The Killer with the Yellow Wall-Paper
by helico.pter

Summary

Sherlock navigates a case - and John - with his usual tact and social grace.

Notes

This fic was inspired by the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Tedious. Tedious. TEDIOUS. TEDIOUS TEDIOUS DULL DULL DULL BORING.

Idiots and short-sighted fools!

“You said that out loud, Sherlock.”

Sherlock swirled around on the front step of 221 Baker Street and glared down at Lestrade who stood by his car, weary and defeated in the street lights. “Of course I did!” Sherlock roared.

“You're officially under house arrest until this case is solved, okay? Go in and stay in,” Lestrade sighed.

“This is ridiculous. You'll never solve the case without me, not with the logic-impaired people you
have on it!"

“You mean Anderson. You know, Scotland Yard has solved some cases without any assistance from you in the past.” Lestrade had the car door open, standing behind it as though it would shield him from Sherlock's ire. “Go in,” he repeated. “I really don't need to be told off again for having you around.”

Sherlock's only reply was to slam the door. He didn't answer Mrs Hudson's greeting (it was after 9pm on a weekday, she was on her soothers, she'd forget she even heard the door in about two minutes) and stormed right upstairs. “John!”

“Stop shouting, it's past nine.” John was there, knocking about on his laptop. “And I'm right here.” He hadn't looked up yet, rather worn and faded about the face (still hungover).

“Are you even a doctor,” Sherlock demanded, throwing off his greatcoat.

John lifted his head, wearing the question on his face, then blinked. “Oh God, Sherlock. What did you do now?” He got up and walked across the rug (silent, he wore woollen socks when he felt ill) and came to stand in front of Sherlock, looking up at him with a frown. “Your eye's almost swollen shut.”

The pain was marginal, but John's expression made it return and Sherlock slunk away into the kitchen, vision hazy in his obstructed eye. John had consumed tea in copious quantities during the day, the biscuit tin was still there (comfort food). Mrs Hudson had taken pity on him and made lunch and dinner; it was easy to take pity on John. He was pitiable. Sad. Sherlock ground his teeth together which made his jaw hurt, but it was all right, it hurt even more to be grounded and forced off a case.

“Are you going to-” John began, with that tone of voice Sherlock hated.

“Shut up,” Sherlock snapped in return. “You don't know anything, observe anything or understand anything!”

“What-” John started again, slightly wounded this time. Confused. Stupid, stupid John. So human. So perfect a gauge for matters of being human that Sherlock had not yet mastered and never would because they were boring and unnecessary.

“Have you ears? Eyes? It's OBVIOUS I've been struck in the face. I'm limping, favouring my left side, extensive bruising. I'm back early from a case, so it's not gone according to plan, Lestrade's car has a distinct sound, you must have heard him drive up, the street was empty. We spoke at length, with volume, the window was open because you needed fresh air for your headache, so you also must have heard us. You mixed your drinks last night because you're an idiot and think you're twenty years younger than you are.”

He paused, vindicated, listening to the silence that John radiated, then turned. Being mean at John was gratifying, though sometimes, briefly, Sherlock felt bad about it.

John was, however, not hurt this time. He was still frowning, a little slumped at the shoulders (he had the perpetual stoop of someone who peered too closely at his laptop screen, using too small font sizes, most likely). “I heard you,” he said simply. “House arrest. I'm sorry. Will you let me help you now?”

“How could you help,” Sherlock snorted and limped into the sitting room and carelessly threw himself on the sofa. “I'm going to DIE of BOREDOM. It was the ONLY case.”

“You could help me find my wallet. Haven't seen it since last night.” John followed him, patiently
(annoyingly) waited until Sherlock gave up and sat up on the sofa, too much in pain to lie down.

“For God's sake, John, of course you haven't and of course I won't.” He had to shake off his jacket and unbutton his shirt, to let John look at the bruises all over his left side. There would be no peace otherwise.

“You must have fallen.” John mumbled (and he was right, he was sometimes more clever than he let on), only studying the purple blotches first. Then he reached forward and pressed along Sherlock's ribs. “Sorry.”

“They're not broken.” Sherlock looked away, at the deer skull. He knew insisting that he was all right wouldn't make John work any faster (as if he EVER did anything FAST) or stop altogether, so it was best to keep quiet, try not to wince and let him poke around until he was satisfied. After the ribs it was the foot, and then it was the distribution of cold packs and pain tablets, neither of which worked fast like the drugs Sherlock really wanted, but which John never let him have.

“How many soldiers died out of boredom while you DID NOTHING because you are so SLOW,” he finally gnashed out from under the cold thing covering half his face as he lay post-inspection on the sofa. “And either get me cigarettes, ten patches or your gun so I can have some RELIEF.”

“Oh, shut up, Sherlock,” John replied from his seat at the desk, patiently typing something, so very annoyingly slow and hesitant tap-tap-tap on the keyboard, so very indifferent to Sherlock's suffering. “And go to bed.”

“Bed? BED?” Sherlock paused, looking at John with his one good eye, and his mind was agitated (Lestrade must pay) with the loss of the (his) case and the house arrest. “John,” he growled.

“All right, fine, what do you want? A game? A swift kick in the groin?” John sighed and looked up (finally, attention).

“Didn't you hear me? I want your gun.”

“I have an idea. Why don't you find my wallet?”

“It's on the hat shelf, under your gloves and that stupid cap you took from the theatre and insist on wearing. You came in, drunk, you had your keys in your hand, wallet in the other because you'd just paid the cabbie, but since the last thing you did was to open the door it was the keys you were thinking of and not the wallet. Oh. My. God. John. I'm going to die if you keep this up.”

John, unperturbed like only a man with half a brain could be, got up and checked, making a pleased little “ah!” (he vocalised far too much) when he found that Sherlock had been right (as if he could have been wrong).

“Thanks,” he grinned. “Did that hurt?”

“Does your brain hurt when you try to think?” Sherlock muttered, closing his eye. John was being distracting, taking away his rightful wrath at being grounded like he was a child.

“Not your best, that.” John padded about on his socked feet. Into the kitchen, freezer, out of the kitchen, across the sitting room, stopping by the sofa. “Sherlock,” he said by way of warning though Sherlock was perfectly aware of what he was about to do, which was to take the cold packs that were no longer cold, and replace them with fresh ones.

John knew not to expect gratitude or niceness, Sherlock had seen to that (it was necessary), and was complacent enough to ignore Sherlock's meanness (also necessary) but for the extremes. Sherlock
mulled on this for a brief moment, then felt merciful (which had nothing to do with the cold packs and the pain medicine).

“Ask,” he said.

“Ask what?” John was back in the kitchen (tea).

“All the things you’ve wanted to ask me.”

“What makes you think I want to ask you anything?” John snorted.

“The fact that I’ll go mad if I have to lie here quietly and listen to you do chores,” Sherlock replied. Why was John so slow? So incredibly stubborn. It was dull. DULL. “Ask!” he barked.

John shuffled back into the sitting room. “Right, then.” He sat down and adjusted the cushions (thinking audibly). “Have you ever been diagnosed? By someone other than yourself?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and then regretted it. “Yes, of course. Many times. With everything. Is this the sort of question I’m to expect from you?”

“Does it matter?” John nursed his tea, he nursed everything. People, drinks, eggs in the morning. Slow, slow, slow. Slow of wit, slow of movement, slow to observe, slow to anger. “You told me to ask you the things I’d always wanted to know, now deal with it.” All too smug.

“Next!” Sherlock called. “TRY to be more clever, for God’s sake.”

“Why were you put under house arrest, then? Are you a suspect again?”

“That isn’t clever, that’s obvious, and I refuse to answer.” Sherlock let the cold pack from his face fall off to the floor, crossed his arms and attempted to make a cup of tea float over to him with the powers of his mind, which he knew were formidable and thus the world should have bent to his will.

“Okay.” John straightened his legs in front of him and looked at his toes, then at Sherlock. “Tea?” he asked kindly. Sherlock looked back, but said nothing, which set John into motion, shuffling into the kitchen and back a minute later with a cup that had a cloud of steam above it.

“It's hot,” he said and waited for Sherlock to sit up a little, stuffing a cushion behind his back, before handing over the cup. “Keep your leg elevated.”

That was another comment that required no reply from Sherlock, he had his tea, John could go hang. He was momentarily distracted by the hot drink and making sure it had the right ratio of tea to milk to sugar (2:1:0,25). John kept on talking and Sherlock was peripherally aware of it, zoning back in when he was satisfied.

“I said, who told you you had no heart?” John was looking at him with a little frown, obviously worried about this heart business.

“Who hasn't?” Sherlock thought of a sandwich and some biscuits, very hard, looking toward the kitchen, then at John, then again at the kitchen. It had worked before.

John narrowed his eyes, attempted to look mean (impossible), and went back into the kitchen. “I've never told you that.”

“I want it toasted! Butter and orange marmalade!” Sherlock peered in after him, directing the sandwich-making. It was important. “You've never told me I'm heartless because you don't believe
that people are bad. Nobody's good, you know. Not even you, you drink too much, enjoy violence too much, watch stupid programmes on the telly too much.”

“Thanks, and those are some of my faults, not my moral views. You should know the difference.” John carted him some biscuits while the bread was in the toaster.

It was John, if anyone, that would be good, if Sherlock believed in such a thing. He didn't believe people were bad either, he didn't need to believe in people, they existed, it was confirmed, and their actions spoke very clearly of their lack of goodness or morals or whatever it was they were supposed to have. They were irrelevant, psychological experiments had shown people could throw out their morals and beliefs like rubbish if they wanted to, or the right situation was provided for them to forget them. Gain to oneself was the backbone of morality.

“Stop thinking whatever it is you're thinking,” John advised him from the kitchen. “You've got that look, like you want to set something on fire.”

Everything, everything, everything was negotiable. “Some men just want to watch the world burn.”

“Where did you learn that? Does that include you?” John yawned as he brought Sherlock a plate with two pieces of toast, covered in marmalade. “Don't answer that.”

“Yes, of course myself included. Obviously.” Sherlock inspected the toast, deemed it satisfactory, then looked at John who'd sunk back into his chair and picked up his cup. “Ask more.”

“You don't like my questions.” John wasn't upset, it was harder and harder to upset him as time went by, and when he did get upset it was about ridiculous things like feelings or morals or caring (which was not an advantage). Or their friendship. That was a subject not to be crossed, and Sherlock avoided it out of niceness, which was a social construct, one he'd personally constructed in his social behaviour just for John. He'd witnessed people using their constructs in public, but too much niceness just made them weak.

“I understand murderers,” he commented.

“Oh boy, here we go.” John huffed into his cup.

“No, I must clarify. I understand serial killers. They're not encumbered by niceness or niceties or social rules or constructs or expectations,” Sherlock opined from the bottom of his shrivelled and non-existent heart.

“And you are?” John made a face at him, then rolled his eyes into the other direction, at the lucky cat.

“Yes. By you. You stop me from using all of my knowledge and skills.”

“I'm an encumbrance now. Great, thanks. I feel better. At least I'm stopping you from killing people, I guess.”

“Barely, John! Don't go to sleep, I'm still bored.”

“Mm, right. Um. Do you play any other instruments than the violin?”

Sherlock almost spit out his toast into his hand so he could be scathing at John, but decided against spitting because chewing alone was quite painful and being scathing might hurt more. As it were, he merely eye-balled John very meanly.
“What's the point of asking you anything when you refuse to answer?” John was still nursing the first cup. Was it even warm any more? The steam was long gone, but John still curled his fingers around the cup so it must've been retaining some heat, but he took no care when drinking and looked vaguely displeased when he swallowed, so the liquid was tepid at best.

“FINE. I do. The recorder. Are you satisfied? Does this fulfil the required parametres of an answer you expected?” It was a complete lie, but it worked and John looked a bit happier.

“The recorder? Really? That's- that's- Never mind. I didn't know you were into woodwinds.” He paused to grin at Sherlock, then sobered up again. “Why don't you tell me about what happened with the case? You left this morning and- Well, that's all I know about it.”

“Post hoc!”

“And that is Latin. Why Latin?”

“Post hoc, ergo propter hoc, John. After this, therefore because of this.” Sherlock brushed crumbs off his shirt which he'd done back up after John's inspection of his ribs. He put his cup and plate down on the floor and then wiggled deeper into the sofa.

“And that means?” John was back to yawning. “Don't keep me in suspense.”

“Suspend this,” Sherlock muttered, which made John laugh shortly, tired. “You assumed that because I left this morning it had something to do with the case, which was... not the case.”

“What?” John chuckled, still amused by the previous quip, so slow to change gears and reconfigure for the matter at hand.

“Concentrate! The case happened after my leaving, so you assumed my leaving had something to do with the case. Thus post hoc.” Sherlock was starting to feel tired, and he ached, and his eye was now completely obstructed.

“Right. I'll concentrate when you start making sense. Deal?” John looked utterly relaxed, head tilted back, eyes half-lidded and crescent-moon-shaped in amusement that had more to do with sleepiness than actual humour. “Besides, I think you had a logical fallacy in your Latin reasons.”

“It IS a fallacy!” Sherlock bristled.

“I meant, you great big idiot,” (too smug), “that the case didn't happen because you went out, did it?”

“According to Scotland Yard, yes, it did, since I'm their big suspect. Concepts such as thinking and logic and reasoning and deduction and even induction are completely out of their comfort zone.”

“Induction... heating?” John attempted, yawned prodigiously and leaned his head back, eyes closing (he had asked, why wasn't he interested in the answer).

“Inductive thinking! Opposite of the science of deduction,” Sherlock corrected him. “I left to go do my body part experiments at Barts this morning because you were in a vegetative state from last night's outing, and worked on them for several hours until I learned of a new corpse that had just been brought in from a crime scene, untouched, and no cause of dead was immediately evident.”

“Why didn't you ring me?”

“Because I knew you'd be useless and moan too much.” Sherlock made a dismissive gesture at John. A stiff drink was quite all right now and then, but drinking until inebriation and then having a
hangover at work was very not all right, and John was particularly annoying when hungover.

“Who was the dead person?”

Sherlock shrugged. “A young woman of no consequence.” He had crossed his fingers on his stomach, looking up at the ceiling with his good eye, the hurt leg elevated on throw pillows which were Mrs Hudson's. He could hear John sighing and rolling his eyes, objecting to Sherlock's lack of sympathy towards the recently deceased. He chose to ignore out of courtesy to John who had chosen not to lecture him about it. *Quid pro quo, et cetera.* This is how a partnership worked, apparently, giving and taking, though John mostly took Sherlock's patience and Sherlock gave enormously out of his intellect and time.

“I inspected the body for clues because the police officer that had accompanied it had clearly been hired from the policing for IDIOTS school and had no worthwhile input even when questioned with the utmost simplicity.” Sherlock grunted in disgust. “What interested me were the traces of the yellow, papery substance under the body's fingernails. I took a sample and left to look at the crime scene.”

“You could've texted me, at least.”

“John,” Sherlock intoned. “I DID text you, even if you were completely useless at the time and never replied. And you're now realising you've no memory of this happening and are wondering where your mobile is and if the text is still there. Your mobile is in the pocket of the cardigan you wore last night, OBVIOUSLY, and the text is still there because you never delete any texts from me. Don't. Get up. To check.” Sherlock raised his hand and looked at John who had already sat up to go do just that.

John sunk back into the chair. “All right. You went to see the crime scene. The police were already there?”

“Yes. The body was found in a small room by the owner of the property. He'd rented the room out through the Internet as he himself lives out of town. He only came to inspect after the rent hadn't been paid for two months.” Sherlock made sure John was still listening by giving him a glance. “He had trouble entering the place because it seemed someone had put wall-paper not only on the walls but also over the door and the windows. The yellow residue under the body's fingernails were from clawing at that wall-paper, trying to find a way out.” He demonstrated by scratching at the air with both of his hands, delighted at the mystery. Whoever had put up the wall-paper had left AFTER covering all the exits.

