John goes to work and comes home from work. He tidies up when he can be bothered, cooks when he can be bothered and orders food in when he's feeling lazier.

He tries not to feel lonely spending his evenings in the sitting room with just a closed bedroom door for company. At one point he almost considers trying to talk to the skull. At least it's there. Unlike Sherlock, whose mood seems to have improved but often it's hard to tell what sort of mood he's actually in because he mostly keeps to himself.

It's as though he's found a new routine, a new purpose to his idle days. John is reminded of a college student before midterms - Sherlock emerges from his bedroom only for bathroom breaks or to distractedly eat an almost regular schedule of meals. Offers of Cluedo, crap telly, a walk in Regent's Park or a conveyed offer of cadaver thymuses from Molly ring on deaf ears.

Well, almost. Sherlock does bother to correct John that the proper plural for thymus is *thymi*.

Out of idle curiosity and worry, John begins counting the amount of fluids Sherlock keeps drinking. When he tallies it all up to a hair-raising amount, he walks to the surgery to borrow a blood glucose meter.

After ambushing Sherlock during a bathroom break, John drags him to the kitchen and unceremoniously pricks his finger and squeezes out a drop of blood.

Sherlock watches, mesmerized, not attempting to withdraw his hand.

"Is this an experiment?" he asks John almost approvingly.

"Not really."
Sherlock's gaze narrows when John shows him the stopwatch-sized meter. Together they watch the counter descend to zero. The machine then announces the results with a beep.

Normal.

"There goes that theory out of the window," John says.

Diabetes would have explained so much: Sherlock's suddenly ravenous appetite, the disconcerting amounts of water he's consuming and the fact that despite all that, he's clearly losing weight and looks exhausted. As much as John wants an explanation, he would have despaired if his suspicion had been confirmed - Sherlock on insulin would have been an epic disaster, when taking into consideration his usual level of self-care.

John ought to breathe a sigh of relief even if it means that he's back to square one.

Maybe what Sherlock is doing behind that bedroom door isn't what John is suspecting - burying himself in those books - but sleeping?

"I'm fine, John," Sherlock offers.

"If you say so."

Sherlock stands up and starts for the hallway. John sighs and the sudden pang of sadness, of loneliness, of please not another night of this, of missing Sherlock hits him.

What is he doing behind those closed doors? Reading? Resting? Spending time online? Likely not, since his laptop has lain discarded under the sofa in the sitting room for a week now.

What could possibly be so fascinating that it would completely wean Sherlock off a preference for John's company?

John doesn't want to think about the alternative - that this is all because of what had happened that one night. Because nothing had happened! Even if there had been some sort of a moment, there - skirting the edge, playing with fire, an aborted acknowledgement of something unnamed, this was not what they - John and Sherlock, Sherlock and John, were supposed to be about.

'I consider myself married to my work.' Maybe Sherlock was trying to save that neglected marriage after allowing himself to be distracted by John for so long?

John drags himself up from his chair and trails Sherlock to the hallway to grab his arm. Sherlock swings around, eyes narrowed.

"Where are you going?" John asks as innocently as he can.

"I have things to do," Sherlock answers.

"Can I help?" John asks and tries to make it sound more like an order than a suggestion.

*Let me help.*

*Let me in.*

"You never ask me to assist you in your medical work, because I don't have the qualifications. This is analogous to that," Sherlock explains.

John wants to hear apologetic notes in his tone but is not sure they're there. He lets go of Sherlock's
arm. "Fine," he says.

Sherlock’s bedroom door closes with an already too familiar bang. The sound feels like a punch in the gut every time, a reminder of the extent to which John is being shut out. He has grown to hate that sound even more than he ever hated the sound of grenades, or the sound of his pager when he had still been a junior house officer. He hates it as much as he hated the sound of his father yelling, the crack of bones breaking.

It has become the theme song of his helplessness.

Later that evening, John goes to the bathroom for his evening routine of teeth-brushing and shower.

He closes the door behind him and delays switching on the light. Somehow the darkness in the small, room feels inviting - like a blanket that hides him. He lets out a breath and then lifts his gaze to the mirror. The small, stained-glass window of the bathroom is letting in cool, blue-tinted white moonlight.

He steals a glance at the mould. It's still there, but it isn't doing anything. It just exists.

It waits.

It stagnates.

Tonight, John almost feels a bitter kinship to that strange lifeform.

He looks in the mirror. In the dim lighting, he looks older than he is. He feels older than he is. Sometimes it exhausts him, this constant vigilance, being on edge because any minute Sherlock might burst out of his room with giddy exclamations of a new case. If and when that happened, John would immediately be clambering to his feet, grabbing his coat and following Sherlock downstairs, running outside after him, then a cab, a crime scene, a corpse, amazing, idiots, brilliant, oh it's Christmas!

It's not been Christmas for a while now.

John needs to do something.

Perhaps ram the door to Sherlock’s bedroom? Call Mycroft with the hopes that John might somehow be able to contact him when even Sherlock can't?

Maybe he could come up with a puzzle to post on Sherlock's blog. John digs out his phone from his pocket and tries to bring up the website. All he gets is a 404 error message - page not found.

Maybe it's a server issue. Blogs have them all the time, don't they? Even John's own crashes on occasion when there's maintenance going on.

Surely Sherlock wouldn't have deleted his blog? He was probably just toying with the background code and decided to take it offline.

He turns his face sideways and watches his reflection comply. The moonlight makes the shadows on his face deeper and his frown more serious.
Despite all his determined self-assurances, the worry over Sherlock does not abate.

It's no use standing there, in the dark, is it?

John decides to come up with a game plan tomorrow. He needs to clear his head first, get some rest. He's been sleeping quite fitfully of late - old nightmares have begun mixing with strange, black dreams of falling, which always end with John waking up with a film of cold sweat covering his limbs and the sheets tangled around him like manacles.

With a newfound determination he reaches for the light switch and flicks it. The bathroom floods with yellow, artificial light. John blinks, trying to adjust his eyes and grabs the edge of the mirror door of the cabinet above the sink.

When he begins to open it, something in the reflected image catches his attention.

The rest of his brain catches up with his visual cortex and he screams.

Loudly.

Before John is even aware of what he's doing, he's sunk an arm into the water-filled bathtub, fingers raking for contact with what he'd just seen reflected in the mirror.

After a second Sherlock surfaces, face suddenly pulled above the water by John's iron grip in his hair.

John is hyperventilating. His spasming fingers somehow manage to let go of Sherlock's soaked curls.

"What - the - everfucking - hell---!" John manages, wide-eyed and blinking, thoughts darting around in his head.

Sherlock blinks as well, now sitting up in the bathtub, water spilling over the edges as the waves caused by him being dragged up by John still roiling on the surface.

What John had seen when he'd switched on the ceiling lamp and began to turn the mirror was the filled-to-the-brim bathtub, its surface absolutely still, and a dark figure on the bottom, unmoving.

"Are you trying to --" John gasps, black dots dancing in his eyes, adrenaline tingling on his fingertips. He can't finish that sentence. Not now, not ever. It's the thing that had been hiding on the tip of his tongue when he'd watched Sherlock teeter at the edge of the roof of the hospital and concealed inside his fisted fingers when he'd watched Sherlock try to exit a plane drugged up to his gills.

"Do finish a sentence sometime. It would be refreshing," Sherlock replies. He doesn't sound like someone who had deliberately tried to drown themselves. He looks a little pale and his fingers are ridiculously wrinkled but he looks fine, he's fine, absolutely fine, John tries to remind himself, but his hands are still shaking.

Sherlock stands up, naked as the day he had been born, grabs a towel and steps out of the bathtub. Usually John would have averted his eyes politely, but this time he stares without even realizing what he's doing, because alarms have gone off in his head and are drowning out all other thoughts.

It must've been only a minute, his brain practically begs. It can't have been more than a minute that he'd stood there, in front of the mirror. He'd been thinking such depressing things that it had just felt longer.
He hadn't heard the water stir once during all that time.

It must've been just a minute.

"The next time you try to make a Guinness record of holding your breath, please let me know in advance. Put a bloody note on the door," John says.

Something still doesn't add up.

The phone. The phone.

John digs it out with shaking hands. He's absolutely certain that the time on the locked screen had said 21:23 when he'd tried to bring up Sherlock's website.

It's now 21:39.

Sherlock is looking at him with a put-upon, expectant expression.

John stares at him, still reeling.

Sherlock glances at him. "What?" he asks, now sounding downright annoyed.

"What were you doing?" John pleads.

"Thinking. Which, by the looks of it, you should do much less of," Sherlock replies, smiling slightly. He then leaves John alone in the bathroom, swaying slightly when he sidesteps when going through the doorway. John almost steps in to grab a hold of him, to steady him, but his sense of balance seems to return almost instantaneously. Sherlock then strides into the hallway, out of sight.

John leans on the sink and decides he must've read the time wrong on the phone.

He's seen Sherlock do this before, rinse his hair by leaning back in the bath, completely submerging himself momentarily.

He's left the water in the tub. Nerves now somewhat under control, John reaches down to pull the plug.

The water is freezing cold.

Sherlock has never been much of a sleeper. He binges after cases, spending up to a full rotation of Planet Earth snoring under his duvet.

Lately he's begun going to bed before John. That is, at least, what John assumes. From his bedroom window upstairs he can usually make out whether the light is on in Sherlock's room if he leans out of the window, putting his faith on the old, creake, probably half-rotten window frames. For a week now, the light has been out as early as ten in the evening.

John's suspicions of an uncharacteristically increased need for rest are confirmed and his already deep concern reaches a critical level, when after leaving the bathroom a few minutes later he finds Sherlock asleep on the worn carpet of the living room floor, clad only in his favourite blue dressing gown.
On his stomach lies one of those old books again, open on the dedication page.

"Please accept this fittingly eldritch token of our strange friendship, A. Crowley."

John gently removes the book and places it on the coffee table. He then touches Sherlock's shoulder.

Sherlock seems to be in deep sleep. Crusted blood flecks his cheeks underneath his eyes. John frowns at the sight, and uses his thumb to gently lift Sherlock's eyelids. Sherlock mumbles something and turns to his side away from him, preventing John from getting a proper look. He swats away John's hand as soon begins to snore.

After standing up John rakes a hand through his hair. He then fetches a pillow and lifts Sherlock's head onto it. John also finds a blanket to spread over him.

He turns on the kitchen light and steals one more glance at Sherlock.

John's breath hitches when he takes in how pale he is. He has always had the complexion of Victorian nobility, but at current he is not just pale, he's spectrally pallid.

John drinks a glass of water for fortification, his eyes barely leaving the visage of Sherlock on the floor.

John then leans on the kitchen table.

He's been ignoring this for too long. This, whatever it is that's going on with Sherlock, requires an intervention. A medical one.

Chapter End Notes

Reference notes

A reader challenged me to use the word 'eldritch' credibly in a sentence. Challenge completed. 'Eldritch tokens' are important components in Eldritch Horror - a board game that is based on Lovecraft's works.

Aleister Crowley was a famous British occultist, painter, novelist, and mountaineer who lived around the same time as Lovecraft, and founded a religious movement known as Thelema.
The disinternment

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sickness brought me this
Thought, in that scale of his:
Why should I be dismayed
Though flame had burned the whole
World, as it were a coal,
Now I have seen it weighed
Against a soul?
from "A Friend's Illness" by William Butler Yeats

The next morning John drags Sherlock to the surgery he locums at.

He draws some more blood - this time enough to do other analyses besides just blood sugar.

Full blood count to check leukocyte and hemoglobin levels. Kidney and liver function. Vitamin levels.

He peers into pupils with the aid of a penlight.

He tests reflexes.

He goes through everything and anything he could possibly think of.

Sherlock had mentioned that his ears keep ringing with a high-pitched sound, so John tests his hearing. Sherlock's sense of temperature has certainly seemed off, so thyroid hormone levels are tested.

John curses when he realizes he can't get a head MRI ordered from the clinic - a referral to a hospital with such facilities is required for such an exam, and he hasn't found anything warranting such a costly endeavour yet.

"Working diagnosis?" John's patient asks, mildly amused. He has been unsherlockianly forbearing all morning. John has a theory that this is because he thinks that if he allows John to do this, he'll get the man off his back. If he does this, John's curiosity will be satisfied, his worry alleviated and John will leave him alone to do as he bloody well pleases. Like he always does.

Is that what he really wants now? For John to leave him be?

Why?

"There's got to be something," John mutters stubbornly, mostly to himself, while grabbing a stethoscope for the fifth time that day.

With the bloodlessness of his pallor, to John he had begun to look like a leukemia patient. The morning had brought with it a novel symptom - dizzy spells which had forced Sherlock to grab onto walls to regain his balance. He'd tried to hide them from John with little success.
John had insisted on a medical intervention. "If I let you be my goddamned master elsewhere, I at least am yours when you're not well", he'd told Sherlock. His reply had been a dramatic eyeroll but when John had presented him with his coat, he'd put it on without a further argument.

Despite John's meticulous examination, he finds little tangible in his scrutiny, and all of the laboratory and imaging results come back normal. Even the full toxicology screen and drug test panel are clean, which fits with the fact that no puncture marks or any other indications of narcotics use can be found on Sherlock's body. John had even checked between his toes for needle marks while Sherlock had watched him with an expression that seemed to wordlessly pose the question which one of them was actually the more crazy one at the moment.

John is rattled to realize that he would have actually been relieved for such a clear-cut explanation as a drug relapse. Especially if everything that had happened lately could be chalked up to both of them being dosed with some sort of a hallucinogen, they could just figure out where it came from, fix the problem and move on.

No such luck.

This just means that John has to dig deeper.

He leaves Sherlock sitting on the exam table, dressed in trousers and a half-unbuttoned dress shirt, swinging his legs back and forth.

John marches to Sarah's office door with the plan of demanding permission to order something akin to a full-body MRI, but halts when he realizes that she's unlikely to sign off on such an idea. A head MRI or a CT might be pertinent due to the dizzy spells, but as far as John can tell his sense of balance has now somehow returned and he hadn't been able to find any abnormalities in the other neurological functions he'd tested.

John walks in regardless, if only just to request a second opinion.

Sarah goes through everything, repeats some of the physical exams on an increasingly impatient Sherlock and then turns to John. "Everything looks in order. Knowing what sort of a life the two of you have, I'd say it's stress. You should take a breather, have a holiday for a change." She flashes an attempt at an encouraging smile, but it gets shot down by Sherlock's disinterested, dismissive expression and John's stubborn and indignant glare.

John glares at the lab result strip as though it might somehow change if he stares it down. "There's got to be SOMETHING!" he says, perhaps louder than he had intended and shoves it into Sarah's hands.

That morning John taken Sherlock's pulse when he'd stumbled out of the bathroom.

Either it had been approximately twelve beats per minute or John was well and truly losing his touch. Maybe that's what it is - John was developing some sort of a dementia without realizing it himself?

The ECG strip John had ordered had announced Sherlock's pulse rate as 48 per minute - perfectly normal for a fit bloke in their thirties.

Forty-eight. Not twelve.

"Just look at him!" John tells Sarah, who has crossed her arms and is looking at John with a mixture of worry and confusion playing on her features.
"A little pale, perhaps, but that's not unusual for you, is it, Sherlock?" Sarah asks.

"His fingernails bleed! For no reason!"

Sarah crosses her arms. "No past history of clotting abnormalities, plus the lab results are normal."

Sherlock hops down from the table and grabs his coat. "If there's nothing else...? I've got work to do."

"Sherlock Holmes," John says with a cautionary tone he hopes invites no arguments, "you are not yourself."

"Dr Sawyer doesn't seem to share your sentiment."

John bites his lip and shoots an angry glare at Sherlock. Ignoring Sarah's scrutiny that is now centered on himself, he grabs Sherlock's coatsleeve when he's trying to head for the door. "And what work are you even referring to? We don't have a case on. At least none that I know of."

"This is more important."

"This? What, pray tell, is this thing, then, that you can't or won't share? Are you punishing me for something?"

Sherlock flinches, but then regains his composure. "This is far more important than some petty feud you've imagined in your head. If there's nothing further to address here, I'll leave you to tend to the rest of your shift. Dr Sawyer," he nods courteously, and walks out, leaving John to deal with an increasingly perturbed Sarah. It takes him a moment to realise that her concern is not directed at Sherlock, but at himself.

John dismisses her suggestions of taking some time off work. He shoots her down with an angry glare until she can suggest what John is certain has already crossed her mind - that John might want to talk to someone if he's getting stressed out like this.

"I'm fine," John tells her while buttoning up his coat, but leaves out the rest of what's going through his head.

We're not alright, and Sherlock is the epitome of not fine, and it scares me to death.

Since medicine is falling short of providing answers, John decides that it's time to talk.

The task ahead of him feels daunting. He's actually thinking about attempting to get Sherlock Holmes, master of subterfuge, a man whose defences are made of the psychological equivalent of brick wall, to talk to him about... whatever it is they need to talk about. It's likely exactly the sort of thing that John himself finds awfully difficult to put into words.

Even after everything that happened between him and Mary, John had never discussed his or Sherlock's feelings. In the early days after the crisis John had drank some, Sherlock had acted up some and neither had commented on their newly acquired bad habits until slowly, normalcy began to set in and the pain abate.

John decides that after breakfast is as good a time as any to breach a difficult subject.
Around ten in the morning Sherlock idles to the kitchen, book in hand, somehow managing not to bump into things even though his eyes are glued to the pages.

John is sure he's after tea. Sherlock might be impulsive to the extreme, but in some things he's a creature of habit.

John gently grabs hold of the book and Sherlock looks up, frowning. He shakes the book so that John lets go of his grip, and actually hides it behind his back.

John pretends not to have noticed, and deposits the steaming mug of darjeeling he'd just made on the kitchen table. When he'd heard Sherlock's bedroom door opening he had hastily prepared it. "Sit. There's something I want to talk to you about."

A whole rainbow of emotions moves across Sherlock's features like clouds on a windy day. Apprehension. Alarm. Suspicion. An attempt at steely dismissal. Curiosity. John decides that's the one he needs to try to tap into.

Sherlock takes a seat at the table. John quickly rummages around the cupboards and the fridge for biscuits and a non-congealed carton of milk and then takes up position in the chair opposite.

The book Sherlock had been immersed in is nowhere to be seen - John suspects he's placed it on his knees underneath the table.

Sherlock sips his tea, looking expectant.

John crinkles his nose. It's a nervous tick, he knows it, Sherlock knows it, everyone knows it.

_Bloody hell. Here we go, then._

"It's good to have hobbies," John says and Sherlock looks stupefied.

"Obvious and somewhat condescending," Sherlock replies. "And I'm sure there exist neighbours of taxidermists and serial killers who would beg to differ.

"Still, in general it's a good thing to be enthusiastic about something and devote a lot of time to it. But hobbies can also be time-consuming."

"Time-consuming like solving crimes or joining the army to wage wars in foreign countries?" Sherlock suggests.

"That's the thing. I wonder if you've sort of lost the appetite for the consulting."

"Hardly. My motivation hangs on a case-by-case balance, which is hardly news for you."

"I enjoy what we do together. The... consulting and all," John adds, hoping that Sherlock will take things at face value like he usually does. He needs to keep this light for a while, and if Sherlock starts reading into things too carefully John is certain he'll get spooked and retreat.

"As do I," Sherlock says carefully.

Usually Sherlock would not be this patient if his conversation partner took such a long time in arriving at a point. John knows he's the exception. "That's the thing. I'd like to have more of it. Time together, I mean. You've been kind of preoccupied lately."

Sherlock is smiling slightly - it's the sort of a smirk John hates, the one Sherlock wears when he knows more than anyone else in the room.
"If it's a project I could possibly help you with, you only need to ask," John says more enthusiastically than he'd intended.

Sherlock suddenly looks suspicious. Secretive, almost.

"Are you depressed?" John blurts out when Sherlock's almost accusatory glare gets too much for him.

"Excuse me?" Sherlock asks, his expression blank as though he's not understood a word.

Anger flares up in John. He manages to stifle the worst of it but maybe Sherlock needs to hear it. He needs to get through to the man, to show him that this is affecting John as well. "You stay holed up in your room, burying your nose in those books. It makes me wonder if you're using it as an excuse for you to withdraw from everyone else. If the things you normally enjoy don't give you any joy anymore, if you're feeling down then perhaps---"

John has no idea how to broach the subject of all the other stuff. The stuff that he can't talk to anyone else about. The stuff that is making him uneasy in his own home. Maybe even a little frightened.

Sherlock splays his fingers and places his palm on the table. John watches it with morbid fascination. Sherlock has become so pale lately that those long, lithe, fingers look almost alien now.

John decides Sherlock needs more sunlight. More fresh air. Healthier habits.

"Maybe if we went out more, it would be good for you. Take a break from those dusty old books, yeah?"

"Good for me?" Quite presumptuous of you, assuming it is your prerogative to assess what is and what isn't 'good for me'. I thought we established yesterday that there's nothing wrong with me."

"You bury yourself in those books instead of seeing what's actually happening around you - Lord knows your health choices would appall any physician in their right minds even if it isn't showing up on any tests yet."

John's heart is racing. He knows that if he doesn't steer the discussion to more amicable waters he's going to lose control of it. Sherlock will leave the room, and all this will have done nothing but embarrass the both of them. "I just meant that you must know how you have a tendency to go a little overboard with whatever you choose to---."

Sherlock leans back in his chair, suddenly regarding John with thinly veiled anger. "Is that it? You disapprove of my choices? That you think they are appalling, unhealthy, unnatural? And that your somehow you have the right to judge them? Oh we have heard it, meaning everyone in a three-mile radius, loud and clear, John, what sorts of things and choices you don't approve of, God forbid I ever mix you up in such terrible matters. It's quite clear, thank you."

John blinks. Where the hell is this coming from? Are they even talking about the same things?

He needs a different tactic. "You used to enjoy spending time with me. You don't seem to want to do that anymore," he says, sounding so sad he surprises even himself.

That's the gist of it, really - Sherlock is withdrawing from him, preferring solitude to his company.

Saying it out loud hurts.

Sherlock takes this in and exhales slowly, which seems to dissipate most of the ire from his eyes. "It's not a decision I would make lightly," Sherlock says slowly as though evaluating every word for
possible pitfalls before saying them out loud.

'Would make', not 'have made'. John has that on his side, at least. "Then why make it at all? And this isn't only about me. Anyone would think you don't somehow care anymore, not about the things you used to enjoy. Molly says you haven't been to the morgue for a long time, and I got a text from Lestrade this morning that you've been ignoring his calls and messages. He's got new cases, you know, and some of those might be good ones."

This is a slight fib. It has actually been John who has been texting Lestrade, practically begging him to find a case worthy of Sherlock's interest so that John could test his theory that not even cases that would rank high on Sherlock's arbitrary scale of interest manage to entice him anymore.

"I do care," Sherlock says carefully, crossing his arms. There's a clunk when the book slides from on top of his knees to the floor. Before he can retrieve it John doubles down and picks it up.

It's a Sanskrit vocabulary. Sherlock's interests and varied and many, and it wouldn't surprise John that he would learn a new language on a whim. But why try to hide the fact? Why is Sherlock being so secretive about it all? Does he fear John's disapproval, or what is it about these books that requires keeping John's hands off them?

"It's just that I'm a realist," Sherlock mutters.

"I like to think that I am, too," John replies, not exactly sure what Sherlock is getting at.

"Anyone seeking a career in medicine or enlisting in the army must be operating on the delusion that the universe cares about the fate of this nation or humankind in general," Sherlock starts to explain.

Realization dawns on John.

_He IS depressed. Maybe this is the worst of what his 'dark moods' can develop to. Obsessive clinging to pointless things in order to escape from inside his own head._

John feels almost giddy at this theory, and more relieved than he would have thought. It doesn't explain all of it, not really, but maybe some of these strange things are just John's own stress playing tricks on him. It does explain a lot, though. "Look, we've probably felt like that at some point, Lord knows I did after Afghanistan - the world's a shitty place, pointless at best. You just gotta find your nook, your role and stick to it, not think too much about the rest. Everyone has a place if they look for it. And people who care about them. You certainly do."

_It's just a bit of thirtysomething world-weariness with a sherlockian twist. It'll pass. It has to._

This is easy. This is fixable. And this is way less problematic than the more sinister option - that Sherlock's behaviour of late might have something to do with what happened that one evening downstairs in the dark.

Because that was--- It had been---

At least John won't have to worry about it now. There's no need to talk about it, because there's nothing to talk about. Surely what happened that night isn't helping Sherlock's moods, but it can't be the only reason for all this.

John is almost shocked when he suddenly realizes that while getting to skip what would have been a very awkward conversation about that moment feels like a stone has rolled off his chest, there's something akin to disappointment roiling at the bottom of his feelings as well.
John remembers that moment so vividly - the nervousness, the anticipation, the nearly intoxicating sense of danger and novelty that had been crackling in the air between them. It had not been unpleasant in the least, just... strange.

That's what scares John the most - that he had wanted it, that it was something he still wants, but stupid reasons and stupid hangups and stupid excuses are keeping his tongue tied.

John fears that there's the right road and the wrong road and he's too scared to make a decision so he lingers on at the crossroads.

If Sherlock is depressed, it is definitely not the right time to address something as monumental as a shift in their relationship paradigm, as Sherlock would probably describe such a thing.

Without much of a thought, John reaches across the table and lays his hand on top of Sherlock's. "Look, I'm just---"

Sherlock flinches and then withdraws his hand sharply as though he's been bitten by something. He draws a sharp breath, averts his eyes and stands up. He grabs his book from the edge of the kitchen sink where John had placed it and tries to head out of the kitchen.

John grabs his wrist in alarm. "Sherlock, what is it?"

"You don't need to--- Oh never mind," he spits out, sounding distressed.

"I don't need to what?" John asks.

Sherlock tears himself away from John's grip and hurries out of the kitchen. "Nothing. I was merely lost in thought and startled. Please excuse me----" he mumbles while pushing past John.

John expects him to perform his usual bedroom-door-slamming-followed-by-a-sulk show, but Sherlock grabs his coat, puts on his shoes and disappears down the stairs instead.

John is left standing in the kitchen, wondering what on Earth he's gone and done now.

At midnight car lights are drawing moving bars of light on the ceiling as John lies awake, listening to sounds from downstairs.

Sherlock had returned home hours after John had gone to bed, and judging by the sound of steady, frantic footsteps he's now pacing in the living room.

He often picks up his violin during these sorts of thinking sessions, but lately Sherlock's music has been completely absent from their lives.

John's thoughts leap back to their discussion earlier that day. The defeat and embarrassment in Sherlock's voice had thrown John, and he'd missed his moment to prevent Sherlock from aborting the discussion.

'You don't need to---' what?

Don't need to care?
Don't need to be kind to me?
Don't need to touch me?

Which one of those things, if any, and why?

The universe doesn't appear willing to grant John an answer tonight.

Eventually, a dreamless sleep takes over.

Chapter End Notes

The lovely Kate221b lent a hand with betaing the first half of this chapter.

I mentioned earlier at the comments section that chapter 5 would be the only one from Sherlock's POV. Well, he showed up and demanded another chapter all for himself, since John gets centre stage in all the others. Chapter 10 will thus offer you a glimpse into what's going on in that brilliant brain. Poor John would probably give his left hand for such insight at this point.

While John has now fallen asleep, Sherlock is still very much awake.

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As for references, just two this time. "Holmes, you are not yourself." is from ACD's "The Dying Detective", as is the slightly tweaked sentence "If I let you be my goddamned master elsewhere, I at least am yours when you're not well." At least in this verse Sherlock refrained from insulting Watson's medical skills... ;)

This chapter owes everything to 7percentsolution and Emma221b. Without you, I'd be flailing around frantically in a pool of unorganized angst.

This chapter is in Sherlock's POV.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Take the worst situations  
Make a worse situation  
Follow me home, pretend you  
Found somebody to mend you  
I feel numb  
I feel numb in this kingdom  
- Daughter

Insomnia is not a novel companion for Sherlock.

At times when there's a case on that involves lives at stake it is a choice, but more often it's a result of the cogs turning so fast that there is no way to stop them or even slow them down. It's a crackling nuclear fission reaction and there are no control rods that he has ever discovered, save for the lulling bliss of a mystery solved or an opiate injected. From what he had heard, sex might have the potential, but fate has not allowed Sherlock an opportunity to test that hypothesis.

He remains painfully awake that night, because the ghost of John Watson that lives in his Mind Palace won't leave him be. It has followed him around the rainy streets that he had wandered aimlessly for hours that night, after their flat had began to feel too suffocating. Now it keeps him company as he paces the living room floor.

Eventually, when exhaustion finally begins to gain the upper hand over anxiety, he retreats to the relative safety of his bed.

He could have tried to distract himself by continuing his studies, but John has upset him too much to muster any focus tonight.

He'd give a kingdom for a cigarette but does not want to get out of bed, doesn't want to risk having to listen yet another condescending lecture from John. For all of his usual cluelessness, his ability to smell cigarette smoke on Sherlock is akin to that of a bloodhound.

'It's good to have hobbies'. A bit rich, coming from a man who got so bored of mediocrity that he stormed a drug den armed only with a tyre iron. Sherlock is tall, but not tall enough to reach John when he's up on his high horse.
John does try. He's the only one who does nowadays.

Lying back on the bed and staring with unseeing eyes at the cracks in the ceiling, Sherlock thinks of those who might have once cared for him, those he knew must be driven away if they are to be kept safe and if Sherlock himself is to stay sane and in control.

His drug relapse, and certain things that had happened during their final battles against Moriarty's legacy, had widened the already threateningly large rift between him and Mycroft into what was now practically the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. Mycroft had never known how to deal with their distance, veering between excessive interference of forced rehab to the passive enabling behaviour of someone willing to declare that he would always be there for him. Neither would be helpful or welcome in this particular situation, so Mycroft’s continuing absence is a welcome relief.

Lestrade, whom he had once relied on to moderate his brother’s fraternal fractiousness, had backed away, passing on the baton to John. The DI relies on John to sort Sherlock out, now.

Mrs Hudson has always operated on a "don’t ask; don’t tell" policy; it's a useful approach for the day-to-day functioning of their unconventional household unit, but it does not provide much tangible help in a crisis.

Professor Trevor had laid it all out before, but when Sherlock had been younger he had thought that the Professor's warnings had been exaggerations: "You have to make a choice, Sherlock. You cannot afford to be weak or hesitant. Once you get past a certain point, no ties will be strong enough to overcome your need to delve deeper, and you will give up control over your fate if you decide this is what you want.” Now that he has gotten further than ever before, he is willing to believe every word. He can feel it now, tugging constantly at the edges of his consciousness. It's waiting.

He wishes he had the words to explain it all to John. The man does ask, but it's like someone trying to understand an elephant by only observing its cells under a microscope. His questions are kind and genuinely interested, but somehow they manage to instantaneously remind Sherlock of things he has fought long and hard to keep locked behind the Palace doors. Because of this he constantly finds himself reacting caustically and impulsively in a way that's clearly increasing John's worry instead of alleviating it.

It's unsettling how there is no one else left than John that he cares about. Even more troubling is the thought of how fragile Sherlock's own pathetic cravings make this whole situation. Letting himself drift away from John feels like the last string of a life-saving rope breaking.

"You cannot afford to be weak or hesitant." Easier said than done.

He had tried bending his emotions to his iron will, to no avail. If he could stop wanting, it would be all fine. If they could just be friends, everything would be fine.

At what point did the word 'friend' become such a profanity for him?

Victor had been a childhood infatuation, a painful lesson to be learned. Sherlock had been in love then, certainly, but it had been a love only half realized. He had not known himself like he does now, had not gotten acquainted with his own soul to the extent necessary to truly understand what it is he wants and how that should feel.

Or who it is he wants, to be precise.

Victor had been.... Victor, but he'd never come close to reaching the destructive potential that John has in this respect. Before John, he'd gotten by somehow. He had thought that he was coping, that
alone protected him, but now he realised that he had merely been existing. Now he can't imagine his life without John, and that dangerous dependence is yet another sign that something needs to change.

John is his friend, his companion, his confidante, his pressure point, his assistant, his guiding compass and his conductor of light. And his greatest weakness.

What good is this aberrant intellect of his, if it fails to protect him from the sort of destruction that he had already experienced once, with Victor, and had no desire to repeat? Why couldn't his unruly mind somehow turn its attentions to something or someone he could actually have?

John is strange mixture of devotion and disapproval when it comes to Sherlock. Sherlock is quite certain that John doesn't know himself what he wants, in the long term, when it comes to major life choices. John is a man who operates very much in the present. Perhaps war had taught him that, or maybe Sherlock himself has.

Sherlock is certain of these things: John could not possible want him, not that way and even if he did, it couldn't possibly work. John had often reminded him how taxing life with Sherlock is even now, within these current relationship parametres.

He sighs, flings the duvet away, and slides his feet onto the floor, curling his toes as he feels a cold draft.

It's two in the morning, and the ghost of John Watson is showing no signs of releasing its chokehold.

There are two sides of Sherlock, forever battling - one, the clever one, the reasonable one, telling him to leave behind the useless and the unrequited. To avert disaster and protect his already battered heart. The other tugs at his hem with a hope he's too weak to ignore.

Even if he leaned on that hope, dared to give it his best try, he wouldn't know how to proceed forward. He feels like a rich man dying of thirst in the middle of the desert, a blind idiot god with no realm. What little skill he has in the world is not suited to this task.

It feels so useless, but in the dark, exhausted and fed up with it all, that flickering hope is all the consolation he has. He's fumbling in the dark, literally, but at least John is there with him. Still.

It occurs to him that maybe it's time to test this tether that's holding him down one last time. What could he possibly have to lose?

He stands in the living room for several minutes, procrastinating by listening to the pipes in the building gurgling and watching a lone, likely drunken cyclist taking a tumble outside Speedy's. Then he quietly walks up the stairs.

He pauses in front of the door to John's bedroom. He raises his hand to knock, twice even, but lets it drop both times before letting his knuckles make contact with the wooden door. A floorboard creaks underneath his weight and he freezes, listening carefully and expecting a rectangle of light to appear beneath the door, fearing that John has woken up.

There are no signs of life from the bedroom. Darkness continues to envelop Sherlock. Usually he finds it consoling - it hides him from his enemies, allows him to move unseen and most interesting things transpire in the dark - humanity's strongest impulses seem to run amok during nighttime.

Not tonight. Tonight the darkness is hollow, uninviting and terrible, and the silence feels suffocating.

His control slips. The hope he's been trying to hold on is getting weaker by the hour, while other things are taking over. Things from years past, a fire he'd played with once, a power the depths of
which he had only been able to distantly intuit. These things seduce his mind like a flame entices a moth. It's fascinating, it's terrifying and it's real, unlike the ridiculous daydreams that have brought him to John's door.

He's not an idiot. He knows exactly what kind of a risk he's taking. The more he learns, the more he lets go. They are taking over and he's letting them, because he's not an imbecile who thinks that such knowledge comes without cost. It whispers at the back of his mind constantly now - the awareness, the connection. In his youth this is as far as he had come, but now he knows he is capable of moving forward - far beyond what he had ever anticipated. He now has access to materials Professor Trevor had never even revealed to have been in his possession. Sherlock would never have thought that a solitary scholar could be in possession of such a collection of knowledge, which had made him suspect that the Professor may have been less solitary in his endeavours than he'd let on.

None of that matters now. There are no limits now, he has access to everything he needs. It would be so easy to just let it all take him right now, forget this life as he's learned to know it but he can't. Not just yet. Not as long as his control keeps slipping like this.

If he could just--- just *stop this nonsense*.

The nonsense has now brought tears prickling into his eyes. He swipes them off with a violent sweep of the side of his palm, and sits down on the drafty hallway floor, leaning his back on the wall.

*Maybe he loves you back. Maybe he's just waiting for you to say it.*

But what if the opposite is true? What if nothing good can come off it? What if he's rejected, and John leaves? Or what if they somehow found themselves trying a relationship on for size, and he ruins it because the universe has decided that whatever love was, it would never grace the life of Sherlock Holmes in a way that could last?

It's preposterous to even entertain the notion that John might want him like that.

Besides, he had made a vow that one terrible day, sitting under that poplar tree, fully aware that he could only afford to be that broken once in his life.

*Never again.*

He returns downstairs. Sleep circles him like a bird of prey but never makes its move.

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**Chapter End Notes**

**Reference list**

The name of the chapter is the name of one of Lovecraft's short stories.

The "blind idiot god" is a descriptive, alternate name given by Lovecraft to Azathoth, one of the so-called Outer Gods in his fictional mythology. I've always loved that turn of phrase so couldn't resist using it at some point in the story...
Chapter Notes

Have you ever wondered what it would like to sneak into Sherlock's bedroom and take a look around? Your wish is granted, as John decides to take drastic action in trying to understand what is going on in their lives.

Betaed by 7percentsolution, finishing touches by Emma221b.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You and I were once friends
Now you're only an acquaintance
I hate dreaming of being with you
Terrified with the lights out
- Daughter

John waits. And waits. It takes two days for Sherlock to leave the house again.

John doesn't ask where, doesn't ask why because the answer is always the same, 'research'.

If Sherlock won't tell him what's going on, John is going to do some bloody detecting on his own.

He breaks into Sherlock's room. It isn't even that difficult after spending years watching Sherlock pick locks. John's approach is brutal and effective - he screws the whole lock off. The owner of the room will probably notice he's been there even if he takes care in putting everything item back to where he found them. Sherlock can always tell.

Let him notice, John thinks wistfully. Maybe that'll get it through his skull that something needs to change.

He puts the lock pieces in his trouser pocket, forces himself not to hesitate and steps in.

Rays of sunshine streak in past the half-closed heavy curtains. The window glass is streaky from years of London's polluted rainfall. Dust seems to saturate the stale air in the room, swirling in kaleidoscopic patterns when John pulls the curtains fully open.

The bed is unmade, sheets in a tangle as though Sherlock has been sleeping restlessly. John wonders if that is how he always slumbers. He has sometimes wondered if Sherlock's claims of not needing all that much sleep are a smokescreen designed to hide something. Nightmares? Fear of the lonely endlessness of an insomniac's nocturnal hours?

