Redemption

by sgam76

Summary

The reappearance of James Moriarty means an initial reprieve for Sherlock Holmes. But the consequences of that reappearance put not just the Holmes boys, but most of the world, at risk. An emerging threat in Eastern Europe brings visions of the plagues of the Middle Ages--but that's the least dangerous part.

Notes

This story, started before TAB aired, originally arose from the universal feeling among us that something Was Not Right with Sherlock on the plane--the red eyes, etc. I mentally linked that with Mummy's comment at Christmas that Sherlock was "home from hospital"--i.e., that was something that had just happened, almost four months after he was shot (if you accept the August date for the wedding, and the shooting being roughly Sept. 1). That lead me to speculate what could have kept Sherlock in hospital that long.

Beyond that, I went off on a wild and wooly trip as to what kind of threat Moriarty could now be posing, and what that could mean to the Holmes boys after the Magnusson affair. The key words for this tale are "espionage", "fencing" and "plague".

One important note for my regular readers--this is NOT set in the Scheherezade verse. So in
this world, John knows virtually nothing about Sherlock’s time away.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Sherlock

He never did remember, afterward, exactly what he’d said on the tarmac. It had a misty, hallucinogenic quality at the time; he was speaking, John was responding, but none of it was moving to memory, and absolutely none of it made sense.

It did register dimly that he must have made some sort of joke; he recalled John laughing. Gallows humor, perhaps. Certainly appropriate to the occasion.

Somehow he was moving towards the plane. He was shaking, a whole-body tremble through the substrate of his bones, but he managed to keep his knees locked and supporting his weight. He strode up the steps and all the way into the cabin before his balance went, dropping him into the nearest seat with an undignified thump.

The cabin attendant said something. Sherlock’s complete lack of response was troubling, apparently—the man hovered indecisively, shooting a concerned look at Mycroft, who had mysteriously appeared beside them.

There was a lapse of time; Sherlock’s next awareness was of the increasing thunder of the engines as the plane lifted off. Mycroft had been speaking, hadn’t he? But evidently silence, or Sherlock’s (perhaps) break with reality, discouraged him from continuing, led him off the plane. He was certainly no longer here. Mycroft Holmes, after all, didn’t participate actively in suicide missions. He had people to do that for him. Sometimes family.

Sherlock’s shaking was abating, at least temporarily. That sense of detachment, however, was not. He may have said something inappropriate to the cabin attendant; the man was distressed. There was, then, a burst of conversation from the flight deck. The attendant was summoned, and when he returned he was holding out a phone.

“Sir? It’s your brother.” He may have had to say it more than once before Sherlock blinked and held out his hand. It was Mycroft; Sherlock was sure of that, though again, he had no recollection of the actual conversation. It was nothing good. Something terrifying had been mentioned, and he just couldn’t think about that. Just couldn’t think, truthfully.

The plane turned, quick and tight, and there was a swift downward swoop as it glided back to land, on the same runway it had just left.

When they landed, the cabin attendant popped open the door and lowered the steps, then stood by Sherlock, waiting for him to stand. Sherlock was suddenly back in the moment, though his mind still skittered away from the “why” of this turn of events. He was bleakly aware that standing was going to be a problem. He was unspeakably glad when the attendant grasped the situation, leaned over to grip his elbows and helped him to a standing position, then stood close behind him as he walked carefully to the door and down the steps.

Mycroft waited twenty feet away, his face an odd combination of haughtiness and what no one but Sherlock would recognize as relief. Mary stood back by the car, but John was striding forward, ready, as always, to follow Sherlock’s lead.

Sherlock intended to give a reassuring, confident smile. That was not, evidently, what actually appeared on his face, and both Mycroft’s and John’s expressions morphed into alarm as they moved
forward. And that was just about the time that Sherlock felt his knees give way, and his vision went, and then it got blissfully quiet except for the high singing in his ears, until the ground reached up and slapped him.

John segued instantly to Doctor Watson as Sherlock dropped to the pavement. He quickly checked for pulse and respiration as he eased Sherlock onto his back and straightened tangled limbs. Both were unacceptably fast, his breathing shallow and choppy.

Mycroft leaned over, concern absent from his face but clear in his manner. “Shock?” he inquired, as he jerked his head towards his driver, who hurried to the boot of Mycroft’s car and came back with an impressive field medical kit.

John continued his assessment, and shook his head. “Partly, I’m sure, but there’s more going on here. He’s not coming round. Has he slept these past few days? Or eaten?” Mycroft’s expression gave him his answer.