“God.” John was wincing. “And the girl had been locked there for how long?”

“Long enough to be emaciated, but that wasn't the cause of dead. She had a water supply, she should've survived longer than she did, based on purely physical facts, but. She didn't.”

“So why-”

“John. I'm trying to simplify this as much as I can for your sake, so stop interrupting me.” Talking about the case was helpful at staving off the boredom and physical discomfort brought on by that and the bruising. He heard John mutter an (insincere) apology, but there was no bite to it. There were routines of interaction that had grown between them, their exasperation with each other's idiosyncrasies was just one aspect of those routines. Sherlock resolved to analyse them more when he had nothing better to do.

“The wall-paper was what interested me most. It was yellow, aged, covered with a slightly darker
yellow pattern in a way that defied the human eye's ability to follow it, but I had seen it before, during another case. The police at the scene was at a loss, naturally, and Lestrade wasn't even on the case. I texted him to meet me where I'd first seen this type of wall-paper when I left.”

John had settled into his listening pose, eyes only half-open, but concentrated on Sherlock (as was right). “So what was this other case?”

“It happened years ago. I helped a Mr Gosbeck who'd lost his sight.”

“A blind man?”

“No, for God's sake, John, do you ever listen? A man who had LOST his sight. How much more obviously can I say it?”

John blinked, then attempted again, taking Sherlock's words as literally as he could (which was a visible effort). “A man... who had... misplaced his sight? He was able to see, but not at the moment because his sight was missing?”

“Yes, and I helped him recover it. He had a swath of the same wall-paper between the pages of the third volume of Encyclopaedia Britannica.”

“A suspect, then?” John lightened up a little, he was a good listener and liked to take part in any narrative, even when he was mostly distracting and not at all helpful. “Had the police already traced the e-mail address?

“Yes, and yes, wonder of wonders, but it was a dead end. I resent the implication that you think I'd waste my time chasing someone who can be found by e-mailing them.” Sherlock gave John a cross look and kicked the sodden ex-cold pack off his foot into John's direction, but his aim was off and it landed harmlessly in front of the telly.

John followed the arc of the cold pack with his eyes, then turned back to Sherlock. “I have some other questions.”

“If you must,” Sherlock sighed. There was no way to avoid it, other than smothering John with a pillow or insulting him until he left in a huff.

“First,” John held up a finger. “How did the killer manage to wall-paper the whole place and then get out? Second, if you're on a case, why did you just eat?”

“John.” Sherlock rubbed the bridge of his nose carefully, though raising his arms was beginning to be a chore, particularly the left one. “I know that on occasion you've managed to rise above the ambient level of intelligence that pervades the humankind, so I'm surprised you haven't grasped the fact that obviously the person behind this had done considerable structural work on the room to be able to wall-paper it shut. There were attachments over the windows and the door to make them blend into the walls, and the place had been locked from the outside. As for my eating, I'm not on a case, I'm under house arrest.” He couldn't help a little note of petulance creeping into his voice.

“Right, then. Continue, your detectiveship. The man with the wall-paper.”

“The piece he possessed was approximately fifteen centimetres wide and twenty-five long with a long tapering end, obviously having been torn off a wall by hand.” He demonstrated the movement with his right hand, grasping the air and pulling down. “He had worked as a building renovator before being retired and one of the last places he'd worked at was an old house being turned into smaller flats. There was a big room at the top floor, just under the roof, with a hardwood floor that had been scored all over as if heavy furniture had been moved around a lot. The walls were bare
except for this one scrap of wall-paper which was so odd that he went and tore it off immediately, and then kept it."

"The reason why he kept it, he told me, was because of the pattern. He'd never seen anything like it, and neither have I. I was studying it when Lestrade finally arrived, barely up to date on the case, but once he heard where the piece was from he started looking constipated."

At this point John snorted and got up to close the window, collected the cold packs and their dishes off the floor and carried them into the kitchen, showing surprising initiative for someone who often left tea cups around the flat for weeks on end, which Sherlock permitted as a sort of a social experiment. They were normally returned to the sink by Mrs Hudson rather than Sherlock or John.

"I take it he knew something about the place, then?" John said once he returned to his chair after turning off the lights in the kitchen and the overhead in the sitting room, leaving them in the yellowish glaze of the dim table lamps.

"Yes, he told me several boring suicides had happened there over the years he'd worked in Scotland Yard, and one open-and-shut murder case where the murderer turned himself in on the spot."

"Boring?" John was making a face. "That's a nice way of describing someone's despair."

Sherlock felt he owed no response to that, John was familiar with his stance on boredom and human life and it didn't require further elaboration. "Lestrade contacted the landlord for the property and found out no one was living in the top floor flat at the moment. He explained to us that three of the five suicides that had happened on that property had been in that flat."

"Oh, that- that's creepy," John said.

"At that point Lestrade was contacted by the police, letting him know there was another corpse. A young woman like the first one, basically in the same condition, wearing the same thing, with the same sort of residue under her fingernails, but also in her mouth unlike the previous corpse."

"Oh God." John was clearly no longer amused and Sherlock took some pleasure in that, smirking at him briefly. John was like that, always held down by the weight of the world and the suffering in it, as though it was either his fault or because he should've been doing something about it but wasn't (he was sometimes exceedingly lazy).

The sofa was getting somewhat uncomfortable under Sherlock and he shifted with a grunt, trying to find another position where his battered side would be more or less comfortable. He wasn't done recounting the story yet.

"Mr Gosbeck gave us the name of the company and his contact that had hired him and his men to do the renovation of the property as we left. Lestrade drove us over to the second crime scene while I looked through some background on the place and pictures of the corpse that Molly took and sent me. No evident cause of death again."

John was giving him a look. "Wish you'd rang me. I'd've come even if it was inconvenient."

"You would've been of no use, I told you already," Sherlock said simply, ignoring John's pursed lips of disappointment. "The new crime scene was identical to the first. The same wall-paper, a water supply, scratch marks on the walls by the victim. The place was rented off a private person via e-mail, traced to nowhere. The first month on both places had been paid with cash, sent by mail, but no further payments had been made, and no e-mails answered."

"The landlady was there, as was the police officer who had come over to Barts with the first body,
along with Scotland Yard's ‘finest.’” Sherlock made the sarcastic quotation marks with his fingers. “The landlady, a Mrs Hayling, was almost nonsensical, she was so frightened. Most of it was self-provocation and in response to the fawning of the police. A bored, middle-aged, married woman, affluent enough to not work, with an achiever type husband who rather works than spends time with her. Very typical. She recognised me with some surprise, which was enough for the police officer from Barts, possibly because she'd been ingratiating herself to him and vice versa and his manhood felt threatened.” Sherlock made a frustrated noise at human stupidity and gullibility. “He rugby tackled me down the stairs and punched me, claiming loudly that I must be the one responsible, that he'd seen me at Barts, just waiting for the corpse, knowing it'd be there.”

“This took Lestrade by surprise because he hadn't been aware of how I got involved and instantly took it to mean I must be involved because I'd known where to go for a piece of the same wall-paper. It was obvious he was also entertaining an idea of Mr Gosbeck and me working together. As if I'd ever have a partner!” Sherlock scoffed only to receive silence from John who was frowning at him.

“Really,” John said, very flatly. Of course he would take offence at that, their friendship was called into question, which hadn't been Sherlock's aim.


“You make things sound very personal,” John muttered, but was begrudgingly appeased by Sherlock's recognition of their bond.

In a way, Sherlock reflected, John was particularly useful in his role as a gauge and repository of useless human responses because he wasn't afraid of reminding Sherlock when he'd broken some absurd social rule, making it possible for Sherlock to completely delete them from his mind and free space for the more useful data. Sherlock had always had trouble trying to keep them in mind, along with the corresponding emotional state, when interacting with the unintelligent masses.

“So,” John hedged. “After that Lestrade brought you home?”

“Yes, AND he took the piece of wall-paper Mr Gosbeck gave me,” Sherlock huffed. “And the pieces I scraped from under the fingernails of the first corpse. He said he'd take me to the hospital to be checked over, but I refused. I knew you'd be here, after all, eager to fuss.”

“Speaking of that, you really ought to rest now, and give me your phone, I want to look at the pictures Molly sent.”

Sherlock agreed with a nod (to John's relief, obvious in the sudden drop of his shoulders as he relaxed). “More paracetamol, and help me up.”

John did exactly that, acting as a crutch for Sherlock to lean on, slowly shuffling them into his bedroom, then leaving him there with a glass of water and a bottle of tablets. Sherlock listened to John proceed through his evening rituals and finally climb upstairs (each step of the stairs was recognisable by different creaks) leaving Sherlock to design the violation of his house arrest he was about to undertake the next day.

At 4am Sherlock was awake in the unnatural glow of his mobile, typing a text message to John. He was aware of the very faint ding that was audible through the thin structure of the house (he also had excellent aural abilities) when his message made it through to John's phone. A very long moment followed which Sherlock spent in agitation, dragging himself up from bed and into the loo. As he was inspecting the swollen side of his face he finally received a reply to his text. A rather peevish
one. John was overreacting. They'd had a solid several hours of sleep and early morning was the best time to go about without everyone interrupting (why was this concept so hard for John to grasp).

After a few more messages that mostly consisted of things like “get up, John” or “for God’s sake, John” and “I'm deleting all your lady videos, John,” John finally came down the stairs, wearing a reproachful expression and the imprint of his pillow on his cheek.

“I swear to God, Sherlock, one day I WILL shoot you,” he muttered, standing in the middle of the corridor outside the loo. “What the hell do you want?”

“The case,” Sherlock replied primly and hobbled out. “Bandage my foot so I can walk on it.” He didn't mention it hurt a lot more now than it had earlier, but he suspected that John knew that, which led him to congratulate himself on establishing a line of unspoken communication with another person. Maybe in the future he could stop talking completely. It was a slow and cumbersome way of communicating any way.

John's reply was inarticulate and thus beneath Sherlock's notice. He had made his way into the kitchen and sat by the table. “I've a theory. I need to prove it.”

“You mean,” John said in his ‘translating Sherlock to normal people’ voice, following him into the kitchen. “You mean you know what happened and you want to show off to people.” He turned on the light and squinted at Sherlock, still cross (he should learn to process emotions faster), but also curious because he, too, loved the job.

“Just because my electroencephalogram wouldn't look as flat as Salisbury Plain after waking up...”

John made a drawn-out sigh, but crouched down with a roll of bandage in his hands and inspected Sherlock's foot. “Stonehenge is on Salisbury Plain, Sherlock. It's probably the most important British landmark there is. So it's not FLAT.”

“Stone-what?” Sherlock didn't look up from his phone which he'd carried along. Sometimes (arguably rarely) he needed someone to translate to him what other people were on about with their astronomy and geography and garden gnomes (useless AND ugly). Geology, on the other hand, was a completely different matter, and was very useful along with chemistry.

“Wait here,” John instructed him once he had bandaged Sherlock's swollen foot against his better judgement (visible in his expression). He then quickly fetched his old cane and offered it to Sherlock.

“It's too short.” Sherlock wrinkled his nose, dismissing the cane at once, but after a few seconds looked up at John who was still holding it out with a resolute expression. “You're sincere,” Sherlock was taken aback, but he knew he had to accept now. “All right. Thank you.” He took the cane and received a short (pleased) nod from John who turned to go back upstairs and get dressed.

The cane, though too short, was actually a rather good idea as Sherlock found out making his way back into his room to clothe himself as well. He partook liberally in the paracetamol still there and pocketed the bottle, as well as Molly's ID card for Barts in case he needed to visit the bodies before actual visiting hours for the morgue.

John was waiting for him when he clattered back and no words were exchanged as they got their coats and John put on that damned cap with a slight eyebrow raise at Sherlock, who narrowed his eyes but said nothing. It was John's prerogative to make himself look ridiculous if he so wished, but Sherlock wouldn't be caught dead in that damned ear-hat, the legacy of which still plagued him.

“You're ridiculous,” Sherlock muttered under his breath as he headed downstairs to the door.
John snorted but didn't reply, keeping quiet, considerate of Mrs Hudson and their neighbours sleeping (always so NICE). Sherlock clanked the cane against the stairs and the door jamb out of spite as they took the herb garden exit (via Mrs Hudson's flat, a less known entrance to 221 Baker Street) into the damp night with the street black with condensation and street lamps wearing halos of mist. A sleepy cabbie took them in and became an unwitting accessory to their ability to trespass on the fresh crime scenes.

Once the long and quiet journey was over and they stood on another empty street, looking up at the building with its black windows, particularly the uppermost floor. John had his hands in his pockets, head craned to look up.

“So, genius, how are we getting in?” he broke the silence.

“Did you look at the photos of the body?” Sherlock asked instead, once again choosing not to acknowledge a question that had an obvious answer (John really should have learned by now).

“Yeah,” John sighed. For a doctor he really had a lot of trouble looking at dead bodies sometimes, which Sherlock took to mean he was using his imagination wrong, thinking of how they might've been when alive, when Sherlock instead imagined them as maps.

“And?” Sherlock prompted. John was being SLOW again.

“Nothing. A small antemortem bruise on the forehead. Maybe from being shoved into a wall?”

“No,” Sherlock decreed immediately. “She died alone.”

“That's nice.” John was making that face, the 'don't be so morbid' one. Sherlock was an expert on decoding John's face, but he was also an expert at catching micro-expressions on anyone's face, he made a living out of details, after all.

“She hit her head against the wall, on purpose, but she was still lucid enough to think it hurt too much to try and kill herself that way so she did it only once or twice.”

Sherlock had moved to the door of the building and punched a code into the keypad with some flourish and was rewarded with a click as the door unlocked. He entered with a bit of a prance, feeling the consternation from John.

“All right, I'll bite. How did you know the code?” John said after a few seconds, and Sherlock felt the familiar warmth of being cleverer and more observant than anyone ever, but also the same exasperation he often felt with John whom he knew to have more rattling around in his brain except fluff like people's names.

Sherlock stopped, turned around and pointed at a bulletin board near the door in a very highfalutin manner. “It is written there. On a piece of paper that is attached to the cork board with two silver thumb tacks.”

John looked over, then back at Sherlock with a little embarrassed smile. “Hah. So it is.”

They climbed the stairs, John hedging on every step. “What did you mean by ‘lucid enough’?” he finally asked as they made it to the top landing, the door sealed with crime scene tape which Sherlock proceeded to ignore completely as he crouched in front of the door.

“Both of the victims died due to madness,” Sherlock explained, hiding the uncomfortable soreness radiating up from his foot and sideways from his ribs and into his jaw from the swollen eye. He handed the cane to John and withdrew his roll of lock picks from his pocket. “Caused by the wall-
A long silence followed during which John swallowed this explanation, and Sherlock could follow each tick of John’s mind. First the familiar denial (‘no, that can’t be, nobody dies of madness’), then anger (‘ought I punch you in the face again?’), followed by bargaining (‘I’ll give you that if you let off about the hat’), depression (‘why can’t I be as clever, the code number was right there on the bulletin board’) and, finally, sweet, sweet acceptance that John released into the atmosphere with an exhalation.

“Right,” he said. “A sort of a nervous shock, like broken heart syndrome.”

“Whatsoever you need to tell yourself.” Sherlock muttered, eyes closed. Picking locks had more to do with feel than sight but all of Sherlock’s senses were highly trained (and there were more than five, only a stupid person could believe humans only had five senses, what about balance, hunger, pain, heat, they were all feedback from a person’s relationship with the world) and the lock did eventually give up.

Sherlock pushed himself up with a grimace and a grunt, and was about to stagger when John was suddenly there, propping him up. The cane was returned to his hand as he regained his balance.