He feels like sitting down, but the only chair on the room is overtaken by books and the thought of taking a seat on the bed now feels surprisingly intimate.

They've seen each other naked, cared for one another when ill or injured in ways that have entailed
some awkward scenarios, and John has been to this room plenty of times before. What has changed? Could it be that John is now aware of the possibility that Sherlock may have entertained thoughts of the two of them in bed together? Or is it the fact that John himself has? In his imaginary version of taking things further with Sherlock it always happens in this very bed instead of his own.

On the other hand, if he's honest with himself, these sorts of things running through John's head is not a new thing. Before Mary, he had adamantly tried chalking them up to the sexually frustrated and thus situationally undiscerning mind of a bachelor with a flatmate who had a tendency to send all his girlfriends running for the hills.

Then Mary arrived, but those thoughts had not dissipated. This John had chalked up to habit and thought nothing of it. Until that moment in the dark, when a whole universe of possibility had opened up before his very eyes as those slender, lovely, familiar, beautiful fingers had traced a path on his cheek, asking permission. And in his hesitation, John may have unintentionally said no, at least from Sherlock's perspective.

Maybe it's always Sherlock's bed, because Sherlock is the one who dictates the terms, calls the shots and sets the pace in every aspect of their lives. That might be part of the problem now, letting Sherlock reign supreme in all issues. John putting his foot down never goes down well and his attempts are mostly either ignored or shot down with ridicule. John is saddened by the thought that if he's to stop whatever is going on, he probably needs to bulldoze over Sherlock so profoundly that it might will certainly shake their usual dynamic.

Maybe this is where it always happens in John's dreams, because he's painfully aware that he is the only one Sherlock has let into his life and his heart like this for a long time. Plenty of people have been in John's bed, but not many have been invited into Sherlock's. Perhaps... no one? Even Irene had helped herself instead of being invited. What about Victor? John has no way of knowing.

It's not John's fault that things have changed, is it? It's Sherlock whose actions have forced his hand to resort to this intrusion of privacy, not his own.

Never mind. There are more pressing issues at hand, and John isn't sure how much time he has to proceed with this act of domestic espionage. In the previous occasions that John has been in this room, Sherlock has been the only thing John has focused on. Now he can be attentive to other things.

He turns to glance around the room, and when his gaze falls onto Sherlock's wardrobe, he freezes.

There are drawings hung on the walls and the wardrobe doors with pieces of scotch tape. Drawings of vast cities with impossible, vertical walls of stone rising from barren, icy wastelands. Images of stormy seas, underneath which something dark stirs in the depths. The night sky, its blackness not unified, but a swirl of strange colours.

There is no artist signature underneath them.

There's another one on the small side table, and this one is unfinished. A boxed set of oil pastels lies open on the table. John realizes that the colours of the selection are very similar to the general palette of the drawings hung up.

Maybe Sherlock has taken up doing art, and these ancient texts are offering him inspiration. Maybe all this secrecy is just Sherlock being nervous about his early works, worried that John might not think them any good and that he would be ridiculed?
Plausible, but it doesn't even begin to explain all that's been going wrong lately, and the way John has stopped feeling like the flat is a safe haven, the way that a home is supposed to feel like. Besides, Sherlock rarely projects any confidence issues when it comes to his intellectual or artistic abilities, and these paintings are clearly very good technically as far as John can tell. They're as detailed and confidently composed as though done by using a photograph as a model. Or as if the artist was someone who had been to these strange places. That couldn't be, of course, because they don't look like places that could possibly exist. The geometry is all wrong, and what seems to be moonlight in the images feels all wrong - sickening, alarming and uninviting.

John decides he has learned all that he can from staring at these pictures. Besides, they are making his skin crawl, even though they're just paintings.

He moves his attention to other things in the room, such as the small glass cabinet in a dark corner next to the wardrobe. John wonders why that piece of furniture has never registered properly on his radar before.

He clicks on the vintage lamp on top of the cabinet and leans down on his haunches to see what's inside. He opens the right half of the wood-framed glass door and goes through the objects contained within, picking them up one by one.

A small cube made of brownish glass soldered together with copper foil contains a stuffed, severed bird wing suspended eternally on a metal rod. Its colours are faded but clearly they have once been spectacular - jewel-like tones of glittery green and blue. Most likely a hummingbird? There's something about it that makes John sad, like the massive cabinet filled with stuffed hummingbirds he and Sherlock had seen at the Natural History Museum.

The next artefact looks like some type of a panflute, but the reeds are smooth and curved. Their material seems porous and familiar. John laughs incredulously when he realizes why. Rib bones. Human or animal?

Next there's an old Oxford English dictionary, with a photograph as a bookmark. It's a circle of megalith stones in moonlight. The date on the back says 1934 and the photo also carries the words "commission of G. de la Poer".

John half expects to find a skull next but what would be the point, since there's one adorning their fireplace already?

He rummages around the lower shelf, which mostly contains papers both old and new. Notes, quite recent bills which John hopes have been paid, the pair of cufflinks he had received from a client for his services, and an old mobile phone without a battery. John thinks it likely that Sherlock has used it for some experiment.

In the back of the upper shelf John finds a small but sturdy cardboard box filled with colourful stones, fossils and coral pieces. He imagines they may have been something Sherlock had collected as a child. Next to the box are small, porcelain-looking figurines that resemble the Egyptian statues at the British Museum. They're turquoise and look like pharaohs in their sarcophagi, with long-ornate beards.

The glass on the left door is missing. This side of the cabinet seems to contain fewer items. There's just an old pair of theatre binoculars, a chunk of dry honeycomb and Sherlock's passport. John takes a peek, wanting to know if the photo looks as droll as everybody else's.

It doesn't. It just looks like Sherlock. Trust the man to look good even in a passport photo. He leafs through the pages reserved for customs stamps and visa stickers. During his two years of taking
down Moriarty's criminal empire he had probably used fake IDs and his passport reflects this - the only stamps John finds are from trips outside the EU that John remembers Sherlock taking for cases during the time they've known each other. Mycroft has probably helped Sherlock get rid of all traces of his activities during the two years he had supposedly been death - including destroying any related fake documents. John wonders what sort of aliases Sherlock would have been using.

When John puts the passport back, his fingers brush across something unexpected. When he peers closer, he sees that it's a small plastic bag of whitish desiccated mushrooms. John almost wants to wash his hands even though he has only touched the outside of the bag. Knowing Sherlock, they might be some hallucinogenic or otherwise toxic variety he has collected just for the curiosity's sake.

His curiosity now largely satisfied, John closes the cabinet and lets his gaze sweep across the rest of the room. Time to get back to more pressing issues.

There are books everywhere. Books and notes, scattered across the bed, on the chair, on the windowsill, on the floor.

John picks up a notepad discarded on the carpet, the first few pages of which have been folded over the edge.

He doesn't recognize the language - or even the lettering. It doesn't look pictographic like Chinese or Japanese, nor does it seem cyrillic. John has seen plenty of written arabic in Afghanistan and it doesn't resemble that either.

There's the Liber Ivonis again. Sherlock has stuck pieces of old postcards between the pages to mark important bits. Not that John can make out what is so important about them. He puts down the pad and picks up a book Sherlock has placed on the nightstand.

It's called Cthäat Aquadingen. It is clearly in German. There's just one bookmark, a piece of a Christmas card with the words 'mostly useless and inaccurate' scribbled on it with Sherlock's swirly handwriting.

John picks up one book after another. The big picture does not offer itself. Many of the manuscripts look like religious texts, some resemble astrology books with star maps and lists of dates and some look like utter gibberish. The language varies - old English, German, Latin, some variation of Greek and some he doesn't even recognize. He wonders how many of these languages Sherlock knows.

On a whim John peers under the bed and notices a palm-sized black blotch on the floor. He doesn't want to investigate it further and its unlikely it would offer him answers.

He continues his inventory of Sherlock's reading materials.

One book deposited on Sherlock's nightstand is filled with images of statues, relics and temples. Written by an Erich von Däniken, it illustrates a theory according to which aliens have been visiting earth, influencing ancient cultures.

Is this what Sherlock is into now, UFOs? Or is this merely what he thinks the Celaeno fragments are connected to?

Leafing through the book, John stops at a spread of star maps. Considering Sherlock had claimed having deleted the solar system, such issues suddenly becoming pertinent makes John hum quietly in sarcasm.

John drops the book on the duvet in frustration. What is all of this?
Frustrated, John puts everything back to where they were, reattaches the lock and ends his survey. There are no answers here. Sherlock is the only one who would have any, and he's not exactly being very forthcoming.

Back to square one. Better prepare for what is likely another night alone in the living room with just the telly to keep him company. Maybe he should go see Mrs Hudson or finally sort through his pile of unread British Medical Journals. Sherlock keeps ripping pages off them to use as note paper, 'you never read them anyway'.

He ends up consoling himself with a marathon of old Inspector Morse episodes that happens to be airing. He finds himself paying much more attention to the Oxford settings in the scenes. He imagines a younger Sherlock walking those very streets, a pile of books under his arm. There's so much John doesn't know about those years. Much could have happened during those university years that had changed Sherlock, molded him closer to the man John now knows so very well. Or does he? Lately it certainly hasn't felt that way.

Something startles John awake. A brief moment of uneasy disorientation passes until he realizes where he is and that there's no one else in the room.

In the evening John had obeyed the impulse to drag his bed to the corner of his room, because for some reason he couldn't fall asleep they way it had been before - next to the door, facing the window, through which darkness had felt as though it was seeping in like some toxic mist.

An image from a dream he'd just been having floats to the top of his consciousness. He'd dreamt of an owl watching him with an intent, supercilious gaze from the window.

He's thirsty and his mouth tastes like ashes. John drags himself out of bed and pads quietly downstairs. From the kitchen he spots the reassuring sight of Sherlock's Belstaff hanging in the foyer.

He drinks two glasses of water, spitting out the last mouthful and deciding that he can't be arsed to brush his teeth. He doesn't need to go to work in the morning, he can sort himself out then.

He starts walking towards the stairs, when a sudden coldness overcomes him. The hairs on his arms stand up and the air feels so prickly it's almost electric.

His phone is on the floor where he had left it hours before, hooked up to a charger. He picks it up and presses the power button. The screen abruptly goes black and the phone emits a high-pitched, electronic whine and discharges such a blast of static electricity that John instinctively drops it. It falls on the carpet. When John bends down to pick it up, he realizes it's become very quiet. He make out the usual background noise of living in the city - the quiet humming of the air condition, cars driving past and old waterpipes gurgling. He abandons the phone where it had fallen and straightens his spine.

He walks a few steps back towards the kitchen. Even the sound of his footsteps seems muted as though he was underwater.

It's quiet in a way that forebodes something bad. It's the sort of expectant silence that happens before the first thunderclap.

John goes to the fireplace and reaches his arm behind the books on a shelf nearby. Soon his fingers curl around the familiar shape of his gun. Sherlock hasn't found this most recent hiding place for it,
Something is making his skin crawl and his heart rate spike.

Then he hears footsteps. Tiny footsteps as though created by animals, but clearly bipedal as far as he can tell. John steals a frantic glance behind his shoulder towards the door that leads downstairs. The safety chain is engaged. All the living room windows are closed, and so is the one in John's room. The one in the bathroom is just an air vent and it has a screen - nothing could possibly get through that.

In the darkness he can make out a moving shadow at the end of the hall.

John runs after it, gun in hand, finger perched on the safety.

The sound of tiny footsteps disappears. John arrives at the end of the hall just as the edge of his visual field registers something moving by the door to Sherlock's bedroom. A flicker of something dark in front of it, and then nothing. It's as though something has passed through the door.

John tries the handle. The door is unlocked. He enters.

The moon is shining through the window. The curtains are drawn, and the windows is firmly closed. John flicks on the lights and a mound of duvet begins to stir on the bed.

Sherlock sits up, squinting, expression confused and eyes unfocused. "John?" he asks.

"Yeah. You alone?"

"Of course." Sherlock now seems to have awoken fully and if following John with his gaze. He raises his brow when he notices the gun.

John walks around the room, taking a look under the bed, inside the wardrobe still covered in the drawings, under an armchair, behind the curtains.

There's nothing here.

Maybe his imagination had just been playing tricks on him. Tired brain producing ghost sensations?

He closes his eyes. A car is driving past. A dog barking. A radiator is clicking. The vacuum-liked silence has given way to a normal nocturnal soundtrack.

"What's going on?" Sherlock asks, watching John peering into the waste-paper basket.

Nothing could have gotten into the flat, and nothing could have gotten out.

John shakes his head in disbelief. He again comes to the conclusion that maybe Sherlock is not the one going crazy here. "It's nothing. Go back to sleep," he tells Sherlock who, surprisingly seems to take this at face value. He burrows back under the duvet and turns to face the wall.

John leaves the room, closes the door and goes up to his room. He double-checks that the safety is on, plants the gun under his pillow and checks that both his bedroom door and the window are firmly closed.

He slips into the bed.

Hours later, when he finally manages to catch the tail end of sleep, he dreams of a black lake of unstirring, mirror-still water. He doesn't go in, because instinctively he knows that there's something
there. Something that doesn't care for him, doesn't care about him and would crush him like a fly - not out of malice but like an elephant stepping on an ant, simply because it was so insignificant it never even registered in the mind of the more powerful creature.

The sky in his dreams is both black and somehow anything but. He had no idea black could contain so many different hues.

Sherlock is there, too, holding a book. He wades into the water. John tries to run in after him, but something invisible keeps stopping him from getting close.

Without being able to do anything to stop it, John watches Sherlock wade deeper into the black, unmoving waters until he disappears from view.

Chapter End Notes

In chapter 12 it's Sherlock's turn again to take over as the point of view character. This should please the two muses going by the names of 7percentsolution and 1butterfly_gr11 who whispered in my ear a request for more Sherlock POV :)

Reference list

"Drawings of vast cities with impossible, vertical walls of stone rising from barren, icy wastelands. Images of stormy seas, underneath which something dark stirs in the depths. The night sky, its blackness not unified, but a swirl of strange colours. This passage was inspired by many of Lovecraft's stories, but the whole concept of the drawings scattered around the room is from a very specific scene in a movie that made a huge impact on me as a kid. More on that in the author's notes at the end of this story for storytelling reasons. The notion of there being many different kinds of black is beautifully illustrated in Lovecraft's "The colour out of space".

Gilbert de la Poer, the first Baron of Exham, is a fictional character created by Lovecraft. He is featured in the short story "Rats in the walls".

The small turquoise statues John finds in the cabinet are ushabti figurines. Ushabtis were placed in ancient Egyptian tombs among the grave goods. They were intended to act as servants or minions for the deceased, should he/she be called upon to do manual labor in the afterlife. A perfect thing for someone like Sherlock who hates chores.

The Cthäat Aquadingen is a fictional book created by Brian Lumley for his short story "The Cyprus Shell".

Erich von Däniken is a real author, an amateur archaeologist and pseudoscientist who believes that many ancient cultures were influenced by creatures from the stars.

The chapter title is, again, shamelessly borrowed from a Lovecraft story X-
"Breakfast." Sherlock is aware that it probably comes out sounding more like an order than an inquiry or request, but he doesn't particularly care. John is used to his abrasiveness and he's not in the mood to placate anyone with pointless niceties.

Seeing John nowadays is a taxing experience. At any moment, the exclamations of worry and the questions that intrude on Sherlock's privacy might start. There's an air of finality in their interactions, a sense of impending loss that grates on Sherlock's nerves. He's exhausted and frustrated with himself, and John's meddling certainly doesn't help. A mere glance at the man can still send him reeling, bring back all those emotions he's been trying to control. It's hateful and makes him want to break something.

John takes a bite out of his toast. "Help yourself," he says.

Sherlock opens the fridge. "What do we have?"

"There's tea and toast. We're out of butter, but that jar of lime curd Molly gave us for Christmas is still there if you want to give it a go. Not much else."

Sherlock picks up the jar and frowns at the label. "Ugh," is his verdict.

John's head snaps up as though Sherlock has done something startling. The atmosphere in the room is suddenly different and Sherlock is not at all sure why.

John looks as tired as Sherlock feels. He clearly hasn't slept well even after retreating back to his own bedroom. He seems on edge, too, which is hardly surprising after his nightly antics. Waving a gun around? That was new.

Sherlock had had some strange dreams himself last night, but that's all they had been. He finds it unlikely that there had been anything in the flat last night. He can't have made enough progress yet to make contact with anything substantial. Surely he'd know if he had, since his control is outstanding.

Maybe John is still on edge after whatever it was he'd thought he'd been chasing last night. Fatigue can make people react irrationally, even hallucinate. Sherlock has experienced something similar
many times during times when he hasn’t slept for days because of cases.

John is wearing that look that he sometimes uses to warn people off. It's the expression that he has when someone is mistreating Sherlock. Even when taking into account causticity caused by extreme exhaustion, it's a mystery to Sherlock why it should appear now. It's lacking its usual chivalrous quality, and the ire seems to be directed at Sherlock instead of the random idiots who deserve it.

"If I could get a sensible word out of you, maybe we'd have food in the fridge you would deign to eat and God forbid, maybe we could even have some fun every once in a while, like we used to,” John accuses, pointedly grabs the newspaper and opens it so forcefully that the front page rips a bit.

This is exactly why Sherlock finds talking to John such an upsetting experience lately. There seem to be constant demands being placed on him, but he has no idea what they are. He’d been quite certain he has made it clear to John that things are fine, that they are to remain as they are, and John is not to interfere with his life any more than he has before. The purpose of all that is to protect both their sanities. Why can't John understand that, and respect their boundaries like he used to?

"What are you implying?" Sherlock enquires, hoping that John isn't too grumpy to explain. John knows he isn't good with these sorts of things - understanding what's written between the lines - and Sherlock is not in the mood to have his nose ground in his shortcomings.

"I'm not implying anything. I don't imply things, because that would allow you to pretend you didn't understand them, and then use that as an excuse to ignore it all. It's a convenient cop-out to ignore my opinion and the impact that your actions might have on others."

Sherlock has no idea where this is going, but clearly the conversation is spiraling out of control. This is how discussions like this are supposed to go: Sherlock does something socially unacceptable, John snarks at him with a fond glint of a smile at the corner of his eye, Sherlock rolls his eyes and they then go about their day somewhat amicably.

This time John doesn't look like he's about to let things slide like he usually does. "I can't sleep. There's things going on in this house I don't like. There's something wrong with you, and I'm sick and tired of being kept in the dark. So how about you stop assuming toast, cases and the upkeep of important relationships in your life just happen without you having to put any work in, hmm? How about participating in your own bloody life for a change?" John adds with venom in his tone.

John is staring him down and Sherlock doesn't know what to do except hold onto a frighteningly old can of mayonnaise he'd found behind the lime curd for dear life and probably look as shellshocked as he feels.

"That is all I've been trying to do for the past thirty-odd years with little success," Sherlock says quietly before he realizes that this sounds so pathetically self-deprecating that it could confirm John's idiotic depression theory. Sherlock hates the slight waver in his voice and hopes that John is his usual oblivious self and doesn't notice.

Slowly, the worst of the anger seems to dissipate from John - Sherlock knows this by a minuscule change in his pupils, which had been dilated by the adrenaline, and the softened curves of the corners of his mouth.

Sherlock puts down the condiment he's holding on the kitchen counter, keeping his eyes fixed on John. He's trying his best to focus on trying not to look as rattled, perturbed or apprehensive as he feels.

Sherlock rather enjoys an assertive John, as long as that determination is directed at someone else. It's
a whole other thing to be at the receiving end. He had hated it after he'd returned from the dead. The thought of returning to John was what had kept him sane during those toruturous years, and John turning his back on Sherlock after he'd come back had felt like standing on a trapdoor that was sprung, plunging him into darkness. That's when he had realized the true extent of John's power over him.

John is his perfect drug, to which there is no antidote and no rehabilitation.

John has now begun to appear embarrassed and regretful instead of angry. He looks as though he now hates himself because he did this to Sherlock. “You’re scaring me. Whatever it is you’re doing, please stop. If not for you, then for me. I don’t know what’s wrong, and it’s scaring the shit out of me,” John admits in a pleading tone.

“You’ll hear no further of it.”

“I’ve not heard one word about it so far! I don’t care what it is or why you’re doing it but you need to end it. Something is going on in this flat, it can’t just be in my head! And it’s not even the house, it’s, it’s --- you, somehow.”

This is getting out of hand. Fast. And it doesn't help that Sherlock is having a hard time shoving some rather painful memories back into the nooks and crannies of the Mind Palace where they belong - memories of similar moments when John pleaded him like this to do something. John by his grave, asking him to not be dead. John by his hospital bed after the shooting, pleading him to wake up. John kneeling by him on the living room carpet, begging him to consent to rehab after his attempt at kicking his heroin habit after the Mary's departure had proved unsuccessful.

Had he ever denied John anything the man had asked for? And had John ever granted him any of the things he truly wanted, in return?

Sherlock slams him palm on the kitchen table and John's glass of water falls over, spilling its contents. “Leave, then! If your life here is getting more alarming than you feel comfortable with and I’m such a broken excuse of a person, go!” he points his forefinger towards the door, and John stares at it as though it was a loaded gun.

For a frightening, dreadful, stomach-churning moment Sherlock actually expects him to obey because he usually does when Sherlock tells him to do something, but then he remembers that when it comes to the really important things, John Watson doesn't tend to give up that easily.

John is still looking at him, with the general appearance of a deer in headlights, but makes no move to get up.

Sherlock now regrets his melodramatic turn of phrase. Maybe Sherlock had overdone it, just a bit, just a tiny bit, but he's so rubbish at this. He had meant to merely dissuade John from continuing this pointless discussion, but now the man looks even more alarmed and more determined to continue it. Sherlock is rather good at arguing - so good, even, that people rarely turn up for round two. After everything, John still stays. Why?

Sherlock realizes he's being ridiculous again, letting his useless pipe dreams govern his actions. If John would just give up on this subject and go back to being only moderately grumpy, they could both plough on with their day.

"Look, you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to, but clearly there's something going on that isn't good for you. Or me. If it's the museum case, then just drop the damn thing. No case can be so important that you should drive us both nuts with it."
“It’s under control.”

“I’ve lost count of the ways in which it fucking isn’t. Whatever it is.”

“We’ve established that my health is unaffected. Neither of us has been in any danger. Nothing that would warrant invading my privacy twice in one day.”

Sherlock grits his teeth. He has again said something he hadn't intended. He had vowed to keep quiet about the fact that John had been in his room and had covered his tracks rather clumsily. Sherlock hadn't wanted to raise the subject, because it would inevitably lead to a discussion about John's reasons for doing so. Why can't he control himself? The constant hunger and the need to sleep have been annoying enough, but this new tendency to be impulsively verbally effusive is the worst part yet. He's changing, and it's an expected side effect of the process, but he still finds it profoundly irritating.

“Sherlock, I—“

“When you decided to come to me four years ago even though I warned you it might not be safe, you came anyway.” Sherlock reminds John, "The hour is a bit late now to start yearning for a normal existence. You tried that once with Mary. Didn’t really pan out."

Statements referring to John's wrecked marriage usually make him John angry enough to stop talking. Sherlock would never have resorted to such antics if he wasn't feeling unsure of being able to regulate his own demeanour.

*Just look at him*, Sherlock thinks. *He wants you to be a normal person. He doesn't want someone who doesn’t understand social cues, who hates Christmas, who can’t sit still if their socks are made out of the wrong material, who plays violin at odd hours because there are too many thoughts fighting their way round in his head, who was nearly hospitalized as a child after having a meltdown because of the overwhelming barrage of sensory information at his own birthday party and who doesn't know how to do any of the things that belong in a proper relationship.*

Yes, John thinks he's amazing, brilliant, clever, extraordinary, but how long until John again begins vacillating between this and wanting something more constructive, more sane, more accommodating and something that's not Sherlock, because Sherlock is certainly none of those overrated things.

This is the very definition of Sherlock's life - he’ll never be enough, he’ll never be the right sort, he’ll never be good for anyone. He'll always be the square peg, the odd one out, the freak, the outcast, the sidelined and the lonely. He's thirty five years of age already. It's not like someone is going to appear, wave a magic wand and fix those things for him. He could go and scream in cathedrals for some deity, try some more therapies on top of the ones his parents had dragged him to, attend a thousand self-help seminars or cross the Himalayas hopping on one foot and it still wouldn't do a damn bit of good, because this is how he functions and even his pediatric neurologists had been eager to point out that these were the cards he'd been dealt and that's that.

It is a crushing thought that even John, who had always made such a song and dance about valuing his peculiarity, clearly wants him to be a normal person, a normal best friend who doesn't lust after their flatmate. John needs and deserves someone who can give him everything he wants, not just a twisted friendship with dangerously undefined parameters.

John draws in a deep breath as though bracing himself for something. Sherlock has rarely seen him look this solemn, this careful - as though he’s expecting a sudden slap on the face. John shifts on his chair, sighs and then fixes Sherlock’s gaze with his own. Apart from serious, he also looks frighteningly empathetic, and Sherlock suspects this is something he’s learned from years of being a
doctor. It’s infuriating that John would resort to these purposefully constructed mannerisms when dealing with him. He’s not a patient, not a child to be mollycoddled, not a crazy person to be placated and talked to in a reassuring and circumspect manner.

John abandons what is left of his toast on the plate in front of him. "Look, I'm sorry. I know things have been a little--- off, lately. I think I've been going a little stir-crazy, too. I seriously thought there was somebody here last night." John tries to smile, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. "You do know I'm here for you?" John asks and he sounds as though he'd want Sherlock to reassure and console him, now. "No matter what sort of trouble you might get into, whatever problem you might have, I'll always be your friend?"

There's that word again, the one that feels like a knife to the guts. Sherlock has to begrudgingly admire John's uncanny ability to make his hope stir and then crush it completely within a couple of sentences.

Sherlock's fingers curl into a fist behind his back. There are two opposing forces waging a war in him. One side wants to go stop chasing the ghosts of his desires and to go forward in his studies instead, to seize what he seeks, no matter the cost.

The other half of him wants to burn all the books, lock the door and hold onto John Watson for dear life.

The fear in John's eyes reminds him of the fear he feels at this threshold to the unknown he's standing at.

John isn't quite finished yet. He's pursing his lips in a way that might signal he's about to do something he doesn't really want to but feels he must. "I think we need to talk about what happened that night you solved the kidnapping of that stockbroker's clerk, Sherlock. I mean downstairs, when you---"

Before Sherlock even realizes what's happening, the searing, blinding rage of frustration that he'd managed to keep a lid on so far, drowns him like a tidal wave. "No. Absolutely not. You do not get to put me on the spot and demand answers. That's not how it works. That's never been the deal. While I watched you make an idiot out of yourself with all those women I stayed quiet. I died for you, I watched you marry Mary, I agreed to be your best man even though it was as close to hell as anyone could have invented for me, I’ve welcomed you back here, put up with your rules and your expectations and your constant disapproval so what else could I possibly owe you? Surely what you wanted out of life was not to spend your days pointing out my missteps, now was it? WAS IT?"

“I just—“

“Shut up. For the love of all that’s holy, *shut up, John. And stay that way!*"

John looks like a bomb has gone off and left him a little dizzy. At least he complies. He is, after all, a good man. Knowing John it's likely that he might try to say something eventually, to try to defuse the tension, but his eyes are filled with defeat and if Sherlock wasn't still shaking with the aftermath of his outburst, his chest would constrict seeing John looking so hurt.

Maybe John has finally learned that cornering Sherlock will not lead to anything.

It's for the best, really.

A ragged exhalation leaves Sherlock's body and takes with it his last bits of energy and determination. He retreats to the living room, picks up his violin and coaxes out some Paganini.
doesn't sound very good - would have been better minutes earlier, when he still would have had his righteous indignation to tap into for the more aggressive passages.

John lingers uncomfortably in the kitchen for a few moments. He then grabs his mobile and locks himself into the bathroom. Most likely to call Mycroft, which is what he does when he's at his wits' end with Sherlock.

Ha. Good luck with that. If Sherlock himself hasn't been able to get hold of his older brother lately, then John hardly stands a chance. Sherlock has already given up trying to learn more through Mycroft. Even if he had something to do with the museum case, it's highly unlikely he'd be much of help now that Sherlock has access to a much greater source of knowledge.

It always stings when John goes to Mycroft. It's condescending to the extreme. This is what it has been like even during his childhood - **Mycroft, you are to see to it that Sherlock doesn't wander off. Mycroft, make sure Sherlock keeps quiet during the Christening. Mycroft, please see to it that Sherlock doesn't light his homework on fire again.**

Sherlock stretches his neck in front of the window and nearly drops his bow.

These last few weeks have been trying. The blackouts, the fear that his control is slipping, and the compulsion to do things he would normally never do have been draining him.

The thought of what he's about to embark on is equal parts frightening and consoling - it’s coming, and it’s going to take him. All this will be no more. What he wants, what he needs, what he can’t have and the pain he sees on John’s face - he’ll consent to all of that being a distant memory, if that means that it all finally stops. Sherlock is quite certain he can remain at the helm of himself. Perhaps he could even return a changed man and somehow rearrange the pieces of his life into a more bearable order, he on occasion thinks to himself, but knows that this is his weakness talking, the part of him that is sickeningly prone to holding onto useless flickers of hope.

What will become of him when all this is over? Sherlock has no idea. He can't be certain of anything beyond a stage that is now approaching fast.

The violin's weight feels reassuring against his shoulder and his chin. He briefly wonders what'll happen to it if he loses control over what he's attempting, and he's no longer here to play it. Will John sell it or give it to Mycroft?

He’s been putting off proceeding further in his studies because of his own fears and doubts, but judging by the date on the calendar, if he doesn’t do it sooner rather than later, he’ll lose the opportunity. Might as well be sooner, then.

It’s time to make proper contact and let the harbinger in.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Betaed by 7percentsolution and Emma221b, the latter of which truly proved her mettle as a Sherlock whisperer extraordinaire when it came to fine-tuning this particular chapter.
At this point I want to express my bottomless gratitude to all who have read, recced, left kudos and commented on this story. It is the greatest joy and privilege to get to tell these stories to such clever and enthusiastic fellow fans.

Not a lot of references in this chapter. One alludes to one of my earlier works in this fandom. Brownie points to those who can find it X-) The chapter title is borrowed from a Sarah Brightman song. "The Adventure of The Stockbroker's Clerk" is one of Conan Doyle's canon stories.
Strange ports of call

Chapter Notes

This chapter betaed by the brilliant 7percentsolution who also provided indispensable help with research.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I would rather be wrong
Than live in the shadows of your song
- Arcade Fire

"Cabinet Office general enquiries, how may I be of assistance?"

"Could you connect me to Mycroft Holmes, please?"

"I will put you through the someone who may be able to help you with your enquiry," the disinterested female dispatcher tells John.

After a few moments of listening to the line click, a more mechanical sounding male voice inquires: "Who is this speaking?"

John states his name.

"Please hold the line."

John scrubs a piece of soap off the edge of the bathroom washbasin with his finger. Some of it gets stuck under his nail.

"Mister Holmes is currently unavailable. Can I put you through to his personal assistant Miss Scott?"

"I've already spoken to her twice." John has Mycroft's direct personal number, which is currently being manned by this 'Gloria Scott' - or whatever her real name is. She keeps insisting that she can't comment on the man's whereabouts, regardless of whether an emergency is at hand or not.

John is about to tap the red receiver icon on the mobile screen to end the call, when an idea occurs. "Would there be a Judith Glencoe available instead?" That had been the name of the mystery woman who had been so officious at the Yard.

"No, Sir, there is no one listed by that name in the directory."

"Is that the--- the only directory you have available?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Sir?"

John leans the back of his head on the wall, pinning the shower curtain in between, feeling rather
silly. Even if The Home Office had some mystical directory of secret employees they probably wouldn't share it with, John who didn't possess any level of security clearance. This is one of those moments that John wishes he had Sherlock's acting skills. The man could probably coax nuclear launch codes out of presidents if need be.

"Never mind," John says in defeat and ends the call. He leaves the bathroom and goes to the kitchen to confirm what he already knows by the sounds he'd heard earlier: Sherlock has left the building.

John can't resist texting him.

[19:20] *Don't tell me - 'research'?*

He receives no reply, but the application tells John that the message has been read.

Sherlock must still be livid with him.

John briefly considers trying to get hold of the brothers' parents but John doesn't have their contact information and it seems unlikely that they could shed much light on the entire situation. Most importantly, calling Mummy Holmes certainly isn't going to dampen Sherlock's ire at John trying to interfere with his life.

John needs outside help, that's for sure - luckily he hasn't exhausted all the options yet.

John stops by to see Molly on his way home the next day. He walks to Barts from the family clinic he works at, since it's only a few blocks' worth of a detour.

While he does always enjoy seeing Molly, John has an ulterior motive today - if Sherlock wants to solve the case of the museum burglary, maybe John could find something new for him to work with, something else than those unintelligible books. A new clue, one that would take them out on the town? The two of them together, again. Maybe that could be a start, a sign for Sherlock that things are still good, still the same. It might at least shake the cobwebs out of their jarred interactions.

John digs out the bag of Fisherman's Friends he'd bought at a news kiosk to ward off the unagreeable metallic taste he'd had in his mouth lately. Not even coffee has been able to erase it completely.

When John enters the pathology department, Molly is dictating an autopsy report in her small office. She swivels around in her chair when John walks in and frowns when she notices that Sherlock is not trailing behind. Not that Sherlock has a habit of trailing behind people. Usually he's the one at point, with John bringing up the rear.

"Hi," John says, trying to sound purposeful.

Molly puts away the digital dictaphone, looking delighted. "Hey." Then she seems to have a sudden epiphany. "It's not Sherlock's birthday approaching, is it?" she asks, alarmed.

John laughs and shakes his head. Molly is referring to the only other prior occasion on which John had called on her at work without Sherlock. It had been John and Sherlock's very first year of being flatmates, and John had been planning on a surprise birthday party for Sherlock at a pub. His only excuse for such a colossal mistake had been that he hadn't known Sherlock all that well yet. After a lengthy lecture on the pointlessness of birthdays and some store-bought cake, Sherlock had gotten into an altercation with some random bar patron, and John had spent the rest of the evening queuing
at A&E with Sherlock who'd had two of his fingers broken. The rest of the small party crowd had continued the proceedings in another watering hole without their guest of honour. "You didn't know what was going to happen, don't worry about it," Molly had told him back then.

The warning example of that birthday party had been on John's mind when he'd asked Sherlock to be his best man - duty laden with many kinds of social demands - but who else could he possibly have asked?

Hindsight is a fine thing; looking back on it now, his wedding memories are strongest about Sherlock. Not even Mary - the bride - usurped the way the man’s presence shaped every aspect of that day or even the planning of it. He should have read something into that back then, he really should have.

In hindsight, there were many things John regrets about that matrimony. Such as entering into it in the first place.

John no longer trusts his instincts when it comes to his love life. Not after Mary. On the other hand, it is appearing more and more like that his poor judgement back then had been simply the result of his head being first empty of and then too filled with a certain consulting detective.

Something had been off about the whole thing. Off about Mary's behaviour and certainly off about Sherlock's. Once, just once, Sherlock had let slip the words 'our wedding'. This, too, probably ought to have sent alarm bells ringing in John's head. He'd thought nothing of it back then.

Molly offers him the other half of a granola bar she'd been eating. John declines politely.

"What else can I do for you?" Molly asks, and John wonders if this is always her assumption, that people don't visit to see her, just for what she can do for them. Or maybe it's just a habitual turn of phrase.

"Did you get a body from Chelsea Creek recently?"

"The museum burglary suspect? Yes, we did," Molly replies readily.

"Is there anything you could tell me, anything that you haven't told the police, even if it's just a hunch?"

"Why wouldn't I have told all I know to the police?" Molly asks.

John looks sheepish. Of course she would have shared all pertinent information. It's just that when hanging around Sherlock one got a bit too used to secrecy and economic dispensation of facts.

"Sorry. Not what I meant. I just wondered if there could something that occurred to you afterwards, something Sherlock could maybe look into."

"I didn't know he was on the case? I thought they closed it already."

John slumps down onto the worn sofa in the corner of the office. "They did, but Sherlock thinks there's more to it. He's convinced that whoever killed that guy left a decoy set of stolen artefacts at the scene, and that the purpose of the murder was just to cover something up. Sherlock's been known to be wrong on occasion - I'd love to give him the benefit of the doubt."

Molly leans back in her chair. "I wish I had something, but I don't. Can't even show you the body since it was picked up ages ago."

"The relatives collected it? I didn't know it could be released that quickly."
Molly frowns. "Not the relatives. They claimed to be from NSY but judging by what they did I'd say more likely to be from the intelligence side of things. They had all the proper paperwork from NSY, though. They took all the samples we'd taken, all the documentation, all the photos, even made us delete everything from the hard drive."

"Figures," John scoffs. "Anyone named Glencoe? A woman?" John figures that if Mycroft Holmes had been present, Molly would surely have pointed it out without being prompted.

"I wasn't here when they came over. Maybe the dead guy was Security Services as well?" Molly suggests.

"Working at a museum, watching over artefacts nobody has cared about for years? Lestrade said that nobody even knew what those things were and no one had even requested research access to them for years and years. Hardly sounds like a state secret worthy of being guarded by a spook."

"You're probably right. Plus there's no reason why they'd steal from their own agent and then kill them?" Molly concludes.

"Just some innocent museum guy, who got mixed up in something big."

"But why would he steal from his own workplace? It didn't sound like those artefacts were anything that collectors would pay a lot for on the black market. Why not steal something more valuable?"

John smooths his hand along the surface of a sofa cushion. "What if he didn't have anything to do with in the first place? Maybe someone framed him after killing him for telling the police about those things? Or maybe he was trying to hide those artefacts as per someone's orders?"

"This is beginning to sound very Indiana Jones," Molly giggles.

"How'd the guy die?"

"Strangled. Not drowned although he was found floating in that creek - couldn't find any of the native diatoms in his lungs. I'm surprised Sherlock hasn't been by to ask about the case. He'd probably get a kick out of the forensics we did on the guy's lungs."