“Hurts, doesn’t it?” John commented, but with only a tinge of smugness and a good deal of concern.

It was still odd to Sherlock to realise that there was somebody in his life who felt concern for his well-being in a personal way, rather than the familial duty concern of Mycroft’s, who was satisfied if Sherlock was alive, largely in one piece and not drooling on the loo floor after drug experiments. There was also an element of proprietariness to Mycroft’s caring (using the term loosely), it was self-serving because Sherlock was useful to him, but John, while Sherlock was (obviously) useful to him, too, cared because it was something he did with people he liked, because he was decent and because he was capable of forming emotional attachments.

“I’m fine.” Sherlock pushed the door open with the cane and limped in to the middle of the room and pulled the cord that lit the bare bulb that hung from the ceiling. The room was nearly empty of furniture and felt hollow without the press of police personnel crowding in it. There was a sink and a toilet seat, a mattress on the floor and tracks of dirt from the boots that had trod the floor back and forth in the last 24 hours.

The yellow wall-paper boiled with movement when Sherlock looked at it. Seeing all of it, every wall covered, with no visual distractions, was like a punch to the eyes. Sherlock approached it and laid his hand flat on it, glad he wore gloves. Then he leaned in and sniffed it.

“What- what’re you doing?” John asked, still standing under the light. He was disconcerted, disturbed, and starting to believe Sherlock’s assessment of the victims dying of madness.

Sherlock leaned the cane against the wall and took out a flick knife, digging the blade into a seam in the wall-paper, tearing it off. “John, light,” he commanded and John came over carefully, pointing a small torch to where Sherlock worked.

“This place is,” John swallowed, “horrific.” He had noticed the long scratches made by the victim. “It hurts my eyes.”

There was a piece of wall-paper loose now and Sherlock put away the knife, taking out his magnifier instead, peering at the wrong side. “It’s been re-used,” he said, mostly for John’s benefit. “This wall-paper was stripped from the house Mr Gosbeck was hired to renovate and was re-used in these rooms.”
“So.” John was looking at Sherlock, avoiding eye contact with the walls. Sherlock had to admit he didn’t much like looking at it either. “That means whoever did this had access to that house for a long period of time. Maybe the previous owner?”

Sherlock rolled up the piece he’d carved off the wall and put it in his pocket along with the magnifier, then grabbed the cane and started out of the room. John didn't take long to follow, though he did his ‘leaving a room’ check (windows, doors, people, lights, sharp objects) and turned off the light and closed the door while Sherlock was already on his way down the stairs.

Everything, everything, everything was clear now. These rooms and the original house were connected through the wall-paper. He dug out his phone, only peripherally aware of John coming down behind him.

“Lestrade!” he barked as soon as the man answered his phone. “The house, who owned it before the city bought it? And for how long was it empty? What? No, of course I'm at home. House arrest, I know what it means. That wasn't a car passing by, John's watching Top Gear. At this hour? I don't know why, I don't care to ask. Stop trying to change the subject! Get me the info!” There was no satisfaction of slamming the phone down, only the touching of the red ‘end call’ button.

“ Took it well, did he?” John asked, having stopped by Sherlock's side.

“He was ASLEEP,” Sherlock said with a sneer.

“Imagine that.” John yawned (pointedly), but Sherlock wasn't a social animal so it didn't catch. “What's next?”

“We go to the source. Obviously.” Sherlock gave him a look and limped on with the too short cane.

“Oh, obviously.” John followed. “Can we stop for breakfast? I mean, we're going to have to wait for Lestrade, aren't we? People still live in that place, we can't just kick down the doors and demand to... I don't even know what we're going to demand.”

John was all ‘we’s, all the time, even if both of them knew their lives were mostly about Sherlock, which suited Sherlock just fine. It was as it should be.

“Did you bring your gun?” Sherlock asked.

“Yeah.” John gave him a suspicious glance. “Are you planning on shooting someone?”

“Yes, you, if you don't stop asking stupid questions.”

Sherlock stopped listening after that, his cognitive processes had more important things to do. The murderer still lived at the house where the wall-paper was from, he was quite certain. Eighty percent. The five suicides and the murder had to have been his work, but like all serial killers, he'd wanted wanted more and had elaborated on his earlier works. Serial killers started killing when fantasising was no longer enough, or when other brutal acts didn't satisfy them any more. The first kill might be enough for months, but then he'd have to do it again and again, with a shorter interval every time because the rush wouldn't last as long as it had before. They lost control.

This one was still in control. Or thought he was. The execution of the dual murder had been impeccable, and he retained deniability. He hadn't actually killed the girls. Kidnapped and imprisoned, perhaps, but not killed. None of the cases could be tied to him directly. His methods were almost admirable. Using madness to do the work. Indirect, but effective.

Madness, or poisons. Hallucinogenics?
“Hurgh,” Sherlock said, blinking. Why was it so bright suddenly?

“Welcome back.” John was there, sitting opposite to him at a diner table, a piece off egg dangling off his fork. “I decided to have something to eat while you were off in your mind thingy.” He made a gesture at Sherlock’s head.

“Mind PALACE,” Sherlock snapped out of reflex, looking around. They were sat in a booth in an otherwise empty diner. The waitress sat behind the counter, reading a book (An Introduction to Sociolinguistics, 6th edition, Wardhaugh), and everything was washed down with white lights. “For God’s sake, John.”

“I was hungry and you don't really pay attention to what's outside your head sometimes. It makes you easy to herd along, like a sheep.” John grinned. “I expect that's why you keep talking to me when I'm gone, too.”

Sherlock gave John the glare of impending doom, but John was far more interested in his toast and bacon and he had grown quite apt at ignoring Sherlock when he wanted (absolutely maddening). “Did Lestrade ring?”

“Yeah. And for the record he didn't believe we were at home so-”

“Because you're completely useless at lying!” Sherlock cut in, feeling slightly vindicated.

John just gave him a look. Sherlock was aware that John was somewhat proud of his inability to lie, or the small amount of lies he told, or something to that effect. Sherlock had never bothered to learn what exactly John thought was special in being only able to tell the truth. It was just one more ridiculous thing about him that Sherlock had learned to live with.

He took out the bottle of tablets and poured a pile of them into his palm, drinking them down with a gulp of John's (horrid, black) coffee. “Did he have the information I asked for?”

“He's going to meet us here.” John glanced at his watch, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

“That's just unnecessary.” Sherlock made a face and had he felt physically better he would have gotten up and left, but he hadn't slept properly in a while and every part of his body seemed to be in pain or residing next to pain.

“So's breaking and entering.” John pushed his plate to the side and folded his arms on the table, looking at Sherlock. “Greg won't be here for a while and if I've understood you correctly, you've practically solved the case already. Why not eat a little something? Have that sickening milk and sugar concoction you call coffee.”

It was tempting. The smell of burnt oil and egg matter was not, but Sherlock had long ago learned to control his senses and could ignore it, and it was hardly the most horrible thing he'd smelled in his life (that, he maintained, was marzipan). He HAD solved the case, but they hadn't seen it through yet. Sherlock knew where the killer was, living inconspicuously at the house his family had sold to the city, he'd have formed an unhealthy attachment to the place, perhaps believing it gave him unnatural power, much as any talisman or crystal sold in New Age shops. Humans were so predictable.

“We could swing by Tesco when this is done,” John was saying. “There's nothing to eat at home.”

“Coffee!” Sherlock yelled in the direction of the waitress. “Three sugars, milk!” Then he leaned towards John over the table and hissed: “I marvel at your ability to turn everything into routine.”
“Years and years of practise.” John just smiled.

John was, in fact, terribly adept at adapting to situations. It was really a question of willpower, being able to flourish wherever he existed. Sherlock had grudging respect for this ability of John's though he would've preferred not to have to talk about Tesco ever, ever, ever again. Doing the shopping was something that happened to other people.

The coffee arrived in the hands of the waitress who gave Sherlock a very weary look (full-time university student, worked nights to pay for living expenses, owned a cat for company, just broken up). Sherlock looked her in the eye.

“He wasn't worth it,” he said seriously and was gratified to see her start slightly. “And switch to natural sciences, no one likes human arts students.”

At that the waitress left hastily and fortified herself behind the counter again, giving Sherlock haunted looks.

“Show-off,” John muttered, but he was amused.

Sherlock gave him a slight grin and took a sip to determine if the amount of sugar and milk was correct and able to cover the taste of the bitter diner coffee. He nodded to himself after the first mouthful went down and when he looked up again John was watching him with an expression of bemused fondness.

“Coffee beans aren't beans. They're seeds, like cherry pits,” Sherlock told him.

“Fascinating,” John replied without a trace of irony.

They sat there in uninterrupted silence after that, except for the bit where John made Sherlock straighten his leg on the bench and even fetched him some ice to press against the puffy and hot parts of his face. Sherlock was not ungrateful, or unmindful of his good luck of having met John in the first place, or, indeed, John existing at all (he had looked into the probability of that once, the numbers had plagued him for weeks afterwards).

The place had gone through a change of employee shifts and was serving the breakfast rush when Lestrade finally made it there. Sherlock had closed his eyes, leaning against the window with his leg stretched out in front of him. The surroundings had melted into white noise, a skill Sherlock had honed to separate himself from the flow of unnecessary information that was ever-present. He was alerted back to himself when he heard John speak.

“Greg. You look fresh.” John was mildly amused, mostly sympathetic; Sherlock still refused to believe Lestrade's name was Greg.

“Tired your time,” he said, opening his eyes.

“I was asleep,” Lestrade replied. He was far from amused, slumping next to John in the booth. “What the hell are you doing? I told you to stay home.”

“I can give you the killer.” Sherlock looked at him. These were usually the magic words.

“Do you have proof?” Lestrade sighed, giving up.

“I can GET proof.”

“Oh God.” Lestrade leaned back and rubbed the bridge of his nose, eyes tightly shut. “Why did you
John activated his ‘translating Sherlock’ mode by glancing at Sherlock and then looking at Lestrade. “I think he needs you to be the token voice of authority on the scene so he can terrorise everyone with permission. Not that he needs permission.” The last was added hurriedly and Sherlock nodded in approval. John had got the gist of it, particularly the last part.

“I was ASLEEP,” Lestrade repeated the obvious. “I got to bed about three hours ago.”

“Irrelevant.” Sherlock hated the habit people had of repeating themselves; it proved how stupid and slow they were. John liked to repeat words (another facet of his particular slowness). “I need to get to the house. The killer still lives there. Oh, and he also caused all the other incidents at the scene. The one murder and the suicides.” He flapped his hand in a gesture of dismissing that fact as not as important.

“And the proof?” Lestrade sat slumped.

“Will be at the scene,” Sherlock snapped and got up, a little less graceful than usual because of the foot and the cane.

John and Lestrade followed in the wide swath of space Sherlock created as he swept out of the diner (he’d taken the precaution of his good coat again because he never underestimated the power of appearances or first impressions). Lestrade had not brought a car, but cabs were more than serviceable and they allowed Sherlock to subtly gloat at Lestrade during the trip, which didn't escape John's attention. So John spent the trip frowning at Sherlock, with the expression of ‘behave, I don't want you to end up arrested AGAIN, and I particularly don't want to punch Lestrade just out of loyalty to you’. John had very loquacious face.

The house, when they arrived to see it, had a grand Regency style front. It had the white-painted stucco façade and the black front door framed by two columns. A wrought iron balcony hung above the main door between two tall bow windows. Sherlock took it in with a single glance and clanked up to the door, pressing the first buzzer that happened under his finger.

“Scotland Yard!” he declared at once the connection was established. It was just another type of lie to get in. People were so easy to manipulate into letting someone in.

“We usually ring first,” Lestrade was saying behind him.

After a long while (three minutes) the door was opened by an old lady. Her face was lined in the vertical, drawing down the corners of her eyes and her mouth (rich, widower, estranged from her family, closest of which were probably her grandchildren, had been having breakfast, grapefruit).

“Yes?” she asked, eyeing Sherlock with interest. “I know you. Sherlock Holmes, the detective. It seems you've got what was coming to you.”

“Not the killer,” Sherlock remarked over his shoulder to Lestrade and John, ignoring her comment. Face-recognition was unavoidable these days. “You were one of the first to move in, but not the first. Who was the first?” he demanded from the lady, bracing the cane between the door and the door jamb.

She was peering around him at John and Lestrade, the latter of which was trying to re-assert his authority. “Please answer him, ma'am.”

“That would be Miss Price,” she replied. “She's in number 2.”
Sherlock inhaled sharply. He’d missed something. He felt John touch his elbow, an unspoken question, John knew him too well, saw too much. Lestrade was giving the lady platitudes. She had said something momentous. One ten thousandth of Sherlock's brain was marvelling at Lestrade's ability to simply not listen what was being said. Observing didn't stop when someone opened their mouth.

“I need to see the place immediately.” Sherlock used the cane to force the door open, making the old woman step back.

There was a row of mailboxes in the hall, a large staircase directly opposite the door, and two wings. Sherlock looked around, no longer paying attention to what went on behind him, then took off toward the stairs. The killer would've wanted to live as near to the attic space as possible, but not in it, so logically flat 2 was in the first or second storey. The numbering must've started from the attic flat.

The stairs were a blur, the pain from his injuries was present but pushed aside, there was no time to be injured. He should've known. He should've thought of it, but female serial killers were rare. Her methods were almost typical of one, but her choice of victims was not. Female serial killers tended to keep death in the family by killing their relatives; men struck farther afield.

He arrived in front of the door bearing the Roman numeral for two. Silver on black. The door was unlocked. She had known he would come. Ah. Another challenge, then. He pushed the door open with the cane and waited until it had swung completely wide before stepping in. Hardwood floors, stained dark, a tan rug in the hall. White walls, photos in simple frames, furniture from IKEA. The front room was almost bare except for a large computer desk with two monitors on it. The standby lights were blinking.

“Sherlock,” John said behind him. Sherlock had forgot him and Lestrade. “Sherlock, look,” John bid him and Sherlock turned. John was holding a picture frame in one hand and a picture cut from a magazine in the other. “They're not real photos. None of them.”

John had an eye for things like that, but Sherlock moved away from him and across the floor to the computer desk and gave the mouse a tap to wake up the monitors. Both of them revealed a split view once visible. The left-hand side monitor showed two still pictures of the flats where the bodies had been found; the right-hand side monitor showed nearly the same, but the feeds were live.

“She's not done yet,” Sherlock uttered, staring at the monitor.

- 

Click-click.

Click-click.

Click.

Arson.

Pyromania. In fact, he'd once been diagnosed with pyromania, when he was around fifteen. It'd been an experiment.

Out of the two he preferred arsonists. Pyromaniacs had a psychological problem which made them predictable. Arsonists were at the heart of human nature; they were about gain. The distinction was very important, but not everyone knew to make it. Perhaps stupidity was a dominant feature in the human gene pool, and intelligence a recessive one. The thought made him shiver. Clever people
would be out-bred by the idiots. Eugenics would solve so many problems.

Click.

Click-click.

“God, Sherlock, who gave you a lighter? Hand it over.”

John stood over him, one hand outstretched. Apparently horrified that Sherlock should possess the ability to make fire.

Sherlock was sat sideways on the top step of the stairs up to the attic flat to keep his leg somewhat elevated (John again). The police proper had arrived to go through the killer's place, but it'd taken them long enough to get there for Sherlock to do his own sweep first. It was alarming how faceless it'd been. The computer paraphernalia had been brand new, the stove had never been used, the linens smelled like the plastic packaging they'd come in. The flat was a decoy.

That had been when John put his foot down about Sherlock's foot and fussed him to sit on the stairs, out of the way of the police. He'd just returned from having his fingerprints scanned.

“I nicked it,” Sherlock replied and gave up the lighter.

John pocketed the item. “I'm going to take off your shoe and sock and check your foot,” he said.

Sherlock closed his eyes which he knew John would take as assent and soon felt John carefully pulling his shoe off, then peeling off his sock. He also undid the bandage.

“You oughtn't be up on your feet,” he murmured. “It's still swollen.”

“Then wrap it back up,” Sherlock snapped. What he ought and oughtn't do wasn't any of John's business.

“It's a pretty bad sprain,” John continued conversationally. He was surprisingly calm even though they'd just found out there were two more victims, these ones still alive. “You must be in pain.”

Sherlock made a face, but said nothing. Stating the obvious was as painful as his injuries. He felt John check his foot for abrasions and then begin bandaging his it again. Sherlock detached his mind from the constraints of the present and considered the killer's flat again. It was purely for show. She needed a safe place. Somewhere near. It had to be in the building, the house was meaningful to her.

Ah.

Yes.

Of course.

“John.” He opened his eyes. “Find a way into the attic.”

John glanced at the door to the attic flat, but even he realised it was too obvious. “All right.” He waited a moment for further instruction but there was none, Sherlock had lapsed back into his mind.

The entrance would be somewhere she could control it, and it would give her more power (or, rather, the feeling of power) because she had been initiated into the secret. What was the secret? Sherlock's concentration shattered at a particularly mean throb of pain from his cheek and temple, but there was no one to blame for it so he just leaned over and carefully slotted his foot back into the shoe (which John had left undone, an attempt to get him to stay still). He knew where the entrance was, and John
would never find it without him.

He limped down the stairs, but at the bottom of them he pulled himself together and pushed the ache aside. He saw John coming toward him down the corridor, slipping between the police personnel unnoticed. John had that quality that made others pay little attention to him after greeting him. He was the oatmeal of people. Bland and inoffensive and sometimes even the same colour. But, Sherlock admitted, it was useful. Everyone liked John, or at least, no one hated John the way they did him. No one minded John.

“No one knows where the-” was all John had time to say as Sherlock swept past him, even bumping into him.

“Of course they don't. I do,” Sherlock said loftily, slipping the lighter he'd just lifted off John into his pocket.

“The two women who were found dead have been identified,” John said, turning into Sherlock's wake and following. “Missing persons database returned a hit on both of them and dental records confirmed.”

Sherlock said nothing. He'd already put those out of his mind; they were done, dead, useless. He didn't need to dodge anyone, or step aside for them, they stepped aside for HIM (which was gratifying) as they made it back into flat number 2. John was being genial behind him, greeting people, shrugging when they asked what Sherlock was up to.

The stove had never been used, that was the key. It was, in fact, an induction stove, and Sherlock stopped in front of it, trying all the buttons.

“Oh, is it time for elevensies?” John asked, not fathoming what Sherlock was up to.

“John,” Sherlock said, not having really listened. There were people behind them, watching. Sherlock stepped away from the stove and struck a pose. “Pull the stove out,” he commanded.

John gave him a look (‘what? me? why?’), but didn't argue. Sherlock knew John was aware of their audience as well, and of Sherlock's desire to grandstand in front of audiences, particularly at times when he had deduced something good. John pushed his ridiculous cap into Sherlock's hand (payback) and found a seam where he could fit his fingers and try to pull the stove out of the wall. His face registered surprise when the stove moved out as though it was on wheels and revealed a small hatch behind it. Just tall enough for a grown person to go through on hands and knees.

“There,” Sherlock said, chin high, giving the crime scene technicians a look, “is the real lair of the killer.” He bent and pulled the hatch open, peering into the pitch black behind it. The air filtering out of it smelled still.

“Yes, brilliant,” John supplied, elbowing him out of the way with a glare. “And I'm going in first.” He lit his torch and pulled out his gun, releasing the safety, before Lestrade (also standing there) had time to argue, and crouched into the passage hidden by the hatch.

Sherlock was only slightly miffed. He was clever enough to admit that it was perhaps a better idea for someone (smaller) with no injuries to be the first in, along with light and a firearm.

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“Clear,” John called out, voice a little muffled. Lestrade was readying himself to go in as well, but that Sherlock wasn't going to allow so he hobbled in and through as gracefully as he could under the limitations of the situation and his own body.

The space behind wasn't big, but it was a room. The disc of light from John's torch was fixed on the
far wall as he stood by the hatch. “Careful,” he muttered and helped Sherlock up. “It looks like she did research here. Or something. There's a cabinet in that corner and a door in the other.” He pointed the light at them, one after another.

The door was more substantial than the hatch had been and Sherlock zeroed in on it immediately. This was merely the front room, the liminal phase before the full immersion, the bedroom as it were. He felt energised as he reached for the latch, knowing John had his back.

“Sherlock,” Lestrade said behind him, having crawled in, bringing more light.

“I've got gloves on, for God's sake,” Sherlock replied, his moment briefly disturbed. “Have I ever left any prints?”

“That's not what I-” Lestrade began, but John shushed him and put a hand on Sherlock’s elbow again.

“I'll go first,” he said softly, gun drawn. “You're still an invalid.”

Sherlock was prepared to give him that, but not the act of opening the door. John gave him the nod and Sherlock released the latch, pulling the door open into a short staircase up and letting in air that was even more musky and still. It smelled of damp and mould and old wood. The beam of John's torch caught dust motes thousandfold, rising and swirling like snow flurries in the newly agitated air. At the top of the stairs they could just see the bottom half of a door.

John took a tentative step in, gun still pointed though there was no immediate danger or target. Sherlock made a noise, only barely stopping himself from telling John to get out of the way. It wouldn't have helped any, anyway. John gave him a look, that steady one, ‘I've got this,’ he was saying. He was being protective, the idiot.

“John,” Sherlock said anyway, getting an eye-roll from John, but he did move forward, allowing Sherlock on the stairs behind him. Sherlock dug out the lighter and clicked the flame out. John turned sharply when he heard the sound.

“If you set me on fire I will kill you,” he hissed, not wanting to raise his voice because of the oppressive atmosphere.

“Move,” Sherlock hissed back, giving into his desire to direct John. “Get up to the door and shoot it open.”

“Sherlock!” Lestrade said from behind him. “You can't tell him to do that.”

“Shut up.” John's patience was starting to snap, like a rubber band stretched too far. It had been known to happen sometimes and usually it ended with violence. “Stay here, stop playing with fire and stop nicking things that don't belong to you.”

Sherlock snorted. The POINT of nicking things was that they belonged to SOMEONE ELSE. If they were his already then it wasn't stealing, it was just moving them from one location to another. Sometimes, Sherlock had admitted this to himself, he took things just to have John react, but the best part was he never knew what John would react to or how he would react. He was amused at some, but strict about harmless things like cigarettes (they had been low-tar, too, Sherlock had been moderating himself which he'd thought John would appreciate).

The door remained still and ominous as John neared it quietly. If he put his mind to it, he could be very silent and light on his feet, he'd even surprised Sherlock once or twice (four times, but who was counting) with it. He stopped on the landing few steps away from the door and patiently ran the light...
up and down the sides of it, checking it thoroughly, which in turn made Sherlock's patience twinge worse than his ribs.

“John!” he said, though what he meant was ‘for God's sake, could you be any slower, get on with it or I will!’

“It's not locked. I don't think. It's just rusted shut,” John called back and prodded the door with his foot.

Sherlock gave up on waiting and strode up as best he could on the rather uneven stairs, ducking out of the way of spider webs and low-hanging rafters. They seemed to be somewhere in the superstructure of the building. The previous room and whatever was beyond this door had been there for a long time, but the hatch entrance itself hidden behind the stove was new. The renovators would've known otherwise; Mr Gosbeck would have known and then Sherlock would have known.

He put his hand flat against the door and pushed, it creaked but didn't give. The door was wooden, crooked from damp and sticking against the frame. The lock was old-fashioned and brown and corroded and the rust had ran down in rivulets under it. Sherlock gave it another push, then stepped back. Lestrade stood below them on the stairs, radioing the people behind the wall.

“Kick it in,” Sherlock instructed John, stepping aside.

John gave him a brief smile, visible in how the shadows shifted on his face in the semi-dark. “Get back,” he said and backed up a little, calculating the distance and force he needed. Then he simply did it, crashing the door in, causing Lestrade's radio to sing out with questions about the noise.

“Brilliant,” Sherlock breathed, then coughed because of the upset dust and rust particles, and when he inhaled a dull, putrid smell assaulted his olfactory senses. He could tell apart the remains of hydrogen sulphide and methane in the air, typical of biotic decomposition gases. The identification of good and bad smells was a socio-cultural product, and Sherlock had never learned any product of societal or cultural effect particularly well. He thought of chemicals first.

“Oh, God.” John was cringing. “That- that's horrible.”

Lestrade had hurried up, but was now covering his nose and mouth with his arm. “Don't go in. I'm getting a team here.”

John obeyed but used his torch to scout out what was behind the door that now hung sadly off its hinges and the lock shattered. “I took part in a recon mission in Afghanistan,” he said, “to find a way to help civilians that were held by an extremist group. They held about twenty women and children in a ten square metre room and this is the way it smelled when we got them out.”

On occasion Sherlock was somewhat taken aback when he realised John had seen and experienced rather terrible things and that they lived somewhere in his subconscious as memories of how dreadful humans could be to other humans. Sherlock of course was not and wouldn't have been shocked because he KNEW just how unfeeling people could be (himself included), but to John it was just proof that he must try harder to be the exact opposite, and helping Sherlock with the cases made him feel like he was doing something. Sherlock could not convince him otherwise despite several tries and explanations and even tangible situations.

The moving beam of light revealed another room, not big at all. The walls were aged yellow and bore a hauntingly familiar pattern that writhed in the shadows. There was a bucket in one corner and stains all over the floor and the walls. The wall on the right-hand side bore the imprint of a door beneath the wall-paper, most likely leading to the attic flat. Sherlock was able to declare the room
useless to him with one glance and returned to the first room, clicking the lighter on and off because it, like a metronome, helped him think.

Certainly that room was at the heart of it all, it was the original, and it seemed this generation was not the first to use it in (non)imaginative ways (what imagination did it require to shut a person in a room to die?), but it hadn't been used for some time. So the killer had moved on, created her own prisons elsewhere, perhaps she had finally realised it wouldn't do to draw all the attention to one spot, for which Sherlock couldn't respect her because it had taken her such a long time to understand it.

The cabinet in the first room wasn't locked and Sherlock was able to get it open. It, too, had fallen victim to damp and was of a different era in its shape. What he found was a collection of old chemistry equipment and a few rolls of the yellow wall-paper. Useless. This was the preparation room, as it were, for the madness space beyond. Undoubtedly of great use once upon a time, and precious enough for the killer to preserve, but she had moved on.

“John!” he called out. “We're leaving!” He didn't stop to listen for a reply, merely squeezed out through the hatch, just in time to watch a team of three technicians go the other way before John was able to join him.

He had looked in the fridge, the microwave and the kitchen cabinets, he took his time with the bathroom, washing his face and picking out pieces of debris from his hair, and finally on the way out he noted the camera feeds had gone dark. Another team of Scotland Yard's finest was congregated around the computers, furiously trying to track the location of the webcams.

They clattered down the principal staircase, but Sherlock had to stop by the mailboxes to try and open the one belonging to the number 2 flat. The old lady who had opened the door for them stood in her doorway and watched.

“She never gets any mail, you know,” she remarked calmly. “Comes by once every week, that's all.”

John seemed encouraged by this and went over. “Hello again, Mrs… Havershaw, was it?” At her nod he continued. “Would you mind if I got him a glass of water?” he asked, pointing at Sherlock who was leaning against the mailboxes now, not admitting that he was exhausted and in pain.

The old lady gave Sherlock a look. “Not at all,” she said and gestured for them to follow her in. “Make yourselves at home. Don't pay any mind to old Captain Williams there.”

Sherlock hobbled in after the lady and John, instantly realising he was in the home of an avid smoker and that Captain Williams was a great big green parrot, sitting on the back of a chair. The parrot remained wisely silent. The lady lived very comfortably though all of the comfort was at least fifty years old. She appointed John an armchair and Sherlock a sofa on which he laid out, not gratefully, but not ungratefully either. His face throbbed and his ribs ached and his foot was on fire.

Mrs Havershaw brought him a glass of water and he took the opportunity to down another handful of paracetamol along with it, which had been John's intention all along, no doubt. The lady sat opposite them, across a coffee table finished to such a high shine that Sherlock could've used it as a mirror when shaving.

“I expect the police already spoke to you,” John said politely, sitting up straight on the edge of the armchair. “But is there anything you could tell us about Miss Price?”

“Hmm,” the lady intoned and dug out a silver cigarette packet, extracting one for herself and then offering one for each of them. John declined (as expected), but Sherlock was eager to accept and lit up with his own lighter, feeling considerably better for the moment, even if the future held many put-
upon looks from John and a lecture about quitting. The cigarettes were hand-rolled, there was just enough filter to be called a filter and the rest was blissful tar and nicotine.

“Not much, I'm afraid,” she finally replied. “And I spy on my neighbours all the time.” She didn't quite cackle at the end, rather coughed with a smile. Sherlock judged her use of time as useful. Observing one's surroundings was always useful. He had observed Mrs Haversham's home had very few pictures of family, almost singly old black and white ones (or sepia, which came from cuttlefish) of her parents and her wedding photo. The few pictures in colour were of a young man, her grandson, the only one she got along with. Her wealth was obvious in the furniture and in the Bohemian crystal in her cabinets, but it was all old.

“Anything?” John repeated hopefully, the picture of politeness. He could be so incredibly stubborn about manners, as if they truly mattered. He maintained they did and were there to help social interaction to go smooth and as expected. Sherlock maintained John was a social dinosaur.

Mrs Haversham had sunk into her armchair. “Why, yes, now that I think of it, I do remember something. An address I heard her give to a cab driver once not long ago. Would that be the sort of thing you're wanting?”

“Yes,” John was quick to assert that yes, it was indeed what they wanted. He wrote the address down in his little notebook (Sherlock knew this even without looking).

“Tea?” the lady asked then. Another social custom which Sherlock could tell was only out of politeness, not any real desire to offer them refreshments.

“Uh, no thanks,” John said after glancing at Sherlock. “I think we should be on our way.”

The cigarette smoke had flowed down Sherlock's lungs and lingered around his face as he lay on his back on the sofa, staring at the ceiling with one half-lidded eye and another almost swollen shut. For that brief moment nothing really hurt and the world had retreated to a distance, leaving him in a hazy, nicotine-filled dream. He suddenly desired an iced sweet bun.

“Sherlock,” John said, looming suddenly in Sherlock's field of vision. “Stop smoking while on your back. You might set your hair on fire. Or blind yourself.” On top of being patronising John plucked the last of Sherlock's cigarette out of his fingers and put it out in the ashtray on the polished coffee table.

“I'm not a child,” Sherlock protested. Mrs Haversham had lit another cigarette from the end of her old one and was watching them, but with an expression of one who wants her solitude back.

“Could've fooled me.” John helped him sit up and pushed the cane into his hand. “Get up, we've overstayed our welcome, and there's a case to finish.” He paused, studying Sherlock's face for a moment. “And then we will get something to eat.”

“Good luck,” Mrs Haversham said with an exhalation of smoke as Sherlock climbed up from the sofa and leaned on John on the way out.

They exited the building into the rainy mid-morning. The mist from earlier hours had dissipated with the rise of temperature, and John turned up his collar. Sherlock did the same and they smiled at each other, John tired and Sherlock in pain. They got into a cab and John gave the driver the address they'd received from Mrs Haversham.

Sherlock had the lighter in his hand, clicking the top but not actually making flame. Arsonists and pyromaniacs had the same sort of distinction that he made with killers and murderers; the former
signified a person who had chosen to do what he did for other reasons than personal pleasure, while the latter did it because they needed to do it out of psychological reasons. He found it disappointing that Miss Price was quite solidly in the second category. Perhaps once upon a time someone in her family had used the wall-paper room in a semi-scientific way, to conduct experiments on people.