"He hasn't?" John is surprised. He'd been certain that Sherlock had already collected all possible data - John had been merely hoping to find something that might have occurred to Molly after that.

Molly twirls a pen between two fingers. "I've not heard a peep for him recently."

John swallows, unsure whether he should share his worries.

Molly has known Sherlock for years - way longer than John. Perhaps she's seen this before.

John swallows and lets the fear he'd successfully kept stuffed to the back of his mind during his clinic shift float back to the surface. "Have you ever seen him... not well?"

Molly rubs her fingers on her cheek, gaze roving across the ceiling beams, deep in thought. "You mean ill? Sure, bouts of flu and a pneumonia or two - he never lets those slow him down, though. I once got him a course of antibiotics from the leftover stash of a research project when he was feverish, since he was close to contaminating my tables with his coughing. He refused to properly go to a doctor, or get an X-ray or the usual lab work, but judging by the terrible greenish stuff he was coughing up I thought the diagnosis was pretty clear."

"What I meant is have you ever seen him --- melancholy?"
Molly's smile wanes and to John she looks like she's suddenly remembering something unpleasant. "He hides it from you. Still," Molly says furtively.

John sits up.

She draws a breath, then explains: "Before he jumped, I saw it. He was troubled. Worried. Sad. I think that's the best word, sad. Withdrawn, but not when he was with you. I think he was making a huge effort to push you away."

Her gaze meets John's. There's grave concern residing in her brown eyes.

The notion which Molly has just introduced - that Sherlock has deliberately pushed him away once, right before doing something utterly catastrophic - chills John to the bone. "He's not hiding it anymore, not really. I have no idea what's come over him," he says.

You do have a hunch. It's not something you'd tell Molly, because of how much hate that very idea - the thought that it could be you who's making him so evasive.

"He keeps to his room, buries his nose in books. He got a surprise visit from someone a couple of weeks ago, someone from his past and it seems that there was a lot going on there. That's when it started, really."


"Have you asked him what's wrong?" Molly suggests.

John snorts. "Ask His Highly Logical Nibs to talk about his feelings? I actually did try. He told me to fuck off, only with fancier words."

Molly gives a wry smile. "That's our Sherlock."

John decides to bite the bullet and ask the other question that's burning a hole through his brain. If this makes him sound crazy, then so be it.

"Molly - do you know someone who knows something about... Weird stuff? Supernatural things? Occultism?" John looks first at the floor, and then forces himself to face Molly. He hasn't said any of this out loud to anyone before because it's insane, but what better words could describe the things that have been happening lately?

He wants to hug Molly when not even the corner of her mouth quirks up in amusement. Instead she merely looks thoughtful, as if trying to remember something. "Do you mean like a psychic? Or like Derren Brown?"

John lets out a hollow laugh. "Not really. Look, there are these books ---- It's hard to explain. I think Sherlock's been meddling with something that's... bad."

Molly sticks her hand in the pockets of her white lab coat and rocks on her heels. "That's a little vague. Maybe you could try a bookshop? I'm sure there's one somewhere in London that specialises in... the bad and the weird?"

An hour later they've compiled a list of suitable-sounding antique dealers and bookshops. John has
picked one that sounds promising and is still open at this late hour of the afternoon.

He pulls open the door to the Atlantis Occult Bookshop, located on Museum Street in Bloomsbury. The tiny bells attached to the handle chime dissonantly when he enters.

He's the only customer in the shop. An elderly man with reading glasses hanging from a silver chain around his neck looks up and raises his brows inquisitively. "Good day, Sir," he remarks and then continues labeling what looks like a pile of plastic-wrapped tarot card decks.

There's a cosy fire burning in a fireplace and next to it there's an empty leather-upholstered armchair which looks rather inviting, but John walks past it to wander around some more.

The shop is well-ordered and brightly lit - not the shady establishment with a thick fog of incense floating around John had been expecting.

In a quiet corner a sign marks the shop's collection of rare vintage books. John lets his gaze wander up and down the shelves. There are dozens upon dozens of old, mysterious tomes on offer - some of them even locked behind plexiglass, with price tags reaching up to several thousand pounds. No matter how assiduously John scrutinises the selection, he can't find any of the books Sherlock has been reading. They must be rare, if even such a connoisseur shop in a major city doesn't stock them.

John walks up to the sales counter. The gentleman manning it awards him a smile and puts down a stack of books he had been about to carry somewhere. "How can I assist you, Sir? Anything particular you might be looking for?"

John digs out his phone. With Sherlock's stern warning not to touch his things ringing in his ears and his own embarrassment of snooping around still lingering, he'd snapped a couple of photos of books Sherlock had left in the living room. Had he taken any with him, Sherlock would likely have noticed that they'd been missing or moved. John thumbs through his phone's photo collection until he finds the first image of a book cover, and shows it to the shopkeeper.

"Liber Ivonis". "Can you tell me anything about this?" John asks.

The man's expression shifts from incredulous to annoyed. "Is this a joke?"

John is taken aback. "Excuse me?"

"That book doesn't exist. It's a myth."

John's frustration flares up, "I can assure you it's not. According to an---- expert it's bound in human skin. There's more, look," John says and flicks through the next couple of images. The books depicted in these images are called 'De Vermis Mysteriis' and the 'Testament of Carnamagos'.

The shopkeeper is now leaning on the counter as though seeking fortification, shaking his head in disbelief and alarm. He raises a visibly shaking finger and points it at John's phone. "Get that thing out of here," he hisses, "Don't ever show that to anyone. Don't speak of it, don't show those images around. Ever. Forget you ever saw such things."

"I can't forget!" John says pleadingly, "I took those pictures myself!"

The man's eyes widen. "Get out!" he commands and his rhetoric leaves no room for misunderstanding, "Get out and don't ever come back! OUT!"
After a hasty exit from the bookshop John takes a long walk, wandering around Kensington Gardens until rain starts to pelt down. The dark clouds hang low and his fingers are tingling from the cold breeze.

John wishes he could be like Sherlock, who can glance at a puzzle and make the pieces fit.

It's so, so tempting to chalk a lot of things up to stress, especially given what he'd been through since Mary and the baby, some yet undiagnosed ailment Sherlock seems to have picked up, and enough time spent with Sherlock as to allow John's imagination to get the better of him. It's tempting, but it would just be the equivalent of sticking his head in the sand and hoping that it all goes away.

The shopkeeper had clearly thought that John was pranking him, showing him fake covers of books that do not even exist, and when the realisation dawned that John might actually be in possession of said tomes, he'd been thrown out. Why?

The notion of 'they're just books' had begun to sound somewhat unrealistic and belittling. But still - books. It wasn't as though Sherlock was using them in any worrisome way - trying out satanic rituals or creating love potions. He was reading them, studying them. How much harm could be borne of that?

John can't really just up and tell Sherlock to get rid of the books, can he? They're clearly rare and valuable, and they're Sherlock's now. Left to him by a former mentor. Heirlooms, clearly. Definitely not something to be heartlessly thrown away or donated to Oxfam.

There's still a good chance that this esoteric knowledge has nothing to do with Sherlock's dwindling health, because how could it possibly? They're still just books, despite what some kook running a tarot card and crystal shop might think.

Someone needs to keep a level head about this and clearly, that one needs to be John.

He raises his gaze to the weeping heavens to again beg for a new case that would give them something else to focus on, something that would end this ridiculous episode of Sherlock's.

There's one more theory John has but one certainly doesn't like to dwell on. Sometimes certain features of Sherlock's behaviour seem to go a bit beyond Aspergic or OCD. At times John has wondered if Sherlock's grasp of reality might be a bit flimsy - his tendency to throw himself into things so deeply that he doesn't even register the pressing needs of his body or the presence of others is a good example and so is the talking when no one else is present. All in all, many things that Sherlock does could raise the brows of psychiatrists. His intense forays into the Mind Palace could certainly be seen as downright dissociative behaviour.

John sits down on a bench, takes out his phone and tries to shield it from the rain by hunching over it. After a quick search he brings up a website listing the outward signs of psychosis. Sleeping too much, anxiety, depression, withdrawal and suspiciousness are among the features mentioned.

Still, outside of the more disconcerting moments Sherlock still functions quite---- not in a normal manner, but within the usual parametres of what Sherlock is like when he is clearly being a functional adult in control in his faculties. And, as far as John can tell, there are no hallucinations, nor are there concentration problems or any other signs that Sherlock might be losing control over his intellect.

Hallucinations seem to be more John's cup of tea lately, when taking into account the strange things
that have been going on in the flat. All the doors and windows had been locked, yet John had been
certain he'd heard footsteps and even seen something moving in the darkness.

The worst part may be that whatever new theory John manages to devise, the nagging feeling that
he's in way over his head - that it's all much more complicated than meets the eye - never abates.

When John finally gets home, the kitchen and the sitting room are empty, but there's a strange, raspy
sound floating into the hallway from Sherlock's bedroom.

John walks in to investigate.

The source of the quiet sound turns out to be an old phonograph playing a shellac disc. The sound is
distorted and scratchy, but John can make out enough to decide that the recording sounds like a
religious ceremony, for lack of a better word. There are male voices chanting and in the background
a strange, pulsating sound mingling with a low rumble can be heard.

John listens for a moment, not having any idea what he's hearing, except that it doesn't sound very
pleasant. The recording eventually ends, and the phonograph stops on its own accord. The needle
moves aside and the room goes quiet.

John considers it unlikely that Sherlock would have left a recording playing when heading out of the
flat, so he must be somewhere.

John returns to the foyer to shed his coat and to kick off his shoes. He makes note of Sherlock's coat
hanging there - a reassuring sight.

It's probably best to start making dinner. Despite everything that's been wrong with Sherlock's
behaviour lately, his newly found appetite continues to make John happy, even if it's coupled with a
visible drop in Sherlock's weight. John is almost tempted to buy into Sherlock's strange theories of
his metabolism not obeying the usual laws of human physiology.

Before taking on the cooking, John decides to head upstairs to change into less formal clothes than
the ensemble he's worn to work all day.

At the top of the stairs John's mind screeches an alarm when he notices something lying in front of
his closed bedroom door that certainly isn't supposed to be there.

He's down on his knees in a fraction of a second.

"Sherlock?" John taps his cheek gently, and Sherlock begins to stir. Eyelashes flutter, unfocused
eyes realign themselves into a more conjugated position and he coughs dryly.

"Hey," John says with relief, "what on earth are you doing down here?"


John lets out a relieved breath. If Sherlock is correcting him then he's clearly fully conscious and
functional. John peers into his pupils and gives Sherlock a quick once-over to make sure there aren't
signs of a head injury. None can be found.

"I was trying to find a working pen," Sherlock explains, rubbing his closed eyelids with his
"And you decided to take a nap while at it?" John might sound amused, but it's a constructed front to hide the fact that since this is likely a new symptom, his worries have acutely escalated.

"I suddenly felt dizzy. Must've blacked out."

"Anything else? Chest pain? Headache? You didn't hit your head, did you?"

Sherlock shakes his head. "I don't think so."

John takes his pulse by gently pressing his fingers on his wrist. The skin feels clammy and cold, waxy even, and Sherlock's wrist is so thin that John can circle his forefinger and his thumb around it. Why hasn't he realized how much further this weight loss has progressed? John takes his time counting the heartbeats, because he's certain his initial assessment cannot be correct. Still, no matter how many times he checks, it's the same. This shouldn't be possible. They had checked him up at the clinic, the ECG had been normal---

Sherlock's heart rate is about 14 beats per minute.

It's not just low, not just disconcertingly sparse, it's downright impossible for someone who is awake, quite calm and capable of saying sensible things. The pulse is not thready, it's surprisingly strong, but not even a marathoner's heart can discharge enough blood flow with a rate so abysmally low to maintain a healthy circulation.

John's diagnostic gears whirr into action. He runs all possible causes of intermittent bradycardia through his head and makes the obvious conclusion: conduction problem. Sick sinus syndrome, most likely, since the problem seems to come on go instead of being consistently present.

This could explain everything. Well, not everything, but a lot.

John is almost happy. If it's just a case of classic sick sinus syndrome or a third-degree heart block, it'll be easily fixed with a pacemaker. He doesn't tell this to Sherlock just yet. They need confirmation first. A new ECG, Holter monitoring, all the works.

John almost chuckles when he realizes that Sherlock would probably be fascinated with a pacemaker. He'd probably try to hack it with his mobile.

"John?" Sherlock asks, frowning. He's probably trying to decide why the edge of John's eye is twitching in concealed amusement.

"Stay down," John commands, fetches a pillow from his bedroom and arranges it under Sherlock's head so that he won't have to keep on straining his neck to see what John is doing. John then digs out his mobile from the back pocket of his jeans, and dials for the emergency services.

Sherlock is glaring daggers at him and even tries to snatch away the phone while John explains the situation to the dispatcher.

"I don't need an ambulance," Sherlock complains loud enough for the person at the other end of the line to hear, and melodramatically drops his head back on the pillow in defeat when John's step back takes him beyond the reach of his fingers.

John ends the call and gives him a stern look. "Yes, you bloody well do. No wonder we didn't catch this before - we only did a very short standard ECG strip before."
He does another pulse check. Now it's a healthy 65 per minute. Sick sinus syndrome is now appearing extremely likely. It means that the sinus node, which usually looks after the heart's pacing, is malfunctioning in fits. It's akin to a faulty wire in the cardiac conduction system. It could explain practically all of Sherlock's recent physical symptoms if John stretches his imagination a little. Besides, Sherlock is never typical in anything that he does.

They aren't even halfway through the diagnostic process yet, but John can't resist breathing a sign of relief.

*It's just a broken connection in the heart.*

Even if this can't be fixed, it can be *managed*.

Chapter End Notes

**Reference list:**

The chapter lends its title from an anthology of science fiction edited by August Derleth, a friend of Lovecraft's who has written several stories that take place in the Lovecraftian Mythos.

*De Vermis Mysteriis* is a fictional book invented by Robert Bloch and later used by Lovecraft. The title can be translated as "The Mysteries of The Worm".

*Testament of Carnamagos* is a similar fictional tome invented by Clark Ashton Smith and first featured in his short story "Xeethra". According to Smith, only two copies are known of and only one remains in existence, bound in shagreen with clasps made from human bones. I love fictional books with silly occult titles, can you tell? X-

So, John now thinks Sherlock has the wires of his heart a bit crossed, so to speak. The *sick sinus syndrome* is a real entity. Patients suffering from it can even go from bradycardia (abnormally low heart rate) to tachycardia (abnormally high heart rate) in mere moments. Wouldn't it be nice if John's diagnosis turned out to be correct? We'll find out in chapter 14 if that's the case.

-------------------------------------------

At this point I'd love to begin introducing my writing soundtrack to those readers whose fancies such a thing tickles. I shall start with what I jokingly call the main theme - a song that to me epitomizes the tone and themes of the story. It's something I tend to play at the start of every writing session to instantly kick me into the right mood. I've also listed pieces I've used as a background score.
Story theme:
Metallica's "Nothing Else Matters" as covered by a string company called Apocalyptica

Score pieces:
Danse Macabre by Camille Saint-Saens
Valse Triste by Jean Sibelius
Down By The Sea by Von Hertzen Brothers
the entire Daughter album "Not to Disappear" [a song called "Numbers"]
The Isle of The Dead by Sergey Rachmaninov
John breathes a sigh of relief upon the sight of Sherlock safely tucked into bed at the coronary care unit, the wires of a continuously recording ECG monitor snaking out from underneath his blanket.

*He's being watched. Observed. He's safe. He must be.*

Sherlock had vehemently argued against the ambulance even after the EMTs had arrived. John had reiterated his opinion of the situation in a tone that could be described colloquially as yelling.

Together with the doctors the two of them are reluctant participants in a waiting game - hoping for the heart rate problem to manifest itself so that they can confirm a need some form of treatment, because absence of evidence certainly isn't evidence of absence. Even though John is a physician, his telling of what had happened at home is not proof enough to embark on an invasive procedure such as the implantation of a pacemaker.

This is not the first time John has sat vigil beside Sherlock's hospital bed. At least this time he's not dying - if John is right in his working diagnoses, it'll be a problem that can be effectively managed. Sherlock can then stop feeling faint, tired, breathless and drained of energy. A dangerously flipflopping circulation would mean that his brain hasn't been getting enough oxygen flow at times. Could well explain why he's been a little off in so many respects.

There's going to be a diagnosis, then treatment, and then they can go back to cases and tea and arguing with NSY officers and being best friends. Like they used to and precisely how things are supposed to be when the world is not trying to unhinge itself.

*Stop fooling yourself. Something's changed.*

Maybe the nagging doubt in John's head is making him see things through a distorted lens. How could there be anything beyond these physical problems, when nothing else had happened?

*And maybe that's precisely the problem: the things that were snuffed out before they ever had the slightest chance to exist.*
John heads home late in the evening to pick up some things for the both of them. He had briefly contemplated spending the night at home instead of the hospital, but decided against it. He wants to be there, if only for company's sake. Bedrest and limitations to his autonomy make for a sulking, moody Sherlock and John knows that being present to cushion his interactions with the staff will make things easier for everyone involved. When things are serious, even Sherlock can be rather sensible about medical treatment, if not for his propensity to make hasty escapes after being shot in the chest. Sherlock likely doesn't share his sentiment of this current situation being as serious as the gunshot wound, but John is willing to argue as long as it takes to make him see reason. So far he's been reticent but somewhat co-operative.

_Gunshot. Mary._ The memories are like a weight sitting on his chest. _Not now!_

He returns to the hospital with the last tube train of the evening. The CCU corridor is empty save from a television set attached to the wall at the opposite end of the long hall. A fluorescent lamp is blinking with a crackling sound near the nurses' station.

While walking past it, John steals an idle glance at the remote patient monitors, one of them showing a view of Sherlock's single room.

When his eyes fall on the correct monitor, he nearly drops the bag of Sherlock's belongings he's carrying.

He blinks, unsure of what he's seeing and if he is actually seeing what his visual cortex claims to be registering.

In the grainy CCTV image, Sherlock is not in his bed.

He is _above_ it.

It looks as though he's floating in midair, back distorted backwards in an odd angle.

John lets go off the bag without even realizing doing so and sprints to the door to Sherlock's room, flinging it open so violently the soft-close mechanism groans.

The sight that meets him is... deceptively, mind-bendingly _normal._

In the dim light of the room John can see that Sherlock is now lying on top of the bedding, looking as though he's asleep. A couple of monitor wires have become dislodged, but that could easily just be a result of tossing and turning in bed.

John briskly walks closer and peers down at the slumbering, pale body in the bed.

Nothing seems out of the ordinary.

Maybe it's not Sherlock that's wrong after all.

Maybe John _is_ the one who's going crazy.

He lets his gaze roam around, looking for something, _anything_ that would prove otherwise, prove that he's not hallucinating.

He clicks on the beside lamp. He gently tries to readjust Sherlock's white-and-blue striped hospital gown, the strings of which are untied, so that his chest is more covered in the chill of the heavily air-
conditioned room.

That's when he sees them: faint white marks visible on the skin below his collarbones.

Sherlock does not stir when John tugs the gown gently down towards his waistline.

There are twelve of these white, elongated round marks visible on his chest and upper abdomen in a neat, symmetrical pattern.

They look a bit like *dermographia alba*, the white lines appearing on the skin of people suffering from an allergic rash or atopic eczema after something sharpish has been drawn along the skin as caused by the constriction of blood vessels instead of the reddish welts that appear in the skin of healthy individuals in a similar situation.

Still, even those kinds of white lines are supposed to start fading soon after the touch of whatever has caused it stops. These aren't going anywhere.

They look like scratch marks, but the skin is intact.

Twelve marks. Patterned as if twelve fingers had made them.

John shudders.

Then he digs out his phone, and takes a picture.

The welts don't show in it.

"What the hell---" John mutters and when he returns his line of sight from the phone to the marks, they're gone.

Sherlock is now awake, eyes narrowed to slits, watching John.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asks after noticing the phone in John's hands, still poised as though he's snapping a photo.

"Nothing, I'm just, it's. They were just there!" he exclaims, pointing at his chest.

Sherlock pulls his gown up to his neck with a look of alarm and dismay, but John manages to see that the marks are now nowhere to be seen. He lets his hand drop.

Sherlock raises the head of the bed with his remote and leans back against the pillows. Strangely enough, he doesn't interrogate John any further about his admittedly odd behaviour.

Sherlock distractedly scratches his bare arm, evading John's gaze, and John notices a perfectly normal, reddish blush on the skin after Sherlock removes his hand. It fades quickly.

"Was someone here with you?" John demands and Sherlock shakes his head. "Are you sure?"

"The only one who's been here tonight, apart from the nurses, is you," Sherlock answers calmly. "See for yourself," he adds and moves his arm around in an arc as to present the entire room to John.

John opens the closet door, peers into the en suite, even behind the shower curtain. He leans down on his right knee to look under the bed. The shadows seem to be concealing nothing.

"You're not interested at all, then?" John says and hides his shaking hands in his jacket pockets. "No curiosity whatsoever?" There's a waver in his voice that Sherlock is bound to pick up, and his pitch
"Explain," Sherlock remarks in a calm, disinterested tone that he often uses with clients whose stories are not proving entertaining enough. He crosses his fingers on top of the blanket. Usually Sherlock's calmness has a worry-evaporating effect on John, but tonight his attitude feels like a wall of ice being dropped down between the two of them.

John runs a hand through his hairs, wanting to pull half of them out just to feel anything but this hollow abandonment, this sense of no one understanding and no one accepting the reasons for the fear that has become his regular companion. "You don't think there's anything going on at all? Not here, not now, not at the flat?"

Sherlock keeps looking at him expectantly, wanting John to elaborate.

"You're the world's most observant man, and you think it's business as usual, then? Mm?" John wants to punch a wall, take off his shoe and throw it through the plexiglass on the door - anything, really, to dissipate this boundless frustration that is courting the afterburns of adrenaline and fear. Anything, to prove that the universe still functions as it used to. Glass breaks, bones crack and flatmates don't float in midair.

Sherlock's gaze narrows. "Instead of hurling general accusations at me you might want to be a bit more precise. If you think there's something going on besides the health issues you are trying your damnedest to diagnose in me, I'd like to see some proof."

"You want proof?" John asks and makes it a rhetorical question by marching out to the hallway and straight to the nurses' station, now manned by a yawning ward sister. "Excuse me?" John asks, his tone much less polite than his wording.

"Evening, Dr Watson," she answers, taking in John's determined expression and still slightly pale complexion. "Is everything alright?"

"No, it bloody well isn't. Do those things record or is it just a live feed?"

The nurse scrutinizes the set of monitors, leaning against the counter. "We sometimes arrange taping if we suspect syncope attacks but it's not done routinely."

"Any chance you would have been recording with the one in room 24?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"Well, you probably should start doing that, then."

"Is this a police matter, Dr Watson? What do you think has happened?"

"No, it's--- hard to explain, really," he says, now more sheepishly than angrily. Without proof he'd just sound insane.

"Recording a patient for diagnostic reasons requires an order from the consulting physician. I could put in a request to discuss the case in the morning, unless you think it's urgent?"

John leans over the counter to peer at the monitor. The room is empty, save for a Sherlock who appears to be fiddling with the TV remote. "No, it's fine. I'll talk to him in the morning if he's available."

The nurse's expression is a mixture of relief and suspicion. John hasn't left her much to go on, but
she's probably happy since she's not being forced to call a potentially busy and grumpy call doctor at this hour.

John returns to Sherlock's room, now illuminated only by the bluish, flickering images of a late night newscast.

John grabs a chair and places it in the corner of the room, pretending to be watching TV but watches Sherlock instead, stealing occasional glances at the monitors.

The steady, normally paced heartbeat offers him relief beyond measure, but does not erase the chill from his spine.

There are no further incidents that night, but John does not sleep a single eyeful.

The continuous ECG monitoring shows nothing out of the ordinary. A cardiac ultrasound shows a perfectly healthy organ as far as the cardiologists are concerned.

No other part of the battery of tests that have already been done show any discrepancies, either.

The next morning, John argues with the doctors until an electrophysiologic catheterization procedure is scheduled. He then practically bullies Sherlock into consenting, painfully aware that he's probably breaking the GMC code of conduct in an impressive number of ways. He doesn't care. Something's got to give, and he'll not allow it to be Sherlock's dwindling health.

After the procedure has been done, the ward sister of the OR begrudgingly allows him to sit with Sherlock. The catheterization has been done under sedation, and Sherlock is fast asleep when John walks in.

He drags a chair from the nurses' station to the small recovery area designated for cardiac patients.

Sherlock's consulting cardiologist nearly walks past them, but retraces his steps when he spots John.

They go over the findings. There really aren't any. As far as the cardiologist is concerned, they can close the book on John's working diagnosis of a conduction issue.

"As you know, brief but profound bradycardias are possible with benign vasovagal syncope," the man reminds John, who nods while secretly gritting his teeth. "I think he'll be fine," the cardiologist then reassures John and leaves.

John looks at Sherlock. The formerly lissom man now looks borderline emaciated, with sunken facial features, almost bluishly dark shadows under his eyes. The normally angular bone structure of his ribcage seems almost withdrawn now. He's so pale he appears almost translucent. John begins wondering about anaemia until he realizes it's one of the first things they had thoroughly assessed with Sarah's help at the clinic.

'He'll be fine.'

John briefly considers at least trying to believe that dismissive assessment. Maybe he needs to accept that there's nothing physically wrong with Sherlock. Nothing, at least, that John's medical school education and his clinical experience or the skills and knowledge of even the best of his colleagues could reveal.
'Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.' That's what Sherlock himself has told him on several occasions.

How is it possible to tell impossible from merely improbable? Is John's brain suddenly betraying his own senses, or is something impossible truly happening in the physical reality of his world?

Surely a man going insane wouldn't notice such a thing happening to him? Is this some kind of an experiment of Sherlock's, making John think he's lost it and seeing if and how he'll figure it out? Or is this some fucked-up folie a deux? Have they been drugged?

Sherlock's drug tests and toxicology screens had been clear both at the clinic and when done less than 24 hours ago.

John goes to the toilet, rolls up his sleeves and lifts his own shirt, turning a full circle in front of the mirror. Everything looks normal. He scrutinizes himself in the mirror - he looks like he always does. No bloodless complexion, no strange markings. The metallic taste is still there, but he had changed his toothpaste brand only a short while ago.

While Sherlock sleeps off the sedatives, John sneaks into an empty office on the OR floor and closes the door behind him. He leans the back of his head against a wall and puts his mind to work.

He again wishes he could do what Sherlock does - to connect the dots no one else even realizes exist.

When did this all start?

Around the time Lestrade came calling with the museum case.

Around the time Victor Trevor had appeared on their doorstep.

When exactly had Sherlock begun to behave oddly?

*The books. The books from Victor's father. And whatever else was in those boxes.*

Since the former owner of those things is now deceased, John decides there's just one person in existence who could possibly have answers.

Victor never left them any contact information. John racks his brain trying to remember anything and everything that the man may have said that could help in finding him.

*It was some village in Cornwall. Fall something.*

John digs out his phone and searches for 'fall cornwall'.

'Cornwall Lions Fall Harvest feast'. No.

'Fall Harvest Race 7,5 miles'. Hardly.

'The Greater Cornwall Chamber of Commerce'. Aha. On closer inspection, not very useful after all.

John then remembers something more: the video rental Victor had said he ran.
He restructures his search, and finally lands on an establishment called Noden's Video Shop in Falmouth.

Falmouth - that's the village name he'd been trying to remember.

John dials the number on the website. It's 1 p.m., and unsurprisingly, after a few rings, a familiar voice answers, announcing the name of the shop.


"Okay, John. What can I do for you? Surely you're not looking to rent something?"

John doesn't care much for jokes at the moment. "No. It's about Sherlock."

"Figures. Did he claim Father's things?"

"He did. And I think that's proving to be a problem."

Victor lets out a long breath. "He's at it again, isn't he?" his tone is resigned, thick and soaked with memories.

"If you're referring to the books, yes. It's all he does. And I don't think it's doing him any good. Which is why I'm calling. He's not telling me anything, and I don't understand a word of what's in them."

"Look, John-" Victor's tone is apologetic and pained, "I know very little myself. Father never wanted me to find out much. Said that he wouldn't let me waste my life with such stuff. Why he'd think Sherlock's life was any different or acceptable to be ruined like his own is beyond me."

"I understood that he was a sort of an apprentice to your father?"

"I don't think they had a formal agreement. Sherlock was a biochemistry major and I think Father saw something in him - no doubt you've realized how extraordinarily smart he is."

*Understatement of the decade.*

"He doesn't let that go unnoticed, no."

"He used to be shy. Had a tendency to stammer a bit when nervous. Father gave him a huge confidence boost, I think, made him realize his potential. Before all that he had been sort of drifting through his studies with no clear direction."

"What the hell is that direction that he found, then?" John sounds more demanding than he would have liked but he's had it with subterfuge and avoiding important issues.

Victor doesn't seem offended. "I don't know what's in those books or what Father was teaching him. Father never got all that far in his own studies of that sort, I think, which frustrated him, but Mother still felt as though he didn't care about anything else and left us. Something made her scared enough to leave not only him, but also her children behind - me and my sister, that is. Don't get me wrong, we were well looked after, just not by Father or Mother."

John says nothing, hoping that Victor will continue. He doesn't.

"I'm not calling just to rattle any skeletons or upset you," John says, "I know what it's like to have to accept you've got a messed-up family. What I'm looking to find is a way to get through to Sherlock that this is unhealthy. That he's unhealthy. That however interesting or challenging it is, it's not good
"That's what I tried to convince him to believe, too," Victor says quietly, "I know he cared about me, he really did, but I think there's something, not in those books, but connected to that knowledge, that when it grabs hold of you, you'd have to be pretty damned strong not to lose yourself. Your priorities get mixed up. You need to have real incentive to leave it be and he didn't seem to have enough reason to do so when he was with me. I don't know if Sherlock cared enough about me that if I'd have made him choose, he would not have gone the way of those damned books and scriptures and artefacts. I think he's got a bit of a reckless, self-destructive streak. Sometimes I'm glad things ended, we ended."

John bites his lip, wanting to ask what exactly had transpired, but it's not his business in the least. And he's not certain it has all that much to do with what's happening now.

"They're just books," John says, suddenly feeling very tired and very, very confused.

"Yet you're calling me because of them."

"There was also a case, something to do with some artefacts at the British Museum."

"Father used to talk about things he didn't have access to, things he suspected were stored there or at some other well-known museums. 'Hiding in plain sight' is how he described it. Sounded like an old man's conspiratory ramblings, but he was very secretive about it all, and sometimes he seemed to worry for his life. Had his will drawn and everything." Victor pauses and John can hear a radio playing in the background. "If they're just books, John, then surely the Bible, the Quran and whatever Mao had written are 'just' books, too, even when their followers have gone to war over them. We've all seen what that sort of extremism based on the misinterpretation of 'just books' can do."

"Sherlock doesn't care about religion or other sorts of fanatic ideologies. He prefers thinking for himself, testing a theory before he lets himself be convinced."

"Did you see the human body and our brains differently after going through medical school, than how you did before it?" Victor asks.

"Sure."

"Can you undo that knowledge, go back to the way you were before?"

"No. I'm not sure what you're saying."

"He's curious, and he cares about how the universe works. If he's testing some theory, what theory could that be? I always had this pipe dream that if Father hadn't sent him packing, had kept him on even after----" Victor pauses and John grabs a firmer hold of the phone, trying to will Victor into explaining, "That he would have chosen me over that arcane bullshit. Because that's what it has to be, if it makes you not care about anything else. It scared me, the way it grabbed Sherlock's attention. I made a mistake--"

"Please," John says without even thinking it through, "Please tell me."

There's a pained silence at the other end for a moment.

"I'm sorry, John. It was a long time ago and it's still raw. Whether you like it or not, he's your mess now, not mine."
John is suddenly shaking with rage. It flares up so quickly it sends his heart rate galloping. "My mess? YOU brought this to our doorstep, literally! He's been fine, he's been doing really well with his life, and then you show up and now he's sick, he's withdrawn, he doesn't talk to me! I can tell you watching all that and being able to do a whole bloody nothing is hard, too! And if that's all you've got to say, then TO HELL with you!"

John suddenly yearns for an old-fashioned cord phone, because slamming a proper receiver down is so much more emotionally satisfying than just tapping the 'disconnect call' -button.

John returns to the recovery area from the staff toilet he'd made the call from, trying his damnedest to fight the feeling of helplessness twisting his stomach into knots.

"You'd tell me if I was going insane, wouldn't you? You know me better than probably anyone does so you could tell, right?"

Sherlock awards John's pleading enquiry with an incredulous and slightly amused look. "If you ever exhibited signs of mental illness, I'm sure my brother would promptly have you sectioned. Yes, I would tell you and no, I wouldn't let him do that."

It's a healthy reminder that Mycroft probably still watches them through some sort of surveillance at home. John would love to get his hands on those tapes.

Gloria-not-Anthea promises to deliver them to John, once she will able to clear it with Mycroft.

"When will that be?"

"I couldn’t possibly say."

"Don't tell me - he's 'not available'?” John asks, and ends the call.

Chapter End Notes

Reference time!
Just one this time: Nodens (Lord of the Great Abyss) appears as a human male riding a huge seashell pulled by legendary beasts. Invented by Lovecraft.
Something very like fright

Chapter Notes

It's time to treat you to a long chapter. A very important one. One that I have been especially looking forward to sharing with you.

A beta goddess among mortals, Emma221b mopped up after my blunders and for that we should all be most grateful. Skilled betas are the lifeblood of writing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You asked for night: it falls: it is here.
- Charles Baudelaire

Despite John's protests, Sherlock is discharged. John had tried to raise every possible differential diagnosis from eating disorders to even an undiagnosed malignancy, only to be shot down by his colleagues who can find nothing worrying in Sherlock's physical exam results, imaging reports, a tilt test to detect vasovagal syncope with a normal result, or any of the lab work to warrant further scrutiny. John knows that if he was in his colleagues' place he'd make the exact same call. 'The patient is functioning normally and has no complaints about his well-being. Recommend discharge with no further examinations.'

John tries to enthusiastically raise the subject of a full week of ECG monitoring, but the cardiologists are reluctant and the point is moot, because Sherlock declines such an undertaking. It's his first input into the conversations concerning his treatment.

It's not like him to be this disinterested or obliging. All in all, Sherlock has endured all the scrutiny uncharacteristically patiently, and John suspects it's because he thinks John will get off his case if his curiosity and worry are satisfied by a thorough workup.

"If you don't stop arguing, they're going to start looking into the possibility that you have munchausen by proxy, John," Sherlock finally points out, after a discussion between John and Sherlock's doctors had resulted in something akin to an uneasy truce and the doctors have left the room.

"The current term for that is 'factitious illness imposed on another'," John had quite facetiously indeed corrected him.

Their eyes are locked in a staring match. Sherlock is fingering the edge of his blanket as though he's about to fling it away and leave. Which he's entitled to, since the decision to discharge has now been made.

"You've had your frivolous professional curiosity satisfied. Will you let me go now?" he asks.

He sounds so resigned, so tired that once again, John finds his reservoir of worry to be even more
limitless than he had been aware of.

Before all this started, Sherlock had practically always won every argument between them - or at least abandoned the conversation with some righteously indignant, melodramatic move. Lately, every time John tries to confront him about something he looks as though he's expecting a slap on the face. It's as though some defence has been permanently decimated, and John's verbal arrows fly straight through without hindrance.

He knows he's a soft spot for Sherlock, a special case allowed more leeway than others when it comes to calling Sherlock Holmes out on his bullshit. He knows he's a liability of sorts, a pressure point, but never before has he acknowledged the destructive potential that his words and actions seem to have over Sherlock.

This is Sherlock, diminished and defeated. And that frightens John more than any physical symptom ever could.

"I'm not going to let you go anywhere. We are going to go home, sit on the damned sofa and have a quiet night in. That sounds nice, doesn't it?" he tries to sound encouraging but in his ears it sounds alarmingly perky, almost grotesquely so.

Despite all the setbacks, despite the feeling that he's in way over his head, John isn't discouraged from fighting for him, because who else is there for Sherlock now?

Sherlock nods, slides out of bed and walks to the locker in the corner of the room where his clothes and other belongings had been put in after his hospital admission. John watches as he changes clothes, not bothering to avert his eyes. They live together. They're past that sort of unease. And it's not like Sherlock doesn't walk around the flat in just a sheet. Not lately, though. Lately he's hidden himself in suits and coats and blankets.

There are no bruises, no white, elongated fingerprints or anything else out of the ordinary on the landscape of Sherlock's pale skin except for a plaster in the crook of his arm due to blood samples having been taken.

John moves to his side when Sherlock retrieves his coat from the locker. Without a word, John grabs the coat around its shoulder seams and helps Sherlock get it on.

His reward is a smile. Not a wide one and certainly not the triumphant blaze of excitement that Sherlock's crime scene and post-case bliss smiles are, but it's something.

Two days later, Sherlock returns from one of the 'research' trips he has taken up again. He doesn't look much better, health-wise, but at least there haven't been any more alarming episodes of him passing out. To John's surprise, he doesn't retreat to his book-filled crypt of a bedroom that evening. Instead, he lingers in the sitting room, idling about, arranging and rearranging various items.

His sleeping habits also seem to be approaching how they'd been in the long term. He's spent the last two nights pacing around his room as far as John has been able to tell. Last night, John had made him a mug of chamomile tea which had been met with disgust, but to John's surprise Sherlock had still drunk it.
On the surface he's behaving more normally than he has for a long time, but he seems more restless than he gets between cases. On edge, as though waiting for something. Expecting something. During the day, he seems unable to concentrate on anything. Hasn't picked up his violin, keeps interrupting his reading just to listen or stare out the window. There are also the aborted sentences even in conversations about everyday things, and the fidgety hand-wrting.

It's painful to watch him - the agitation is infectious and John finds himself reading the same newspaper page over and over again, not remembering a word of what his eyes have just skimmed over.

Instead of entrenching himself in his room Sherlock has taken up a habit of lingering around John as though making sure he's there and not going anywhere. When John aknowledges his presence, he usually darts back to his bedroom only to reappear moments later, usually with a book in hand.

John has heard him mumbling something indecipherable - on occasion even talking to himself but he couldn't make out individual words through the bathroom door separating them.

John is still tempted to consider some sort of a psychosis as a possible explanation, but during the rare moments that Sherlock seeks to communicate with him, he seems largely back to normal. That is not how psychosis works. It can't be turned off and on, with completely lucid periods in-between. Sherlock would act oddly all the time if such a theory was correct.

If John wasn't so tempted to think in medical terms, he would probably describe Sherlock's behaviour as that of a person expecting something unpleasant to happen but unable or unwilling to stop it.

At the moment Sherlock is standing by the fireplace, skull in hand, twisting it around in his fingers.

John watches him for a moment, dishrag in hand and the chilling spikes of worry prickling on his spine. What if something happens, and suddenly he loses Sherlock again, like he did that day years ago?

So much has happened since, so much that has tied his fate to that of Sherlock's even more intimately than before his leap off the hospital roof.

How does Sherlock feel about this symbiosis? Through his two-year absence, through John's ailing and then failing marriage, during the business with Magnussen and their joint mission to eradicate the remnants of Moriarty Sherlock had held on like a general in a war, doing what he must, never vocalizing what it was that he, Sherlock, needed or wanted. It was as though life had been a tide along which he'd allowed himself to be swept - he'd been given these missions to attend to, these mysteries to solve, and he would see them through with no regard to himself.

Once, in his youth, he may have had very different ideas about the way he would have wanted his life to do. Did he miss those dreams, those ideas of a very different future? He'd been a brilliant student with a devoted mentor and a fledgling love until tragedy had struck - it was obvious from what John had pieced together from Victor's words that things had somehow gone to hell in a handbasket in a manner that Victor thought could still affect Sherlock. They certainly seemed to be still affecting Victor.

John tries to imagine a younger Sherlock, the sort of Sherlock that Victor had described during his visit to the flat. The idea of a shy, stammering, besotted young man in place of the private, determined, abrasively confident man currently scrutinizing dust patterns on their manteliece is strange to say the least.
John tries to imagine Sherlock and Victor exchanging stolen looks, coy smiles, tentative touches and enjoying apprehensive kisses underneath elm trees lining endless green Oxford lawns.

He shakes his head with an incredulous smile. It happened, but there's a black hole in between those borrowed memories and the Sherlock John knows. A lot must have happened to rip such a chasm.

Maybe what had happened that one night, in the dark downstairs, had been the younger, more hopeful and less cynical version Sherlock reaching out across all those years for one final attempt at having what he'd been left without for a long time. A connection. A union.

John needs to make his peace with that moment, so that they can move past it. Make peace with his guilt, his confusion and his mortifying failure to communicate so that they can get past it and start again.

John closes his eyes, leaning on the kitchen sink. He tries to muster up the courage to remember that one night and look further, think further, dare to imagine what could have transpired.

He almost jolts out of those memories when he realizes that he can't do this in front of Sherlock, who is now sitting cross-legged on the sitting room floor. John quickly averts his eyes, fearing that Sherlock will home those strange-coloured irises on him and somehow read his mind. It's still so new, so raw and so frightening in John's head that he refuses to see it splayed open by Sherlock before he understands it himself. John needs to come to grips with his own feelings before he can start sorting out those of Sherlock's. He can't afford another cock-up. They can't afford another such disaster.

If he's ever to talk about this with Sherlock, to talk about how they feel about each other, John will probably need to take the reins. Judging by all he knows about the man, Sherlock will likely look at a romantic relationship like an exotic creature that might either welcome him or bite him in the arse without being able to deduce which option is more likely.

Sherlock turns on the television and begins watching the evening news.

John finally resumes drying the dinner plates and listens with half an ear.

"Suspicion of chemical soil contamination in Berkshire. Several estates centered around the Nahum estuary are complaining of wheat crops growing outstandingly well, but the taste is reported to be so terrible as to render the crops inedible, and they have caused several cases of poisoning similar to that caused by Datura. Locals have reported a meteorite hitting a nearby lake prior to the crops becoming inedible, but local authorities have dismissed the possibility that this might have been the cause. A more likely source of contamination is the electronic waste disposal facility located upstream. Local conservationists are protesting---"

John loses interest in the news and heads for a shower. Sherlock pays him little attention. John makes a mental note to watch something on the telly with him later, to make good use of this opportunity to communicate with him without a bedroom door separating them.

Standing under the warm stream of the shower jet, John finally lets his guard down. The hot water drains the tension from his shoulders and he feels like crumpling into an exhausted heap on the bottom of the bathtub.

He's been walking on eggshells, half-holding his breath for weeks now, spending a lot of energy in trying to explain away all these strange occurrences and trying not to give Sherlock reason to react negatively to his presence. Could it be just that he's just being more observant of everything, now that he feels that something is amiss with Sherlock? Has he been trying to find patterns in the universe
where they don't exist, just to find a plausible explanation?

A sudden urge to protect Sherlock at all costs comes over him like a tidal wave. Do something, a voice much like his own demanding in his head. Trust your instincts. Forget reason and normal and sensible. Believe, if that's what it takes to protect him.

Believe. In what exactly?

'T'd be lost without my blogger.'

John wants to scream but all that comes out is a bone-tired, choked-up grunt. He leans his open palm against the wall tiling for fortification, trying to focus on inhaling and exhaling in equal amounts.

He's alone now so he can do this. He can let himself think about it all.

To think about Sherlock in ways that he's never allowed himself to do. He has wanted to, but so many things have made him insist such things never even cross his mind. 'So many useless, unimportant, ridiculous, bourgeois things', comments the Sherlock that lives inside his head and occupies way too big a chunk of his thoughts than is sane or healthy.

He closes his eyes, and lets the memories flood in.

He's holding his breath, waiting. Sherlock is holding his wrist. His heart is pounding, pulse ringing in his ears like waves crashing against rocks.

Bony, cold fingers touching his cheek, trailing down towards his chin, gently, gingerly, lovingly. John's skin anticipates more, expects more, more of this, more of Sherlock. All of Sherlock, always.

The fingers stop at his chin, forefinger almost hooking underneath his jawline. John knows this gesture, it's what he's done many times. Christ, he knows exactly what this is, what it's an invitation for---

A sudden intake of breath. Sherlock steps closer.

John realizes that he's well on his way to a hard-on already. A sarcastic laugh escapes his lips - so much for all his public, verbal insisting that Sherlock Holmes does nothing for him whatsoever.

Why had he not stepped forward and claimed what had been freely offered by a Sherlock whose defences had been completely down, heart bare and fragile? Why hadn't he stepped forward and claimed what he wanted?

When had it even began? There had been no grand moment of revelation. Without even realizing, they'd gradually become inseparable, tied to one another more tightly than John had even been to another human being.

Perhaps he'd just been so shellshocked with the boldness of Sherlock’s actions and mortified by fear of misinterpreting the situation and acting on an invitation wasn't there. He'd been unsure if he was completely ready to take that last step, aware that they were playing with fire, terrified of getting it wrong. It was human to hesitate at such a precipice, was it not?

Still, in his hesitation, John had destroyed that fragile thing, and the moment had gone.

How had Sherlock felt upon hearing his very public dismissals of the very possibility of them ever being together as more than friends? Had they struck him as John ridiculing and disapproving of his orientation and his heart?
He’ll probably need to apologize for all that at some point. Sherlock won’t know what to do with such an apology but it needs to happen.

John had once asked what he'd done to deserve Mary, and Sherlock’s answer had been ‘everything’.

That says it all, really.

Everything John has done is what has lead up to this, too. The patterns of his life, what he wants, what he needs, irrevocably tied to one person. He is clearly a creature of habit since he has repeated the end result, too, by completely, utterly, irrevocable bollocking everything up.

What would have happened if he hadn't hesitated in the hallway downstairs? The whole concept of kissing Sherlock, kissing Sherlock bloody Holmes, was something that seems like a concept too earth-shattering and complex for his brain to process entirely.

All John knows is that if he loses Sherlock, he loses himself. He would never have said that about Mary - or about anyone else he has ever met on this Earth. He'd loved Mary, but somehow it doesn't really compare. It never has.

Even in this, Sherlock is in a league of his own.

Kissing or not kissing is a side note, an irrelevant minuscule detail, but the symbolics of that one moment are not lost on him. For Sherlock it may have been a do or die sort of a deal.

John needs to own up to it. He needs to accept that whatever bad has been going on with Sherlock lately, he may be to blame. Even if he's not the cause, he may have been the catalyst.

Protect him.

Believe.

John makes a decision. All this nonsense has to end right now. Things are not going to do back to how they were before - he now recognizes that it's not a feasible option. But they're not going to continue the way they are, either. And if he does right by the both of them, things might even get better than they've ever been.

They're going to talk, and John is going to burn those books, if need be. Sherlock will be furious, but that's irrelevant. He's faced a livid Sherlock Holmes before, and survived. And maybe, just maybe, he could change Sherlock's mind about giving up on him.

There's something he needs to do first, though. It's a small thing, but it's been driving him crazy and it's as good a place to start fixing this mess as any.

After draping a towel around himself, John kneels down in front of the bathroom sink.

The mould under the sink has grown again. John had been meaning to eradicate it before, but the hospital trip had foiled his plans.

Tiny antenna-like proboscis are now peering out from the frogskin-like surface of the mould. When John brings his open palm close to it, it seems to hum soundlessly like an electric field. He gently touches it, and that brief brush of fingers leaves a slight tingling on his skin. There are bubble-like red blisters within the spongy surface that almost look like eyes.

John dresses, goes to the kitchen and heats a kettlefull of water. He pours in a good helping of a bleach-containing cleaning solution Mrs Hudson had left in their cupboard.
Sherlock shoots him an inquisitive glance.

"I'm getting rid of the mould in the loo," John tells him.

"Oh," is the reply he receives. Sherlock returns his attention to the television.

John takes his loot to the bathroom. He wets a small flannel in the steaming kettle, and presses it against the mould.

The gelatinous mass of it peels of easily from the surface of the sink, making a faint fizzing noise as the slimy mounds of it melt into a runny, brown mess that is soon disappearing down the drain. After a bit of light scrubbing with the flannel it's all gone. There's a rumbling gurgle from the drain when the last bits of the mould disappear down into the pipes.

John stands up, knee aching slightly as he stretches into his full height.

The mould had looked so foul that it doesn't feel beyond the realm of possibility that it might be producing some sorts of toxic spores or vapours that are causing the both of them hallucinations.

John still remembers vividly Sherlock's flesh-eating plant hobby of 2014 that had fizzled out quickly because Sherlock had left that experiment untended and the plants had died and rotted, leaving behind a stench strong enough that other neighbours besides just Mrs Hudson had begun to complain.

John has become sceptical of easy explanations of late, but the chance that it may all have just been a hallucinogenic mould playing tricks on their brains is comforting.

He's going to get rid of everything toxic or unhealthy in the flat. Getting rid of a patch of mould surely won't solve anything, but it's been bothering him for a while now and it needs to go.

Just like the books need to go. As soon as possible.

John dries the bathroom floor with his towel and throws some empty shampoo bottles in the rubbish bin. When he returns to the kitchen, the room is empty and dark. The TV is off.

The door to Sherlock's bedroom is closed.

John sighs. It's late. Enforcing his emotional revelations on Sherlock will have to wait.

Tomorrow. It'll happen tomorrow. His determination hasn't wavered an inch. He will put his foot down. If it means learning to talk about his own confused feelings in the process, so be it. Sherlock deserves to hear it all.

John glances at the antique table clock on the mantlepiece. Half-past eleven. His self-grooming and the mould-decimation had taken longer than he'd thought. Usually it's Sherlock who hogs the bathroom for uncanny amounts of time, making John worry that some unsightly experiment is taking place.

John yawns. He needs to replenish his strength, because come tomorrow, he's going to fix everything.

Sleep comes easily.
In the middle of the night, something startles John awake. Before he's even aware of his surroundings, he has sat up in bed.

The darkness is thick and suffocating. It's as though time is standing still.

Dead cells float across his corneas like ghosts, making him blink to focus, and the overworked neurons in his brain seem to be adding colours into the engulfing blackness in the room.

It's quiet again. Too quiet. It's as though a stagnant veil has descended, blocking off the rest of the world. It's hard to imagine anything at all existing beyond these walls.

The air is dry and tastes like ashes on John's tongue. He feels as though he's been wrung dry, as though he hasn't been allowed a singly drop of water for days.

He can feel the hairs on his neck standing up. It's as if his skin is picking up static electricity in the air. His limbs feel heavy and the logical decision would be to stay in bed, let himself be lulled back to sleep by the quiet, but instead of feeling relaxed it's like seeing a thundercloud at the edge of the horizon - the ominous waiting for the first thunderclap, the first flash of lightning.

Suddenly a thought like a soundless alarm shrills in his brain, and if he could instinctively tense the bones in his inner ear to dampen it, he would.

Sherlock.

Go to Sherlock, right now!

Something is pulling him downstairs with increasing urgency, telling him to check on Sherlock, to go to Sherlock, hurry, no time to waste.

John flings the blankets away and shifts his feet from underneath the covers to the floor. He expects to feel the usual draft, but instead his toes slide into something that feels like warm mist.

He squints in the darkness and tries to switch on the lamp on his nightstand. He flinches when the bulb explodes with a crack and a flash and the darkness clings to him again.

John looks down to his feet, where a whisper-like warmth is still cradling his feet. It's a faint, iridescent glow that floats and swirls near the floor. Its bluish, alien colour resembles images of cherenkov radiation John remembers seeing during his modern physics classes in college - electromagnetic energy in the visible light spectrum that can be seen in the water tanks shielding nuclear reactors.

The glow seems to move with the mist. John leans down and waves his hand next to his foot. The mist moves like smoke, around his fingers in churning clouds. Its glow around his hand has now dimmed but is now pulsating slightly like a sickly, thready heartbeat.

It's as if it is reacting to his heartbeat, adopting its rhythm.

He straightens up, shaking his hand just in case something is clinging onto it.

Sherlock!
John curses for becoming momentarily distracted. His words sound distorted, distant and he’s not even sure he had actually said them out loud.

He walks to the door, muscle memory and the faint blue glow on the floor guiding his way.

He makes his way down the stairs as quietly as he can. As far as he knows, there shouldn’t be anyone else, nothing else in the apartment besides its usual occupants, but something is making him cautious and setting his teeth on edge.

He stumbles a little when his estimate of the number of stairs they have turns out to be one too little.

The darkness downstairs is even more overwhelming than in his bedroom. John wonders if Sherlock has closed all the curtains for some reason, since not even the dim glow of the streetlamps is able to reach inside.

He doesn’t turn on the hall light, because something is telling him not to raise attention.

Just a few steps and he’ll be at Sherlock’s door.

John forces himself to draw in a deep breath. The door will be closed like it's supposed to be, everything is calm and normal and peaceful and bloody perfect.

It's open. The door is wide open.

Even before his habits had begun resembling those of a hermit librarian, Sherlock had always closed his door for the night.

Sherlock would probably appreciate it if John closed it for him now. He'd be alarmed to find it open in the morning.

John takes one more step to grab hold of the door handle. That step places him in the middle of the doorway, and that’s when he sees it.

A creature taller than any human stands between the bed and where the window used to be. There’s no wall, no window there now - just a swirling maelstrom of multicoloured darkness mixed with the blue glow that is much stronger here than in any other room.

John gasps, vocal chords suddenly so completely petrified that the scream struggling to escape never makes it out. He stands frozen, staring, gaping, shaking with fear as he watches the scene unfolding in Sherlock’s bedroom.

The creature is white as marble, its limbs long and thin, leathery skin wrapped painfully tight around its lissome bones. Lit by the moving, cascading, writhing, swirling otherworldly glow of the blue mist its colours appear to resemble cold, white starlight. Its head looks like the skull of a bison or some other grazing animal. Where one would expect a face there are no eyes, no mouth, and the lower part of the head ends in a cascade-like curtain of glittering skin. Pearl-like nubs decorate the ridges of its head and its back, and its ribcage expands to a set of terrible-looking leathery wings.

The creature seems to be sitting on its haunches, if that even is what such strange limb parts are called. Its upper limbs are outstretched as though in prayer, raised against the unmoving, much smaller shape of a human body lying on the bed, draped in the oppressive darkness.

John knows that body. He knows it after years of watching it, tending to its injuries, touching it to seek comfort, companionship and to seek attention.
John makes a strangled sound without even realizing. He is completely torn between fleeing, attacking, protecting, setting himself between the creature and what seems to be its prey. Fear is crushing his heart, freezing the blood in his veins, but he's not backing away until he knows Sherlock is safe and breathing.

He blinks, trying to take in the whole scene instead of just staring at the creature.

The same glow that is circling around them seems to be flowing from Sherlock into the creature like a river.

*Do something for fuck's sake!*

John lets go of the door handle his hand had still been perching on, and the hinge of the door creaks slightly.

The creature raises its head towards John and cocks it slightly. He can now see the head better. It's just coarse skin without any sensory organs to speak of and since there are no eyes John has no way of knowing if it has even seen him.

John steps into the room.

He now knows that it has noticed him, that it knows he's standing there and watching. He knows, because he can now feel the creature in his head.

Inside his thoughts.

There doesn't seem to be a personality there, nothing that seems to be attempting to communicate with him, but there's a strange sort of intelligence present there. It's like a thrumming pulse at the back of John's skull, a warmth that is unfamiliar but not entirely unpleasant.

The creature seems to be regarding him as a human would a microbe under a microscope's lense - with nary any emotion but some level of curiosity.

It is not malevolent or benevolent - it merely is.

John tries to sever the connection by letting his anger and fear have free reign in the hopes that it'll be startled. All that does is raise an almost irresistible urge to flee, but he can't. Now yet. Not until that thing leaves them alone. He focuses his thoughts on Sherlock instead, trying to wordlessly beg him to wake up, to get away from the creature, to do something to save himself.

Sherlock suddenly moans and the creature seems to startle. The dim river of light connecting them dissipates until there's nothing but darkness there.

John clears his throat and takes a step closer.

When the creature had turned its scrutiny towards him he'd momentarily forgotten about Sherlock, about his surroundings, about everything. Completely mesmerized. Even if the creature didn't feel all that malevolent when it was in his head, it had been in his fucking head. And whatever it had been doing to Sherlock, John can't even begin to guess at.

Sherlock tosses and turns on the bed, letting out another agonized whimper as though he's in terrible pain.
John has no idea what to do, so he does the first thing that comes to mind.

"Shoo!" he says, waving his arms in what he hopes is a threatening gesture. He picks up a book from the floor and hurls it at the creature. He blinks when it flies straight through it - it's as though the entity is made of wispy mist that simply swirls and then somehow solidifies again after the book has passed through. The book falls on the floor with a thump, and the sound seems louder than it likely is, because it's been so unnaturally, tenebrously quiet.

The faint glow that mostly now seems to be emitting from beneath the bed fades, and the creature seems to fold into itself, wrapping its massive wings a little closer to its torso. Its head droops down, and it seems to be focused at John, its eyeless head directed straight towards him again.

John picks up another book from the floor - "An English Approximation of The Tarsioid Psalms", according to the brief glimpse he'd had of its title - and flings it at the creature. When the book is due to hit it somewhere around the shoulder - or whatever that bit is called - there's suddenly nothing there. Without a flash or a bang, or any sound for that matter, the unfathomable creature disappears.

Relief hits like a punch to the gut, but his nerves haven't yet caught up. He fights to control his breathing, feeling as though he's drowning, frantic pulse ringing in his ears. A disgusting taste of metal floods his tongue and he spits on the floor, trying to get rid of it. Black spots dance in his visual field and he drops to his knees.

He grabs hold of the edge of a dresser, dizzy and disoriented. His palms are sweaty, and a residual wave of adrenaline rushes through his limbs, making him shake and shiver.

He has no idea how long he stays there, hanging onto the dresser for dear life, incapable of speech or anything else useful. Once the panic finally eases and he feels confident enough that his legs will carry again, he drags himself up from the floor and hurries to the opposite side of the bed.

It isn't as dark anymore, the room somehow seems smaller and he can hear cars driving past on Baker Street.

John turns on the lamp on the nightstand with uncoordinated fingers and turns his attention to his first priority - Sherlock.

He's lying across the bed sideways, tangled in sweaty sheets, clad in his underwear and a crumpled dress shirt. John presses his palm onto Sherlock's forehead. It's sweaty and warm, feverishly so.

Sherlock's hands creep onto his eyes, rubbing his closed eyelids. "John?" he asks, words garbled and quiet.

"Shh, it's fine, it's me," John says and sits down on the bed. He snakes his arms around Sherlock, who feels limbless and weak, and pulls him against his chest. They're both shaking.

"You're safe. It's fine. Just sleep," John says, because he knows of nothing else he could possibly comment. There are no words to describe what he's just seen. How does one name the unnamable?

Sherlock sags against him like ragdoll. His breathing is shallow and unregular. His fingers creep onto the collar of John's T-shirt and hang on, stretching the fabric.

"It's fine," John whispers into his curls, but it's a lie.

It's not fine.

He fears it'll never be fine again.
Because whatever the hell that thing was, John has no idea where it came from, or more importantly, how he could keep it away. How can he fight an incorporeal thing that clearly has free access whenever and wherever it wants?

John's gut instinct is telling him that they are alone in the apartment right now, but the cold icepicks of fear are still crawling on his spine because he can't avoid the inevitable question: for how long? Will it come back?

He gently pushes Sherlock's boneless form away from him to get a look at his face. His eyes are closed, complexion ghostly pale.

John knows that he should probably get his stethoscope, count the heart rate, evaluate peripheral circulation, shine a penlight into pupils, tap for reflexes, do the medical things he knows, things that give him comfort and data to work on.

He doesn't.

He does none of those things, because science is not going to solve this.

John pulls Sherlock closer again. Sweaty dark curls are tickling the tender skin under John's chin, but that's the least of his worries.

Sherlock's breathing is deeper now, more regular. He's asleep.

John lets out a ragged breath. He wants to tell Sherlock he's scared, even if he can't hear him, wants to throw in the accusation that it's mostly Sherlock who's frightening him. Because whatever that thing was, whatever it wants, it's clearly related to Sherlock.

John wants to wake him up, to demand answers but he can't bring himself to utter a single word that's louder than a whisper lest that nameless something that is taking over their lives hear him somehow.

John closes his eyes and indulges in the childish fantasy that that none of it even happened.

*Just a dream. Just a nightmare.*

It doesn't work.

He runs his hand through Sherlock's curls - an idle movement mostly to calm his own nerves.

A wad of it is pulled off by his gently ministrations instead of the individual hairs he would expect to come off, if any.

John's breath halts in his throat and he stares at dark curls on his palm. He drops it on the mattress and cards his hand through Sherlock's unruly mop again. An even thicker tangle comes off.

John fights the resurfacing urge to panic.

It's such a small thing, but the contrast is staggering. Everything he knows of medicine, everything he has been taught, all the exams results, all the other doctors have been telling him that Sherlock should, in all likelihood, be fine.

He's not. This is merely further proof, but somehow this is the worst of it.

Sherlock is so very much *not fine*, and as many different algorithms of differential diagnostics John could march him through, whatever potential causes of all these symptoms he could rule out, it
would still not explain the *thing* that had stood in this very room.

Everything John has ever thought he’d known about the world feels very useless now - like the flame of a match flickering in a vast cavern of impenetrable darkness.

Chapter End Notes

**References for this chapter:**

The title of the chapter is a quote from Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu".

Nahum Gardner is a character in the Lovecraft short story "Colour Out of Space", which the news report loosely references.

"The Tarsioid Psalms", as invented by Walter C. DeBill, Jr. in 2006 for his story "He Who Comes at the Noontime", are a fictious collection of writings dating back the early Cenozoic Era, describing an entity named Ngyr-Korath. I'm sure an English translation of them would make a fine projectile.

As for what exactly the creature standing in Sherlock's bedroom was, you and John will learn a bit later (picture included, I promise!). As for whether that thing was the big bad of this story, the answer is a resounding nope, not even close. That was just a harbinger...

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There's an illustration for this chapter done by the amazing [Cecilia G.F.](https://www.artstation.com/cgartist/ceciliagt):
When you all have stopped screaming I'd like to share with you my musical horror themes for this story.

"O Fortuna" from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*

"The Ardat-Yakshi" from the Mass Effect 3 soundtrack, composed by Cris Velasco and Sascha Dikiciyan
John wakes up when the sunlight streaming in through the window becomes too bright.

Everything appears normal. Business as usual, world rotating on its proper cosmic axis. Only one tiny thing is off kilter, only one piece missing from the puzzle: John is in the wrong bed, and the owner of said bed is currently using John's knees as a pillow, fast asleep. His face is away from John, his breathing pattern that of deep slumber. He's wearing a pair of dark blue pyjama bottoms and a worn T-shirt.

In bright sunlight, it all feels like a ridiculous sort of a random dream - something one might tell as an anecdote to make people at work laugh over lunch and then forget.

Still, the evidence is clear - something has caused John to sleep here, as though there had been something in his room he had wanted to avoid, or something in here he had needed to watch over. His memories are fragmented, like remembering only some short, confusing passages from a nightmare.

A breeze can be felt coming from the window - which John is certain had been closed during the night - makes the heavy velvet curtains shift but not dance. Traffic sounds drifting up from the street envelop the building like an auditory safety blanket.

John snakes his fingers underneath the curls framing Sherlock's forehead. The skin feels hot and damp, goosebumps are raised on his bare arms and he's shivering slightly. Fever, John's still sleep-addled brain provides helpfully.

He nudges Sherlock gently off his knees so that he slumps onto lying on his stomach and John can climb off the bed. Sherlock doesn't stir in the slightest even though he's being jostled around.

John pads to the window, feeling sleep-disoriented and sore. A tension headache is pressing into the inside of his skull. He rubs his temples with the tips of his fingers and blinks in the bright sunlight.
His neck feels stiff from falling asleep in such an awkward sitting position. The headache and a heaviness his limbs that reminds him of a hangover, but he's certain he hasn't consumed any alcohol lately.

John lets his gaze rove across the room. Something stirs momentarily in his memory - like a shadow passing at the edge of his vision. Strange shapes in the darkness, different hues of darkness, lit by a strange blue light.

_Must've been a dream._

But if that's what it had been, then what on Earth is he doing in Sherlock's bedroom, not to mention Sherlock's _bed_? Surely they haven't---?

No. John would certainly remember something like _that_. They're also both wearing too many clothes for it.

The likeliest scenario is that John had just popped in to check on Sherlock, sat down for a moment and fallen asleep. Sherlock must then have somehow rolled around the bed, ending up mistaking him for a pillow.

_There might be a pathetic amount of indulgent self-deception going on here._

Still, John has little else to go on since his memory isn't in a serviceable mood. He looks over his shoulder as he latches the window closed. "Sherlock?" he asks tentatively. There's no answer. John goes to stand by the bed and nudges his shoulder. "Hey, mate?"

Sherlock groans, coughs but doesn't seem to wake up. His fingers twitch, resembling a nervous tic John has seen once or twice when he lifts his hand near his chin and his fingers make movements resembling his hand moving on the violin's fingerboard. His breathing sounds throaty, congested.

John wonders if it's the flu. They might both have it. It would explain how sore he feels himself, but that might also be from sleeping in such a strange position. His shoulder is aching, tingling similarly to how they had been when the gunshot wound had only barely begun to heal. Injured nerves firing off false signals, that's what he'd been told. It feels as though his brain is doing the same right now. The T-shirt he'd slept in is soaked with cold sweat.

It's unsurprising that John would have found himself in a weird position but why isn't Sherlock under his own duvet, either? He's lying sprawled across the bed as though someone had tossed him there at random. Sherlock is certainly a restless sleeper, but never before has he managed to swap his own bedding for John during the night.

John briefly entertains the notion that Sherlock may have drugged him - or the both of them, but going by his gut instinct it doesn't seem likely. When would he have had such an opportunity? Everything John has eaten or drank during the next 24 hours he'd prepared himself or eaten from a sealed package he'd opened himself.

Had they both been having fever dreams? Perfectly logical, but this explaining away everything that John doesn't want to accept is getting old and a little pathetic. This is yet another sign that his life is spiraling out of his control. He needs to stop evading it. The decisions and plans he'd made the night before, he certainly remembers and this annoying confusion, this jumble of real and possibly false memories are cementing his determination to follow through on it. To do something concrete and sensible.

Sherlock begins muttering something unintelligible. John puts his palm on the bed so that he can lean
his ear closer.

It's nonsense. Complete nonsense. A verbal barrage of random letters, punctured by occasional pauses. It could have been something like ‘ygnaiih, y'bhnk, h'ehye, n'grgdll'lh’, but John doesn't write it down because he decides it's just random gibberish. It does sound somewhat familiar but then, it's not the first time he's heard Sherlock talking in his sleep. The man once went through almost the entire Greek alphabet. Probably dreaming of some posh public school lesson from his teens, John had reasoned after hearing it.

John grabs a blanket from a nearby chair and arranges it so it covers most of Sherlock. He briefly considers trying to turn him and get a proper pillow under his head but decides against it - it's such a rare sight, Sherlock resting so peacefully, that he doesn't want to ruin such a moment. They've both been through the wringer lately. Sherlock needs his rest.

John leaves the bedroom door ajar when he goes to the kitchen to have breakfast, and to make a solid plan to get their life back on a more normal track.

John walks to the corner store, where Mr Chatterjee is more than happy to give him a few empty cardboard boxes that had previously housed fruit. What little sunlight and air as fresh as it ever gets in downtown London he manages to get manage to shake some cobwebs out of John's head.

He's not going to dwell on whatever has already happened. He's going to focus on the future - getting rid of everything that could possibly bring forth more strange events.

The books need to go. Right now.

John carries the empty boxes to Sherlock's room. As determined he is that this needs to be done, he can't just start chucking out Sherlock's things without at least asking first.

Besides, it's past noon and Sherlock probably needs fluids if he's developing a fever. Not to mention breakfast, especially considering his recent weight loss.

There are books scattered everywhere on the floor. Two of them are lying by the wall near the window. One is leaning against it, half-opened, about a dozen pages bent. The other book is behind a pair of shoes. They look as though someone has flung them there for some distance. Sherlockian tantrum?

A sudden memory from the night before jars John when he's about to pick up a book from the floor: he remembers picking the same one up, but why would he have done that, and when?

Taking a step back John stumbles on the corner of a rug, and his stumble creates a breeze that makes one of Sherlock's drawings pinned to the wardrobe flutter like wings.

It's a new one. A closer look reveals that it isn't the only one John hasn't seen before hanging from the vertical surfaces of the room.

One depicts stone pillars covered in hieroglyphics. They don't look as though they belong to any culture John can remember reading about in history books.
The image depicts a ruined city in the desert, its walls smooth and seamless. There is neither a moon or the sun in the sky - just a grey, red-tinted low light framing the buildings. The scene is quite peaceful but ominous in a way John can't quite put his finger on.

There's a handwritten note on the floor which John picks up, containing the same sorts of unidentified hieroglyphics. Underneath them, written in plain English in Sherlock's familiar, wild cursive, is a translation:

That is not dead which can eternal lie,
And with strange aeons even death may die.

Not knowing what to make of it, John places the note on the desk in the corner of the room.

He turns to face the bed again.

Sherlock is lying on his back, the fingers on his right hand moving. It's no longer a twitchy, restless movement - instead his fingers are curling into a fist, nails digging tight into his palm. Droplets of sweat have formed on his forehead, and his eyes are moving frantically under his closed, almost translucent lids.

REM cycle, most likely - he must be having a vivid dream.

Something's not right. John has no idea how he knows this, but suddenly adrenaline is tingling at his fingertips and his heart rate skyrocketing.

Sherlock is a light sleeper - he should have woken up the minute John had walked into the room.

John sits down on the bed next to him and leans down, shaking Sherlock's shoulder gently. "Sherlock?" he whispers into the ear only partially visible under the mop of disheveled curls, trying not to cause a startle.

Without opening his eyes, Sherlock begins to sit up without visibly stirring from sleep. He ends up facing away from John, just sitting there without turning to face him or uttering a word.

John plants a foot on the floor and uses it and his outstretched hand on the bed for balance to peer around Sherlock's hunched shoulders.

Sherlock still doesn't turn to look at him. John leaves the bed and circles it, frowning.

He's at first delighted to find Sherlock has opened his eyes, but violently jolts to a stop when their eyes actually meet.

These eyes are not the ones he's seen so many times before.

These are black as night, without irises or any familiar features whatsoever. Not even the eye drops used by ophthalmologists could create such a striking effect.

John positions himself so that he's facing Sherlock, his brain scrambling to the conclusion that the man must still be dreaming, possibly about to start sleepwalking. Sherlock does that, on occasion.

John reaches out a hand to touch Sherlock's arm.

His fingers have barely even reached the pale skin, when he yelps out in pain and he doubles over, control completely lost over his own muscles, incapable of letting go. A searing pain explodes within his skull.
His mind explodes with images - of empty space, endless walls, strange corners, geometry, impossible geometry, gorges sloping to nothingness, something stirring in starlight, something that doesn't even know him, doesn't notice him, doesn't care about him, something beyond reason and madness, beyond existence itself----

John falls on his knees - and remembers.

Following the mist down the stairs. Dark wings moving in the enveloping darkness. Bony, white-skinned limbs reaching for Sherlock. Faceless, alien awareness tickling the edges of his consciousness. Picking up a book----

It feels like days have passed before John's backside finally collides with the worn carpeting of the bedroom floor, shaking him violently out of the memory that had taken over him. His eyes fly open and his vision swims. His eyes feel sore and itching as though he'd been staring at a welding torch. His head is pounding as though there's a frantic animal trying to escape by burrowing out of his skull. His ears are ringing, which reminds him of grenades in Afghanistan, guns fired next to his ear, Baskerville and Sherlock----

The name suddenly makes his head feel much clearer. John clambers up onto the bed, clawing around for where he expects Sherlock to be. Then he quickly withdraws his hand, memories of what had just happened flooding back.

He breathes a sigh of relief when his eyes fall on Sherlock's prone figure at the opposite side of the bed. His eyes are open, but instead of being unearthly black or sharply focused as they usually are when Sherlock is awake, they are now unfocused. The pupils look normal but slightly dilated, his line of sight not really converging. John pokes Sherlock's bare arm gently with his finger and breathes a sigh of relief when nothing untoward happens, he slips his hand under Sherlock's neck and uses his fingers to attempt to bounce the head around a bit. No neck stiffness, then. The skin now feels surprisingly cold instead of feverish.

No matter what John tries, he can't get a coherent response. He even presses his thumb down onto the sensitive nerves converging around the eyebrows, trying to elicit some sort of a reaction. Nothing.

Glasgow Coma Scale 4+1+1, he counts before catching himself. Securing of the airway with intubation indicated before transport.

No.

Not this time, something tells him. We've been here before.

'He's fine', 'the results are normal', 'discharge recommended'.

No.

A sudden rage comes on. John squeezes his eyes shut, a desperate tear threatening to snake its way out as the panic fills him like an overflowing river, mixing with the anger into something he can barely contain.

That thing was here.

That thing was here and it did this.

John wants find it, to spill its blood, to push it back into the darkness it had emerged from, chase it down like an animal if it tries to escape his clutches. He wants to tear it to pieces, limb by limb. Not
even Moriarty has awaken this sort of a blood-lusting vengeance in him, because Moriarty was just a
man.

John had never thought he'd see that psychopath as a small-timer.

If there's a positive to be appreciated here, it is that Sherlock's colour looks better than it has, his
pulse is in the normal range and there isn't all that much off with his breathing.

John's own head is still pounding. Deciding that he needs to address that problem before he can
possibly even try to think more clearly, he heads to the kitchen to quickly down a paracetamol and a
glass of water.

He leans on the kitchen table, shivering.

Everything looks so normal. Sherlock's things scattered about the living room. A tower of dishes in
the sink.

Yet John can't shake the feeling of not being safe, of someone watching him, watching them. Their
home has never been a safe haven - many an assassin, secret agent, murderer and lowlife have visited
them within these walls. Still, none of them had managed to exorcized his peace of mind this
thoroughly.

John bangs his fist on the table. "Right," he says as though the universe might possibly be listening.

The feeling of helplessness lurks right around the corner, trying to rip off the last vestiges of hope.

No.

There's one thing he can do, what he should do, and damn it if he isn't going to do it right now.

The books.

He strides back to Sherlock's bedroom. He gives Sherlock a quick once-over to make sure he's still
breathing quite satisfactorily and his pupil size hasn't suddenly exploded to indicate a sudden increase
in pressure within the skull. John arranges him into the recovery position, and then begins flinging
books into the cardboard boxes as fast as he can.

Whetever this is, whatever's messing about both of their heads, it'll be gone before afternoon tea.

An hour later, John closes the lid of the nearest rubbish collection point. Had Sherlock been available
for an opinion, he would have probably insisted that the books be taken to a specialty bookshop,
museum or the library, since many of them are bound to be rare, but John can't find any soft spots in
his soul for those dusty tomes. Down into the bin they go. The best options would have been to
make a bonfire, but finding an empty allotment suitable for that would entail having to transport the
staggering amount books elsewhere, and John can't afford such an undertaking. He needs to keep an
eye on Sherlock.

It's clear that the books are somehow connected to all of it. And even if it's not the physical objects
themselves, it must be as Victor had said - words can change thoughts, and make dangerous
connections. And Sherlock has certainly been thoroughly messing up his head with these almost
indecipherable things.
John tries not to blame Victor - after all, the man had merely tried to fulfill the last wishes of his estranged father - but since Victor seemed to know what sort of things were contained on those pages and also of their potential effect on Sherlock but still wasn't forthcoming with details, it was hard for John not to feel scornful towards him.

Well, that should all be over now. No need for Victor now.