Experiments were, in general, something that Sherlock approved of. He was aware that John made a difference between experiments performed on dead bodies, parts of dead bodies, bacteria, sponges, foodstuffs and household items and those performed on living things, humans in particular. While Sherlock saw no need for animal cruelty, he had no reservations about human experiments. They yielded the best and most interesting results. Humans were a very self-interested species and all their experimentation was to benefit themselves in some way, and as objectionable as human rights activists found it, experiments performed on humans gave the most relevant data about humans.

Sherlock didn't even know where to begin. First of all, he wasn't allowed to do locked room experiments on anyone (except once he locked John up into his room and had received several days' worth of silence in return, which was just as well). Second, he had realised who they were after was most likely a psychopath, which was as tedious as cases could get. And it had been so promising at the start. He was quite put off.

“You're bored,” John said as if this was a great revelation. “God, you're really bored, aren't you? There are two women still in danger and you're bored and want to go home and eat sweets all evening. You can't be serious. Sherlock. You need to see this through.”

“Why can't we just watch what happens to them in the rooms?” Sherlock was looking out the window. “That's bound to be more interesting than just getting them out.”

John made a few strangled sounds that Sherlock recognised as rising exasperation with a bit of righteous anger. “Because they're people, Sherlock, and deserve to keep their lives.” He took a breath, a disappointed pre-sigh, acting as though Sherlock's lack of interest in human life was more horrific than what cruelty men were capable of during a war. “And don't think I haven't noticed you left my hat behind.”

“Took you long enough,” Sherlock muttered.

Their argument had brought them to the address and they were left on the kerb, under an awning, staring at the front of the shop that bore the right street number. Swatches of wall-paper hung in the windows, along with wall borders and other accoutrements of an interior design shop.

“We don't know what she looks like,” John said then, with slight disbelief that a killer who killed using wall-paper would have a design shop. There was no such thing as coincidence.

“What,” Sherlock said in reply. He had forgot again that people other than himself needed a visual representation of someone before they could be recognised. How could they not read manners and
expressions and the tens of tells everyone had, just hanging on them like Christmas ornaments. That is how obvious they were. John had his giant, shiny red bauble of ‘army’ tacked onto him, and the slightly smaller one of ‘doctor’, along with the myriad other colours and sizes of decorations ranging from his frown of ‘Sherlock, you are being an arse’ to the ‘I'm casual and not at all 40 years old’ stripy shirt.

“T’ll be able to spot her,” he continued, giving John a disgusted look. “She’ll be practically flaunting it. In fact, why would you even mention needing a picture.” He swept into the shop, pride carrying him over the pain in his foot that had reached his hip, joining with the discontent of his ribs. He navigated immediately to a service counter, with John somewhere in his wake.

A young woman was standing there, going through a book of samples, but she looked up when Sherlock laid his hand on the counter. First there was the badly hidden cringe when she saw his swollen cheek, and then the ingratiating smile when she noticed John behind him. John had that effect, Sherlock had noticed. When he was alone, people didn't quite know what to make of him, but with John he was automatically slotted in as a part of a couple. It was helpful, and it annoyed John, so it was win-win.

“Hello,” the young woman greeted them (him). “What are you looking for?”

“This.” Sherlock pulled the rolled up piece of yellow wall-paper from his pocket and straightened it out on the counter. The woman looked at it and made a face.

“I don't think we have that in our selection, I'm sorry.”

“I want to talk to the owner,” Sherlock said rather casually. John was at his elbow, looking around the shop.

She looked slightly apprehensive at that, but then nodded and said: “Of course. Just a moment.”

John had an elbow on the counter and was looking up at Sherlock, and Sherlock could feel it without having to look back at him. John was worried and apprehensive, too, and wanted Sherlock to know it (Sherlock was AWARE, thank you, because John was the most obvious person in the WORLD).

The girl came back and moved away, and was soon followed by a perfectly pleasant-looking woman (and John was about to object that this must not be Miss Price), but Sherlock recognised her manner immediately. She had that smile, the same he wore sometimes, the one that said ‘I'm normal and not a threat’. Only people who categorised the world with ‘hunters’ and ‘prey’ needed to make that distinction, when they wanted to show they were a threat and when they weren't. (Sherlock had a few more categories, most of them comprising of a single person, like ‘John’ and ‘Mrs Hudson’ and of course ‘me, myself and I.’)

“How can I help you?” Miss Price spoke also perfectly pleasant Estuary English (socially a middle-class accent and completely fake), but her eye was drawn to the scrap of wall-paper on the counter. Her smile didn't waver.

“I want this wall-paper,” Sherlock replied, just as pleasant.

“Why don't we take this to my office. This way, please.” She gestured toward the back of the shop.

“Yes, let's. Wait here, John.”

John made a little sound, face troubled, but he stayed by the counter, disquieted. He had learned to spot some of the tells that were so flagrant to Sherlock and he could tell this person in front of them was not quite right.
Sherlock snatched up the piece of wall-paper and rolled it back up into his pocket, then followed Miss Price into a spacious office that was immaculately furnished, giving every air of normalcy and efficiency. She stopped by a side table.

“Do sit down, Mr..?”

“Sherlock Holmes,” Sherlock said and sat.

“Can I offer you some refreshments, Mr Holmes?” she asked. “Coffee? Tea? Water?”

“No, thank you.” Sherlock watched her circle her desk and sit down in her chair.

“To be honest, it's an honour to meet you,” she told him once she was seated. She had the eyes of a fish, unblinking. “You're quite the celebrity.”

“Yes, and you're a psychopath,” Sherlock countered, never one for pleasantries.

“Well, I believe that is a matter of opinion.” She was still smiling, hands crossed on the desk, very poised.

“If you want to call psychology that.”

“It IS a soft science, Mr Holmes.”

They watched each other for a moment, until she made the first move. Sherlock was very good at silences.

“Do you want to know how I do it?” She, like all of her kind, wanted people to know how clever she was. Sherlock had rather expected it, and he fully intended to take advantage of it.

“You mean the way you lock them up and give them hallucinogenics to further the effect of the wall-paper, which eventually, along with hunger, drives them mad and kills them?” Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “Why go to all the trouble?”

Her eyes narrowed briefly, but then she relaxed the muscles consciously (visible to anyone watching) and smiled again. “Isn't it marvellous?” She paused for a moment. “I expect you found the original room?”

“Yes,” Sherlock nodded. “And the original wall-paper. Well-used in its time.”

“Mm,” she agreed. “My great-grandfather was an eccentric. He built the room to house demons. Complete nonsense, of course. The real power, if you want to call it that, is in the mind. My mind.” Her eyes were fixed on Sherlock's face. “You understand, I think. You also have an extraordinary mind.”

This was completely correct, Sherlock DID have an extraordinary mind. She rose up and moved back to the side table, calm and slow. Sherlock turned his head slightly because she was on his left side and he couldn't see very well out of that eye.

“Are you certain you won't have coffee?” she asked and raised her arm in his direction, only a vague blur in Sherlock's sight. Then something hit his side, followed by bright white light in his eyes and the pain of forcefully contracting muscles, driving him off the chair and onto the floor. He was able to take a short breath before another wave of pain broke over him, replacing the white light with darkness.
“If you expect me to do something dreadful to you, you'll be disappointed. You're not my type, I'm afraid.”

Something tasted like blood.

“You seem to have bit your tongue. Try not to bleed all over the rug, please.”

There was a shape against the white ceiling, moving in and out of Sherlock's field of vision. He could only see a blur.

“This is only a precaution. I don't want you to follow me, you see.”

Pain sprang at him from every corner of his body, forcing a grunt out of him that bubbled at his lips with blood and saliva. He tried to swallow and ended up coughing.

“How many people do you think I have locked up? It's more than two. More than four. Good luck, Mr Holmes.”

A door closed and a pounding silence fell on Sherlock, pressing him into the rug. He drooled blood onto the rug out of spite and attempted to get his seized limbs under control. He flopped and rolled, going “John, John, John,” without breath, mouth thick with hurt. John was typically SLOW.

There was a knocking on the door, then an argument that Sherlock couldn't quite catch (but he heard John's angry voice), and then the door crashed open, and John was there, on his knees, pulling Sherlock into his lap. He was better in a disaster than anyone else Sherlock knew. It was like different pathways in his neural system opened up and neurons began firing down those at double the speed, removing the usual faffing about block he had on all his actions.

Sherlock just lay there, propped up against John. On top of the things that had been injured before, now his tongue was a lacerated mess and his arm was cramped up and twitching, the taser barbs having embedded themselves into his skin through the coat and the jacket and the shirt, and he had probably hit his head as he fell. He could have gotten up, he could have told John off and ranted, but he chose not to. He very pointedly chose to stay down and tried not to choke when John (roughly) inspected his tongue with his no-nonsense scowl on.

“Stitches,” he said, then at the young woman who stood in the doorway, hands pressed on her mouth: “Get an ambulance. Now!” The last was added with that whiplash of a voice John was capable of but hardly ever used (he’d get so much more respect if he did it more often). He gave Sherlock a glare and dug out his mobile when the girl was gone and rang Lestrade.

“Sshfzt,” Sherlock informed John. The blood was starting to clot and he didn’t want an ambulance.

“God, Sherlock, now if any is the time to just shut up.” John wasn't amused; he was taking out the barbs, very carefully. “You're going to go to the hospital to have your tongue put back together—stop that, it's happening—and you're going to behave.”

“Shoot me,” Sherlock said earnestly, but it came out in bubbles and spit, some of which ended as red spots on John's stripey shirt.

The girl reappeared in the doorway, querulously saying that the ambulance was on the way, then gaping at Sherlock who grimaced at her and saw her (to his great satisfaction) go pale and swallow and turn away. He snorted and some of the blood that had gone down his throat came out of his nose.
“Stop scaring the help,” John admonished him, quiet now, having braced Sherlock in the crook of his elbow, wiping some of the blood off his chin. “Look, you can go to your mind palace. I’ll take care of things here.” He paused and then smiled. “Go and find out how many cars the Stig has taken around the Top Gear test track as of the end of the 18th season. I know you listen in when I watch it, in case you have to tell super cars apart some day. Oh, and tell me the top five and their times when you get back.”

Sherlock snorted and coughed and spat on John's shirt again, attempting an objection, but the sound of ambulance sirens convinced him otherwise. Dealing with doctors was tiresome (John didn't count, he was John first) and he hated hospitals. He blinked ‘yes’ in Morse code (long short long long, short, short short short) to John whether he noticed it or not and then closed his eyes and sank away.

He was not completely unaware, but he was able to keep his mind occupied while his body operated on automatic, and he knew when he was in the hospital because he could smell it (turning off the olfactory sense was difficult). He welcomed the narcotics that followed: they took away the niggling pain and banished the burden of consciousness with blessed finality.

When it returned, with all of its glorious side-effects, Sherlock was laid on his bed. “John!” he said immediately, but his tongue was numb and thick and all that came out was an indistinct noise. His wrist was bound up, his foot was in a cast and propped up on some cushions (Mrs Hudson's best throw pillows, he liked the one with the gold tassels), and his body felt like a led weight at the bottom of the sea. The door was open and he could hear the faint sound of the telly (John liked to have it on for 'company').

“John,” he re-attempted and it was slightly better, the j was almost there and the o, but not much else. It, however, worked and John poked his round head into the room after a moment. His hair was silvery white in the glow of the hall light but his face was a blob of shadow in Sherlock's eyes, one almost working and the other almost open.

“Are you awake, then?” John asked.

“Hng!” Sherlock twitched. John could infuriate him from torpor to full-on rage with one question. OF COURSE he was awake and OBVIOUSLY he couldn't just say yes because his tongue was laying in his mouth like a dead and uncomfortably hot fish that tasted of blood and anaesthesia and was incapable of any more complicated motor functions than flopping about.

“Oh dear,” John said, unflappable, probably able to see the red light that Sherlock felt should fill his eyes right now. “Calm down, I'll get you something to drink.”

He did that while Sherlock rolled from side to side like an upside down tortoise, trying to get enough momentum to fling himself off the bed and go strangle John, but John was back too soon. He helped Sherlock sit up, rearranged all the pillows and held up a glass of water with a pink straw in it up to Sherlock's mouth.

“I can tell by your expression you want to kill me again.” John smiled (but he was not condescending or unkind, just John, smiling because he was relieved, which was even more annoying) and let Sherlock grab the glass and hold it up himself. “If you recovered the Top Gear power lap times, you can text me, or you can tell me later.” He had sat on the edge of Sherlock's bed and now reached his mobile from the bedside, handing it over. “You shouldn't strain your tongue too much in the first few days so if you absolutely need to be a complete dick, do it without speaking, okay?”

It sounded a lot like a challenge. Sherlock tested his tongue against the roof of his mouth but the stitches felt like bristles and it hurt so he didn't try to form any letters (though he could do bilabials
and labio-dentals). He resorted to pointing at the door and snapping his fingers until John got the hint and got up, giving the room that look (windows, doors, people, lights, sharp objects), and left. Sherlock glared after him, then began speed-typing, sipping desolately, and noted the fluid feedback from his mouth turned the water in the glass faintly pinkish.

His text read: **John, as much as I consider you my only friend, I will, some day, put you out of your simple misery. There are 154 cars on the list, excluding the not road-worthy ones, but including the ones that did not start or finish. The top five is Ariel Atom V8 (1:15:1), McLaren MP4-12C (1:16:2), Lamborghini Aventador (1:16:5), Bugatti Veyron SS (1:16:8) and Gumpert Apollo (1:17:1). I hope you choke on your toast. Tell Lestrade to include industrial areas in his search for the rooms. -SH**

He listened for the ding of John's phone, which was followed by a chuckle, and John calling out: “Thank you for including your initials, I wouldn't have guessed it was you otherwise.”

Sherlock had a mind to get up on the crutches that were thoughtfully left leaning against the wall next to his bed and go over and bash John's head in with one of them. But he didn't, showing considerable self-control. He finished the water, wiggled all of his body parts to take in and calculate the amount of damage and pain, and decided on his next course of action.

He typed another text. It only said: **Thanks**. It was to John, as well.

Sherlock was not unkind, but he was not kind either (there could be no unkindness or kindness where the idea didn't exist at all), but he WAS grateful and appreciative when he perceived something (someone) was deserving. John was alarmingly often deserving. John understood some things about Sherlock on a fundamental level, like his ability to ignore the physical world if he had something to occupy his mind, exactly what John had done for him by giving him the task of recollecting the (very trivial) names and numbers from a car programme.

In fact, and this fact was something Sherlock had a difficult time admitting as actually factual (but he had gone through the normal process of elimination and while it was improbable, it was all that was left), he quite adored John. And adore wasn't even in his vocabulary; he'd heard it on the telly. Then he'd checked it on Wiktionary, and then the OED. Whatever the word meant and whatever Sherlock may (or may not) have felt, he still wanted to throttle John.

Buoyed by these thoughts, or perhaps troubled by them, he swung his legs out of bed and the cast landed with a clank, jarring his already tortured foot. The swelling of his face was down, and he was able to see again out of both of his eyes, but his ribs felt re-bruised and his arm was sore up and down and around the barb-marks. He reached the crutches into his grasp and hobbled up on them and out of his room. He visited the loo and after washing his hands and face he went to the kitchen.

It was suspiciously clean. Mrs Hudson, then. She tidied up when she was nervous, or when there was mould growing on their plates, but John had done the shopping. John, who was sat in the other armchair in front of the telly, feet stretched out, minding his own business, though Sherlock was able to detect a pleased air about him, listening to Sherlock clatter about.

“Nnh!” Sherlock said, which was for now his version of ‘John.’