There was still the museum burglary case, which to John really had felt as though it was connected to these books. Still, that was a connection insisted upon by Sherlock and no one else, and they hadn't even seen the stolen artefacts or talked to anyone with much knowledge of them. It seemed unlikely that the case would pose much of a problem any more.

All he needs to do is to figure out how to shake Sherlock out of what closely resembles a coma.

*Bloody hell.*

John licks his lips in the dusty cold air, draping his parka tighter around him. He wishes he'd worn socks inside his trainers. There's an unpleasant tang in the bitingly cold wind, a whisper of dead leaves and decay.

John shakes his head with resigned disbelief as he begins making his way back to their front door. Halfway there, a set of hurried footsteps and someone calling out his name catch his attention and he pauses, turning around.

Lestrade strides the last few steps to him, slightly out of breath as if he'd been running. He doesn't seem to like the crisp weather, either, since he sticks his hands into his coat pockets. "He in?"

Lestrade asks, cocking his head towards the door to 221. "I texted him and even tried to call, but there's no answer."

John inhales sharply. "He's in, but not--- well."

Lestrade chuckles but it's not a relaxed laugh - more of an empty gesture to get the conversation moving forward. "He never lets a flu or even a stomach bug slow him down. Once drove Anderson nuts when he was absolutely convinced Sherlock was going to contaminate the entire scene with his retching. Food poisoning from some new Chinese place, he told me, *Bacillus* something or other."

John raises his brows. "Oh?" That sounds like Sherlock 'it's only a shallow wound, no need for stitches' Holmes, alright.

"Yeah, but only right after he'd solved the case based on the sort of lacquer used on the staircase railing in the murder house."

"I'm not even going to ask how," John says, turning the key in the lock. "I assume this isn't a social call since you look like you've ran all the way from Westminster?"

Lestrade swallows and seems to remember something. "Roadworks. Had to leave the car a few blocks down. I need you guys. Especially you."

"Look, it's not a good time," John says, deciding not to explain any further, because he has no idea how to even put it in words.

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

"If this is about the museum murder, then we can hardly change the outcome now," John argues, crossing his arms.
"I think we caught the real killer."

"If you caught him, what do you need us for?" Frankly, at this point, John couldn't give a toss about the case. What he cares about is the irresistible urge to go to Sherlock and handcuff the two of them together just for safety reasons, until he can figure out what the hell is going on and how to fix it.

"Guards at Stonehenge found three bodies hanging from the monument arches early this morning, badly mutilated. They'd been stolen from the cold storage at some parish church in Wimbledon. There was a man running around the area, starkers, screaming and muttering nonsense. He's in custody, about to be sectioned. We found his fingerprints all over the curator's home. We can't get a coherent word out of him, except that he keeps referring to those shards that were stolen, and he's mighty pissed off about not having access to them. I need the pair of you to prove that Sherlock was right all along. And quick, if we want to avoid another murder suspect being taken out of our hands, like the girlfriend. If we want to exonerate her, we have to prove a connection. You're a doctor and you know what Sherlock knows about the case, so we thought you could try and talk to the guy. Nobody has heard about those artefacts, except for the curator, Sherlock for some reason and this guy. Can't be a coincidence."

"Why do you think no one's going to interfere with due process this time, show up and just take that guy out of your hands like they did with the curator's girlfriend?"

"I think it's mostly because no one so far has been able to get a sensible word out of the guy we've apprehended. Plus I've been trying hard to keep this under the lid until I get to hear what Sherlock thinks since he called it right from the start that the girlfriend was a red herring. Still, if we can't find a motive except for the man being batshit crazy, and there could be an innocent reason as to why his prints would have been at the guy's home, but we can't prove anything unless he talks. That's where you'd come in. Surely you've got experience of talking to trauma victims and psychotic people."

John rocks back on his heels, eyes wandering around the scene on the street as he tries to rack his brain into making a decision. Isn't this what they've been waiting for - a crack in the case? If there's even a remote chance here to find out something useful, something that could help John understand what the hell is going on, isn't that an avenue he needs to explore?

Still, he couldn't possibly leave Sherlock alone in the flat like this.

Lestrade has sensed his hesitation and dug out his phone from a coat pocket.

"If he's psychotic and rambling nonsense, it's unlikely I'd get any more out of him than anybody else." John says dismissively.

"It's not all nonsense. That's why I thought Sherlock might come up with something once you've done what you can, interview-wise." Lestrade then digs out his phone and after a few taps of his fingers he turns the screen towards John so that he can see the video rolling on the screen.

It's an interrogation room. One of the officers in Lestrade's team is standing in front of a man sitting in the corner, wrapped in a space blanket. He's staring at the officer who looks unsure of how to proceed.

The huddled man in the corner suddenly scrambles to his feet, hand raised and finger pointed at the officer, The foil-like space blanket falls off his shoulders, revealing a torso with strange, rune-like markings carved onto the skin. They look old, already scarred. They remind John of the scar tattoos of some African tribes.

"You can't stop it," The man's snarling, frantic voice rattles through the phone's speakers. "Can't
stop, can't ever stop, it's here, it's coming, everything alive... suckin' the life out of everything it come from some place whar things ain't as they is here... one o' them professors said so... he was right..., the moon comes, it got everything livin' - it fed itself on 'em, mind and body, Can't git away - draws ye - ye know summ'at's comin' but tain't no use ---- is not dead what can eternal lie, with strange eons even death might die, is not dead what can eternal lie, with strange, strange eons it can even, even death can die---"

The video ends but John can't tear his eyes away from the screen, cogs turning in his head as he realizes he recognizes those last sentences.

It's suddenly become very clear that he needs to go with the DI.

He meets Lestrade's gaze. "Alright. You've got me for two hours, but I have to check on Sherlock first."

He almost tells Lestrade to wait out on the street, but realizes how suspicious that would look. The DI had visited their home at all hours and they've never behaved as though he's not welcome. John hopes that he might go and fetch the car, but Lestrade determinedly follows him to the door and then up the stairs.

John is secretly glad for the company. Going back to the bedroom to see Sherlock had become something he'd been dreading more than he liked to admit.

He feels off kilter, emotions barely contained. John realizes his attempt at a smile to reassure Lestrade that everything is fine probably looks more like an unnerving grimace. He's never been as good at acting as Sherlock, who also thinks he's a terrible liar.

John knows that he can't start dwelling too much on the events of the the past twelve hours and the video he's just seen. He needs to approach the murder suspect like a doctor on a house call. If he begins to chase the mystery in his head, connecting the dots, he's going to lose it, and then there would be no one left to look after Sherlock. No one at all.

He quietly opens Sherlock's bedroom door just enough to witness the fact that Sherlock still looks as though he's sleeping, his lithe form just a mound under the blanket John had arranged on top of him before taking the books out.

He circles the bed and once again, goes through a shortened version of an exam he'd give any patient whose level on consciousness was diminished. When he gets to the part of prying open eyelids to check on pupil side and reaction, he gasps and retracts his fingers before he's even realized what has happened.

The eyes. He's seen these eyes before.

It all comes back, faster than a blink, a sudden flash of images and sounds. Sherlock falling from the roof as he watches, a sickening, almost wet thud made by the impact of bone and soft tissue on pavement, the metallic tang of blood in his mouth where he'd bit his lip after colliding with the cyclist, 'Let me come through, please.' Figure in a dark coat lying on the pavement. 'He's my friend.' Blood on the pavement, blood on those dark curls. 'Please, let me just---' Sherlock's eyes open, staring without moving, glassy, unseeing, lifeless---

John may have screamed - he can't be sure, nor is he sure how he'd end up kneeling on the floor. When he finally manages to shake off the grip of those memories, he frantically scrambles up onto the bed and slips fingers onto Sherlock's neck, his other hand already pressed onto the sternum, ready to start CPR.
There's a pulse. A strong, steady one. Sherlock's chest is rising and falling in a regular rhythm. John brings the back of his palm in front of his lips to feel the reassuring blow of exhalation. He grabs Sherlock by the wrist and shakes it - there's some level of muscle tension, he isn't completely limp. His eyelids are open - narrow slits not allowing John to see the pupils, and he can't bring himself to open them.

He slides his palm onto Sherlock's cheek. "Come on, snap out of it. We need you back. Come on, Sherlock!" he whispers, trying to keep quiet enough so that Lestrade won't hear him but loud enough to sound commanding. "Come on, you berk, nap's over. Case to solve," he demands with an edge to panic creeping into his voice.

The only reply John gets is a bit of moisture, possibly a tear, that meanders its way between his splayed fingers on Sherlock's cheek.

Suddenly, it's too much. Everything that has gone on suddenly catches up to John and his defences crumble.

John runs to the bathroom past a confounded-looking Lestrade, stumbling on the corner of a rug but not falling over, and bangs the door shut behind him, chest heaving.

His chest feels constricted. His heart is racing. He feels a distant nausea, and he has trouble focusing his gaze. All ambient sound seems to be coming from afar.

He grips the edge of the sink, grasping the cold white porcelain so hard his knuckles turn white.

His stomach clenches and his mouth is dry. He retches into the sink.

*Get a grip, right now.*

This is not happening. This is not happening, like what had transpired that morning couldn't possibly be happening. Or that thing in the bedroom. That certainly couldn't happen.

It's real. It's *real* and it was *here*. It's all connected and it, whatever *it* is, is after Sherlock. Either that or some form of collective psychosis was breaking out all over the place, linking that nutter at Stonehenge with Sherlock in some way.

John feels so alone. If he weren't so damned worried he could have been quite cross with Sherlock, always getting the two of them mixed up with the wrong sort of crowd, to put it mildly.

At least it's another murder investigation. That'll be familiar and morbidly cosy, at least. And there's a possibility John might actually be able wrench something useful out of it with his medical skills, instead of literally fumbling around in the dark at home.

Lestrade knocks on the door. "John, you alright in there?"

John makes a noncommittal grunt that seems to satisfy the DI. He rinses the taste of bile from his lips and splashes some cold water on his face. There's no towel in the bathroom - no one has replaced the one John has chucked in the laundry, so he digs around his trouser pocket for a handkerchief to dry his hands.

There's got to be *someone* who could help them. Clearly not Lestrade - he knows even less than John, and if he knew what was going on he'd probably have John sectioned and Sherlock hauled off to a hospital once again, and John couldn't look after him.

His fingers come upon his phone, which feels like a sudden lifeline.
Mycroft.

He must know something. Why else would his sudden avoidance of the both of them and his traipsing around crime scenes coincide with things happening to Sherlock? He might not know anything about strange nightmarish creatures trespassing in bedrooms, or about occult books or psychotic murderers, but he knows something and the man has never failed to step in when the hour is dire when it comes to his little brother.

John types with trembling fingers, having to redo several letters because he keeps hitting the wrong ones.

I NEED TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT SHERLOCK, URGENT, JW

He presses 'send', biting his lip, bile rising onto his tongue again.

*Get a fucking grip, Watson.*

When his head stops swimming and he finally manages to get his breathing under some level of control again, he leaves the bathroom, pulls back his shoulders mostly to try and convince himself that he can do this, and looks for Lestrade.

He finds the DI standing in Sherlock's bedroom, looking both irritated and worried.

John busies himself with making an inventory of Sherlock's vitals signs again, more for the benefit of his own nerves than the well-being of Sherlock's, since he is losing hope that any of his professional skills might be of any use.

Sherlock moves his hand a bit and John feels like it's Christmas. He ends up holding his breath, heart pounding with the hope that Sherlock might just wake up and be fine, but then he lets out a pained whine and all the tension seems to leave his body. John continues his ministrations by pressing down on his nailbed to try to elicit a reaction to pain, even tugs at a strand of hair that luckily does not come off. No reaction.

Not even the Mind Palace can claim such a hold on Sherlock.

If John is to fix this, he needs to *solve* this. Solve the case like Sherlock would. Time to test whether any of the clever has rubbed off on John.

Lestrade's gaze is darting between him and Sherlock, suspicious and alarmed, clearly demanding explanation. "What's wrong with him?" he asks John.

"Can't really get him to wake up," John admits with a voice that is slightly shaky. Saying it out loud makes it feel even more alarming than before. He's going against all his medical instincts just standing there instead of dialling for the emergency services.

His other instincts are reminding him that it won't work, it's useless. He needs to listen to them. Sherlock makes intuitive leaps all the time, even though he refuse to call them that. John needs to finally take the lessons he's learned through years of watching Sherlock and follow the clues.

Lestrade looks taken aback. "You sure that's okay, just leaving him there? Couldn't it be serious? Meningitis or something?"

John purses hips lips. How *does* he know exactly, what this is or isn't? How can he be so sure?

He could summarize the Lestrade all those recent trips to the clinic and to the hospital. Recite all the
test results that had been normal or inconclusive. John had received so many accusing looks already when he'd kept insisting that there was something wrong that modern medicine just managed to miss, time and time again. Lestrade is giving him that same look right now and John is a bit fed up with it.

This does not lend itself to diagnoses, won't bow down to science.

Still, the alarm and worry in Lestrade's expression gives him pause. *Even Lestrade knows a sick person when he sees one.*

John rubs his forehead with his hand. "I don't know," he finally says sheepishly and gestures towards the kitchen. He's relieved when Lestrade trails behind him out of the bedroom. At least the DI seems to have decided not to drag Sherlock to a hospital right this minute.

Standing in the living room John realizes what a mess the whole apartment is. Usually their bachelor-like habits never bother him, but right now he decides he hates the dishes piling up in the sink, the mud on the carpet near the door, the papers scattered everywhere. The very air seems to taste stale and old in his mouth.

He wants *order*, wants things to start making some *sense*, preferably right now. Many things that Sherlock does make little sense at first, but this is never going to make any fucking sense, now is it?

Lestrade backtracks from the bedroom to join him. "Are you sure we shouldn't get him checked up?"

"I've checked him out already," John hastens to assure him. He's not in the mood to summarize all that he has already done to check Sherlock up. He's a doctor, for God's sake, even if he feels like a rubbish one at the moment.

Lestrade moves to stand in front of him. "John - what's going on here?" his tone contains a warning of some sorts, and John realizes how this all looks - Sherlock is unwell, he's reluctant to seek help - any policeman worth their salt would suspect foul play.

John wants to groan out loud. This is the cherry on top of the cake.

"Is he using?" Lestrade asks, concerned and a little disappointed.

John hates lying, abhors deliberately confirming other people's low opinions of Sherlock and feels bad for deceiving a man he certainly considers to be a friend to the both of them, but needs must. He needs the DI off his back. Off their back.

"Yes," John says, trying to sound solemn and conspiratorial. "Mycroft's sorted out some rehab where he'll be going tomorrow."

Sadly, it's the perfect ruse. It explains why they wouldn't want to call the emergency number or why they'd prefer Lestrade not to find out. It also nicely explains why John's care would be enough for Sherlock even when he looks near comatose.

"He's coming down from a dose," John adds, and Lestrade nods with a knowing look, "It looks bad, but I've given him some naloxone that's probably already kicking in. There's just that, and symptomatic treatment available at this point," he says, trying to sound like he does at work when explaining things to patients' relatives.

He then gets an idea that has the dual benefit of placating the DI even further, and also calming John's nerves about having to leave the apartment.

He regards Lestrade with a stern look. "I'm going to give him some more naloxone, and then I'm
going to get Mrs Hudson to watch him. After that we need to get going.”

Lestrade opens his mouth as if to say something, and John fears that there’s something he’s seen years when he’d known Sherlock, something he’d witnessed concerning Sherlock’s drug use that would contradict John’s assessment. In the end, he just nods. "Alright, if you’re sure. I’m sorry, John," he says, laying his palm on John’s shoulder and gripping it in a reassuring manner. "I know what it’s like to see him use. He’ll get off it, like he always does. Besides, he’s got you, and that’s got to count for something. You helped him quit after Mary, didn’t you?"

John nods and then shakes the DI’s hand off to return to Sherlock’s bedroom. He opens and closes some drawers to pretend he’s administering the medication. He tries to avoid looking at Sherlock besides a quick glance lest the panic bubbling barely under the surface gain a hold on him again. He then hurries downstairs to fetch Mrs Hudson, practically manhandling her into Sherlock’s bedroom and commanding her to hold vigil. Mrs Hudson calls a friend to tell her that she won’t be making it to bridge that evening after all and kicks off her shoes, picking up an old, tattered copy of the Count of Monte Cristo from Sherlock’s bookshelf and settling down into the armchair in the corner of the bedroom.

John marches into the foyer and grabs his coat. "Let's go," he commands Lestrade.

The pain and worry caused by having to abandon Sherlock even briefly in such a state is crushing, since it means leaving him at the mercy of whatever has been prowling in their home, but John doesn’t feel as though he has all that much choice left.

Chapter End Notes

Reference list:

Sherlock's nonsensical mumblings are a quote from the Lovecraft story "The Dunwich Monster".

A similar location to the the "nameless city" John sees in a vision is described in Lovecraft's writings as being located somewhere in the Arabian desert.

"You can't stop it," The man's snarling, frantic voice rattles through the phone's speakers. "Can't stop, can't ever stop, it's here, it's coming, everything alive... suckin' the life out of everything it come from some place whar things ain't as they is here... one o' them professors said so... he was right..., the moon comes, it got everything livin' - it fed itself on 'em, mind and body, Can't git away - draws ye - ye know summ'at's comin' but tain't no use ----" is a mostly a quote from Lovecraft's "The Colour Out of Space".

Perhaps Lovecraft's best-known poem, "That is not dead which can eternal lie,/And with strange aeons even death may die" first appeared in his short story "The Call of
Cthulhu”.

Chapter title comes from Lovecraft's "The Whisperer In Darkness": "To Nyarlathotep, Mighty Messenger, must all things be told. And He shall put on the semblance of men, the waxen mask and the robe that hides, and come down from the world of Seven Suns to mock--"
What the moon brings

Chapter Notes

My dear readers - for the past 16 chapters I have frightened you, dangled red herrings in front of you, made you despair with John and fear for the life and well-being of both our heroes. I have kept Mycroft away and let innocent museum curators' girlfriends get framed for murder. I am happy to tell you that come chapter 18, all will be revealed. Well, perhaps not all, but plenty enough so that John can properly get on with saving Sherlock.

Before that, we've still got a murder suspect to interview...

This chapter skillfully betaed by the fabulous Kate221b. I want to thank all the readers, kudos-button pounders, commenters and other supportive and fun people this fandom is full of. Love ya.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What ravages of spirit
Conjured this tempestuous rage
Created you a monster
Broken by the rules of love
- Sarah McLachlan

They meander slowly in the afternoon traffic, since there's nothing that would warrant Lestrade using the emergency lights or the siren.

John is too agitated, too expectant of an answer to the message he'd sent half an hour earlier, to put his phone back into his pocket. He keeps turning it in his cold fingers like a stress toy and nearly drops it when a beep and a vibration signal the arrival of a message.

WHILE I APPRECIATE THE DIFFICULTY OF YOUR POSITION, CAN DO NOTHING RIGHT NOW. TAKE NO ACTION YOURSELF FOR IT COULD ONLY HARM BOTH. STRONGLY ADVISE AWAITING FURTHER EXPLANATION ASAP. MH

John curses colourfully and Lestrade, while changing gears, shoots him a sideways glance. "Everything alright?" he asks pointedly. "That wasn't Mrs Hudson or Sherlock himself, was it?"

John shakes his head. "I'm just worried, that's all," he says distractedly, looking out the window across the seemingly endless lines of cars trying to advance on Vauxhall Bridge Road. No use in deepening Lestrade's curiosity as to what is going on, or about Mycroft's role in it.

Mycroft knows something. Why won't the man spill the beans, then? He's usually so hell bent on protecting his brother - what could possibly be keeping him from doing that now?
John follows Lestrade into the tower of glass and concrete that houses the NSY headquarters. Instead of their usual destination - namely that of Lestrade's office - they head to one of the lower floors where the holding cells are located. John deduces that since Lestrade is trying to get them a head start they're not waiting until the suspect has been taken to a proper interview room.

When they reach the right corridor, they find themselves walking into chaos. Several officers, a nurse, and a man in a checkered shirt and crumpled tie and the general look of a put-upon psychiatrist are bustling about the place, walking in and out of a cell at the end of the block. Metallic banging, the sound of objects hitting the floor and screaming can be heard from inside.

DCI Sally Donovan is stuck the midst of the ruckus, looking exasperated as she's trying to instruct her subordinates and talk to the psychiatrist at the same time. Lestrade marches straight up to her, John in tow.

"Any progress?" Lestrade asks.

Donovan spreads her arms. "Not really. We can't get a sensible word out of him, and the forensic psych is petitioning for transfer to a forensic psych unit for further assessment. He's insisting we stop agitating the man and suggesting sedation. Not all the bodies were corpses from that graveyard - one of the victims seems to have been killed on site hours before the whole thing was discovered. The families of the victims haven't been able to identify all of the items in the car registered to him that we found near the megaliths, so there's a possibility there might be more bodies to be found elsewhere or even live victims. With that in the air, we need to get him to talk."

"I brought John for that purpose," Lestrade points out.

Donovan looks sceptical. "How much good is he going to do? We've already got Dr Craddock here, surely he's better qualified to--"

"Unlike Craddock, John knows the first murder case. He might be able to connect some dots. Besides, you and I both know that once Craddock gets his way he'll just dope the guy up and insist he gets transported to Broadmoor once the ministry has authorized it, and that'll be the end of trying to wring anything out of him."

"Where's the freak, then?" Donovan asks, shifting her weight to look behind John, expecting Sherlock to materialize.

"Flu," John says sharply and Donovan raises her brows. She seems to then decide to drop the subject, and points her thumb towards one of the interview rooms. "Number four. Knock yourselves out. Much good that'll do. I'm getting some overdue lunch."

The wall clock reads two in the afternoon. It has taken them an hour to get from Marylebone to Westminster.

John follows Lestrade into the cell, stopping in the middle of the small cell. Lestrade takes up a position between him and the door.

The suspect is huddled in a corner, underneath the surveillance camera, and John wonders if it's a deliberate move.

The man is gaunt, his hair unkempt, and he's wrapped in the same space blanket that he'd had around
him on the video. His eyes look haunted and he clearly hasn't shaven in days. The whites of his eyes seem strangely bright, and they almost appear to be glowing in the dimmer light of the corner. His breath comes out in visible wisps, even though the room is quite warm. His head is turned away and he doesn't seem curious about his visitors even though he must've noticed them entering.

"Have we got a name?" John asks Lestrade.

"Seth Whateley. He's a lecturer at the UCL Institute of Archaeology. PhD and all."

To John this information seems a striking contrast to how the man looks - more like a mentally ill homeless person than an academic. Universities do house some strange personalities, but surely nothing this extreme? John wonders how long the man's life has been going downhill. Wouldn't someone have noticed him succumbing to what looks like rampant psychosis?

Lestrade takes a step closer to the man, who wraps the space blanket tighter around himself.

"Mr Whateley? I've got someone here to see you."

The man stirs, and looks up from underneath his disheveled fringe. John kneels down on his haunches next to him. He has not inquired whether Whateley has been aggressive after his arrest, but it was clear from the sounds they'd heard that he hadn't exactly been co-operative either. He certainly seems to be putting Lestrade on the edge.

"Hello," John says slowly, and the man blinks at him. "My name is John. I'm a doctor, not a policeman. I'm here to talk and see if we could help you."

A vile sort of amusement plays on the man's face and it looks as though he's not quite sure whether to laugh or not.

His facial features are near-skeletal, withdrawn and pale. John is reminded of the way Sherlock has been losing weight recently. He combats a shudder.

"Could you tell me what's been going on, Mr Whateley?" John asks.

"How will we all be feeling, when it comes, when it gets through, when it comes we'll all be fine, fine, fine, nothing to it really when the world ends, ain't gonna be much use, can't get away."

"Do you think there's someone after you?" John asks.

Whateley opens his palms and studies them. "Not me, not really. It doesn't care, but it hears, now, it's coming." His expression is pained, as though expecting something unpleasant to happen any minute.

"You seem very upset, could you tell me why?"

"All dead, dead, dead, but not the things that were dead before. I couldn't you see - it needs someone, someone needs to be given to it---" Whateley whines.

"What do you mean, when you talk about the dead? The dead that eternal lie, or how'd that thing go?" John asks.

Lestrade gives him a confused glance.

Whateley begins humming, and gradually that humming turns into mumbled words. John catches the tail end of a phrase: "Even death may die..."

"I'm not crazy," Whateley tells him, and the look in his eyes seems momentarily less confused.
"That's right. We don't use those sorts of words anymore," John tells him reassuringly.

"You're not crazy, either," Whateley points out matter-of-factly.

Whateley suddenly crawls into John's personal space, dark irises creating such a contrast with the luminous whites of his eyes that John fights the urge to retreat. He doesn't. He needs answers.

Whateley grabs hold of his wrist and before John manages to wrangle it away or Lestrade intervenes, Whateley presses his other palm onto John's. There's a searing, burning sensation that isn't very strong, but it's so startling John stumbles backwards but thankfully doesn't fall.

Whateley leaps after his like a striking viper, pushing his face within an inch of John's. His breath smells foul. "You've seen it, it comes, it's the messenger, it draws ye, draws ye in, can't stop, can't ever stop, but then you know," he hisses.

Lestrade has had enough. He steps between the two of them, and Whateley raises his arms in submission and sinks back against the wall.

"Look, John, I don't think--" Lestrade begins to argue, but John is not done yet.

"What? What is it you know if you don't stop, if you let it take you?" John says, craning his neck so that he can see Whateley from behind Lestrade. He's trying to keep urgency out of his voice but failing.

"Idiots, all of them, idiot gods. Saint ebbs, they get through, Saint ebbs, need to be going now. The Saint ebbs and it comes, it comes!" Whateley chants. He then raises his arms towards the ceiling and begins muttering as though meditating, his eyes closed and a rapturous smile on his face. "Ygnaiih . . . ygnaiih . . . thflthkh’ngha . . . “Y’bthnk . . . h’ehye—n’grkd’l’h. . . .”

"Did you get any of that down?" John asks Lestrade in a demanding tone.

Lestrade looks at his as though he's gone off the deep end. "Get what down? He's a madman, John, it's nothing but nonsense."

The man suddenly scrambles to his feet, stumbles to the cell door that had been locked behind John and Lestrade, and begins pounding it with his fists. "NEED TO GO NOW IT'S COMING, THE SAINT EBBS IT'S HERE, IT COMES, GONNA END IT, NOT MUCH USE NOW, DOORS AND HANDLES WHEN IT COMES THROUGH!" he bellows.

Lestrade grabs the man by his arms, swings him around and pushes him against the wall, keeping hold of his wrists and shaking his head. He glances at John. "Sorry for wasting your time."

He then has to return his attention to Whateley, who's trying to squirm away.

John raps his knuckles sharply on the cell door, and a pair of uniformed officers hurry in and wrench a struggling Whateley onto the cell floor.

They're now effectively blocking John's line of sight to the man. "Greg, wait, please make them stop, let me try to to talk to him!"

As though on cue, Whateley screams from the top of his lungs and then begins laughing hysterically. He attempts to shake loose the grips of the officers but to no avail.

John watches the scene with resignation.

The light seems to have gone from Whateley's eyes, leaving in its place an animalistic rage. He's
growling, yelling and screeching out random vowels.

John has to agree with the DI that further attempts at conversation do seem useless. Whatever sense had been left seems to have dissipated completely.

They are let out of the cell. John digs out his phone and quickly types down into it everything he can possibly remember of Whateley's ramblings. He then stares at the words.

Nonsense. Bloody nonsense.

Lestrade gets a call and steps out to an adjoining hallway, and John is left alone. Under the glare of the old, yellow halogen ceiling lights that seem to be vibrating in high frequency he feels strangely exposed.

He leans on the wall and closes his eyes momentarily, trying to arrange his teeming jumble of thoughts.

He feels as though a tide has swept him along, carrying him away from Sherlock into the unknown. And it's at least to some extent Sherlock's doing.

His nerves are so exposed that other things, old things, bitter things are returning to the surface. Things he doesn't like to think about.

He likes to pretend that his occasionally reappearing residual anger at how Sherlock had abandoned him for two years is righteous, but in all honesty he has already exacted a rather cruel revenge.

Is this what it had felt like for Sherlock when John had chosen Mary and gone through with the wedding? Left, abandoned, lost, always the second choice?

The thing that gnaws on John's conscience the most is the possibility that he may have rejected Sherlock twice already. Just as things had been starting to get really good again, good like the old times before Mary and the baby and Moriarty, Sherlock had dared to cross that last distance between them after waiting so long for probably a very long list of reasons. Had it been the final nail in the coffin for Sherlock, the last required piece of evidence that this was never to be, that he would always be allowed close, but not close enough?

Had Sherlock felt as helpless and desperate then, as John does now? Had it been a resigned, quiet sort of letting go like the moon waning, or a writhing, terrible, almost uncontained rage at the unfairness of it all, threatening to tear him to pieces? Is that what the drugs had been for, to keep it under the control?

John doesn't do quiet resignation, nor is he planning to drown his sorrows in a bottle or exile them into the depths of his veins with a syringe as Sherlock has a tendency to do.

He's not going to give up. Not now. Not on Sherlock.

He's going to fight, to do whatever it takes.

Footsteps appear at the end of the hallway. John opens his eyes and rearranges his balance so that he no longer requires the support of the wall.

It's Sally Donovan, who wanders in with an indecipherable expression.

"Do you really think, beyond doubt, that Whateley killed Webb and the new victim at Stonehenge?" John asks her. To John the man doesn't seem coherent enough at present to set up a murder tableau at
a prehistoric site.

"Forensics hasn't gone through the scene yet, but since he looks pretty good for the murder of William Webb, and he was found near the stones covered in blood, I'd be damned surprised if he had nothing to do with it. Did the two of you get anything useful out of him?"

Lestrade joins them again, phone in hand. "Hardly. Unless John here thinks he's got something?" he asks but it sounds mostly rhetorical.

Still, despite Lestrade's obviously sceptical attitude, there's a flash of optimism in Donovan's eyes.

John tries to evade her gaze. Whatever he thinks he might have, the detectives are unlikely to understand his reasoning of why it's important. It's unlikely they'll even believe any of it if he tries to explain where he's heard some of the man’s mutterings before. "No, I thought I did but it's just as you said - just the ramblings of a madman."

Sally nods and leaves them to peer into the cell.

John turns to Lestrade, already buttoning his coat. "I need to get home."

What if Sherlock wakes up in a similar state to Whateley?

That would give Mrs Hudson the fright of her life.

John doesn't even want to entertain the notion of what else could happen.

Their flat sounds reassuringly lived-in when John slogs up the stairs. It had taken him an hour and a half to find a cab due to a tube and bus strike and it's already dark outside. He finds Mrs Hudson in the living room, watching television and knitting. There are fresh scones on the table, a kettle steams on the stove and John wants to hug the woman. It's strange how comforting these trivial things suddenly feel. John fights a temptation to ask Mrs Hudson to stay in the apartment for the night. It's ridiculous, really. What good is an elderly lady against those things that seem to live in the very shadows on the wall, apart from strength in numbers?

"How is he?" John asks anxiously after he has shed his coat.

Mrs Hudson's expression is strange - it's as though she can't quite decide whether to be concerned or not. Maybe she has picked up on the worry in John's tone. "Not a peep. I've peeked in every once in awhile. He's sleeping, poor thing, so exhausted. Has he solved a case, then and this is the normal way he crashes afterwards?"

"Something like that," John replies, hoping that Mrs Hudson won't pick up on the fact that he's lying. Whatever is going on, he's not going to mix Mrs Hudson in it. He's quite certain she hadn't heard him lying to Lestrade about a drug relapse.

Mrs Hudson slides her knitting project into a canvas bag and then slowly, stiffly stands up, stretching her back. "I'll be heading downstairs, then," she says with a tired smile.

"Thank you, Mrs Hudson. For tea, and for staying."
"No trouble at all, no trouble at all."

John stands in the kitchen until he hears the door to the downstairs apartment close with a click.

He then wastes no time in hurrying to Sherlock's bedroom.

The lights are out, and a gibbous moon shines through the window glass. The window is open and a slight breeze is moving the curtains. They dance like ghosts in the draft.

John sits down on the bed and reaches out to lay his palm on a low mound at the opposite side of it, barely visible in the low light. When his fingers press down on it, it doesn't feel the way it should.

John had been expecting a warm body hidden under the covers, but this mound turns out to be nothing but the bedspread pushed to the opposite side of the bed. He scrambles onto his feet, dives for the ceiling light switch, and the room floods with warm, yellow lamplight.

Sherlock is nowhere to be seen.

John peers under the bed, checks the wardrobe. He searches the whole apartment. The last place he checks is behind the shower curtain in the bathroom.

He's alone in the apartment.

He sits down on the closed lid of the toilet seat.

There's still no hand towel. John suddenly remembers where the old one had disappeared. It had been the result of an experiment of Sherlock's - or more precisely, his preparations for said experiment, that had resulted in the demise of that towel. John had come home one evening to find Sherlock standing out on the curb and a fully suited Centre for Radiation, Chemical and Environmental Hazards disposal team leaving the building, carrying out a small cardboard box, covered with their hand towel, enclosed inside a large plexiglass container.

"An explanation, right now!" John had yelled at a sheepish-looking Sherlock.

"It's just some polonium isotopes I ordered online to do some radiodegradation experiments---"

"You ordered what online?! Radioactive materials?!"

Sherlock had looked at him with that infuriatingly superior expression he uses when trying to underline the purported difference in their IQs. "The glass container had broken in the post. I called University College to see if they might know of a more reliable supplier, and despite my protests they insisted that I was required to report this to the Office for Nuclear Regulation. They're clearly overreacting, since Polonium only gives out alpha particle radiation, which can be stopped by a single sheet of paper, really---"

John had shot up his arms in resignation and anger. "Jesus, Sherlock! It never occurred to you that this might not be a good idea? Why not do an experiment like that in the physics lab at Barts? Why the bloody hell would you do this at home?"

"I may have been banned from the Barts physics lab at one point. There was a misunderstanding---"

"I'm sure there was. It also didn't occur to you that ordering radioactive things off the internet could raise some eyebrows at MI5? You're bound to be on their watchlist already."

Sherlock had looked disinterested. "Mycroft would sort that out."
"An ounce of a sense of self-preservation, that's all I ask, yeah?"

Sherlock had looked at him with an innocent sort of confusion. "Why do I need that? I've got you, haven't I?"

John had stormed in through the street door and up the stairs and given Sherlock the silent treatment for the rest of the evening.

Now, John would give his right leg to be whisked back into that moment standing outside the building. Instead of yelling he would have ignored the Hazmat team and the whole incident and told Sherlock that yes, he has John, has always had him and always will. Regardless of what idiocy he would ever get mixed up in, John would see to it that he gets out unscathed. Because there's no changing Sherlock, is there? He needs John, and John needs him more than he's probably ever going to be able to convey to Sherlock in words. He only hopes he could prove in some other manner what he's willing to do, how far he's willing to go to keep him safe.

John knows it's useless but he checks his own bedroom for the third time and even climbs to the attic where Sherlock sometimes pops up to fetch some of his chemistry gear.

No Sherlock.

John runs downstairs and pounds on Mrs Hudson's door. She soon opens the door, rollers in her hair and a pink, fluffy robe wrapped around her shoulders. "John? What on Earth are you making so much noise for?"

"Where is he?"

"Where is who, dear?"

"Sherlock!"

"I told you, he's been in his bedroom all night. Sleeping."

"He couldn't have snuck out past you?"

"I've not dozed off, John, and you told me to keep an eye on him. I was in the chair opposite the flat door, I would have seen him leave."

"Must've gone through the window, then," John mutters. Sherlock has performed such an exit once, when some Sri Lankan gansters had decided to pay him a visit to discuss old feuds, but he'd been at the top of his game, then, not half-comatose with fever.

John runs back up downstairs and returns to Sherlock's room to look down from the window to the moonlit Baker Street.

Sherlock knows London better than anyone. He could well disappear without John ever finding him. But why?

A terrible thought occurs: maybe whatever was after him had returned, and he had been forced to flee?

Could he have been kidnapped? Is that even the right word for it?

Taken?

Stolen?
The vengeful possessiveness John suddenly feels hits him like a punch in the gut.

No one takes Sherlock away from him.

No one and no thing.

And he's going to turn every damned stone in this town if he needs to. And damn it if Mycroft is going to try and ignore him for another minute.

John hurries out of the flat and jogs several blocks until he finds a phone booth - not many of them left since everyone owns a mobile. He dials a number he has in his phone's directory.

"Hello, John," Gloria-or-whatever-it-is-this-week answer with a disinterested, polite tone that John decides he hates.

"Mycroft, please," John says sternly.

"Not possible, I'm afraid."

"Look, I don't care whatever cabinet meeting or smaller coup he's involved with, get him on the bloody line. I assure you he'll want to take this. Just tell him Sherlock's disappeared."

Any normal person might likely be given pause by John's desperate, pleading tone but not this woman. "I am aware of your special status when it comes to letting calls through, and the importance of his younger brother. It's not possible to connect you at this point, but he has given me a message to relay in case your persistence begins compromising his position."

"I'm calling from a secure line. I'm hardly compromising anything!"

Gloria does not reply.

"Just give me the bloody message, then."

"If John Watson calls, tell him all will be made clear in time," Gloria recites dutifully.

Time.

John isn't entirely sure he has that luxury.

He returns to the flat. It could well be that John isn't safe there, either, but he hardly has anywhere else to go. Besides, he needs to be there in case Sherlock comes back needing his help.

John retrieves his gun from the small safe he'd installed in his own wardrobe after one too many of Sherlock's black moods ending in a one-sided gunfight against the walls.

He sits on the floor, back against his regular chair in the living room, a loaded gun cradled in his lap.

He sits, and waits.

And waits.

Sherlock does not come home, nor is it any good trying to text or call him since John had discovered his phone lying forlorn on his nightstand.

Sherlock never goes anywhere without his phone if he's in his right mind.
John briefly considers contacting Lestrade, but filing a missing persons report would hardly help, since that would require John disclosing what he suspects is going on. John certainly doesn't want to arouse suspicion that Sherlock might not be himself - the MET would likely take the possibility of Sherlock Holmes going off the rails pretty seriously, which would be hard to keep off the press. That one public manhunt leading to Sherlock's fake suicide had been plenty enough, thank you.

When John drinks from the bathroom tap he notices that the mould has made a triumphant return. When he brings his fingers close to the mould’s glistening surface, its tiny appendages stretch towards him as though guided by static electricity. John huffs in frustration and scrapes the whole thing off with his bare fingers. The gel-like substance stings a little until he washes his hands with soap.

Some of the mould sticks to the surface of the porcelain basin. John pours a half-used bottle or drain opener on it. The mold hisses and melts, swirling down the drain with the water from the tap when John turns it on for a moment.

John then goes to sit in the kitchen. He turns the TV on for some ambient noise to help keep his fear at bay. The effort is draining.

He sits with his gun until the early hours of morning. Sleep evades him. At three a.m. he makes a decision.

Mycroft Holmes has promised him an explanation.

He can't wait for it any longer - that explanation needs to happen right now.

John is going to force the man's hand. Be it dangerous or foolish, Sherlock is at stake and John doesn't care what happens to Mycroft if he goes through with the plan slowly formulating in his mind. It's silly, it might not work at all, but it just might irritate Mycroft into reacting.

When the first lazy rays of sunshine begin peeking through the chilly mist floating on the streets, John puts the gun away and goes to his room to fetch a different type of ammunition.

Chapter End Notes

When the entire story has been posted I'll have some extra goodies for you all to enjoy: there's going to be a Victor-centric oneshot, a crackfic making all your wild reader theories come true, an extensive behind the scenes -article, and last but not least, a drinking game based on the story!

Reference list for this chapter:
The name of the chapter is followed from a Lovecraft story by that name.

Mycroft's text message is a slightly tweaked version of a telegram in Lovecraft's "The
Whisperer In Darkness.

Seth Whateley’s namesake is a central character in Lovecraft’s "The Dunwich Horror". His mumblings, which closely resemble those of Sherlock’s, are from the very same Lovecraft story.

The poem that keeps popping up which ends with "even death may die" is from Lovecraft’s "The Call of Cthulhu".

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Time for another soundtrack peek! Aside from the Apocalyptica cover of Metallica’s "Nothing Else Matters", there is a song by Within Temptation that has served me well as the major love theme for this piece. That song is called "Somewhere".
The joke on mankind

Chapter Notes

Two chapters at once! *It must be Christmas!*

I didn't want to leave you lovelies hanging with half a reveal, so here goes.

Since my betas deserve to experience some sense of surprise every once in a while, too, chapters 18 and 19 haven't been combed-through by them; ie you can blame me for any and all mistakes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

> *And when the darkness steals some of the choices from my hand*
> *Then I begin to understand*
> - Sarah Brightman

The fog is particularly thick and foul that morning - like a living wall around Trafalgar Square. It clings to John's skin and feels as though it's practically tugging at his clothing. The sun is but a dim glow in the horizon.

John ought to feel rather silly, really, but worry burns in his guts so acutely that embarrassment is the last thing in his mind.

How does one force the hand of a man who deals in secrets and subterfuge?

By public exposure, of course.

The Square is largely empty when John strides to the east corner of it. He's carrying a cardboard sign he'd made at home, the words on it drawn with heavy hand using a black marker. The sign is actually the back of Sherlock's cardboard periodic table poster. It'll probably be ruined after this, but John doesn't particularly care. Sherlock most likely knows the contents of the table by heart.

John defiantly holds up the sign and turns it so that it both faces the empty square but is also clearly visible to a nearby CCTV camera attached to a lamp post.

He stands, back straight and shoulders pushed back, and waits.

*MYCROFT HOLMES IS WATCHING YOU*, his cardboard sign says.
Precisely thirty-nine minutes later, John's fingers and toes are getting too frosty to hold up the sign much longer. He keeps switching it from one hand to another and sticking the other one in his pocket.

Finally, just after John had again read a silent prayer in his head along the lines of 'pick me the hell up right now, you pompous bastard', a black car glides out from the fog and stops in front of him at the edge of the Square. He lets his grip on the sign slip and it drops to the ground.

John opens the car door, expecting anything and everything from getting shot in the head to Mary suddenly leaping out and embracing him. Sometimes he still thinks that might happen. That she'd just come back, tell him it had all been just a misunderstanding, that they can go home now. He's not entirely sure if he would wish it or not. If he had to choose now, to choose between her and Sherlock, it wouldn't even take him a fraction of a second to make that decision.

He'd give his good leg if he could undo some of his idiotic decisions, but life doesn't work that way. All that John can do is to start making better ones, right now. Perhaps he already has.

At least he hopes so, as he glides into the seat opposite Mycroft Holmes.

Mycroft looks a mixture of politely curious and concerned.

Anger flares up in John. Where has Mycroft been, while their home has been overrun by God-knows-what? Where was he, when Sherlock fell ill? Where the hell was he, when Sherlock disappeared from under Mrs Hudson's nose?

"Where the fuck have you been?" John demands, "I could've used a bit of help a little earlier."

Mycroft's gaze drops a fraction and he purses his lips. "I would have attended to you earlier, had I not been forced to focus on preserving all our lives and my livelihood. I assure you that you and Sherlock have both been on my radar constantly."

"What about the guy found at Stonehenge? Was he on that same radar, hmm?" John can barely keep himself from yelling. His finger curl into a fist against the indecently soft leather seat.

"Regrettably, no, since he had been lying comatose in a hospital for several weeks before running away from the hospital three days before the events at Stonehenge. We did not anticipate his sudden awakening."

A fist of dread closes around John's heart. "Comatose? Lestrade said nothing about that. So the guy suddenly just woke up and went around robbing graves and murdering people?" John grabs the handle of the car door - to do what exactly, he's not even sure, but the impulse to leave the vehicle and upend the entire city in search of Sherlock is suddenly overwhelming.

Mycroft places his palm on the car door above his hand to stop him. "You'd do well to calm down, doctor. You'll need to hear what I have to say, before you make any battle plans. Whatever that man did, I doubt my brother would be weak enough to lose his mind so completely and suddenly. He has withstood much more than Seth Whateley already and hasn't gone on such a rampage."

"What the hell would you know about what we've gone through? And what do you mean, 'has withstood more already'?"

Mycroft raises his brows in that infuriating way he does when selectively ignoring something. "For Whateley, getting mixed up in all this was not a choice. For Sherlock, it most certainly was, and the studies he did in his youth under the tutelage of Professor Trevor have likely helped him, to some extent, to resist the destructive effects such knowledge has on human minds. Whateley did not have
that luxury." He links his hands and carefully arranges them on his lap. "I am not attempting to
downplay the precariousness of the situation. If Sherlock has received the same message as Seth
Whateley, we do need to move quickly."

"What message? And how do you know what Whateley knows or doesn't know?"

"He was what you'd probably call 'our agent'. Planted in the UCL Institute of Archaeology and
given funding for a special project granting him access to the collections of the British Museum to
keep on eye on certain... artefacts and to move them into safety, if need be."

"Move them into safety and murder Webb in the process?"

"Webb was... Collateral damage. He got too curious for his own good."

"This it--- It's--- Why the hell would MI5 or Home Office or whatever you work for watch artefacts
nobody cares about?"

"John," Mycroft says, and the look on his face tells John he is being very naive indeed. "Not Home
Office or MI5, then."

"Outside of my employment as a civil servant, I have other engagements. In these engagements, I
have superiors. They are very irate that my brother has appeared on their playing field - I did warn
them that involving New Scotland Yard could well lead ot this, and that I could hardly control
Sherlock, but orders are orders, and out of what must be pride they were unwilling to change the
plan despite my protests. The past days have been extremely busy - an important date is approaching,
and things being as they are I could not have approached you earlier lest I risk all our lives and my
livelihood. As usual, Sherlock has managed to entangle himself in something he should not have,
and regrettable I could not prevent it. At first we thought Sherlock's involvement with the Webb case
would be harmless, and that scenario we were certainly able to control for a while--"

Anger flares up in John. If 'control' means framing the curator's girlfriend, who according to Sherlock
was an innocent woman, for murder, then what is at stake better be as terrible as Mycroft is alluding.
Otherwise, what they'd done to her would be unforgivable.

"Victor was the wild card, the unanticipated factor. Victor's father's inheritance, to be precise,"
Mycroft continues.

"I don't give a toss about your bloody superiors or Victor. I need the surveillance you've got going
on the flat. That's the only chance I've got to finding out where Sherlock's gone."

"Not quite. You did go and see Whateley, did you not?"

"I did, but he's barking mad."

"He might well be at this stage, yes, but it's highly likely he may have relayed to you some
information pertinent as to where exactly Sherlock is headed. Parts of the message, if you may."

"Headed? You mean he hasn't been taken by someone? That he suddenly just woke up like
Whateley?" It stings a little - the possibility that Sherlock may have left John just like that, without an
explanation.

Without so much as a goodbye.

"Sherlock has left London mostly on his own accord."
"Where is he?"

"I will get to that in a minute. First I need to tell you something."

"Well be quick about it, then!" John says, ready to bounce out of the car the minute Mycroft's done with whatever elaborate speech he has prepared.

"John. What I am about to tell you is something that is not shared lightly. If my superiors knew I was having the conversation, I can assure you we would both be dead already. I would have come to you soon anyway since I was aware of what has been transpiring, but your childish antics have forced me to improvise, putting us both in danger."

"I doubt we're in as much danger as Sherlock could well be, if people are losing their lives over this business," John says venomously. He suddenly feels like plonking the man on the head with the cardboard sign.

Mycroft's expression turns grave, devoid of his usual confident, snotty superiority. "This goes way beyond personal gain, even way beyond treason or other such human constructs. I would not be disclosing any of this if I didn't consider it vital for the continued existence of Sherlock."

"Is this about his illness?"

"What you call an illness is in actuality the visible side of the process of his essence beginning to shift from this plane to another."

John can't help a sceptical laugh. He crosses his arms. "That sounds like a load of hocum. I know it's all real, it must be, but I have to warn you - if there's even the slightest chance this is all some bloody joke Sherlock and you are playing on my expense----"

"Unfortunately that is not the case. I do admit the world is quite comic, but the joke is certainly on mankind, not just you."

John leans back, a muscle twitching slightly around his brow.

Mycroft clears his throat as though preparing for a lengthy lecture. "There are groups - cults, if you may, since they do not represent any of the better-known world religions - in existence, who see humanity as a noxious pest that should be eradicated like rats or gnats for the good of the planet and of the universe. The easiest manner in which to bring forth such destruction would be to call upon powers greater and more incomprehensible than anything found on this Earth."

"Terrorists?" John suggests but quickly realizes they won't fit the scope to which Mycroft is referring.

"These are not ordinary troublemakers, John. Neither your most prominent jihadists nor a despot with a nuclear arsenal could not dream to compete with the forces these collectives are trying to bring forth to our plane. Make no mistake, John, these beings, these powers exist and they care little for the wellbeing of humanity. Or for the existence of it, even. Most of them are likely not even aware of us. Consider a biologist with his microscope - he likely spares little to no sentiment to the tiny lifeforms he examines under that lens."

"I never thought you'd be a religious man. It sounds almost like you're describing something akin to gods." John says in disbelief.

"I certainly wish this were just the ramblings of mystics, John. What I speak of is, regrettably, the truth. Known only by a select few, of course."
John is not convinced. All that he knows is that Mycroft, who was supposed to be missing, isn't - and now he's spouting New Age nonsense at John while Sherlock has gone AWOL.

Sherlock is ill.

John doesn't have time for this, but Mycroft clearly isn't done yet.

"These beings, their minions and their harbingers have been given many names by humans, throughout history. They have been worshiped as gods and feared as demons, but no single idea can summarize their true nature. Simply put, the average human simply isn't fit to even begin to comprehend them." He pauses as if to give John time to adjust to this idea. "The groups who seek to harness their powers operate in utmost secrecy, but perceptive and curious individuals have, on occasion, unveiled their existence. They have been described as early as 1701 by a Count d'Erlette in his forbidden book "Cultes Des Goules" and in 1839 by a man named Friedrich von Junzt in his better known but still notorious tome, "Unaussprechlichen Kulten". John realizes both of these books are currently on Sherlock's nightstand. He swallows, which is hard since his throat is suddenly very dry. He nods, prompting Mycroft to go on.

"Such evidence of their existence is rare, mostly housed in private collections of informed individuals. There are other artefacts than books - some of them in public collections such as The British Museum, The Smithsonian and The Louvre, but since facts pertaining to their true origin are not taught in universities, there artefacts have garnered very little attention. Webb got a bit too curious about the Celaeno Fragments, began asking around, and some interested parties began making plans to acquire them. We had to intercept."

"Who's this 'we', then, exactly?"

"There are groups of individuals who oppose these cults - people who would much prefer to see this world continue on its course than be destroyed in a cataclysmic event. This world is imperfect - yes; doomed - perhaps, but hastening its demise would serve no purpose."

"Which side of the debate do you belong, then?"

Mycroft rolls his eyes. "The latter. I see no benefit in an apocalypse. I quite enjoy the world as it is."

As your personal bloody sandbox, John thinks to himself. "Are you saying Sherlock believes differently than you? That he's in some sort of a doomsday cult?"

"No. For you to understand, I need to tell you a story."

Chapter End Notes

Reference list:

"I do admit the world is quite comic, but the joke is certainly on mankind" is an almost direct Lovecraft quote. "humanity as a noxious pest that should be eradicated like rats or gnats for the good of the planet and of the universe" is a quote, but one I have twisted
very much out-of-context for my evil purposes.

Count d'Erlette and his forbidden book "Cultes Des Goules" are most likely the creations of author Robert Bloch.

Friedrich von Junzt and his notorious tome, "Unaussprechlichen Kulten", were created by author Robert E. Howard.
"Orders of things"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"O human race, born to fly upward, wherefore at a little wind dost thou so fall?"
— Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy

"It's a story that might at first appear immemorial, but I can assure you is highly relevant to what's going on. It's the story of a thin, dark-haired young man of neurotic and excited aspect, brilliant and lonely, studying at Oxford. A professor made note of his exceptional intellectual capabilities and made him an apprentice of sorts - not of the professor's public field of study, but in a rather eclectic area. The unfortunate course of events was that this young student then fell in love with the professor's not all that exceptional son, and as these things often go, began to neglect his studies. The professor was impressed with neither his priorities or the fact that he thought that his innocent son had been deviously seduced, lead on a path of amorality. The professor and his student had a catastrophic falling out, and the student was denied the chance to ever discover the sorts of secrets about the ultimate nature of the cosmos and mankind that he'd only gotten a glimpse of."

"But what happened to the son?" John asks.

Mycroft cocks his eyebrows. "Naturally an empathic person such as yourself would be more interested in the human aspect of this than the loss of rare knowledge. Very well. The professor sent his son to a military academy, and they never saw each other again."

"What do you mean, 'sent'? They must've been both of age by then. Couldn't Victor say no? Or did he actually want to go?"

"Even though this was the liberal nineties, especially when it comes to traditionalist families such as the Trevors, free will is a relative construct. Some things are eternal regardless of family values - like a father's power over his son."

"Didn't they look for one another? Was it over, just like that?" John snaps his fingers, "The professor says go to Sandhurst, and Victor just cuts all ties and goes without a peep of protest?"

"I managed to wrench very little out of Sherlock back then due to his--- malice towards me, but I as far as I know, they never ever got to say goodbye."

John cards his finger through his hair. "Fucking hell."

To John the manner in which Sherlock had behaved when Victor had come over - how he'd looked as though he'd seen a spectre risen from the grave, seems depressingly logical now.

"Sherlock, who at that point could only be described at utterly wrecked and aimless, dropped out of Oxford. He lived with me for a short while until one day he'd taken to the streets. I managed to track his whereabouts on and off - arranged detox retreats and rehabilitation attempts. He didn't have the motivation to kick the habit until much later. He happened upon a crime scene, where a Scotland Yard detective discovered his knack for solving mysteries and spotting things others miss. Lestrade made it clear that he was to be clean if he was to assist Scotland Yard. The rest of the story you
already know.

As for what happened to the professor's son after Sandhurst, I did not know until he showed up on your doorstep two months ago. All in all - not much. A rather checkered and erratic employment record, some traveling until he settled in Falmouth and took over a small business."

Something that Mycroft had said earlier had stuck with John. "You said that Sherlock didn't tell you much about what happened - that's odd. Not that he doesn't talk much about personal things, but that he'd push you away like that. He pretends to hate you, but he always turns to you when he's in trouble. Still does."

'Malice' is the word Mycroft had used.

Mycroft regards his with a weary look. Usually he'd extremely talented at hiding his emotions - way more skilled at it than Sherlock, but now John thinks he can make out a distinct undercurrent of shame in the man's demeanour.

Mycroft takes a long pause before saying anything more. "I must admit I may have had a hand in the parting of ways between the professor and Sherlock. I could not reveal to Sherlock that I, too, was involved in it - it would have compromised the safety of our entire family if professor Trevor had discovered that I was more knowledgeable as to what sorts of things he was teaching Sherlock than the average person. Sherlock did not know of the sinister goals of the group the professor belonged to - he was merely aware of the Earth-shattering nature of the knowledge the man seemed to possess. When I learned of Sherlock's involvement, I realized I had to do whatever it took to dissuade Sherlock's involvement with the Trevors. In my haste I made some miscalculations that can be chalked up to youth - I may have at some point even alluded to Sherlock that his choice of partner, his... tendencies, were not acceptable, in order to get him to shun any involvement with that family."

John's eyes are ablaze with fury and he's losing a battle against the impulse to punch the older Holmes. "You're his goddamned brother and you'd judge him like that!"

"I never thought the late professor Trevor's worldviews could be that antediluvian and so destructive when it came to Sherlock. I merely thought he'd discourage his and Victor's relationship and cut off his own ties with Sherlock - I didn't anticipate the lengths to which he'd go to keep them separate. I did what I had to do to protect Sherlock."

"THAT'S ALWAYS YOUR FUCKING EXCUSE!" John yells digs his fingers into the leather seat so hard the leather groans under his touch, just to keep from punching the living daylights out of Mycroft.

"John. What is at stake here goes beyond Sherlock's love life, beyond any of our lives, beyond the lives of all humans. The knowledge Sherlock is yearning for has consequences on a cosmic scale, and for this reason I am sharing with you revelations which has toppled kingdoms and for which countless individuals have died. This very thing is what befell the third reich - they sought to harness powers they could not possibly hope to control. Do you see now, the depths of what we are dealing with?"

John huffs. Certainly this all explains why Sherlock has been so beside himself lately - being reminded of what must have been a deeply traumatic incident in his youth could unhinge him together with the fact that things hadn't exactly been all good at home lately. But still, gods and apocalypses and cults and secret societies? This treacle was thick, even for Mycroft Holmes. Maybe it could all still be a front, a ridiculous subterfuge to draw John's attention away from some more mundane truth? "Next you're telling me that the Illuminati is controlling our government and the Loch Ness monster is real."
Mycroft sighs. "No, John, the Illuminati is not real, nor is there a dinosaur inhabiting the waters of a Scottish lake."

John drums his knees with his fingertips. He's full of nervous energy, his blood singing to get out of this car, to stop wasting so much time.

"I would have hoped that your recent experiences would have made you less stubbornly sceptical of things that aren't within our usual reality, though," Mycroft says.

"If anything, at this point anyone would want to firmly hold onto any shred of reality they could get hold of. None of this exactly falls under the realm of normal or scientific."

"Tell me, John. Have you seen strange things lately? Things that do not, as you said, fall under the realm of science?"

"I've had some fucking weird dreams, yeah."

"How are you so certain they're dreams?"

He knows that the thing that had stood beside Sherlock had been real. He does, but accepting that fact is a whole other thing. As is accepting that what Mycroft is telling him is fact and not just the speculative ramblings of some doomsday cult leader.

The hairs at the back of John's neck stand up as though aroused by static electricity. He has a sudden urge to stare at the palm onto which Whateley had pressed his own. It looks normal, and the brief tingling, burning, electric sensation hadn't reappeared. By all intents and purposes, his hand looks and feels normal.

He has Mycroft's incredible theories, and he has Whateley's insane ramblings. How on Earth is John to fuse them into a weapon capable of rescuing Sherlock?

"I saw a--" John catches himself saying out loud without actually making a conscious decision to do so.

Mycroft looks curious, prompting him to continue with a rolling flick of his palm. "Yes?"

John describes the creature that had stood in Sherlock's bedroom as best as he can, and recognition soon dawns on Mycroft's face. John isn't sure which is more frightening - the creature itself or the fact that the older Holmes seems to know exactly what he's talking about.

"It was sort of like a vampire, really," John offers.

Mycroft shakes his head. "What you saw is no vampire, although it could be at least a partial source of such myths. The creature you saw has many names - from the kallikanzarai of the Greeks to the strigoi of the Romanians, the draugar in Icelandic folklore and the incubi, the succubi and other demonic beings in Judeo-Christian theology. In the Scottish Highlands, these harbingers used to be called Baobhan sith and elsewhere in Scotland and in Ireland their name is Lhiannan shee. More modern tales of aliens visiting humans in their bedrooms, taking them to other realms and imparting strange wisdom straight into their brains is just a twentieth century version of that same myth which, in reality, isn't a myth at all."

"What you saw was what our organization calls a Nightgaunt. In the Philippines they are called the Visayan manananggai - the self-segmenters, which is quite an apt description. They are not human nor have they ever been - they are mediators in between. Their purpose is to prepare the worthy for entrance into higher realms of knowledge - for leaving behind their corporeal bodies and making
contact with the forces that control these creatures. No human being has been known to survive actually witnessing these forces, the Outer Gods and the Ancient Ones, as they are sometimes called - some scholars think our species too weak, our sanity too fragile. If there's a human who could pull this off, it is certainly my mad little brother, but neither of us hardly want him to try."

John makes note of the dark shadows under Mycroft's eyes. He looks haunted. John wonders if the manner in which he'd decided to tell the story of Sherlock and Victor is such a detached, fairytale-like manner had been due to guilt and regret.

Mycroft notices his scrutiny. "You must be angry that I did not come to you earlier. It has been a race against the clock - there are signs pointing to some date in the near future that has caused a stir among those seeking to contact and employ the forces I have described. Clearly it must be some particularly opportune time to do so. For this reason we - meaning our organization - have been busier than ever in trying to prevent certain things from falling into the hands of the Esoteric Order of Dagon - this is the cult Victor's father was a prominent member of. We thought that taking the Celaeno Shards into safekeeping would be enough, but then Sherlock, as is his habit, interfered. My superiors are not aware of how much he knows - I made sure of that to spare his life, which my superiors would not have spared a moment longer had they learned of what he could do. I fear Sherlock may have gotten further in the studies of his youth than I feared and be farther in his quest than even I had hoped."

"Why would he do this? It sounds like bloody suicide--!"

John nearly chokes on the word. That word had nearly wrecked him once already. He had never been able to say it out loud to Ella, because a part of him had refused to believe that Sherlock could possibly do such a thing to him. Suicide is not a weapon, for it has no aim nor does it have a target, but John had certainly felt like he'd been struck with something agonizingly painful and sudden.

Mycroft's expression is one John has never seen him wear before. "I don't think he's suicidal, but what he's doing does reek of a certain kind of desperation. As for what has brought it on, I'm afraid you'd be a better expert to hazard a guess than I am."

John stares at him, biting his lip so hard he can taste blood.

"For some reason he sees continuing his current life as unfavourable. Has anything happened that would explain such a thing?" Mycroft asks.

His piercing gaze making John feel like an insect under a magnifying glass. This is something he does not want to get into with Mycroft Holmes. "Victor showed up with the books," he points out, hoping that Mycroft will think this is enough to unhinge Sherlock.

"I have to warn you - I remember what he was like after that fiasco with Victor. Whatever has been going on lately, he seems the same, judging by what surveillance footage I have had time to evaluate."

John is sceptical. "He wouldn't leave his life behind like this." Wouldn't leave me behind is what John actually wants to say, but doesn't.

"He may not have before, but he's under their influence now, and I imagine his own free will is diminishing by the hour. I doubt he has been in control of his faculties for some time now. Perhaps the arrival of Victor just happened to coincide with something else, creating an opportunity for these forces to take over. My brother will not content to being a lurker at the threshold - I think he's prepared to go all in. And even if he isn't, he might not be able to resist these forces. They want him to let them him, and he has already left the door ajar."
"Doesn't he understand it's dangerous?"

"In his typical arrogance Sherlock won't accept that knowledge is certainly not power when it comes to the true nature of the universe. If anything, it is a crushing sense of meaninglessness, powerlessness. Great men have succumbed to madness and turned to more instantenous and practical methods of suicide after learning what lies beyond our usual realms of experience. I applaud Sherlock's mental prowess - it seems he may have figured out how to do certain things without such powerful artefacts as the fragments. What you described you encountered in his room does not bode well. It means he's gotten further than most scholars could ever hope for. What he's done puts all of us in grave danger."

"You underestimated him, then," John points out.

Mycroft clears his throat. "I never assumed he'd realize the importance of the case because I never assumed he would be aware of the existence of the Celaeno Fragments. I hoped the case would prove to be a moot point, a convenient distraction to keep him occupied while I tried to do my part in preventing those other factions achieving their goals."

John suddenly realizes something. "The books. I threw them out. Could they now be in the possession of this cult you mentioned? Can they do something dangerous with them?"

Mycroft's smile is tight. "Those books have been taken into safe custody. You need not worry about them."

"But why is this all happening now? You said something about an important date?"

"There are times during which cosmic forces diverge. Equinoxes, planetary alignments. We are approaching a time during which certain dimensions might be more... open. The signs have been there for months now. I assume you have noticed strange things reported in the press?"

"There's always weird things in the tabloids. According to Lestrade the police have certainly been busy with some strange stuff."

"Such as what happened at Stonehenge," Mycroft suggests and John nods.

Mycroft's expression changes. It is now pained, worried. "What Sherlock has learned will allow him to access other realms, but returning or shutting off the access route afterwards is a whole different thing."

John's heart is pounding. "Where is he?"

"Are you prepared to witness these things he seeks, follow him to the very gates of what could only be described as some iteration of hell?"

"WHERE IS HE?!"

"Surveillance footage shows him leaving by a train bound for Oxford two hours ago. He's already in the city, and has managed to evade surveillance since."

"Right." John leans his palms onto his knees, itching to go already.

"You need to find him and somehow get through to him until the time comes for him to choose. These things don't care about humans, but it doesn't mean they won't appreciate the gesture of human sacrifice. I can provide you some means with which to tie him to this plane, but he has to make that decision himself, decide not to go walk into the darkness."
"You mean I have to watch him--- what? Choose not to die?"

"In this scenario, death is just a side note."

"No. I don't care what he's up to. I'm not letting him go. Not ever again. No knowledge is worth dying for. I don't care about the rest of this bullshit, just tell me what to do to save him."

"You don't care about the possibility of a cosmic cataclysm ending the world, John? Curious."
Mycroft reaches into his briefcase and passes John a book. It's old, bound into brown leather which John hopes hasn't come from a human being. The bulky leather covers are connected by a brass clasp.

John reads the name out loud. "The Necronomicon, or The Law of The Dead, by the arab Abdul Al Hazred, as translated by Dr John Dee."

"There are many books by this name, many English and Latin versions of the original, but according to scholars who do not advertize their specialty, this is the most accurate translation," Mycroft explains.

John opens the first page. 'Property of the Order of the Silver Twilight' an inscription on the first page of the book reads.

One of the pages is marked with a pink post-it note, which looks deeply out of-place on the yellowed, thin parchment page. It marks what looks like a poem, some of which seems to be in Latin. But the rest of it John can't recognize as any sort of language he's even encountered.

Conventus sylvorum, antra gnomorum, daemonia Coeli Gad, Almouzin, Gibor, Jehosua, Evam, Zariatnatmik, veni, veni, veni. DIES MIES ESCHET BOENEDOESF DOUVEMA ENITEMAUS. Yi-nash-Yog-Sothoth-he-lgel-fi-throdog-Yah! is the first paragraph of it. John is, once again, tempted to laugh at the ridiculousness of it all.

"I must warn you not to undertake this lightly. When these forces seek contact with the human race, an apt analogy of the destructive power of that encounter would be an ocean trying to warm itself against a candle."

Mycroft grasps the edge of the book John is holding. "This might be of assistance, but you need help. You can't possibly be doing this alone."

"You're coming with me, then?" John sounds hopeful.

"The situation concerning our opposing forces is too dire for me to leave London and, as I said, if I am seen with you, and something - such as you being in possession of this copy of The Necronomicon - alerts my superiors to the fact that I have revealed to you secrets I have sworn to protect with my life, the punishment will be death. It has fallen on you to save my brother, and in the process I hope you might prevent a larger-scale disaster as well."

John nods nervously.

"I am sending someone to you, who I hope can be of assistance. He will meet you at Paddington station in forty minutes. The next train to Oxford leaves in an hour."

John opens the car door and is about to exit, when Mycroft grabs his wrist. "John. Before you go, before you do this you need to ask yourself this: how far are you willing to go? What are you willing to do to save him?"
John draws in a breath.

He knows the answer. He's known it since day one. After all, he'd killed for Sherlock before they'd even paid their first joint rent.

You mad bastard. You had me at 'Afghanistan of Iraq', didn't you?

John had been willing to die for Sherlock years ago already: with a bomb strapped to his chest, the only thing that was at the surface of his thoughts had been, 'save him'.

Yes, he'd happily walk through the gates of whatever proverbial hell was waiting at the end of this mystery, and drag Sherlock back from there, kicking and screaming if need be.

"Whatever it takes," John says, and means it with every cell in his body.

He begins inching towards the door on the car seat, and Mycroft reluctantly lets go of the book, fixing a stern gaze on John. "Be prepared, then, for anything," he warns John. "Sherlock may not be much more than a thrall to Them, now."

Chapter End Notes

Reference list:

"A thin, dark-haired young man of neurotic and excited aspect" is a Lovecraft quote. Couldn't resist.

The Esoteric Order of Dagon comes from Lovecraft's story "The Shadow Over Innsmouth".

"A lurker at the threshold" is a reference to August Derleth's short story of the same name, and the Ancient One Yog-Sothot who is sometimes known by this petname.

"Some means with which to tie him to this plane": Mycroft is actually talking about an arcane ritual; he might be referring to something like the Bind Soul one featured in The Arkham Horror board game.

"Bulky leather covers are connected by a brass clasp" is a reference to Lovecraft's short story "The Descendant".

The Necronomicon is one of Lovecraft's most famous creations: a fictional grimoire, to whom the author even created a very detailed pseudo-history. According to these fictional annals, the Elizabethan magician John Dee (1527-c. 1609) allegedly translated the book—presumably into English—but Lovecraft wrote that this version was never printed and only fragments of it survive. For the purposes of this story it turns out that there is one intact edition after all - in the possession of The Order of The Silver Twilight - the secret society Mycroft is a member of. The order was created by the makers of the Arkham Horror board game, and the name is a play on The Hermetic
Order of the Golden Dawn - a real occult/mystic/religious organization. According to the creators of the game, "The Order of the Silver Twilight is an organization that maintains the facade of a high society club for politicians and businessmen. However, hidden underneath this veil, the true motivations of the Order lie in an obsession with gathering power, learning arcane magics, and gaining dominance over the world." What a perfect club for Mycroft Holmes!

The strange spell John finds on the pages of The Necronomicon is adapted from a necromancy spell in "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward", a short story by Lovecraft.

The phrase "an ocean trying to warm itself against a candle" is a quote from Terry Pratchett.

Would you like to see a Nightgaunt? [Here you go](#). Artist unknown - if you know who made this, let me know so I can credit them properly.
A rare transit

Chapter Notes

Emma221b betaed this chapter with grace and finesse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

And I threw bitter tears at the ocean
But all that came back was the tide
- Sarah McLachlan

John reaches Paddington station some fifteen minutes before the train to Oxford is due to leave. The station is quiet, so it takes him very little time to buy a ticket, get a sandwich from a kiosk and find the right platform. Throughout, he keeps wondering who he's supposed to meet up with. Some scholar specializing in the arcane and the forgotten? Some government agent from the special branch of messed-up cults?

When John makes his way to the end of the correct platform, his jaw sets as recognition dawns.

Standing by a lamppost, backpack in hand and a nervous expression on his face, is none other than Victor Trevor. He's wearing a worn denim jacket and his hair is a mess. He looks like someone who's left home in a hurry, throwing on whatever clothes first came within reach.

A mixture of emotions crosses John's mind as he walks up to the man. Suspicion? Anger? Gratitude that he won't have to do this alone?

"Morning," Victor says, glancing at the book John has tucked under his arm. An emotion best described as a mixture of suspicion and curiosity rearranges his expression for a brief moment. It makes John feel a bit embarrassed to be carrying such an item in plain sight. On the other hand, people will probably just think he's some Harry Potter enthusiast, carrying around a strange-looking book at Paddington of all places.

"Mycroft sent you, then?" John asks incredulously, "Even though you say you, I quote 'know nothing'?'"

The train doors hiss when the locking mechanisms open. Victor picks up his backpack and then climbs in. "I may not know much about that," he points at John's book, "But I know Sherlock."

John wants to argue, wants to rudely take Victor down a peg, wants to tell him how much he and Sherlock have been through together, how different Sherlock clearly is from the man - practically just a boy - that Victor had known, but John realizes that it would just be evading the fact that there are parts to the enigma that is Sherlock that Victor might actually be more familiar with than John.

Victor had seen Sherlock turning from a shy student to a confident man dabbling with strange forces. He'd seen that man walk away from his entire planned future.
Most importantly, though, Victor had witnessed Sherlock in love.

John doesn't know what that might look like. Five years have passed, and sometimes he feels like he still can't read Sherlock all that well.

They take over the quietest seats they possibly can from the train. The carriage is empty save for the two of them. John has a sudden urge to check all possible nooks and crannies where someone could have hidden a listening device or a surveillance camera. It's crazy - how would anyone have known they'd be on that train, let alone that carriage? It's clearly Mycroft's fault - his tall tales have made John paranoid. John wants to laugh at his own brain still insisting it's all poppycock, all subterfuge and hearsay and pseudoreligious nonsense, even after all he has seen.

He looks at his palm. He'd touched the mold, and Whateley had touched that same palm. Did that have some significance, or was it just a sign that he was now tainted by these forces as well? If they survived this, would he be marked, connected to something for the rest of his life? He doubts Victor knows the answer, so he doesn't pose the question.

If he's affected somehow, now, then what has happened to Sherlock is bound to be aeons worse.

"So," Victor starts, "We know he's going to Oxford, but where exactly?" He digs a quarter bottle of scotch out of his backpack and offers it to John.

John declines, even though it could have soothed his nerves. He needs all his wits about him.

Victor shrugs and swallows a mouthful.

John puts the book between them on the seat. "Frankly, I've no idea." He realizes that he should have probably asked Mycroft for some more instructions on how to use the book. Is he just supposed to read the marked bit out loud? When? And what good would that possibly do? Are they up against something corporeal, or a more abstract, astral thing that only obeys the laws of ritual and incantation?

The train nudges off from the station. Victor is looking out the window onto the rainy landscape of crisscrossing train tracks. He looks lost in thought. John finds himself to be curious - is he remembering something pertinent? If yes, then will he share it?

John clears his throat and Victor turns to face him. "All I've got to go on are the notes I've made out of what a guy named Whateley, was saying. Did Mycroft explain about him?"

Victor nods.

"I didn't catch all of it and frankly, I think he's mad as a box of frogs, but he seemed anxious to get somewhere. And if Sherlock's headed to Oxford, I assume he's being drawn to the same place."

He shows Victor what he's typed down into his phone. "I think this is some sort of a clue about when it's all going to happen: "when the 'saint ebbs'. That's what he kept repeating."

"Something about that sounds familiar, but I can't put my finger on it," Victor says. "Could it be some religious holiday?"

"Mycroft said that there's a special significance to astronomic events for people involved in this. Maybe it refers to a moon phase or a planetary alignment?"

Victor digs out his phone and begins an internet search. "Rubbish connection," he complains when the pages keep loading very slowly. He shows his phone to John. He's found a page that lists major
astronomical events during that spring.

John taps one of the entries with his finger. "A rare transit of Mercury across the sun. Only happens once every 376 years. It's happening tonight."

"But what the hell's it got to do with any saint? And to ebb is not an astronomical term, is it?" Victor points out.

John throws himself against the worn cushion of the backrest of the seat. "Christ. We're just fumbling around in the dark, aren't we."

He texts Mycroft to enquire whether his surveillance resources have managed to find Sherlock. He gets a reply in minutes - no such luck. At least according to Mycroft it seems unlikely that Sherlock has left Oxford.

"Sherlock knows the town, and likely knows of a few places where he can move around without being noticed," Victor says. "Most students learn of a few secret spots perfect for a bit of privacy."

John is struck by Victor's words, a mental image appearing in his head of a younger Sherlock standing under a picture-perfect oak tree surrounded by ridiculously perfect summer lawns with Victor, hands in one another's hair, fingers trailing down spines, lips locking.

He steals a glance at Victor. He doubts many people would kick him out of bed. By anyone's standards, he's quite handsome and must've looked striking in his student days. John could easily imagine him as a sporty, sunkissed, popular young man. This is conjecture, of course, since John has no idea what he'd actually been like, but it does make John wonder how the two of them had ever concretely ended up together.

John has only seen one image of Sherlock in his early twenties - accidentally found peeking out of a drawer when John had dropped off some laundry in his room.

In the photo, Sherlock had been posing for a photographer with the rest of his family. He didn't seem to have carried himself the way he does nowadays - that is with an almost arrogant pride. His hair had been longer, as if to hide some of his face, and his limbs had seemed longer, his pose awkward as though he didn't know what to do with them. He'd been all bones and pale skin.

It's as though Victor had been reading his mind. He opens his mouth, looking nostalgic. "We met through my Father. As you already know, Sherlock was reading chemistry, and Father was one of the faculty professors. He noticed his abilities - it must've been a good clue that when assigning colleges they'd put Sherlock in Merton, which everyone knew is for the ridiculously clever ones."