John craned his head around to look at him. “Yeah?”

Sherlock pointed at the fridge and then his mouth.

“I got you some soup.”

Sherlock frowned.
“Would you like for me to heat it up for you?” John didn't quite smile, but there was a softness to his face that told Sherlock he was feeling generous and appreciated.

Sherlock nodded and shuffled to the sitting room, lowering himself on the sofa with some care, hoisting his cast up on the arm rest. He dug his phone out of the pocket of his dressing gown and texted Lestrade, demanding to be updated on the (his) case, while John went about heating a can of tomato soup.

“Sherlock,” John said, to call Sherlock's attention back to the physical world. “I'm sorry but you're going to eat only liquid food for some time so bacon is out of the question.”

Sherlock dropped his phone on the coffee table and accepted the bowl of soup from John. He liked bacon.

“And no, I'm not going to make a bacon milkshake.” John hovered by the sofa, looking like there was something more, but there wasn't. Sherlock ignored him until he went back to his chair and telly and whatever he did when he was by himself.

This was the type of together-being that Sherlock preferred. They were in the same room, but not in each other's spheres. If communication became necessary, it was easily achieved, and he was able to keep an eye on John, just to stay aware. John never noticed; Sherlock was awash in the sea of noticing. Right then he had made note of how painful swallowing was on his tongue and how the hot soup made the wound burn. It was unpleasant. Pain was unpleasant. He had once wanted to experiment with different types of pain, but while physical pain was easy to come by, he hadn't been able to think of anything that would give him convincing mental anguish.

But John. He wouldn't be the same without John. Not any more. He would be worse without John. That thought was full of pain, as far as he was able to tell what was psychological pain. It was unsettling. And it was all John's fault.

“Oh, hello,” John said in pleased surprise. He had his laptop. “We've another case.”

Sherlock perked up a little.

“It's one of those paying jobs, you know, that pay actual money rather than gloating points. Gloating points don't pay the rent.”

Sherlock considered throwing the rest of the tomato soup at John, but that would then become a row and John would be cross and Sherlock wouldn't be able to showcase his superior intellect because he had slightly bit his tongue. He indicated with his eyebrows what he thought of paying jobs (so boring, so OFFENSIVE), but John was oblivious.

“I know we've a real case, too.” John glanced at him. “I know it comes first, but we could really use the money, and it'll probably be an easy one.” John looked at him again, hopeful with the ‘we.’

Such words of curse! Money! Easy! How was Sherlock to bear the agitation of being so patronised. He put the bowl of soup that he hadn't finished on the coffee table and crossed his arms, glaring at the ceiling.

“If you like, I'll go and take the laptop and you don't have to move an inch,” John continued, voice a little quieter, a little less hopeful. “We really do need to pay the rent, Sherlock. It's due and it's not fair to Mrs Hudson.”

Sherlock writhed. This was different sort of mental torture, also caused by John. He wanted to be mean and he wanted to lash out, but he couldn't (lisping and slurring words was not threatening). He
gave John a painful glance that John failed to notice (again), being too concentrated on what was on the screen of his laptop. John looked resigned. The glare of the monitor wasn't doing any favours to his crumpled face, and then Sherlock felt bad for one hundredth of a second.

“Fff,” he said, catching John's attention, and when he had it, he grimaced and pointed his thumb up, giving his assent to the easy (UGH) case.

“Brilliant,” John replied, grinning, starting to type.

John was so easy to manipulate. He was like plasticine in Sherlock's hands. His needs and wants were simple like his mind, so easily fulfilled, almost enviable. Sherlock stared at John until John felt the weight of his eyes and looked up, curious.

“Yes? Do you want the details?”

Sherlock shook his head. Of course he didn't. The details were always the same on the money-paying cases. Someone had lost something or someone, like their dignity or a person owing them even more money. He had a box full of trinkets they gave as tokens of their appreciation and all of them were USELESS. He had sold quite a few of them.

“Oh, water and paracetamol?” John guessed, already getting up before Sherlock nodded.

Sherlock wasn't averse to painkillers, he wasn't, right then, averse to being fussed over, and John did just that. He fluffed some pillows, took away the soup gone cold, and when he was about to go back to his chair Sherlock caught his hand, the left one with his right. John stopped and looked at their hands, surprise registering in his raised eyebrows and the shape of his mouth.

“Yeah?” he said, not moving, not pulling away, too taken aback.

Sherlock said nothing, just looked, then let go, slumping back into his pillows. John's surprise had been an expected result of this impromptu experiment in physical relations, but not Sherlock's newfound view on the right-left-polarisation of the world. It was useful for stereotyping, which was a tool Sherlock often used in his line of work (stereotypes were stereotypes for a reason), but it had become questionable whether the right side deserved all it received when for example John's left hand was vastly superior. Sherlock liked (as much as this horrid word was able to describe what Sherlock actually thought) it.

John faffed about a bit, then sat back down, gave Sherlock a confused look, picked up his laptop and proceeded to finish his typing (reply to the money client). “I'll go out tomorrow and meet with Mrs Bertram about the case, and then check up with Lestrade about the yellow wall-paper woman. And, yes-,” he raised his hand in Sherlock's direction, “yes, I know you could do all of this with both your tibias and fibulas shattered and your femurs shot up into your torso, but you're not going to. You're going to stay home and try to keep from falling over or being attacked.”

It took a moment for Sherlock to remember John meant well, that he was concerned for Sherlock's health and wanted to help. This was helping, this was caring, even if it felt like being belittled. He kept his expression neutral, John didn't like it when he was condescending about John's need to be needed.

“Agreed?” John was looking at him, serious, but with a little twitch of his lips that showed he knew exactly what Sherlock was thinking and was appreciative of his self-control. “Sherlock?”

Sherlock huffed and nodded for emphasis, and settled in for a sulk.

The TEDIUM. It was beginning to grate unbearably on Sherlock's nerves. He didn't even have the
assurance of retreating into banter and sweeping announcements of his own opinions (except in the privacy of his head which was hardly the place to keep such things). It was SO BORING. He had to LIE DOWN and STAY STILL and BE QUIET.

“I thought,” John began tentatively, earning an eye-roll from Sherlock, “I thought you might be bored after you woke properly and since it's just only past seven...” he trailed off, looking at Sherlock. “So I took your laptop and hid it somewhere in the flat and I'm going to bet you twenty quid that you won't be able to find it.” As John said this he got up and waved a twenty pound note in the air, then clamped it between the skull’s teeth on the mantelpiece.

What? Sherlock sat up. His laptop? Hidden by John? He looked around, eyes searching out signs of disturbance and John's clumsy attempts at hiding something. John noticed this.

“I'm going out for a bit, then,” John declared. “You'd just deduce me to see where I'd hidden it if I stayed.”

He kept talking until he had dressed and was leaving, but Sherlock had already tuned out the words, just hearing the cadence, surveying the room as he was. His laptop had been on the desk by the windows. He got up and, forgoing his crutches, limped over to the desk. The chair was pushed out and to the right, the back toward the windows, obviously from when John had physically picked up the laptop. Sherlock sat in the chair and looked at the room.

It wouldn't be the sitting room, too obvious, even for John. The kitchen, the bathroom- JOHN'S ROOM. Sherlock was up and at his crutches a second later, eagerly hobbling his way to the stairs. He didn't believe John had hidden his laptop there, no, but it was too good an opportunity to have a legitimate snoop around. John had, after all, said 'the flat,' and that included his room.

The door wasn't locked (and even if it had been, Sherlock wouldn't have cared) so Sherlock moved right in. He stopped briefly in the doorway and breathed in, eyes flicking around in all the little details of a lived-in room. Things were folded, the bed was made in military style, the gun was in the top drawer of the bedside table, the overhead light was dim (a low-watt bulb), there was no mirror or desk, just the bare minimum for sleeping and dressing. Much like John himself, the bare minimum was visible, and all the interesting bits were hidden or not in plain view, like his left-handedness.

The first thing Sherlock did was to go and open the wardrobe, then he ran his hand over all of John's jumpers and cardigans, he rearranged the socks and removed the button-up shirt with the tiny grey gingham pattern that he hated because it distracted his eyes. He picked up a soft and worn cardigan and managed to pull it on (experiment) despite his crutches. Then he approached the bed.

The bedside table boasted a little reading light, Sherlock's newly acquired lighter, John's mobile charger, some change (60p), a three-quarters full water bottle and a little notepad and pencil. Sherlock sat on the bed and flipped through the notepad: the first page had a female name and a mobile number, the next one had an old to-do list (laundry, unclog drain, pay rent, write blog, ring shrink, all of which were crossed over except the one about rent), the following page was shopping list (laundry detergent, hand soap, shampoo and jam), and so on and so forth. Sherlock dropped the notepad and looked in the drawers.

The first drawer (out of two) had John's pistol (current British Army service side-arm Browning L9A1) with a full clip next to it and a cleaning kit (Gunslick Universal Roll-up). The second one held in itself a folded cloth hanky, a Swiss army knife, lotion, condoms (Mates Intensity), paracetamol and a Maglite torch. Sherlock considered the selection of items and the way John had classed them together. The torch and the knife in with the condoms surely signified something about John’s sexual practices (perhaps he was very adventurous and enjoyed spelunking), but Sherlock decided not to dwell on what John did with his bits on his own time.
He didn't as much look under the bed as shove one of his crutches under it and pull out whatever he could. He managed to fish out a collapsed tower of old medical journals and a battered suitcase that was light enough to be moved by his attempts. It wasn't locked (and again, even if it had been) so Sherlock took it to understand it was something he was allowed to and practically meant to look into. He managed to sit by it on the floor despite his numerous and irritating injuries and threw it open.

There was a battered pile of thick envelopes in it, along with a few boxes of ammo for his pistol. Sherlock was disappointed. John was boring him even without being there. He scraped the envelopes to his side of the suitcase and opened one, finding it full of photographs, taken somewhere very brown, with men in uniforms standing or sitting about, sometimes grinning at the camera, sometimes ignoring it, sometimes in full combat gear, staring off in the distance. The photos were dated by the camera and behind them read the amount of days John had had left in his rotation, it seemed. There was one for each day. Sherlock patiently went through all the envelopes (one of them had old family pictures).

Seeing all of those emotionally charged scenes, even if they were stationary and old, made Sherlock tired. So many faces to scan and match up to corresponding emotional states, a skill Sherlock had practised and largely mastered over the years, and which was detrimental to his health right now. He was also sore everywhere. He pushed the suitcase away (but didn't return it to where he got it), grabbed the pain tablets and downed a few with the help of the stale water from the bottle. Then dragged himself onto the bed (narrow, hard) and closed his eyes.

He surfaced from the Lovecraftian depths of his sleep when the floor creaked under John's step (yes, Sherlock could recognise it in his sleep, his auditory sense was perfectly attuned). His brain engaged his consciousness and made him open his eyes to the blurry sight of John standing over him.

“What- what the hell, Sherlock?”

It took a few milliseconds longer than usual for Sherlock to understand the words after hearing them; he felt extremely slow and heavy.

“Why are you- Are you wearing my cardie?”

John was beyond confused and Sherlock was ready to allow him that. This was unprecedented. They looked at each other for some moments, John gathering his wits, and Sherlock gathering his sense of self.

“I told you not to come up here.” John had taken in the state of the room. The open doors of the wardrobe, the rummaged up drawers, the medical journals and the photographs out of their envelopes.

Sherlock tried to lick his lips, failed, and sat up. “When?” he rasped.

“When? When I was leaving!” John was upset now.

Sherlock grimaced and rubbed his hands through his hair. John needed to learn to stop expecting that Sherlock would listen to him when he was being uninteresting.

“And did you have to go through my things?” John had begun the descent into despair. He crouched and stacked up the journals. “Sometimes it'd be nice if you tried to be a bit less of a dick,” he muttered.

“Whchg,” Sherlock gurgled, then grabbed the notepad and wrote down, in capitals: \textit{WHERE IS MY LAPTOP?}
John glanced over, trying to tidy up the pictures, and sighed. “I left it with Mrs Hudson.”

YOU SAID IT WAS IN THE FLAT, Sherlock scribbled down accusingly.

“I lied,” John huffed. “You haven't got the monopoly on that, you know. I wanted to give you something to do, and then you do this instead.” He wore a disappointed expression, like an old coat.

YOU NEVER LET ME IN HERE, Sherlock wrote in reply.

John shook his head in exasperation and pushed the suitcase back under his bed. “Because this is MY room. My space.” He gestured around. “I deserve SOME privacy. Don't I?” The tag question was added in a resigned manner. “You get to see through me all day.”

This was true, but Sherlock was taken aback by the resentment. He hadn't actually noticed it. He stared at John, then, slowly, wrote on a new page, underlining it twice: *I'm sorry.*

John read it and nodded. Sherlock had noticed John was easily mollified with an apology if it looked (emphasis on 'looked') sincere. He, like everyone else everywhere ever, took visual cues to be the most important. But Sherlock was actually sincere this time. It was an unfamiliar thing, but right then he had realised he didn't want John to dislike him. He didn't care that almost everyone else did, but John shouldn't be one of them.

“Here,” John said, getting up and collecting the crutches. “I checked your phone when I got back. They found out the killer had been actually printing her own wall-paper, so there's no saying how many rooms she might've set up.”

Sherlock snorted and stood up, accepting the crutches. She wouldn't have been able to rent many more actual rooms, so it was probable she had found a warehouse space or some sort of industrial containers to make up into the likeness of rooms. Those would work just as well, and also made sense. She wanted more gratification faster, so she would try to expedite the process and do away with such human comforts as warmth and water. Distress compounded with narcotics and that wall-paper would undoubtedly yield pleasing results. Sherlock was probably almost as interested in seeing what would happen as she was.

“Tea, then?” John asked, forcing Sherlock out of his considerations. He was touching Sherlock's elbow again, looking up at him with that expression of pure John-ness that Sherlock could no longer be without.

He nodded and John gave him a smile. It was a weary one, but it was there and Sherlock counted it as a personal victory (what other kinds were there). John still liked him, and would keep on doing so for the foreseeable future. Sherlock felt inclined to be nice for the rest of the evening, aided by the fact he couldn't really speak and was groggy and sore and soon back in bed.

Sherlock woke up at 4am again and counted he had woken up four times during the previous 24 hours. First in his bed, then on the floor of the shop, then in his bed again after his hospital visit, and now in his bed, blood throbbing in his tongue, making it ache with each throb. He was tired of waking up. He went back to sleep as best he could, and at 9am listened to John come downstairs, have a shower, make tea and leave. Sherlock would have dragged himself out of bed if John had stayed, just so he could suffer in front of John, which was far more entertaining than suffering on his own. And suffer he did.

He suffered from boredom and pain, from dullness and aches, from thirst and hunger and from the
tediousness of not being physically at his best. He valued the physical side of things as well. Mycroft didn't; which is why he was fat and sedentary and utterly useless. John did, to a degree, though sometimes he preferred being lazy and also sedentary. Sherlock felt hard-pressed to sit down for eating at times, everything everything everything moved about a hundred times faster in his brain and in his body, and he could only tame those electrical impulses in his muscles with physical action. Right now he felt trapped in his body.

He got up when his internal clock and bladder demanded it, had an awkward wash with his foot sticking out of the bath because of the cast (John's fault) and eventually progressed to gnawing on biscuits and leftover bacon on the sofa (ignoring the canned soups out of spite). He wore pyjamas and John's cardigan, determined to somehow stretch it out of shape (though it was too big for him, just the sleeves were too short).

He was well cross by the time John got back in the afternoon (1:35 post meridian). He had lain on the sofa, sat in the armchair, fiddled with his violin, taken the twenty quid John had left in the teeth of the skull, lain on the sofa again, eaten some jam, looked at some mould that grows on human skin if the body is submerged long enough, then at some fungus that grows on human skin if it's left somewhere dry.