John smiles.

"After the Merton dinner party I already told you about Father invited Sherlock over to our house to plan some extracurricular project. I was there all the time since I had gotten special dispensation to live at home instead of one of the colleges - first years usually have to join one and live in. Father wanted to keep an eye on me and my sister, he said, and since he was senior staff he had some leverage in the matter, I guess. I didn't object since I couldn't have brought my dog to live with me in a college. I always thought Father got us pets - my sister Lavinia had a budgie - because he himself wasn't around very much. You already know what my dog did to Sherlock that night. Sherlock began visiting the house regularly, which was logical, since Father largely kept his interest in the occult separate from his university work. All the books and the related artefacts were kept under lock and key in his study. Sherlock was allowed in, me and my sister weren't."
"How'd Sherlock get on with people at his college?" John asks, even though he already has his suspicions as to what the answer will be.

"He didn't. Didn't socialize much for that reason - spent most of his time in his room, saying to everyone he wanted to focus on his studies. One guy in particular, Sebastian Wilkes, made a career out of making Sherlock's life hell."

Sadness clouds John's features. He's thought as much after witnessing Sherlock and Sebastian interacting during a case. "I've met him," he says.

Victor scoffs. "Still a piece of work?"

"You could say that, yeah. Was it because of the deductions or the fact that Sherlock is----" John finds he doesn't want to say the word out loud, and wants to bite his tongue in repentance. He'll have to come to terms with it all if he wants to stand a chance to fix this. Mostly he feels awkward voicing such things because it feels wrong to discuss Sherlock's most private issues like this - issues he has never shared with John.

Or perhaps he has, in a way, just not with actual words. Maybe it's always been there, in the air between them, but John, as usual, hasn't been observant enough.

Had it all been a strange courtship John in his determined ignorance had mistaken for friendship?

'Want to see some more?'
'God, yes.'

John suddenly realizes Victor has been speaking all through his internal revelations.

"...we didn't keep our relationship secret. Wasn't a big deal among the other students. It was the nineties, the whole HIV scandal had gone and passed and even a conservative place such as Oxford was full of support groups and clubs. Neither of us participated in any of that subculture, but we didn't have to hide either. As long as Father didn't know, it was fine. Sherlock got some flack for being gay from other students but he didn't seem to care. None of them would run their mouth off to me, because they knew who my Father was."

"Professor Trevor didn't approve, then?"

Victor sighs. "For a long time, he didn't know."

"But then?" John can sense Victor's reluctance at speaking of this.

"I never thought he'd spill the beans," Victor says quietly, looking out the window into the rain-drenched suburbs floating by.

John is taken aback. "Sherlock told him?" It doesn't actually feel entirely impossible. The man does have a tendency to drag the secrets of others out in the open without a second's remorse.

Victor looks confused. "No. His older brother did."

"Mycroft?" John now knows that Mycroft had had some sort of a role in the way in which Victor and Sherlock's story had ended, but the older Holmes had been a little vague on details.

A shadow crosses Victor's face. Maybe this is part of what he had decided against telling John on the phone. John wanders what has changed his mind about helping out in this matter.
Had there been a substantial offer of money from Mycroft?
Was it just guilt?
Or..... is Victor here to try and continue where he and Sherlock had left off?

"Sherlock was getting more and more involved in the group my father belonged to. He was... changing. He didn't sleep, he didn't eat, he did nothing but buried himself in those books. He wouldn't tell me anything, wouldn't spend time with me. Father thought he was neglecting his studies, but I can't possibly understand how he could have immersed himself any more than he already was. Father was like that - very absolute in his convictions, very black and white. To me it felt like Sherlock had joined a cult."

Judging by what Mycroft had told John, that description might not be off the mark at all.

"Finally I got so desperate I begged his brother for help. To stop it, to get him out, anything. I even suggested getting him kicked out of uni - I don't know what his brother does, exactly, but judging by what Sherlock had told me about him I don't think that would've been beyond his capabilities."

The edge of John's lip quirks up. Getting someone expelled would probably have been small potatoes for Mycroft Holmes.

"In the end, what he did was so simple, so obvious that the possibility never even occurred to me beforehand. In hindsight it was stupid of me not to realize that would be exactly what he'd do - it was a ridiculously easy way to solve everything."

"Mycroft knew you and Sherlock were involved, then?"

"Somehow, yes. I rather think he was keeping an eye on Sherlock all the time. Usually Sherlock didn't seem to mind or care about his meddling, but he did make sure Mycroft never heard a peep about his association with Father. Made me swear to keep it secret."

John's finger curl into a fist. If Mycroft Holmes were present he'd be sporting a black eye already. John could understand him intervening with the occult stuff, but the man had admitted to adding insult to injury: letting Sherlock believe his brother didn't approve of his orientation, in order to ensure... what exactly? That Sherlock would feel enough shame and defeat over his limited experience of romantic relationships that he'd decide to turn away from the prospect entirely?

_Goddamn you, Mycroft Holmes._

"Your Father didn't take it well, then," John says. It's less of a question than a sound assumption.

"That was the end of my Oxford education. Mycroft had moved quickly. When I came home from London where I'd gone to see him, I found most of my stuff already packed. Father was waiting for me when I came home and he told me in no uncertain terms that he'd arranged me to attend Sandhurst and that I'd be leaving that same afternoon. We fought, and he actually punched me. I was so fucking mad I just wanted to get as far from him as possible. He lied to me - told me Sherlock had left Oxford, too."

Victor takes a deep breath and swallows. "I didn't see Sherlock for four years after that. He came to my graduation but I never talked to him there. I hadn't not spoken to him until last month."

John looks at Victor's fingers. No ring. "You're single, still?"

Victor's laughter is hollow. "Not much of a dating scene in small villages in Cornwall. I've not
crossed paths with anyone like Sherlock again. I don't believe in 'the one', or soulmates, any of that rubbish, but sometimes I think that he may have been it, for me."

The realization hits John like a jolt of electricity - he's jealous. He's jealous of what Victor has had with Sherlock, furious that someone might throw away a thing like that. Sherlock doesn't walk away from people he cares about like Victor did - he fights. John has witnessed him fighting for those who are important to him, forfeiting his own safety and even his life in the process. That fight has been gone from Sherlock's eyes lately, but surely it could return if John could get through to him?

"He does have a lasting sort of effect on people," John hears himself saying.

Victor studies his face with a knowing look on his own. "You, too, then?" he asks slowly.

John blinks.

*Say it. Be honest. Be more honest and braver than you ever were, when Mary was still around.*

*Say it.*

"Yeah, I guess so."

"But you're not--- At least according to what's been in papers."

"Sherlock is still rather good at secrecy," John says dismissively. He straightens a crease in his shirt with his fingers and then looks up to meet Victor's gaze. "It's complicated with him. You of all people should know that."

Victor looks very concerned now. "He has little faith in himself when it comes to these things, John. Back in the day, he was already so convinced that there was no one out there for him, nobody who would truly want to be with him. He saw himself as separate from everyone else, too strange, too smart for his own good, too unadjusted to the company of others. I suspected he didn't even believe in the two of us at all that much, that he turned away because he thought it was useless from the start to even try. I always suspected my Father said something to him that cemented this in his mind. I probably reinforced that idea when I didn't contact him. At first I was ashamed that Father would pull such a stunt. Later, it just felt like it was too late already."

It doesn't sound as though Victor is still carrying a torch for Sherlock.

"In a way, I think, we were both waiting to be saved by someone," Victor says. "Someone who truly thought we were worth the effort. I didn't fight for him then, John. That I regret."

"Maybe you didn't. But *I will.*"

John moves to the seat opposite Victor for the remainder of the one-hour train journey because facing the direction they were coming from is making him slightly nauseous. He closes his eyes, leaning the side of his head to the window. He hasn't slept in the last 24 hours.

*Images float through like soap bubbles in the wind.*

*Sherlock, all giddy smiles and excitement at a crime scene.*
The quiet sound of a sheet dragging up the stairs and the silhouette of a just-awakened Sherlock in the doorway of John's bedroom, inquiring why tea hasn't materialized yet.

Fingers lacing with John's as they ran down rainy streets handcuffed together, the flashing lights of police cars just behind a corner.

Sherlock, apprehensive, slipping speechlessly and chastely under the covers in their shared bed at Dartmoor.

Sherlock, disoriented and blinking, eyes watering in pain when he woke up after the first surgery after the shooting. Whispering, 'Mary'.

The damp, lovely, warm, familiar, wonderful smell of Sherlock's coat and Sherlock, against which John had been pulled from the bonfire to shield him from the flames reaching up to the night sky heaven.

Sherlock's thigh under his fingers, John's fast hands suturing up a wound in the scarce light of their kitchen, both of them pretending that nothing is awkward at all. Both of them drunk on the feeling of skirting the danger right there, in the spark between their skins, the unanswered, the unspoken.

Sherlock is everywhere, every corner of his life and his heart.

John is not letting him go.

Chapter End Notes

A transit of Mercury across the sun happens a bit more frequently than stated in this chapter but hey, artistic licence.

Reference list:

Merton being the Oxford college "for the ridiculously clever ones* is a quote from an actual Oxfordian in this fandom...

The first name of Victor's sister is borrowed from Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror".

"Moping in his room, claiming to be thinking" is a rephrase of how Sherlock himself describes his college habits in ACD's "The Adventure of The Gloria Scott".

_________________________________________________________________________
Time for soundtrack bits'n'pieces again, and this time I'm listing what I used as Victor's character themes:

"Forgiven" by Within Temptation
"Hello" by Adele
"Any ideas?" John asks after he and Victor have made their way down the Botley Road and Park End Street and now find themselves standing in the small medieval avenue, at the edge of which sits Carfax Tower.

John quickly checks his phone: no messages from Mycroft. That must mean he still hasn't managed to locate Sherlock. John closes his eyes momentarily, fighting the pins and needles of panic when he realizes this might be because Sherlock's sick.

He could be in a ditch somewhere, he might be dying, why does he have to keep on doing this to me---

John's derailing train of thought gets a blessed interruption from Victor, who says: "I'd say the libraries are our best bet. If he's come here because it's information he's after, that's where he'd go. He used to spend a lot of his time in the reading halls during when he was working with Father."

John is thankful for Victor's determined tone. The not knowing is grating on his frayed nerves.

"Where should we start, then? The Bodleian?" John suggests, referring to the best known of Oxford's impressive selection of libraries.

Victor shakes his head. "I think Rad Cam's our best bet."

"'Rad Cam'?"

"The Radcliffe Camera. That's where the medieval collection and most of the limited access rarities are kept. That's where Father always headed when his own book collection was lacking something." A frown line appears on Victor's forehead. "I've no idea how to get us in, though. It used to require a note from one's tutor to get access. They won't just let anyone walk into the Bodleian, either. I'm not on the official Oxford Reader list anymore, and I assume you're not affiliated with the university either."

John bites his lip. "I'm afraid not, since I went to King's College. Hold on," he says and digs out his phone again.

He calls Mycroft, explains the problem and receives a curt 'all will be arranged' in reply. John half
expects an interrogation as to what sort of progress they're making but Mycroft sounds busy, worried and distracted. Whatever he's been tasked with seems to be proving a handful along with covertly trying to find his brother and assist John.

John puts his phone away. "It's sorted."

Victor looks half alarmed, half amused. "I wonder how Sherlock himself might be getting in. I doubt his Reader status is active anymore, either. And he couldn't possibly be eligible for an alumni card since he never graduated. How do you suppose he would get in now?"

John chuckles. "Oh, he'd certainly come up with something." A certain incident with an engagement ring to get into Charles Magnussen's office is the first example that comes to John's mind, and he fights of the bitterness and regret that particular memory always awakens. "Lead the way," he says to Victor.

It takes them mere minutes to reach the cobblestone avenue lined by university buildings, in the middle of which lies The Radcliffe Camera - a stunning circular building with a clay-grey dome and stone arches lining the sides. In the late morning light, surrounded by bright green grass it's a breathtaking sight.

There are students walking and cycling past them, as morning lectures must be about to start.

While they stride down the small walkway leading up to the building, John can't help imagining Sherlock walking these same streets. It's an easy image to conjure - the feel of the place is such that John has no trouble imagining him feeling right at home here. All the knowledge, all the promise, all the prestige. Not that Sherlock did anything for fame or fortune, but with his genius this certainly was a world designed for the likes of him. If one didn't take into consideration the social side of things, that is.

Victor is smiling and shaking his head as though remembering something.

"Mm?" John asks.

Victor stops halfway to the entrance and points at a corner of the avenue. "That's where Sherlock beat Jack Prendergast."

"Sherlock beat someone up?" John gapes.

"Fencing," Victor explains. "He was rather good at it. They were trying to oust him out of the fencing club so he challenged the chairman to what he dubbed a midnight duel. Of course he won. I don't think he'd have made such a challenge if he hadn't been certain he could."

"He got to stay in the club, then?"

Victor purses his lips. "No. Prendergast and Wilkes beat him up in return the next day when he was walking back to Merton from a late afternoon lecture. He got bruised pretty badly. I sort of happened on the scene by accident, on my way home from a pub and patched him up at our house. It was sort of our first date. He'd been to the house before, but that was the first time we actually ended up spending some time together."
"That's how one seduces Sherlock Holmes, then, with disinfectant and butterfly strips?" John jokes but it comes out sounding more bitter than comedic.

Victor stops to stand by the old chain fence separating the gravel from the lawn and evades John's gaze. "I didn't, really. You know how it is. Things just happen."

*Not with Sherlock. With Sherlock things like that certainly don't 'just happen'.*

John then reminds himself that this was before all the pain and the disappointment. Sherlock was likely to have been as unguarded as any youth back then.

Still, that moment in the staircase had taken place. Didn't that fill the definition of just letting things happen?

John realizes he's probably spooked the man for good.

Victor rummages around his backpack. "Here," he says and pushes an old photo into John's hand.

It's Victor and Sherlock, sitting in what looks like a very old pub. Victor is laughing at something someone off camera is doing or saying, facing away from Sherlock but with an arm draped around his shoulders. Sherlock, instead of facing the camera, is looking straight at Victor.

The expression on his face hits John like a slap on the face.

This is the expression that lights Sherlock's entire being when something John does catches him off guard in a positive way. This is exactly the way Sherlock looks at him, the way Sherlock has been looking at him from day one. Seeing it sealed into a photograph somehow hammers home what exactly it signifies.

This is what Sherlock Holmes looks like in love.

It turns out that they don't need to employ whatever temporary access Mycroft has obtained for them at the Radcliffe Camera after all, since a security guard tells them that a man matching Sherlock's description had walked in about two hours prior, heading straight down to the large bookshop in the basement level. That area is open to anyone, and it's the only other way out of the building besides the main entrance they've just walked through.

"He's probably used The Radcliffe Link to try and lose surveillance," Victor says. "It's a new-ish underground walkway that they built when they added the bookshop. It connects Rad Cam to the main Bodleian building."

They make their way down to the bookshop. Sherlock is nowhere to be found. John buys a plastic bag for the Necronomicon at the counter, since Oxford is a location where someone might actually recognize it. The book is heavy, and carrying it under his arm was also beginning to get irritating.

After leaving the bookshop they then walk through the large reading halls in The Link, emerging to ground level at the Old Bodleian Library. They leave their belongings on a designated shelf in a security check area before they're allowed to enter the library itself. As instructed by Mycroft in a text message that had arrived while they were walking The Link, displaying Victor's driver's licence is enough to get them in.
A new exhibit of the Library's treasures has taken up most of the open space in the main hall. John nods towards the right half of the hall, looking inquisitive and Victor nods towards the left in reply - they can cover more ground if they split up. They begin jogging through all the corridors and side rooms they can possibly find to make sure Sherlock isn't still in the building.

After a thorough search they meet up at the opposite end of the building. John shakes his head and then raises a set of brows at Victor, who shakes his head as well.

John leans on a bookcase, letting his head loll when the weariness he's been fighting takes over his bones. He hasn't slept in 30 hours. He scratches the side of his palm. It had begun to itch minutes before.

Victor notices what he's doing. "What's that?" he asks.

John brings up his hand. Red blisters have appeared where the mould had touched his hand and Whateley had pressed his palm. "It's from cleaning the bathroom. The mould I was scrubbing out sure was some special variety."

"That looks familiar," Victor says.

"What?" John asks, alarmed.

"Some sort of mould used to grow all over our cellar and in the bathrooms. Drove the housekeeper nuts. She got those sorts of blisters all the time before she started using a pair of leather gloves to scrub it off."

"What is it?"

"Nobody knows. Father didn't care about it, but it used to worry Mum a lot before she left. She liked to keep the house tidy. I remember her having a shouting match about it with Father."

John realizes that there's a difference in how Victor addresses his parents. Father. Mum.

No love lost between Trevors senior and junior.

"I don't think discussing mould is going to help us much," John says, and digs out the Whateley he'd typed into his phone. The phone screen glitches and flickers on and off for a moment until he can actually read the words. It had done that earlier, too, when John had shown Viictor the notes on the train. John suspects he has probably gotten the phone damp somehow. "D'you reckon we could ask someone about these?"

"We could try a librarian at the theology section?" Victor suggests and John shrugs.

They find the right section after consulting a floor map - the theology section has been moved since Victor's student days.

Soon they're standing on the upstairs landing, lined from floor to ceiling with dark wooden bookcases.

A bespectacled woman in her sixties is pushing around a small cart, returning books to their correct shelves. She smiles in a collected manner when John marches up to her.

"Good day," she greets them. "What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"We've got a phrase that's somehow connected to Oxford. Possibly of religious origin but not
The woman looks intrigued. She probably has to fend off enough prankster students asking for the Monster Book of Monsters or the Black Bible that a real enquiry might provide refreshing change. "What is the phrase?"

"'A saint that ebbs'."

"You mean a saint by that name?" the librarian asks, looking like she might have an idea.

She then opens her mouth to comment further, but John cuts in. "No - we think it points to an event or a date," he says.

The woman slides on her glasses which have been hanging from a chain around her neck. She leads Victor and John to a nearby shelf, and digs out a book titled 'The Catholic Calendar of Saints'.

She carries the book to a side table that has a reading light. "If you're looking for a date that's near but hasn't happened yet, there's St Dominic of Savio's day today - he's the patron saint of choirboys. St John Ogilvie's day is tomorrow," she suggests.

"Which century did they live on? Were they very recent?"

"St Dominic lived during the nineteenth century. St John Ogilvie was a Scottish Jesuit Martyr from the 16th century."

"He's old enough alright," Victor says. "Any connection to Oxford?"

"Not that I can think of. As I said, Scottish," the woman, whose nametag reads 'Dorothy Harris', answers.

"But why the ebbing?"

"I couldn't tell you," the librarian says, looking expectant. "Where did you see this phrase, if I may ask?"

"We didn't see it, it was spoken by someone."

The woman regards John thoughtfully. "Are you certain what he was saying wasn't 'Saint Ebbes'?" she asks, enunciating the double E's of the latter word pointedly.

John turns his palms upward, shrugging slightly.

Victor stands up straight, looking like he had just remembered something and is anxious to leave. "That's an old church downtown, isn't it?"

"Well done, young man. Are you a member of the university?"

Victor nods to the librarian and then turns to John, looking excited. "Why the hell didn't that occur to be before?" he asks rhetorically, looking incredulous. "I used to walk by that place all the time. What can you tell us about it?" he asks the woman.

The woman scoffs as though Victor has offended her. John suspects that as a librarian at the theology section, she's likely to know quite a bit about local churches.

"One of the oldest in town. Still in active use. The bottom levels are being excavated and renovated thoroughly, financed by some anonymous business magnate. The church used to be a part of
Eynsham Abbey, and there's been a church there for about 1300 years.”

"Who was St Ebbe?" John asks.

"Daughter of pagan king Aethelfrith. Some scholars think the church may have been built upon an old pagan worship site. Ebbe converted to Christianity and became an abbess. They claimed the power of her prayers was immense, that she could even control the tides."

"And there's an old church by that name here?" John demands.

"As I just said, yes. It's downtown, on Pennyfarthing Place."

"You know where that is?" John asks Victor.

"Like I said, I used to walk by it all the time. It's next to----"

John cuts Victor off by grabbing his wrist and dragging him towards the staircase, not wanting to waste one more minute. "Come on."

When John and Victor reach the small stone church of St Ebbes, they find the concrete-covered small avenue in front of the main entrance is bustling with people. A local daycare group is visiting, a group of elderly ladies are having tea in the small cafeteria in the rectory, and workmen are carrying around ladders and maneuvering a concrete mill towards the back of the building.

The church consists of two aisles that in John's mind give it the look of two small churches pushed together. It doesn't look as old as the librarian had described, and a plaque posted outside states that the current buildings are mostly from the nineteenth century. The tower looks positively medieval as its architecture is similar to the Carfax Tower, but the plaque states that it, too, has been an later addition and is less than three hundred years old. Only the basement levels are of original construction, dating back to early 11th century.

They go to the museum shop and ask the thirty-something clerk currently manning it if anyone matching Sherlock's description has been seen. Joh's chest constricts when the answer turns out to be yes. John digs out his phone and shows the man a photo of Sherlock from his blog,

"That's him," the clerk says, "He came by about an hour ago - he asked when the church closes. I told him at eight p.m. and he left. Said he wanted to take some photos in the evening when the floodlights were on, and that he'd come back after sundown."

John is partly relieved, since Sherlock asking about opening hours means that he's conscious and coherent. On the other hand, it means that whatever he's doing, he's doing it on his own accord - at least to some extent, and that is not a reassuring thought.

"Where'd he go?"

"I couldn't say. I didn't watch where he went after walking out of the shop. Apart from the opening hours he seemed interested in our basement renovations. I told him he couldn't go down there - the catacombs used to be open to the public, but some families who ancesters are buried there have protested this, petitioning for them to be designated a protected area."
"Anything else you'd remember about the guy?" John pleads.

The clerk purses his lips. "He was odd. Looked like he was about to pass out, like he wasn't well. And I remember he never looked straight at me, as though he wasn't really there, you know? Like he was talking to the walls, distracted. When he left he was muttering to himself."

"You didn't happen to catch what he was saying?" John asks, but before the clerk answers John's phone beeps.

Mycroft.

LAST SEEN AT OLD BODLEIAN TWO HOURS AGO. SCARCITY OF CCTV NETWORK IN OXFORD PROVING PROBLEMATIC. MH

"Sorry, no," the clerk says when John looks up from the screen. "He creeped me out, to be honest. I just wanted him to leave, really."

John thanks the clerk and steps back out into the churchyard. Victor lounges nearby while John calls Mycroft.

"Yes?" the elder Holmes' courteous baritone answers.

"We found out where he went next after The Bodleian. And it seems that he's coming back later tonight. St Ebbes downtown."

There's a short silence at the end of the line. "St Ebbes? The church? How did you come upon this detail?"

John is not in the mood to recall his so-called interview with Whateley - the thought of the man's plight raises the hairs on the back of his neck, but if Mycroft is to help he needs to know. "Whateley said as much, but we didn't realize at first it was a name, not a verb. We've talked to someone to whom Sherlock said he'll return here later tonight. We're going to keep an eye on the place."

"I trust your judgement," Mycroft says curtly. It doesn't sound as though he's entirely convinced of the feasibility of John's plan, but refrains from offering any alternate suggestions.

"Do you? You didn't trust it before, when you chose to keep me in the dark until I got convinced Sherlock had been kidnapped."

"I was trying to protect you both."

"And what a fucking fantastic job you did." John tries not to let grudges old and new surface, old ones pertaining to how Mycroft had known all along Sherlock hadn't committed suicide at all and new ones given life by learning what Mycroft had done all those years ago to try to drive a wedge between Sherlock and Professor Trevor. John still feels like Mycroft is due for a black eye for that one, perhaps also for the aftermath of what John now refers to as The Fall.

John had stood by his side at the funeral, accepted rent checks from him when he'd been temporarily unable to work after the whole ordeal. He'd even tried to offer awkward words of comfort to the man, mistaking his act for someone who'd just lost his brother but who was uncannily skilled at hiding his grief.

"Is Victor with you? I hope he's proving useful," Mycroft says.

"He is." John glances at Victor, who is drinking a coffee he'd just bought at the cafeteria.
"Good. Do keep me updated as to your progress," Mycroft says - it's more of an order than a polite request.

"You don't have any idea what's going to happen, then? What Sherlock is about to try to do?"

"Communicating with these forces would likely entail opening a portal of some kind, as to where exactly, I have no idea. All the preparations he's been undertaking are likely to try and ensure he survives an encounter with whatever is waiting at the other end of the connection. He wants to see, John, see what truly lies beyond our limited comprehension, and knowing my brother his overconfidence will have lead him to think that he could handle such an experience that has ruined many brilliant minds before him. That ruin might bring cataclysmic consequences, if whatever it is that finds him, decides to use that connection to come take a peek at the other end of the line."

Not much one can comment after hearing such things.

John shivers, acknowledges his understanding with a hum and cuts off the call.

In the sunlight, the church looks harmless. Comforting, even. John walks around it, raising a hand in greeting to the workmen removing old stones from the cellar levels and carrying them up in large buckets. Heavy wooden beams are being carried in, probably to reinforce the structures after so much stone has been removed.

The librarian had mentioned that the renovations were being funded by some anonymous business tycoon. John thinks that it's probably not a very big intuitive leap to suspect that magnate might belong to one of the secret societies Mycroft had mentioned. Which side? Those in favour of the end of the world, or those opposed to it? And why now? And if they knew something was going on here, wouldn't they have found it already? Maybe it's the side Professor Trevor had represented, since Mycroft had seemed unaware of its special significance.

Four men are grunting as they haul up a heavy rectangular stone to the churchyard. Its edges are uneven, making the stonework look very old. Words have been chiseled into its side.

*L. PRAEC. PONTIFI. ATYS*, the first line of the inscription says. *DIV. OPS MAGNA MATER* is the rest of it.

John turns away from the sun and gets startled when Victor turns out to be standing right next to him.

"Sorry." Victor glances at the stone John had been looking at.

"'Pontificatus'," John reads, "Some pope?"

"I don't think those have anything to do with Christianity," Victor says. "I did a college paper on the advent of Christianity in the Roman Empire. 'Magna Mater', The Great Mother, was an elusive pagan god worshiped in some parts of it. The Romans banned her cult, like they banned the worship of Isis, who was rather popular back then. Atys was another pagan god, supposedly some terrible one the worship of which had spread from the Middle East to the eastern parts of the Roman empire."


"You think Sherlock'll come back later like he told the clerk?"

"Why else would he be asking about closing hours? Most of the buildings above ground are new. I doubt he has much interest in them. It's more likely he's after wherever that thing came from," Victor says, pointing his crumpled disposable coffee cup towards the rectangular stone now lying toppled in
a flowerbed. "Not much we can do until the church closes."

"Anywhere decent where we could have a bite to eat in?" John asks.

"Can't beat the Bear Inn for ambience."

John takes one last look at the basement level entrance. There are so many workmen that they'd be noticed and turned away if they tried to enter now.

He wants to send a prayer out into the cold universe - a prayer asking to find Sherlock sane and in good health, to be there in time to intercept him before anything bad happens, to be able to convince him to refuse whatever it is these forces are trying to make him do - but judging by what he has learned about the universe recently, he doubts anyone or anything is listening. Or if they are, they might not be things John would want to associate with.

They will have to wait. John really doesn't feel like eating, but it might not be a good idea to encounter whatever it is that's waiting at the end of the line with no energy and an empty stomach.

Chapter End Notes

Reference list:

I couldn't resist a nod to Harry Potter since large chunks of the film versions have been shot at Oxford. The Monster Book of Monsters is such a reference.

The bit about a church being built upon an old pagan temple notwithstanding, everything told here about St Ebbes is fact. Find out more at:  
http://catholicsaints.info/saint-ebbe-the-elder/

The inscriptions "L. PRAEC. PONTIFI. ATYS" and "DIV. OPS MAGNA MATER" are from Lovecraft's "The Rats In The Walls". Much of Victor's explanation of the worship of Magna Mater comes from the same Lovecraft story.

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Time for the final soundtrack listings left to share with you. It's time for the battle themes of John H. Watson, and the laments of love of one Sherlock Holmes.

John's themes:
The Heart of Everything by Within Temptation
It's The Fear by Within Temptation
Where Is The Edge by Within Temptation

Sherlock's themes:
The Unforgiven by Metallica
Frozen by Within Temptation
The entire "Any Way The Wind Carries" album by Port Noir (song example: Onyx)
The entire "Not to Disappear" album by Daughter (song example: Numbers)

In addition to a new chapter, I've got some lovely news to share with you: Lunar Landscapes is in the progress of being podficced. More info to follow. I'm over the moon!
Chapter Summary

Tonight you get two chapters because they are, in a way, inseparable. The references for both chapters are listed in the end notes of chapter 23.

“Love is the most difficult and dangerous form of courage. Courage is the most desperate, admirable and noble kind of love.”
Delmore Schwartz

At half-past four in the afternoon, Victor and John are huddled over plates of fish and chips at the Bear Inn on Alfred Street.

John hasn't talked much - he feels too tired, too on edge to engage in small talk. Were this just a social outing he'd probably pick Victor's brain eagerly about tales of Sherlock. There are things that still interest him, but the nature of their travels is dragging his mood down, it's hard to curb the wandering of his thoughts down pessimistic paths.

How the hell is he supposed to stop whatever Sherlock is attempting to do? How will he convince Sherlock that this isn't worth it, that he should stop this bloody nonsense and come home to... what exactly?

It's not going to be an easy task to communicate to Sherlock why John thinks there's hope for the two of them, together. John needs to pick the exact rights words to hammer home the point that there's no reason why Sherlock couldn't get the life he wants, if that life includes John in a capacity more intimate than friend or colleague.

Is John ready for this?

He needs to be.

When the alternative is losing Sherlock to some doomsday cult - or worse - hell bent on dragging the universe through the wringer, then having an emotional discussion with Sherlock Holmes doesn't seem like such a daunting prospect after all.

They've been at this point before, right at the edge but neither of them taking the proverbial leap. Circling one another in a dance of deep devotion and fervent denial.

Facing Victor, the man who had actually taken that very leap once with Sherlock, makes John feel like a coward. A coward stuck on his own misconceptions of himself, his fears that it might not work, that he'll be a bit rubbish at being with a bloke, that people will talk and disapprove.

Sherlock is worth so much more than those petty thoughts, those trivial details.

In a way, Sherlock seems to see things so much more clearly. He would have been willing to die for
John, once, and John is certain that if someone forced his hand, he'd be willing to do the same in return. He needs to get over himself, over these insignificant hangups that mean nothing in the grander scheme of things. He owes Sherlock that.

"Can I see your book?" Victor asks after taking a sip from his pint. John had opted for a glass of water and a whisky with his food. Something had been telling him he'd need to memory of the brief warmth the scotch would seep into his bones, come nightfall.

John passes the Necronomicon to Victor, who opens it from a random page and begins reading a passage out loud.

"Speech was transmitted thought. Even now They talked in Their tombs. When, after infinities of chaos, the first men came, the Great Old Ones spoke to the sensitive among them by moulding their dreams; for only thus could Their language reach the fleshy minds of mammals. 'Wow,'" Victor adds, voice dripping with unimpressed sarcasm. 

"My thoughts exactly," John replies and eats the last two chips on his plate.

They eat the rest of their portions in silence. Neither of them are actually paying much attention to the food, and John in particular is deep in thought until Victor slides the Necronomicon back to his side of the table. There's a splotch of ketchup on the back cover now, which John wipes off with the corner of his napkin.

"Why exactly," John asks to exorcise the somewhat awkward silence, "Would you help me. Him. Us?"

"I think he deserves another chance."

"With you?"

The way Victor looks at him isn't exactly disappointment, but close. "I'm not here to get him back, John. I'm here for me. Father would have hated me to get mixed up in this. I'm here to see what willed him to wreck his family without a second thought - why he let Mum leave, why he cared so little for me or Lavinia, why he cared more for Sherlock because of how useful he was or could have been to Father. I want to know what could possibly be all that important."

"You know this could be dangerous," John says.

"And here we both are, still. I've been safe for thirty-five years. That didn't bring me all that much happiness, John." Victor says, swirling the last drops of his stout at the bottom of his pint with a bitter smile.

John remembers Victor saying he had studied English literature. A small video store in a small village did not sound like something a smart young man with academic aspirations might yearn for. But who was John to judge? He'd practically abandoned his own career as a civilian doctor to follow a brilliant consulting madman into battle.

"Why Cornwall?" John asks.

"My mother was from there. Her name was Margaret Delapore before they married. According to her, it's a well-known family from those parts but they changed their surname from De La Poer at some point. Apparently someone was accused of witchcraft and the whole family sort of maligned after that."

Victor wipes his mouth and puts his napkin down with a determined look on his face.

"Actually, I'm not entirely honest when I say I'm not here for Sherlock. I am, a bit at least. It's my
fault things went the way they did. If I can help save him again, give him a chance once again to see this is not the way, that his life doesn't have to be like this then maybe, maybe some bit of Karmic balance will tip in my favour."

"You regret what you did?"

Victor bites his lip, looking furtive. "I don't regret trying to save him from this", Victor says, pointing at the book in John's possession, "But I sure as hell regret not sticking up to Father. I regret letting him have that sort of a power over me. As a kid I used to think he had some sort of special powers to keep me in check, but now I've gotten enough distance from him that I know it was all me. It's a lot easier to blame something else than your own weakness for not doing the right thing."

They return to the church at a quarter past six in the evening, wanting a good margin between their arrival and the closing time of the building.

While waiting for Sherlock to hopefully appear, they walk around a massive old yew tree, the roots of which look so thick and strong that John can imagine them reaching deep down into the ground. Maybe all the way down to the catacombs. John shudders when he briefly considers what it might be sucking from the hoary, charnel earth.

"You never see these anywhere else than churchyards. I wonder why that is," Victor muses, laying his palm onto its trunk, fingers splayed.

John lets his gaze wander from shadow to shadow in dying light of the evening. There's organ music floating through open church windows - there must be a recital going on. The last rays of sunlight are converging with flickering candlelight from inside the church, creating a warm-hued dance on the stained glass windows.

"What's that?" Victor asks abruptly, pointing towards the grass near the cordoned-off area where the workmen had been hauling stones around earlier in the day.

John squints. At first his eyes can't make out anything of note in the shade of the building, but then his gaze descends on a dark bundle on the grass.

Taking a quick look around the churchyard to make sure they're not seen, John jogs closer to see what it is.

Dark blue wool, rolled into a haphazard bundle.

Sherlock's coat.

"Victor!" John yells, no longer caring about raising attention. The arpeggio-like organ piece sounding from the church nearly drowns out his voice anyway.

Victor hurries to his side. His expression shifts from confusion to alarm when he takes in the sight of the garment lying on the grass. John isn't surprised Victor might recognize it, too, since Sherlock has been wearing it in many a newspaper photograph.

John picks up the coat and presses it against his chest. "Sherlock wouldn't have left it behind voluntarily unless he was sure he wasn't going to need it anymore." John steels himself, refusing to think on the implications of such a deduction. "It's not even closing time. You don't suppose he could
have already gone in?"

Victor walks down to take a closer look at the back entrance that leads to the church catacombs. "The lock's been broken off with something," he says, haste in his tone.

John scrambling down to see the lock for himself. "Maybe he thought the organ recital would keep anyone from noticing him, plus they had probably stopped the renovation works in the cellars before the concert. Jesus," he suddenly exclaims, "How late can we potentially be?"

Victor steps back at the sudden aggression in his voice. "I don't know! I think I saw a recital poster saying the concert started at six." It is now fifteen minutes past.

John reluctantly lays Sherlock's coat down onto a large roll of cable near the entrance. It feels wrong, almost physically painful to leave it behind, but it would just be excess weight to haul around. Besides, they'll be coming out this way, won't they?

Won't they?

Victor pulls the door open and together they walk in.

After a short entryway the descend a spiraling set of stone steps. The hall that begins at the bottom of them isn't very big, but the workmens' floodlights in the arches make it seem atmospheric, painting the old stones with grey shadow and blue-tinted LED light. John wonders why the workmen haven't turned them off when leaving for the day. Could it be that Sherlock had turned them on when he'd moved through this area?

They walk the entire length to where the hall ends at an altar-like crevice. At first glance it appears to be a dead-end.

It's darker here, and the air is thick with dust and damp. A faint but foetid smell of sulphur mixed with something dank is coming from somewhere nearby, and John suspects it might be an old, now unused sewer system.

A tree root trails down one of the old stone walls, disappearing, arm-thick below the floor tiles.

Victor turns a semicircle slowly, taking in his surroundings. He then gives the sleeve of John's parka a gently tug while pointing his finger at a shady corner near the end of the tunnel. "Look."

A ring of ghoulisht green glows faintly on the wall in the darkness. The colour is sickening, and some kind of a vapour seems to be floating in through the wall in that area. Even though there's no draft to speak of in the underground corridor noticed, the smoke-like blue-tinted vapour seems to be dancing, creating strange shapes that merge with the shadows, illuminating the whole corner in a dizzying swirl of otherworldly glow.

John's palms begin throbbing insistently when he steps closer.

Victor passes him the torch they'd bought from a souvenir shop and John lights it, pointing the cone of light at his own hand.

The blisters on the side of his palm are now larger than they had been mere hours before. They're glistening, reflecting the disturbing green sheen from the wall.
John passes the flashlight to Victor, who steps closer to the faintly glowing wall. When he gets within an arm's length the light dims considerably as though cowering from him. When he retreats and John takes up position right next to the wall, the light grows brighter.

Instinctively, John reaches his blistered hand towards the wall. He doesn't know why he's doing this, but somehow he know he's supposed to. The glow begins pulsing slowly and the pain in John's hand increases the closer his fingers get. When his fingers make contact with the wall he nearly recoils at the sensation - slimy and moist, warm. The glowing mass seems to writhe and half envelop his fingers.

Victor moves the cone of light from the torch around John's hand in circles, surveying the rest of the wall.