He was on the sofa with the Union Jack-pillow (it smelled like coffee, John had probably spilt some on it) pressed over his face when John made his appearance.

“Oh, keeping busy, then?” John commented.

Sherlock pressed the cushion tighter to his face, hoping to smother himself and go unconscious. Instead he listened to John drop into his arm chair and stretch.

“I've been productive.” John sounded pleased. “And I see you've cleared the fungus out of the cupboard.”

AND MOULD. Sherlock lifted the corner of the pillow and glared at John. Had he failed to mention the mould because he was so unobservant or because he wanted to be imprecise on purpose. Both of these things made Sherlock's fury clock tick (he was five minutes from explosion at any given time).

“I checked up on that case. I've got all the particulars.” John waved his notepad in the air (why did he need a notepad, left-handed people SUPPOSEDLY had better memories), peering at Sherlock's one visible eye. “It- It's- Well.” He sighed and Sherlock feared the worst. “It was about a pug. A small dog.”

The action was involuntary. Sherlock's muscles worked on their own, releasing all that pent energy he had been carrying around. The pillow sailed across the sitting room in a taut arc and landed on John's face with a satisfying thump. Sherlock smiled.

John made a face and stuffed the pillow behind his back. “Are you done now?” He huffed and grumbled and flipped the pages of his notepad. “You're doing this case whether you want to or not. Mrs Bertram has lost her prize-winning pug, Lady.”

Sherlock considered the crutches. He could attach something sharp to one end and use one as a harpoon to spear John, but then everything hurt at the same time and he had to resign himself to at least listening to John's explanation. Maybe hearing him out would cause a brain haemorrhage from the sheer stupidity and he'd die of it.

“Mrs Bertram has four children, Thomas, Edmund, Maria and Julia. They were all at the scene to console their mother so I was able to question all of them.” He stopped to look at Sherlock, as if
Sherlock had trouble keeping up. He may have been mute but he wasn't dumb!

“Grgglg,” Sherlock uttered and made a go on -motion with his hand.

“Right, so. There's been no ransom demand of any sort, the dog is just gone. She disappeared two days ago when Mrs Bertram was having her afternoon nap. Both of the daughters and the younger son, Edmund, were home at the time.”

Sherlock detested people who had more money than sense, but in all fairness he also detested people who had more sense than money. He was an equal-opportunity detester of people.

“I assume no ransom demand means something,” John was saying, watching Sherlock for cues. “Power play?”

Sherlock grabbed his phone and typed with fury: You assume a missing dog MEANS anything. Sometimes a missing dog is just a missing dog. He sent the text along with a glare.

“Yeah, sure, but I ASKED them about this sort of thing,” John said defensively after reading the text. “They all said the dog was a complete lapdog and was always in the same room with Mrs Bertram. Yes, the dog also slept in her bed, I know how you feel about that.” John was gave him a look. “You don't need to tell me again.”

Sherlock huffed. Not that he COULD say anything even if he wanted, but he could certainly THINK it at John. Sleeping in close proximity to dogs and cats could put a person at risk of contracting a zoonotic disease or infection.

“Healthy pets put no one at risk,” John muttered, obviously having received Sherlock's psychic transmission of facts.

Sherlock whipped out his phone again and texted: Was the family present for a BOREDOM CONVENTION with you?

“Shut up.” John said after reading the text. He flipped a page in his notebook and glanced it over. “I talked to each of them separately. Mrs Bertram was upset enough not to have washed or eaten, though I could smell she had drank something alcoholic, probably to calm her nerves. She told me she'd gone to bed as normal, with Lady on her own pillow in her bed. She hadn't woken up during the night or heard anything, but I spotted a bottle of Valium on her bedside table, so.” John shrugged.

“I talked to the younger son, Edmund, next. He confirmed his mother's habit of taking Valium in the evening and drinking vodka when she's upset. He also told me that the eldest daughter, Maria, had a wedding in two weeks and that everybody's been busy with the preparations.”

Sherlock was resigned to having to hear this out. John wouldn't take no for an answer and if Sherlock tried to leave, John would probably sit on him and then tell him all about the bloody dog.

“Edmund was sure nothing had been out of the ordinary on the night of the disappearance. They'd had dinner, the dog had been present, fed bits of Mrs Bertram's food, as usual. Maria and Julia had been arguing about bridesmaids’ dresses. Edmund said he left early because he didn't want to listen to them. That's the last time he saw the dog.”

“Hurghl.”

“I'll take that as ‘yes, I understand, do go on.’ I spoke to Maria next. She was... agitated. She wasn't really sorry about the dog being gone. She said she'd seen the dog at dinner, eating off her mother's plate as usual, and her mother paying more attention to it than her wedding plans. She wanted pink
and fuchsia bridesmaids' dresses and Julia wanted tan and blue. They asked Mrs Bertram for an
opinion, but she'd just told them 'whatever you want, dears.' After that Maria excused herself to go
ring her wedding planner about the dresses. She says she didn't see her mother or the dog after the
dinner.”

Sherlock was in agony. And his tongue hurt, too. And his ankle and his arm and his ribs. Boredom
was the enemy. It made him realise his brain was trapped in a skull that was attached to a body that
was only human. He glanced at the skull on the mantel, envying him.

“So then I spoke to Julia. She explained that in exchange for not getting to be the maid of honour for
Maria, Maria had promised she could pick the bridesmaids' dresses, and that now she'd taken that
promise back, because Maria is, and I quote, ‘a selfish bitch.’ She left the dinner table right after
Maria did and went to her room. Her room has a view of the backyard and she spotted her mother
taking the dog out for a walk some time later. Maybe two hours.” John sighed and closed his
notebook. “So none of them saw anything or heard anything. The dog was just gone the next
morning.”

The answer was obvious. So obvious it made Sherlock twitch. How could John not see it? How
could John bring him cases like this? How could this person whom Sherlock so liked (yes, he did)
could be so cruel to him? Did John just want to torture him?

“Any ideas so far?” John asked. “I also took a look around the house. Mrs Bertram and her husband,
who's away on business, sleep in separate rooms. There's a connecting door that's not locked and a
bathroom on the other side. The bedroom's on the second floor and there really wasn't anything
anyone could use to climb in through the windows. There's an alarm system that goes on
automatically at 10pm, and no one heard or saw anything. There weren't any small holes or corners
where the dog could've fit, and they'd all searched the house several times.”

On the other hand it was sort of endearing how much John depended on him and his vastly superior
intellect. He sighed and texted: Maria stole the dog. She wants her mother to pay attention to her
and the wedding and not the dog. Get the money and pay the rent.

Then Sherlock turned onto his side, facing the back of the sofa and got ready to suffer some more.
The easy (insulting) cases always left him underwhelmed. He heard John creak up from his chair (his
right knee always popped when he bent his leg) and step across the floor.

“Sherlock?” John said quietly. “Are you in pain?”

How imprecise! Not ‘does your mouth hurt?’ (which it did) or ‘is it your foot?’ (which it was), just
‘are you in pain?’ Did the question include mental pain? What could possibly be the answer to a
question like that?

“Yethh,” Sherlock spat and instantly regretted doing so. It sounded ridiculous, and it made his mouth
ache.

“Okay,” John said and touched Sherlock's shoulder with his wide and warm hand. “I'll get you
something.”

Then he hovered again, until Sherlock wound his neck around enough to be able to look up at him.
John had a soft expression, fond, slightly worried (bags under his eyes, he hadn't slept well).

“Hey, are you all right?” he asked quietly, hand still on Sherlock's shoulder, squeezing lightly. “I
know your brain hurts, I can see it. Do you want me to-” he paused, frowned, “-to put you to sleep
for a while?”
Dear John! Darling John. A medical coma! Sherlock blinked at him, feeling uplifted. He forgot sometimes that John made a study of him in the same way he did of John, and John was aware of some of his less socially approved needs. He didn't always condone or understand, but he knew what Sherlock went through and he wanted to help. That would be his downfall, Sherlock knew (sometimes he felt practically clairvoyant). Moments like this Sherlock couldn't bear to be alive (or conscious) and getting some medically assisted sleep wasn't above him, and John wasn't above offering it when he saw his best friend suffering (a fact Sherlock wasn't above using to his advantage, either).

John smiled. “I guess that's a yes. Get to bed. I'll be there in a moment.”

He helped Sherlock up and onto the crutches, leaving him to hobble back to his bedroom. Sherlock crawled onto his bed and lay down with a sigh of relief. There'd be complete darkness, forgetfulness, painlessness. The boredom would be gone, the dreadful experience of being conscious. It would be glorious. He adored John.

“I'm going to lose my licence for you.” John walked in with those words, shaking his head, but he had no blame. He cared, he needed to care, he needed to be needed. He had an IV bag, which he hung around a bedpost before sitting on the bed.

“You still want this?” he asked, then snorted when Sherlock presented his arm, sleeve already rolled up, and a dreadful grin. “You mad bastard.”

Sherlock blinked in assent, watching John set up the IV, then push the milk-like propofol into the drip. He touched Sherlock's hair when his eyes started to close with the drug euphoria, smoothed away a few strands.

“I'll get you up tomorrow morning,” he whispered.

It was the last thing Sherlock heard.

- 

And the first was: “Sherlock.”

“Come on, Sherlock. It's time to wake up. Rise and shine. God, you're gorgeous this morning. You need a wash and a shave, but first you need to let me know you're alive. There you go, open your eyes.”

Slowly, slowly, Sherlock got his eyes under control and managed to part them enough to regain his sight. First there was a halo of soft light, then shapes and blurs, and then John, peering at him, breaking into a smile when Sherlock focused his gaze on him.

“Good morning,” John said.

Sherlock's brain rarely took the time to restart properly, his uptime could be counted in years. He didn't need to go through the whole existential questioning phase every time he woke up from sleep; he knew who he was, he knew where he was. He felt surprising clarity even now. He knew how the killer chose her victims. They were designers who visited her shop, she got their info, mobile numbers, addresses, she offered help, opinions, got them to trust her (she could be charming, a trait shared by psychopaths and sociopaths), and then she used that trust.

By now Scotland Yard would have frozen her accounts, pulled her customer info, gone through her place, and they'd still have nothing. There would be a place, a project, maybe a renovation in the works, nothing urgent, somewhere she could set up. Sherlock needed to get his hands on the
customer list. He made a grabby hand motion at John, who had removed the IV and was standing there, rolling up the rubber tubing.

“Mm?” he said. He had good peripheral vision, knew how to use it. It caught movement better.

“Need. Lestrade.”

Sherlock's tongue was clammy, covered in dried saliva and crusted blood, a piece of unfamiliar meat, but he could bend it to his will. His will was stronger than many other substances known to man.

“Ohkay.” John frowned, but only briefly. “I'll get him if you get a bath.”

He pulled Sherlock up and acted as a crutch (he was the right size) to get Sherlock to the bathroom and sat him on the toilet seat, starting the water in the bath. He knelt to help the soft cast off Sherlock's foot.

“You can try brushing your teeth if you want. Shaving is optional, using the peroxide mouthwash is not. I'll bring you something to drink and some painkillers.”

The bath was nice, soothing, and it felt good to get clean. Sherlock sat in as long as he could without setting off John's alarms. It was nearly ten in the morning when he limped into the sitting room for a liquid breakfast and a consultation with a put-out Lestrade who sat there on the sofa with a sheaf of papers in hand.

“Here's what we got,” he said, offering the papers when Sherlock sat in his chair and actively ignored the cast John had set out to put on again.

Sherlock took one of John's notepads from the desk and flipped to an empty page. He wrote: Need killer's customer record s.

“Right. They're here somewhere.” Lestrade flipped through the papers. “Got an idea, then, Sherlock? We could use an idea.”

Yes, Sherlock wrote, I told you wouldn't be able to solve this without me.

“You never tire of rubbing it in, do you?” Lestrade sighed and dropped the records on the coffee table. “Thanks, mate,” he continued when John brought him a cup of tea, and a little bowl of soup to Sherlock with a look of ‘eat it or I eat you.'

John sat down as well and chatted with Lestrade (mindless drivel) while Sherlock looked through the list. He had once stolen a cab and driven around, taking customers. He'd done it to test his (encyclopaedic) knowledge of London, and the customers had been appreciative of that knowledge when he'd shaved off precious minutes from their trips. It'd been worth it in tips alone, but the law had caught up to him. Eventually.

FIND OUT HOW MANY OF THE PEOPLE ON THIS LIST ARE MISSING , Sherlock wrote and threw the notepad at Lestrade to get his attention, then immersed himself back in it, ignoring the objections and other irrelevant noises rising from the sofa.

There was a building slated for renovations beginning in a month's time in January, closed off for the time being, destined to become offices. A Jane Wentworth was listed as the interior designer linked to the project. Sherlock knew she would come up missing, he knew this was the place. He needed to get there, and he needed John there. He attempted to make eye-contact with John over the top of the list and when that didn't work he dropped the papers and pointedly picked up his bowl of soup. Just how thick was John being, and just how obvious was Sherlock going to have to be?
Judging from the inane prattle about round leather things and men wearing shorts and knee socks, very obvious. Sherlock raised his arm, pointing at the door, cleared his throat and started snapping his fingers until all attention was on him.

“Sherlock, stop that. No need to be rude.” John frowned at him, but got up from the sofa and Lestrade followed, buttoning up his jacket.

“Right then, that's my cue,” he said and gathered up the papers. “I'll get back to you once the list's been run through the system.”

John nodded and walked him to the door, then came back, a little unhappy. “Why did you have to do that? Again.”

Sherlock downed his soup in hurried gulps, while John glowered and fussed and grunted and tidied up in his desultory way. Moving things from one place to another, stirring up dust which only settled somewhere else. John was, in fact, crap at tidying. Sherlock watched him. He always did. His adoration for John didn't diminish the need for observation, or the logical need for distance and objectivity. Sherlock needed to know everything, he needed information to function, and he needed to separate personal from important.

“John,” he said thickly, forcing co-operation from his tongue. John looked at him, surprised, a furrow between his brows. “I know where.” It was all he could say, but John understood. He stood up straighter, gained that soldier bearing.

“Yeah?”

Sherlock nodded and unfolded from the chair to go and dress. He was done in a few moments, after realising there was no way he could fit a shoe over his cast. He rummaged around in the kitchen for plastic bags and some rubber bands to put over it, and borrowed one of John's woollen sock for padding. John was waiting for him downstairs, catching up with Mrs Hudson.

“Oh, Sherlock,” she said when she saw him. It was the first time she'd seen his injuries. “You ought to be more careful when you go out.”

John rolled his eyes, but there was amusement. “Yeah, but when does he do anything he's told?” He glanced at Sherlock. “Bye, Mrs Hudson. Don't wait up.”

She stayed there, leaning on the door jamb, arms crossed, sighing. She was lonely again. Sherlock waved at her and she waved back and shook her head.

“Be careful, boys,” she called after them.

The site was closed off with a chain link fence and notices saying the place was guarded, which made John hesitate as they circled round to find a gate. Sherlock was only sorry he was unable to ring the private security contractor to make a convincing lie why they'd need to get into the building. The gate turned out to be too impressively locked so Sherlock moved onto the next plan and pulled out a pair of wire-cutters from his pocket. It never hurt to be prepared, and these sites tended to be surrounded by fences of some sort. He'd just gotten lucky on chain link versus wood.

“What?” John said when Sherlock shoved him the cutters and stalked off to find a spot to cut a hole into the fence. “No, Sherlock, no. We're not going to- Hey!” John ran after him. “Sherlock,” he began with his serious voice.

“Gun?” Sherlock interrupted him.
“Yeah, ’course, but we're not going to-”

“Cut.” Sherlock pointed at a section of the fence that was shadowed by the building itself and another next to it.