A familiar sight greets John, whose fingers are still cradled by the tendrils of wispy green light: the same mould that John has been battling at home covers the wall in its entirety, making the it appear darker in colour than the rest of the chamber.

John finally withdraws his hand, wiping his damp palm on his jeans, wondering if it'll stain them permanently. His fingers are tingling.

The green light shifts and whirs, and a square shape beings forming within it. A faint, rippling peal reverberating from somewhere underneath is heard. This is not the organ music they had heard before - this sound mostly resembles distant thunder.

A maw-like blackness opens in the middle of the green mist on the wall. Not even their flashlight shone right at it helps make out any features in the now-altered wall. It's almost as if a black hole has appeared, sucking in all light in its vicinity.

John reaches towards it.

"Wait, don't--" Victor starts, but John's hand has already reached the blackness.

Touching it feels like waving his hand through empty air. John can feel a slight chill, as though a breeze moving through a corridor, where just moments before there had been a very solid wall. He reaches deeper. His hand passes through the veil-like darkness with ease and it envelops his palm, hiding it from sight. He moves his fingers, claws for something to grab hold of on the other side, but there's nothing there. It's an entryway. A door he has just opened. A passage to where?

John draws in a breath, glances at Victor to gain some fortification from a reminder that he's not alone here.

Then he takes a deep breath, and steps through the veil into darkness.

After a disorienting moment during which John passes through something that feels like the heavy air in a room the door of which has been bolted shut for decades, John finds himself standing at the beginning of a stone ramp reaching down as deep as his eyes can make out. Flames flicker from torch-like crevices on the walls.

Victor soon joins him on this side of the veil, stumbling through that strange doorway and nearly falling down when it's less solid than he had expected.
John walks a few steps down the ramp, examining the stonework used to build the corridor.

Victor leans down on his haunches and runs his finger along the seams between the stones that make up the wall. "It looks almost as if this place has been dug from the bottom up," he says, followed with a nervous laugh.

They begin walking down the ramp. Dry, odourless dust is puffed up from the floor by their steps. After some forty metres, John leans down onto his good knee to examine a spot of dust on the floor.

A footprint. Sherlock's feet are about two sizes bigger than his own. He glances at Victor. "What's your shoe size?" he asks Victor.

"Ten."

"Put your foot here," John says, pointing at a spot in the dust next to the footprint and Victor obeys. His foot leaves a print exactly the same size as the print left by the earlier traveler.

John's heart jumps into a set of extra beats. "Sherlock's been here," he says, desperately hopeful.
After forty minutes of walking, the corridor finally ends. John and Victor's calves are beginning to ache from walking down the increasingly steep downslope.

The corridor opens into a large stone hall. The lighting is dim, but there's a sun-like, warm and familiar quality to it. Sunlight shouldn't be possible, since they must be very deep underground.

This place must be old. There's no way to know for sure, but something in the heaviness of the air and the solemn shapes of the silent stones makes it easy to believe that this place could well be older than written history. Sherlock would scoff at such conjecture, were he not the very reason John has been forced to enter such a place.

On the walls, drawings that look like star maps are glowing with faint light as well. John can't figure out where the light is coming from, but he wouldn't be surprised if the paintings themselves were somehow emitting it.

Victor trails his finger down one of the constellations etched into the wall. "Perseus," he says. "And look, there are all of the eight planets and all their moons, even though the last of them wasn't discovered until less than twenty years ago!" Victor sounds incredulous, almost angry, as though they've suddenly become the hapless victims of a tasteless prank.

John is suddenly reminded of a conversation he'd once had with Sherlock on the uselessness of astronomy.

Surrounding the cosmic adornments of the walls are round symbols reminiscent of the Egyptian cartouches John had seen in the British Museum, but instead of pictograms they are filled with dots and lines. There seems to be some sort of a logic to them - it must be a language. The proto-morse code used by a lost civilization?

The shapes of the chamber are soft, asymmetrical. They don't resemble any ancient architectural styles that John remembers seeing in books or on the television. The geometry seems impossible - what supports such strange arches? The walls look seamless, but where could the builders of the place possible have found stone slabs big enough to achieve such an effect? Were they transported down there, or cut from bedrock in the depths?

*Never mind.*

There are more important things for John to consider than the marvels of construction.

Victor and John walk on in silence.
They reach the middle of the hall after a few minutes.

In the centre of it lies a pile of bones.

A very large pile of bones. They walk around it quickly, mostly to peer into the empty antechambers on both sides of the great hall to make sure there's no one there.

When they set on continuing past the bones, John's eyes spot something that gives him pause.

Several of the skulls at the bottom of the pile look... not human. Their features are elongated, sharp and the part where there should be a mouth and possibly a set of desiccated teeth, there's just a small opening.

John shivers. There's something familiar about the shape of the head after all, but he can't think about that now.

The eyesockets are only shallow indents with no holes for a nerve to pass through - no actual eyes? Elongated skulls.

John knows what this creature looks like when it's alive. Sometimes he wishes he could delete things like Sherlock.

'They are not human nor have they ever been - they are mediators in between,' Mycroft's emotionless voice echoes in John's head.

Nightgaunts.

John is reminded of an elephants' graveyard. Had there been a mass killing of these things here, or do they come here of their own volition to die? Are they like dragonflies, who die after filling their purpose?

Get a grip. This one's long dead.

John taps his chest, feeling the reassuring hard surface of the book Mycroft had given him that he'd tucked under his parka before they'd entered the church basement.

As they walk past the pile they can see there are some very human possessions scattered among the bones. Spears. Swords. A gun looking like a musket. A large, early-era NMT mobile phone. John is tempted to take a closer look, but they can't afford such a delay.

They walk on, and before long they reach the end of the hall.

The next hall is gilded, shining, glittering as though its walls are made of solid gold. It's even emptier than the previous one.

A statue of a strange god-like figure with dozens of hand-like appendages sits at the other end of the hall as though guarding the area. It looks vaguely like some many-armed god of the Hindu pantheon, but these appendages are not hands. It is difficult to make out any sorts of facial features - if the creature even has a face, that is. It looks like a maelstrom of different shapes - a tornado-twisted set of body parts from different animals. To John it closely resembles a face he'd once seen - that of a soldier who'd fallen victim to a roadside IED, half of his head completely mauled into a mess.

Victor merely glances at the statue. He's breathing fast, eyes darting around.

The emptiness of these halls is oppressing. The loneliness feels almost crushing - time itself seems to
have halted here. It would be easy, wonderful, sane to turn back now. Even curling up in a corner until starvation, the darkness or something even worse came to take them seems like a feasible plan.

A fear tugs at the edges of John's mind, but at least he feels no presence lurking the shadows - they are very much alone in this grand hall. John fights the despair trying to creep into his mind, feeling like a drowning man trying to keep his face above the water.

Victor seems to be barely holding on.

This place is impossible. Incomprehensible.

Wrong.

It's not meant for them. Not meant for humans.

*Please, Sherlock, turn back.*

With a determination that is increasingly difficult to rekindle, John and Victor wander on; through the golden hall that has nothing to offer to them to the set of winding corridors that makes John feels as though he's trying to negotiate a maze.

Finally they round a corner, and arrive... *outside?*

Outside they must be, but this is no landscape either of them has ever laid eyes on.

They're at the edge of a courtyard, lined by what look like infinity pools of black water on both sides. A large glass ceiling ending with a line a pillars reveals a black-and-red sky, up to which black spires are reaching from the part of the building they've just come from.

There are statues in this courtyard, depicting strange, twisted, deformed figures. The statues look as though someone has been trying to destroy them, hack out whatever they had been depicting before. All that's left are hideous, otherworldly forms.

Beyond the courtyard, a sandy desert spreads out for some distance until black lakes of still water take on shaping the landscape. At the edge of the horizon, rising from the dark waters are sharp-edged mountains. The land between the bodies of water is flat, save for a ridge nearby that half-hides behind it a drop down into a canyon.

A wind is blowing, hot and dry, prickly on their skins. Above, dark red clouds twist like whirlpools.

A fair distance away a figure stands on the sandy plateau, hands raised towards the skies, framed by the endless black wasteland lakes spreading beyond human sight.

*Sherlock.*

The book slides from underneath John's coat and hits the sandy ground with a thud. He doesn't stop to pick it up, taking off into a run as though chased by some unknown terror.

Victor lingers behind just long enough to grab hold of the book, and then follows John in a frantic scramble towards the still figure standing in the distance.
The wind howls and if John stopped to listen, he would likely hear words on the wind - strange words, but spoken with a familiar voice. He doesn't hear it, for the wind and his breathing which has been made loud and panting by the running, drown out such subtler sounds.

A mere ten metres before he reaches Sherlock, the ground begins to shake and both John and Victor are knocked off their feet, forcing them to wait on all fours until the shaking lessens so that they can regain their footing.

The waters surrounding them on both sides begin parting. What starts as the sound of a small waterfall soon intensifies into a deafening roar of water somewhere below.

Sherlock is on his knees, head downcast. He's wearing half a suit - no jacket, just the trousers, and a white, torn dress shirt that is only partly tucked in. He's barefoot.

John crawls the next few metres separating them and grabs the front of Sherlock's shirt, finally getting a good look at him. He looks barely alive, bruise-like blue splotches marring the leathery marble-white skin. His eyes are completely black, unseeing and he sways on his knees in the from the force of John gripping his shirt. His chest does not move in the expected rhythm of inhales and exhales, nor is there a detectable pulse when John presses his fingers onto Sherlock's neck, but somehow he's still strong enough to stay upright on his knees, as though some invisible force is puppeteering his form.

The sight of his gaunt, wasted body comes close to making John lose all hope, to stop holding onto his own sanity altogether.

_Not letting go. Not now, not ever, not again._

The ground continues to shake and shift under their feet. The sound of water is getting louder. Instead of a large plateau, they are now standing on a round cliff, on both sides of which great masses of black-grey water are flowing down in cascades towards deep gorges of black rock which divide and break the flow of the water kilometres below the level at which they are standing.

John wraps an arm around Sherlock and raises his gaze to Victor who is standing some twenty metres behind them. _THE BOOK!_ he yells to Victor, hoping his voice carries over the ambient rumble of the shifting landscape.

Victor opens the book so swiftly he nearly tears off one of the old, brittle pages. He leafs to the one marked page and begins reading. He look as though he's yelling the words at the top of his lungs, but John doesn't hear him over the now deafening noise of water, merely sees his mouth moving.

Sherlock goes limp in John's grip. John tightens his grip on Sherlock's arms, holding on so hard that the skin must be bruising. John shakes him, then bringing him an arm's length from himself so that he can see what's going on. His head lolls back like that of a ragdoll's.

John glances at Victor, willing him silently to be quick, to forget no lines, to mispronounce no words. Finally, Victor moves his gaze from the book to John, and after screaming something to John that contains the word 'done' he snaps his mouth pointedly shut.

Suddenly, Sherlock draws a violent breath, whips up his head so swiftly John fears whiplash, and his eyes fly open. They're still half cast in the endless black shadow that had inhabited them before, but half a familiar iris is now visible.

_He's still in there._

"Sherlock," John breathes out and presses the man's familiar form against himself, enveloping him in
his arms protectively. John closes his eyes, stealing a moment to revel in the fact that there's still hope, there's still something left to hold on to.

Behind them, Victor is making slow progress with shaky steps on the quaking ground, past Sherlock and John and towards the edge of the cliff. He stops right at the edge, by the abyss, staring down into the gorge below.

Suddenly, it becomes quiet. The waters stop moving.

The earth no longer shifts, but down in the darkness, something stirs.

At first it's just a pressure on the back of John's skull, little more than the twinge of approaching summer storm when the sun is still shining, but soon the whispers begin. John pinches his eyes shut and tries to think about nothing at all.

At the edge of the cliff, Victor has slapped his palms onto his ears, face distorted in pain.

The silence feels like a captive animal cowering from its tormentor. The very air they're breathing has been rendered completely unmoving. With great reluctance it's willing to fill their lungs, but it requires considerable effort to inhale and exhale.

Something is moving towards them. They can't see it, they can't hear it but John feels it getting closer as it tickles at his now fraying edges of his consciousness, curious, malevolent, overwhelming.

A new sounds cuts through the oppressing silence.

It could be wings, but it's too slow, too massive to be that, impossible to place within the parameters of anything that earthly or normal or reasonable or possible.

Victor still stands precariously close to the edge, shaking, blinking, eyes cast downward into the depths.

The skies go dark.

In John's arms, Sherlock pushes slightly back from John's desperate embrace with bony fingers and turns his head to fix his gaze in the same direction that seems to have Victor mesmerized.

The hairs on the back of John's neck stand up. Every cell in his body is telling him to go, to run, to escape. The unknown that is trying to gauge his thoughts, trying to get in, trying to take over seems to have lost some of its interest - perhaps its focus is now on someone else.

That gives John the boost of energy he needs. He manages to stand up and to drag Sherlock up in the process so they could go, leave, escape, but Sherlock won't move an inch from where they're standing. He suddenly feels much heavier than his weight, practically immovable, frozen in place.

"Sherlock, we need to go, NOW!"

His words are clearly falling on deaf ears. Sherlock drags himself a heavy step towards the cliff edge, and John is dragged along.

John desperately tries to think of something, tries to come up with a plan, but there's no time.

----- has to make that decision himself, decide not to go into the dark ----- 

--- an ocean trying to warm itself against a candle ----
"He's wrong," John says. "He's so wrong. Don't go," he pleads, wrapping his arms round Sherlock, pinning his hands down against his torso, trying to keep Sherlock from taking another step towards the precipice.

As John continues to struggle to get the two of them moving, a shadow begins to rise from behind the cliff. It blocks out most of what little light is left. It is a hideous, shadowy form of immense size and unfathomable nature - like a black wall rising from the nothingness below them. It brings with a scorchingly hot wind as its unfathomable form rising displaces the heavy air.

John wedges himself between Sherlock and the cliff edge. Sherlock's gaze is still directed past his shoulder, at the thing rising from the abyss below.

"Don't look at it! Goddamn it Sherlock, NO!"

It's almost dark now. Close by, teetering by the abyss Victor - who has a better line of sight to the black form approaching from below, lets out a wailing scream which bursts out with frantic explosiveness, gradually changing form to a paroxysm of diabolic and hysterical laughter.

"Don't go, please Sherlock," John begs.

They've run out of time.

He has mere seconds to distract Sherlock, to break the connection, to tear off the tether that connects Sherlock to whatever is coming for them.

--- waiting to be saved by someone who truly thought we were worth the effort---

---sentiment is a chemical defect found on the losing side---

---I was so alone and I owe you so much---

"I love you," John breathes out, tears running down his cheeks and a broken sob escaping his cracked lips. He then grabs Sherlock's cheeks between his palms, and kisses him with all the fight and conviction and sanity and life left in him.

Their lips part. John closes his eyes and dares an exhale, expecting it to be his last.

The darkness at which he refuses to look at has arrived, and it tries to tear its way into his mind like a ram at a castle gate.

If it ends here, if this is it, he wants Sherlock to be the last thing he sees.

John opens his eyes just in time to witness Sherlock blinking and exhaling sharply. His gaze - still made up half of blackness, half of his own strange-coloured irises - fixes on John, looking at him as though it's a reunion after a long absence.

A careful, shy smile plays on Sherlock's features briefly, making him appear much younger than his years. John swallows, tears still flowing unencumbered, but their source now is an emotion much less desperate than before.

John doesn't care what's still rising to the heavens behind them. All he cares about is the light that has returned to Sherlock's eyes.
John would have been quite content to stay there forever, staring at the loveliest sight in the entire universe, but a very much human exhaustion is taking over Sherlock again, making his sag on his feet, and John manages to barely grab hold of him when his legs give out. Sherlock's eyes roll back in his head and he collapses completely. The alien consciousness that had been trying to shackle his mind in place, trying to gain entry, has been distracted by something.

Or someone.

John is half tempted to steal a look behind them to see if Victor is still there.

In the end, he doesn't have to. A bloodcurdling scream the likes of which John has never heard seems a clear enough answer. Not even the wails of dying soldiers in Afghanistan, torn apart by explosives or ribcages torn apart by rockets had even remotely resembled that scream of agony he had just heard. It is clear beyond any doubt that the vocal chords from which such a sound had broken out of could not belong to someone still in the land of the living.

John doesn't call out to Victor. It would be useless now.

John quickly hoists Sherlock onto his shoulder and begins a retreat towards the shelter of the building from where they'd entered this wasteland.

A distant rumbling begins and the pillars on the side of the courtyard begin collapsing. Everything feels as though happening in slow motion - as if time itself has been bent out of shape.

The darkness is receding, moving away, retreating - John doesn't even know how he is aware of it, but it's clear as day that the threat is diminishing. It feels as though the entire universe is taking a deep, relieved breath after holding it in in terror.

It has been appeased - content it is not, but at least placated. It can't follow them now. The way for it is shut. The sacrifice has been inadequate, inferior - the gates will not let it through.

They reach the entryway to the building. It's still going to be long walk back the way they came.

As John navigates back towards already familiar, empty stone halls with the limp form of Sherlock on his shoulders in a fireman's carry, he doesn't look back once. His precious load feels strangely light - maybe gravity, too, abides to some very peculiar rules in this place.

On both sides of his path the halls crumble, collapse, recede, fade into a desolate nothingness. The destruction is slow, easily outrun.

After what feels like aeons, John finally stumbles through the warm, blanket-like darkness that had separated this place from the damp basement of the church. He stumbles on a loose floor tile but manages not to fall. Before heading to the spiral staircase that leads out of the catacombs John turns his head briefly to look back at the wall through which he'd just passed.

There is no mould. No glow. No swirling mist. No doorway.

John has never been so happy to see a boring old wall.

He repositions Sherlock slightly before taking on the stairs. Sherlock is still passed out, unstirring but reassuringly warm and very much alive. All through their long walk back to the land of the living John has reveled in the feeling of Sherlock's heartbeat and his lungs expanding rhythmically against his neck.
Thirty-one stone steps later, they climb out into the churchyard.

A waning moon shines thinly, tearing a path for its light with feeble horns through the foliage of a large poplar.

A crash and a distant rumble send a dustcloud out from the still empty doorway to the church basement.

John gently lowers Sherlock onto the wet grass, fetches his greatcoat from near the doorway and places it underneath his head as a makeshift pillar. John pries Sherlock's eyes open with his fingers. The pupils react, but there is no awareness there - Sherlock's eyes seem to be staring up into the blackness of space spreading above them.

The fear, the hysteria and the fear finally gain a chokehold over John, and he collapses next to Sherlock on the dewy grass.

Chapter End Notes

Reference list:

The name for chapter 23 comes from a song by Port Noir.

"Speech was transmitted thought. Even now They talked in Their tombs. When, after infinities of chaos, the first men came, the Great Old Ones spoke to the sensitive among them by moulding their dreams; for only thus could Their language reach the fleshly minds of mammals." This quote is from Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu".

"My mother was from there. Her name was Margaret Delapore before they married. According to her, it's a well-known family from those parts but they changed their surname from De La Poer at some point. Apparently someone was accused of witchcraft and the whole family sort of maligned after that." This family history is on loan from Lovecraft's "The Rats In The Walls".

"the hoary, charnel earth" is a quote from Lovecraft's "The Unnamable".

"wailing scream which bursts out with frantic explosiveness, gradually changing form to a paroxysm of diabolic and hysterical laughter" is from Lovecraft's "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward".

"A waning moon shines thinly, tearing a path for its light with feeble horns through the foliage " is from Lovecraft's "Memory".
There is a dream John had kept having after Sherlock's suicidal leap off the hospital roof.

In that dream, they had met at a graveyard, by an old yew tree.

Sherlock had been dressed like the day they had first met, and John in what he'd worn when he had walked into the pathology department at Barts that day.

"If I had asked you to come with me, to leave your life, your friends, everything, to take down Moriarty together with the risk of dying in the process, would you have done that? Would you have followed me?" Sherlock had asked John, his palm pressed against the twisted, distorted trunk of the poisonous tree.

It was the question that John never got to hear, the question that could have changed everything.

John had never been granted the chance to answer it in real life, so his subconscious had given him that chance in his dreams.

In the dream, his answer was always the same."Yes. I would have. I'd have followed you to hell, beyond death, anywhere. Always."

After hearing his answer Sherlock had always faded to nothingness, as though even in death, he'd been incapable of truly acknowledging the depth of what really had existed between them, denying what could have been, if they had only been brave enough to give it a chance.

Three days after returning home from Oxford, John has that dream again.

"Yes. I would have. I'd have followed you to hell, beyond death, anywhere. Always."

This time, instead of leaving, instead of abandoning John even in his own dreams, Sherlock doesn't disappear, doesn't dissipate into air. He's still there, still present with his palm pressed against the ancient tree, gloriously alive.

He stays, and he takes John's hand, entwining his warm fingers with John's.

"I know," Sherlock says with a smile that is not the sad and desperate one scared of its own shadow he has been wearing lately, but the one in the old photo of him and Victor. It's the exact same one he used to grant John - and only John - all the time; the one that lights up the sky and makes everything else in the world completely irrelevant. "This time, you did."
This chapter is dedicated to Ghyll Wyne.
Dear friends - we've reached the final chapter but grieve not, for I come with many gifts! More on that later though, because I know you must be eager to find out how it all ends.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You pull me in
To the land of the living
And I begin
Feeling bolder in my skin
- Saint Saviour

Two weeks later, when the Spring Equinox arrives and the Earth's orbit finally begins taking the planet away from the demon star Algol, John receives a phone call while having breakfast at the kitchen table of 221b Baker Street.

It's Mycroft Holmes, speaking in a voice that to John is the most beautiful thing he's ever heard, even though a deep resentment towards the man still lingers. What Mycroft says is: "He's woken up. And he's asking for you."

So swift is John's departure from the kitchen, that his half-drunk mug of tea topples and begins slowly trickling a puddle of Earl Grey on the floorboards.

The Nightingale Hospital is a prestigious private psychiatric institution located on Lisson Grove, little more than a stone's throw from Baker Street.

After two weeks of spending most of his waking hours visiting a certain room on the third floor, John is very familiar with the place.

Logically, those two weeks should have been wrought with worry and veiled in the fear that the patient in room 56 would never wake up. Many diagnoses have been proposed and written down in hospital records, often with a question mark following them.

Commotio cerebri suspecta. Suspected concussion.

Apoplexia NAS. A collapse of the nervous system caused by an unknown factor.
Vegetative state of unknown origin.

Possible catatonic psychosis.

When taking all this into consideration John should, indeed, be very worried about the sole occupant of room 56.

He's decidedly not.

Sometimes medicine doesn't have all the answers. Sometimes intuition might have more to offer, and sometimes it's the heart that knows best.

John greets the ward sister while walking down the corridor. He finds himself wondering if he should have brought flowers for this occasion.

Sherlock doesn't care much for flowers, unless they are poisonous or carnivorous.

Maybe John is thinking about flowers, because in some ways he's an old-fashioned guy, and in a strange way, this might be a first date of sorts.

On the other hand, perhaps the past five years have already served that purpose - the first date that started that fateful day at Barts and somehow never ended. The novelty and the excitement of an early courtship are still very much present and John doubts this will ever change, since he can't imagine life with Sherlock Holmes ever calming down, ever becoming ordinary, routine or commonplace.

There have been detours: Irene, Sherlock's fake suicide, Mary, the ten-minute exile, the events of the past months. Hitches. Miscalculations. Moments of forgetting what's really important. Still, after every bump in the road, every temporary loss of grip, they've made it back to each other.

'He's asking for you.'

John has no idea whether they will have much to talk about, or nothing at all.

He rounds a corner, and spots Mycroft talking to one of the unit's psychiatrists in the day room. John plants his palms on both sides of the doorframe and peers in.

The expression on the doctor's face had been incredulous and he'd been spreading his hands in a gesture of confusion. Perhaps he'd been trying to explain to Mycroft how his patient could have suddenly woken up without anyone even figuring out what was wrong with him yet. When the doctor notices John he nods in reserved greeting.

Mycroft raises his brows and also nods politely when he notices John, his trademark mask of superior dismissal present in his expression. His features then melt into a relieved smile, the likes of which John has never seen on the face of the older Holmes brother.

John stifles a laugh, shaking his head. He feels rather sorry for his colleague who, as Sherlock would put it, has been attempting to deduce without all the pertinent data.

He could talk to Mycroft, attempt to gather some information on what to expect. He refrains, because he doesn't really need to prepare himself for this. There had been a time when the conversation he's about to have with Sherlock would have frightened him more than a thousand bullets whistling by his ear, but not anymore.

He continues down the corridor until a familiar door comes into view. A few metres before room
511, he straightens his shoulders and allows himself to grin as widely as he feels like. It's a smile that has been struggling to get out ever since he'd had the dream again, but the residual fear still making his steps heavier has kept him superstitious. You can't be happy just yet. The nightmare isn't over until he promises it is.

As a last-minute thought, John pops into a nearby visitor toilet to splash some water on his face and to make sure he looks presentable.

He's being ridiculous, really. Sherlock knows what he looks like, and if Sherlock doesn't like what he looks like, Sherlock would surely have informed him of that fact earlier. Much earlier. Years earlier. Maybe this sort of ritual is procrastination at heart, even though John had convinced himself he really wasn't all that nervous, really.

He leaves the toilet and rounds a corner to get back to the right corridor. His steps come to a halt when he notices he'd not the only one currently headed towards room 56.

There's a woman in a red dress about to put her fingers on the door handle. She's carrying a bunch of flowers, looking like someone's relative coming to pay a visit, but her steps are too confident and the way she carries herself too superior. She stands out because she is not behaving as timidly as laymen do when visiting psychiatric institutions, unless they have been visiting frequently and for a long time.

Perhaps John has been so preoccupied with excitement and expectation, that it takes a moment for his mind to catch up and make the final identification.

Judith Glencoe. The woman who had stopped them from gaining access to the murder victim's girlfriend.

'Agent Glencoe' was what Sherlock has called her, and because of this John doubts that this is her real name.

John clears his throat. Loudly. He then makes his way to the door and practically wedges himself between it and Glencoe.

She quickly examines his face and then flashes on a controlled but genuine-looking smile. "Ah. Captain Watson."

"Agent Glencoe, if I remember correctly."

The woman lays the bouquet of yellow roses she'd been carrying on a side table set against the corridor wall.

_Sherlock doesn't like yellow_, John thinks.

"That would be Director Glencoe, to be precise."

"Pompous title for a minion of Mycroft's," John says, crossing his arms. "I'm not going to believe it for a second that you're not part of the same--- cabal."

The woman laughs primly. "Quite astute, but you have it all backwards. I am Mr Holmes' superior."

John's brows curl downwards. "So he really wasn't lying when he'd said it wasn't his choice, putting the museum murder into the hands of the NSY?"

"He did inform us of his concerns that the younger Mr Holmes would get involved, but we assumed
that was purely out of subjective brotherly concern. We were not aware of the younger Mr Holmes' prior involvement in such matters. Mycroft Holmes had unadvisedly kept this information from us, and for that he will be disciplined."

She clearly spots the alarm on John's face, since she smiled and continues. "I'm sure some leniency is in order, since he did, eventually, make the right call to involve you and Mr Trevor in solving the issue."

John certainly could have done without being involved with any of it, which he's tempted to tell the woman, preferably by shouting a lot. Glencoe is lucky that John is too happy today for his politeness to get completely swamped by his ire. "It would have been useless for Mycroft to tell Sherlock NOT to get involved, because knowing Sherlock that's exactly what he would have done right that instant," John says.

"What neither we or even his brother anticipated were the possessions of the late professor Trevor falling into his lap, and that instead of trying to keep this dangerous knowledge from falling into the wrong hands, Mr Holmes would actually attempt to open the portal himself, not caring about the consequences. I did enquire Mycroft if he knew what had lead to his brother even considering making a dire choice, but he sai he did not know. Even if Sherlock had fallen under the control of these forces, he must've been amenable to their influence to some extent himself to allow them to gain such a hold over him. Mycroft refused to discuss the issue further. Perhaps you might have some insight----"

"What Sherlock wants and what Sherlock does are none of your bloody business," John says and he doesn't feel like the woman deserves an inch more of his time or patience.

"You should congratulate yourself, Captain. Not many can claim to have prevented a potential apocalypse," Glencoe remarks, "Or, more remarkably, managed to break the hold these forces have over a human mind. You are aware that Whateley's dead?"

John purses his lips. "What happened?"

"He took his own life. Managed to break a plexiglass window at Broadmoor Hospital and slashed his throat."

"When?"

"The night before you arrived in Oxford. His last words were very similar to the ones you heard at NSY. He was convinced someone was coming for him the day after, 'if it gets through from Saint ebbs we all die' is what he told an orderly right before his suicide."

"Did he kill the curator?"

Glencoe nods. "We didn't anticipate Whateley to become so involved in the matters that he'd become prey to these forces. The events at Stonehenge were... Unfortunate."

John's fingers curl into a fist. "There's a lot you people failed to fucking anticipate. What's going to happen to the curator's girlfriend, then?" John asks, "The one you people tried to frame for the same murder?"

"Already released with a confidentiality agreement. She'll be well compensated."

John huffs.

Glencoe tries to reach for the door handle again.
"No," John says and lays his palm on the door to keep Glencoe from opening it. "No more. He's done. We're done with this shit. You're not to see him, not to contact him ever again. Done, you hear me?"

Glencoe bites her lip. Their eyes meet and neither budge until she finally takes a step backwards. "Very well. Shame, really. We were hoping that Mr Holmes might consider us among his future employment options. Certainly he has proved his mettle and knowledge in these matters. He'd be an asset to our organization."

"He's not joining your bloody club or whatever cult you're running, not now, not ever," John says. He grabs the roses from the table and shoves them into her lap. "Please leave."

She complies, her heels clicking on the worn linoleum until she turns a corner and disappears.

John lets out a breath and shakes his head. He leans his back against the wall for a moment to allow the anger to dissipate.

Over his dead body will Sherlock ever meddle in these sorts of things. Mycroft has assured him that all the books have been packed up in a locked crate which has been taken to a safe, undisclosed location. John has made sure that nothing remains in their flat to remind either of them about what has happened. He'd spent two bottles of bleach and Sherlock's stockpile of weak acids to ensure that the mould, in particular, has become extinct as far as 221b Baker Street is concerned.

When John feels composed enough, he takes off his coat, goes to hang it up in a rack nearby, and walks back to face the door to room 56.

He enters.

The small single room is bathed in sunlight from the large windows. During John's previous visits they had always been drawn closed. Not today.

Sherlock is sitting on his hospital bed, bare feet on the floor. A nurse is hovering by, taking his blood pressure.

Two weeks in what could best be described as a coma usually do not make people look healthier. On the other hand, it's not even remotely the strangest thing that has transpired in John's life of late.

Sherlock is still thinner than he used to, but the colour has crept back onto his cheek and the hollows of his face have been replaced with healthier contours. Sherlock looks up, recognizes John and his smile lights up the room.

John's entire being is flooded with relief when their eyes meet, and he sees that even Sherlock's eyes have shed that disturbing black tint that had once scared the wits out of John - their original, strange, multicoloured hue seems to be positively glowing today.

The nurse must be gifted with telepathy, because she quickly gathers her gear and leaves with a polite nod to John.

John walks to the bed, leans down and plants a kiss on Sherlock's cheek.

Sherlock frowns, licks his lips and then regards John with a look that betrays the facts that there are frantic gears turning in his head. He's blinking in that distracted manner he does when something has caught him off guard.

John grabs a chair, places it right next to the bed and sits down. "How much do you remember?" he
asks, trying to keep his tone light.

Sherlock wiggles his toes and then tucks his left leg underneath him, leaning his outstretched arm on the mattress so that he can lean closer. He seems to be studying John's face carefully, as though trying to solve a puzzle. "I remember you. On the cliff. The rest is a bit..." Sherlock makes an explosive gesture with his hand next to his head.

John laughs. "Like Spring cleaning at the Mind Palace?" he suggests and Sherlock gifts him with his finest eyeroll.

"What's the official take on what happened to Victor?" Sherlock then asks.

"Presumed dead in a cave-in of the catacombs of St Ebbes church. His sister is suing the church renovation contractors."

Sherlock snorts. Then his expression turns more severe. "I must say I never expected him to make such a choice."

"Mycroft told you, then? What really happened to him?"

"He told me what was probably an abbreviated version. I never anticipated the two of you - you and Victor, I mean - getting along."

"He did help. Plus I got to hear all the stuff you never tell me, all the crazy stories about your formative years," John teases.

"Yes, John, I existed for a considerable amount of time on this mortal plane before my biographer arrived to start properly glorifying me."

They're quiet for a moment. John is looking down, his mind wandering back to what Sherlock had said about how much he remembered.

"When you say you remember me, how much do you actually--"

Sherlock reaches out with his hand and raises John's chin with his forefinger so that he can direct his piercing gaze straight into John's eyes. "I remember the important parts," he says pointedly. "And I would prefer if you stopped this pointless interrogation and kissed me."

John abandons his chair, joins Sherlock on the bed and does exactly that, until the both of them are breathless and flustered. John rest his head on the pillow, pulling Sherlock down with him. After some arranging of limbs they settle into a comfortable position, Sherlock's head laying on John's good shoulder. The bed isn't big, but for the two of them lying this close, John decides it's the perfect size.

This should feel strange and awkward, but instead it feels like they've been doing things like this for years. Maybe it's because both of them are certain, now, that this is what they should have been doing all along.

"How are you feeling?" John asks, because it's what John Watsons do.

"Tired. Brain disorganized and slow. Infuriatingly alive, with all the associated aches and pains of lying motionless in a hospital bed for weeks."

John looks at him, really looks at him so carefully that Sherlock actually looks a bit apprehensive under his scrutiny.
"Diagnosis?" Sherlock inquires after a moment, the edge of his lips curling up into a smile.

"Fine," John breathes out. "We're absolutely fine," he concludes.

Sherlock seems to be positively reveling in the smile that's begins spreading across John's features. He joins it with his own, which is a thousand-watt one, finally gloriously unadulterated from the assumption that John will never, ever, love him back. It's like watching the first rays of sunlight caress the edges of the horizon after an endless winter.

John suddenly realizes he's made a terrible mistake.

He had let himself arrogantly think that he had truly, completely known Sherlock, but he hasn't.

Not until this moment.

He has only known known the man Sherlock has spent years projecting at him, at everyone. He has known Sherlock the mad flatmate, the enigmatic consulting detective, the loyal friend, the arrogant bastard, the self-proclaimed sociopath, the drug addict, the best man and the bratty younger brother.

He has not truly known Sherlock until this moment, because he hasn't known a Sherlock who is in love with him - a creature whose very existence he has denied out of ignorance, out of his own insecurity. He has not met that Sherlock before, because Sherlock has kept him shoved into some dusty closet in his Mind Palace, never to see the light of day.

John doesn't yet know what Sherlock says first thing in the morning when he opens his eyes, his face inches from John's. John doesn't know how he'll look after being snogged senseless on the couch, nor has he learned what Sherlock sounds like when he wants. John doesn't know these things, but he will. And never again is he going to make the mistake of assuming he'll have an infinite amount of time to do that.

He's not going to waste any more time, because one never knows when the next doomsday cult is going to use some stupid planetary alignment to bring forth an apocalypse.

John snakes his fingers into Sherlock's neck, carding them upwards through his hair until they rest of top of his head. Sherlock closes his eyes, and laces his fingers with those of John's other hand. The reply John gives him is a nearly bone-crushingly affirmative hug.

They remain in that position for hours, not saying anything, content to just be.

Gradually the fear rises from their souls, evaporating into the morning air like the mists from a landscape until it feels as though peace and reason have well and truly returned to their world. Slowly, the last traces of terror are replaced with something much saner and more enduring.

Love, that is.

- The End -

“Remember tonight... for it is the beginning of always.”
— Dante Alighieri, "The Divine Comedy"
Chapter End Notes

Here we are, then, at the very end - or is it? If you look carefully, this is now a series, the four remaining parts of which are two oneshots, a behind-the-scenes look at the series, and a drinking game. Enjoy.

Reference notes:

I've done a little Yog-Sothothery in this chapter with the calendar; Spring Equinox would have been about 9-10 days after the March days devoted to the Saints I mentioned earlier.

Algol is a real star (actually a three-star system) in the constellation of Perseus, named after the arabic word for demon, 'ghoul'. Algol has been associated with evil things as early as in Ancient Egypt. A medieval Latin name for it was Caput Larvae (the Spectre's Head'). In astrology it is considered one of the unluckiest of all stars, and belongs to the so-called Behenian stars (The Behenian fixed stars are a selection of fifteen stars considered especially useful for magical applications in the medieval astrology of Europe and the Arab world).

The term apoplexia is also mentioned in ACD's "The Adventure of The Gloria Scott".

"Gradually the fear rises from their souls, evaporating into the morning air like the mists from a landscape until it feels as though peace and reason have well and truly returned to their world. Slowly, the last traces of terror are replaced with something much saner and more enduring." is a remodelled quote from ACD's "The Devil's Foot".

"Yes, John, I existed for a considerable amount of time on this mortal plane before my biographer arrived to start properly glorifying me." is a reference to ACD's "The Musgrave Ritual".

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It's time to give thanks.

I am privileged to belong to a group of lovely, brilliant, funny ladies who all share my love for this fandom. You know who you are. Thank you for all the enthusiasm, the humour and the support.

Huge thanks are in order to my outstanding betas Emma221b and 7percentSolution.

Always grateful to M and J, my partners-in-crime of frug elaboration across fandom lines and literary genres, who understand (and even politely pretend to appreciate) my tangenty brain. You are my peer support group in the agony of authorship.

Also, Mr B deserves a shoutout, not because I'd be even remotely capable of defining his role in this creative process, but because I'm somehow convinced he's definitely had one.

The biggest thanks, however, goes to my readers. There are many nice things in this universe such as tea, jumpers, murders, Mycroft on a trampoline and kittens, but you are without doubt among the very best of what this plane of existence has to offer. Clearly the universe cannot be uncaring and pointless, since it has granted me the company of you all.

Works inspired by this one

An illustration for "A Diseased Fancy", chapter 15 by J_Baillier

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