John gave him a look, but set to work, creating a slice in the fence that allowed them to slip inside. The place wasn’t a priority site so there were no cameras, or if there were, they’d probably already been sabotaged by the killer. Sherlock set off towards the building, intent on finding a side door. The place had electricity; there were a few flood lights set out, most likely linked to the grid through the building. There were no external generators.

There was a side door, a fire exit, and Sherlock mimed shooting a gun at the lock, but John shook his head with an exasperated look and tried the door. It was locked, but it bent with John’s weight as he leaned against it.

“Step back a bit,” he said, but hardly waited for Sherlock to do so. He eyed the door for a bit, then kicked it in. “Guess we'll find out if there's alarms now.”

There was no klaxon and Sherlock grinned at John, delighted. He reached over and squeezed John’s arm, trying to convey how much he appreciated John right then. John smiled at him a little sheepishly and shrugged.

“It had to be done. Come on. We better be quick. Could be silent alarms.”

Sherlock strode in with his crutches. Faint green fire exit lights were on, but that was all. The ground floor windows were all covered. He waited for John to pull out the torch before continuing. He needed to find a lift. There was no way he’d get up fifteen stories worth of stairs. She’d have set up somewhere high, near the top floor, like the original room. He pointed at the central lifts when he spotted them.

“Hnng,” John grunted. Sherlock knew he disliked lifts. It wasn't tactically sound to corner oneself like that.

The lifts were on the ground floor and the doors opened with a faint ding when John pressed the call button. He checked the interior before letting Sherlock in, then backed in himself, keeping an eye on the foyer until it disappeared behind the doors.

“Right. You know the deal,” he said, face set in a serious expression. “Keep to the side until I decide it's clear. Got it?” He had his gun out now. He was lovely. Sherlock nodded and squeezed himself in the corner after hitting the button for the top floor, watching John.

John had turned off the torch (no point to give anyone a spot to aim for) and was looking down, arms relaxed at his sides, breathing evenly. He was readying himself. Sherlock had seen this happen before and he knew what sort of action John was capable of if given a reason. Safety (particularly Sherlock's) was always a reason.

The lift came to a halt and the doors opened with another muted ding. John pointed the gun out, scanning the floor. It was empty of furniture, but walls and doors were still in. There was only limited sight from the lift so John moved out quietly, checking corners. Sherlock used one of his crutches to stop the lift doors from closing, waiting for John's okay.

“Clear,” John whispered and Sherlock eased out of the lift, all senses tuned to catch the faintest flick of movement or anything out of place. “Where to?” John asked.

Electricity hummed above the drop-ceiling, traffic was faintly audible through the floors and walls.
The windows at the ends of the corridors weren't covered and intermittently allowed light into the interior. Sherlock leaned the crutches carefully against a wall and crouched down. Fine dust was gathered on the floor. When he leaned right down, with his cheek almost to the floor he was able to find an angle where he could see where the dust was disturbed against the grey light from the outside.

He crawled along on the floor, with John keeping watch. There was a path. No single footprints. Someone had been here several times, back and forth, and quite recently. He gestured to John and pointed at a dark grey door, stepping aside for John to do his thing. John nodded, stood to the other side of the door, and counted down with his fingers.

3
2
1

Sherlock pushed the door open and John leaned in, gun pointed in. Light came out of the doorway and landed on John's face which had turned from determined to confused in a blink. He checked the corners again, advancing into the room, while Sherlock tried to contain his explosive curiosity.

“Clear,” John said again. “Sherlock... What is this?”

Sherlock limped in, crutches forgotten.

In the middle of the room was a cylindrical metal object. Two metres in length, one and a half in height. There were valves on it, and an obvious seam where the top part could be opened in two different sections. It was fastened shut with rivets. A sensory deprivation tank.

“Is that- It's like a TOMB.” John was circling the tank, horrified. “Do you think there's someone in it?”

Sherlock nodded.

“God, Sherlock.” John was looking at him. “We've got to get it open.” He'd put his gun in the back of his jeans, and was running his hands over the surface of the thing. “We need a blowtorch or something. I'm going to ring Lestrade.”

“I'm sorry, I can't let you do that.”

The voice came from the doorway and Sherlock turned slowly to look Miss Price in the eye again. She had a gun, a real one this time, not a taser.

“Please move where I can see you and keep your hands up, Dr Watson,” she directed John who had been behind the tank. “You look well, Mr Holmes. All things considered,” she glanced at him, but kept her eyes on John. She knew he was the threat (at least in Sherlock's current condition). Clever.

“I didn't want a confrontation. You should have left well enough alone, Mr Holmes,” she continued once John was standing out in the open, a little to the side from Sherlock. “Scotland Yard will follow you here sooner or later, I assume, but not until it's too late for you.”

Sherlock stood unmoving, staring at the barrel of the gun. She wasn't used to handling one, the barrel was pointed slightly down, a mistake many first-timers made. He shuffled slightly to the side, on the pretence of shifting the weight off his hurt foot. Her eyes followed him because for now it was he she wanted to talk to.
Sherlock's brain throbbed with the effort of moving his thoughts through the air into John's head. MOVE, he thought. Separate targets, John! She can't shoot in two directions at once.

"You probably have some last words, Mr Holmes, but unfortunately you are not in the condition to speak them, and I'm a bit rushed for time. Do you mind if we just skip to the end?" She was still looking at him, only flicking his eyes towards John once he made a little sound, sliding himself in the opposite direction from Sherlock. "Stop moving, Dr Watson."

Sherlock took another step to draw her attention back to himself, then stumbled forward, onto his hands and knees, his leg giving up. He caught his breath and then there was a gunshot. The noise echoed in the empty room, and made the windows rattle, bouncing off the tank with a metallic undertone. Then there was silence, and Miss Price crumpled onto the floor in front of Sherlock. There was a bullet hole in her temple.

John's boots appeared in the same frame with the dead woman, and then his knees as he crouched down and took Sherlock's shoulder. "All right, then?" John said. His voice was quiet and calm.

Sherlock looked up at him and nodded slowly. John was always the kindest after he had done something to protect Sherlock's life.

John curled his hand around the back of Sherlock's neck for a moment, then helped him up. "Lean on me," he instructed. "You faked that stumble, didn't you?" His voice was still level, just the slightest bit amused. "To give me the shot."

"Yeah," Sherlock sighed and rested his cheek on the top of John's head. "I knew you'd take it," he mumbled through his unwilling tongue.

"I'll ring Lestrade," John continued, helping Sherlock back to his crutches he'd left in the corridor. "He'll want to tell me off. A dead serial killer doesn't speak or tell where her other victims are."

"Check the other rooms," Sherlock said, balancing on the crutches. They were ridiculous.

"Glad to see you're getting your powers of speech back." John smiled at him, unbearably kind, unfathomably caring. There was no one who loved Sherlock more or in the same way as John did. "Though you sound like an idiot." John's smile had turned into a grin, only a brief one before he was sober again, on the phone to Lestrade, walking from room to room. There was a tank in each one.

It had been four excruciatingly boring days. The stitches had come out, but the blasted soft cast was still haunting Sherlock. He lay prone on the sofa (yes, John, foot elevated), trying to contain the sheer volume of tedium he was feeling in the cardigan he'd borrowed from John. John had been working with Lestrade, helping with identifying the people from the tanks. Some had been long dead, some were still alive. They still had no idea where the special rooms had been built, but an investigation was ongoing, no doubt.

The boredom had had its effect on Sherlock. He'd had a nightmare about being in one of those tanks. Not because he had been or was afraid of the killer, but because he was terrified of the idea of having his senses culled, having the thread of his existence removed. The small space wasn't the problem, he could overcome something like that, he had trained his mind well.

He had been in a completely soundproof room once, the anechoic chamber at the University of Salford. The science had been interesting, and the more silent a place is, the more one can hear. Sherlock had looked forward to the visit for a week, but it had been... unsettling. He had lasted
seventeen minutes and twenty-three seconds inside. First it had been curious to not hear anything (minus twelve decibels), but then he had noticed his breathing, his heart, the blood pumping in his veins, the slight creak of his joints. At about fourteen minutes he had been able to hear neurons firing in his brain. He never wanted to be back in a situation like that, he needed constant sensory input for his brain to process or he would go mad.

He pressed his tongue against his teeth and his foot against the arm of the sofa to stop dwelling on sensory deprivation. He opened his eyes to their widest and took a deep breath, fingers digging into the threadbare fabric of the sofa cushions. The light was grey, the ceiling was yellowing, the flat smelled of curry (John's lunch, Sherlock had had yet another canned mushroom soup) and dust and dirty dishes. There was traffic on the street, an ambulance in the distance. A car with a V8 engine went by.

John trotted down the stairs, adding to the landscape of sensual information. It was not an unpleasant addition. John was in a good mood; it was audible in his step.

“I see you're doing your exercises,” he commented and ignored the dismal state of the kitchen, sitting down at their desk instead and opening his laptop.

“Humans are bioluminescent,” Sherlock said instantly, still with a bit of a lisp, and eyed John. “And striped.”

“Japan, 2009,” John huffed, amused. “And Alfred Blaschko, 1901. You're grasping at straws, now.” Sherlock ignored that. “Are you typing up the case?”

“Yeah. Can't think of a name, though.” John glanced at him, still kind. “Any suggestions?”

“Psychopaths are stupid.”

“Any REAL suggestions?” Sherlock gave him a scathing look. He'd perfected it on idiots, but sadly it tended to just bounce off John.

“How about 'The Secret of the Yellow Wall-Paper.'”

“If you want to be absolutely PEDESTRIAN.” Sherlock crossed his arms and glared at the ceiling instead.

“Fine, you get no vote in naming this thing. Hmm. ‘The Deathly Wall-Paper.’ Oh!” John typed something happily. “Got it.”

Sherlock was silent for a moment, but finally gave up. “Go on, then.”

“‘A Design to Kill,’” John said, pleased with himself. “Because she was an interior designer, you see, and the wall-paper had an evil design.”

“I GET IT, for God's sake.” Sherlock rolled his eyes. It was a desperately ridiculous title and people (Sherlock) would make fun of it, and John, for days to come.

Sherlock watched John as he typed in his typical hunch over the laptop. He was the only moving part, the only thing distracting enough to keep Sherlock from falling into the abyssal embrace of tedium. For such an unelaborate man he was an observer's delight. He took away the lingering memory of the horror of Sherlock's nightmare and the need to keep his brain awake with pain. John
made it almost... peaceful.

“You're staring,” John said without looking up.

The comment registered, but wasn't worth a reply. John enjoyed stating the obvious and Sherlock felt magnanimous enough to allow him that this time, but it didn't mean Sherlock would stop staring. He rolled on his side and continued watching. John had light in his hair which made the hair almost translucent and drew the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes with dark shadows. The chair creak when he shifted on it and the keys of his laptop made a muted sound like slow rain against window glass as he typed.

Sherlock had decided on a different course on caring than Mycroft because of John. It was all right, even desirable, to let OTHER people care. It made them predictable. It had made Sherlock's stumble of faith possible in front of the killer's gun. He knew what John was capable of, but more than that, he knew what John was willing to do, and most importantly, he knew for whom John was willing to do almost anything. Because John cared. It was useful and satisfying, and it was something amazing.

John cared and Sherlock was, for the lack of a better word, obsessed. He was good with obsessed, however. He knew obsessed, he'd been obsessed before.

He sat up and limped over to the desk and waited for John to notice.

“Mm?” John mumbled, only glancing up.

It wasn't good enough. Sherlock murmured in pain and leaned over, favouring his leg. It was for show, but all shows had a bit of truth.

“Oh.” John looked up at him now, with that small delicious dent of worry between his brows. “Does it hurt?”

“YES,” Sherlock huffed. John was so SLOW.

“There's th-” John began, but was interrupted by Sherlock sitting on him. It was not very comfortable wedged between the desk and John (the edge of the desk bit into his side), but Sherlock ignored it, taking delight in John's utterly shocked expression.

It was wonderful and perfect and Sherlock needed to do something about it. He grabbed John's chin and turned his head this way and that to make the light and shadows and wrinkles move around.

“Sherlock,” John said after a while of this. “Have you finally lost your mind?”

“If I had, do you think asking that question would help?” Sherlock fitted his thumb into the little indentation under John's nose, making John frown.

“Sherlock,” he said again, a bit muffled. “I think I'm being very reasonable here.”

“Your reason is faulty at best, completely useless at worst,” Sherlock instructed him (how did he not know this himself, anyway). Sherlock moved his thumb down, catching on John's lower lip.

“Wh-” John started, and because Sherlock didn't want to hear whatever it was John was about to say, he kissed John.

There was a brief confusion; John froze, Sherlock balanced himself with a hand on the desk. Then John huffed through his nose hard enough for Sherlock to feel it. He pulled back.
“Why did you breathe on me?” he asked crossly.

“You were in my face!” John exclaimed.

“It was a KISS, you bloody fool.” Sherlock scowled. This hadn't gone according to plan. In fact, there'd been NO plan, which was probably the reason. He should've planned. “Stupid!” he snapped out loud, looking away from John. The situation had become chaos, and though he was good at pattern recognition he couldn't find a pattern to fit this.

“Sherlock.” John's voice made him glance back, only to find John wearing a puzzled sort of a smile. “You are the most impossible person I know.”

“You can't grade impossibility, either it is or it isn't,” Sherlock muttered. John wasn't keeping with any known pattern of relationship progress, either, and it bothered Sherlock. He had become accustomed to using John as a gauge for the natural progression of everything.

“And yet, somehow, you're still the most impossible thing.” John was peering into his face, bemused.

“Stop using language incorrectly and imprecisely!”

“Sorry.” John was smiling now and Sherlock realised he was no longer unwelcome there. John had re-aligned himself so that the desk was not biting into Sherlock any more; he was being carefully cradled into John's chest with a warm hand splayed flat against the small of his back.

“Sorry doesn't mean anything. Apologising is pointless,” Sherlock said, mollified by the new circumstances.

“Yes, I know, it doesn't mean anything to YOU.” But John was still smiling. “But generally, if the one saying sorry means it, people accept the apology.”

“I hate generalisations. Are there any cases?”

John snorted and laughed. “You generalise ALL the time. And, no, stop touching my laptop. Sherlock.”

Sherlock turned back to look at John at the sound of his name. Not because it was his name (maybe a little), but because of the tone of voice John had used. That fond-serious thing he used surprisingly often. Surprising because he used it at Sherlock, for Sherlock.

“I just wanted to say that was a crap kiss, earlier.” John prodded Sherlock in the arm, looking up at him. “And I'm going to show you how it's done. When you're healed.” The last was added when Sherlock almost smiled, and the words crumpled the smile right out of him.

“I'm FINE.”

“Yeah, but I don't want to be the reason your tongue ruptures.”

While the thought that followed on the heels of those words was vastly intriguing and deserved a lot of study, but not until what needed to be said was said. “Are you even a real doctor? It wouldn't RUPTURE.”

“Do you want to see my medical licence? I'm the doctor, I decide when you're healed. You can't even say 'scrumptious' properly yet. Or 'burglar alarm'.”
"The more important question is why I would want to say either of those things." Sherlock growled, though it was ever so slightly ineffectual because his tongue really wasn't properly healed yet. He wasn't about to wait for it to happen, though, he wasn't going to be denied. He grabbed the sides of John's face and kissed him again (and noted John didn't resist, so much for being the doctor).

It was a better kiss; John tilted his head back and dug his fingers into Sherlock's thigh. There were small noises, breath, John's stubble, sensations beyond the five senses (once again proving Sherlock's stance on the existence of more than those five over-exposed ones), and most importantly, there was the kiss.

When they separated John gave him an altogether new sort of look. An expression unlike Sherlock had ever seen. He had caused it and it was the best thing in the world until John spoke.

"You taste like blood," John said slowly and a little roughly. And then, quietly, "I love it."

And then that was the best thing in the world.

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