John peeled back Sherlock’s eyelid, checked his mouth, and tweaked a pinch of skin on his arm. “He’s extremely dehydrated. Alarmingly so.” Mycroft’s mouth did something uncomfortable, then. “He’s been ill, several times,” he said softly. “I was not made aware until this morning.” That last was accompanied by a look that lead John to believe that someone would regret that lapse.

John contained the fury that surged through his veins with an effort. “You wouldn’t let me see him. And you were sending him off on a mission in this condition.” Mycroft had said that Sherlock’s detention in a secure MI6 facility for the days until his departure was non-negotiable. But this was unconscionable; how could allowing Sherlock to leave in this state not compromise his hope of success in this oh-so-secret, oh-so-important mission?

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Enough. Recriminations could wait; for now, treatment was paramount. “He needs a fluids drip, right now. He wasn’t yet 100% before this happened; I’m very worried this has set him back again. Do we take him to hospital? Is that allowed?” He made himself continue. “Or back to the detention center?” He was profoundly glad when Mycroft shook his head.

“You will find that field kit contains everything you should need in the short run. And there is a bed in the rear of the plane; will that be acceptable?” At John’s nod, Mycroft made a profoundly un-Mycroftian move, leaning over and picking Sherlock up in a matter-of-fact way, carrying him back onto the plane. It was always unsettling to John to see Mycroft display this side of himself, though on reflection it shouldn’t seem so odd—Mycroft was, after all, a 6’2” man in his prime. He just acted like a 60ish Classics don.

John picked up the field kit and followed Mycroft into the glossy interior of the plane, aware of Mary trailing behind him. Mycroft paused, Sherlock limp in his grasp, and waited while the attendant opened the door to the rear cabin.

The cabin, though tiny, was just as elegant as the rest of the plane—restrained, tasteful, and expensive. The room gave few hints that this was, indeed, a plane beyond the curved walls and ceiling. The bed was full sized, with a thick duvet and multiple fussy pillows on top, all of which John roughly swept onto the floor so that Mycroft could put Sherlock down. While Mycroft removed Sherlock’s shoes and jacket, Mary moved into the miniscule attached toilet and came back with a
warm, damp towel that she used to wipe his face and hands with gentle efficiency. John noted, worriedly, that Sherlock had no response to the stimulus.

Mary used a second towel to dry the areas she’d just dampened. She paused, though, when her hand touched Sherlock’s forehead. “He’s very warm,” she told John.

Well, that wasn’t good. “Mycroft?” John asked over his shoulder. “Pull out that digital thermometer from the kit, please.” Mycroft wordlessly handed over the instrument, and John placed it in Sherlock’s ear until it beeped.

His stomach clenched at the reading. “Shit. 38.9. I was hoping it was just from stress and dehydration—that can raise body temperature sometimes. But this? This is infection.” He glared at Mycroft. “Most likely the same infection from the surgical abscess he spent a month fighting, that kept him in and out of hospital until ten fucking days ago. He was supposed to still be taking his oral antibiotics—did anyone ensure that happened?”

Mycroft made a motion that, in anyone else, would have been a flinch. “I was not aware he had any continued medication needs. He never mentioned it, nor did the facility physician.”

John didn’t trust himself to speak. He dug quickly into the medical kit and pulled out a needle, syringe and rubber tubing while Mary opened Sherlock’s right cuff and rolled up the sleeve. “Right, then,” he snapped. “We’re going to take blood, and you’re going to get it tested. I know what it will show, but we’ll test anyway. At the same time, you need to have someone bring us antibiotics for IV use that I’m going to start right fucking now, and hope this doesn’t get any worse. I’ll give you the prescription in a moment.” He quickly tied the flexible tubing around Sherlock’s bared right arm while Mary took the syringe to draw blood. “Tell me now if any of that can’t happen.”

Mycroft was already speaking softly on the phone. He motioned his driver over from the doorway. “We will have that taken care of shortly.” He reached for the vial of blood as Mary finished the draw, then took the hurriedly-written prescription from John and handed both to the driver, who walked silently out. They heard the car start up and drive away while Mary was still cleaning up.

Sherlock continued to lie limp and motionless. Mycroft hovered at the head of the bed as if uncertain—not a look John was used to seeing. “Should we try to rouse him now? Ammonia, perhaps?” he said hesitantly.

John stopped in the midst of digging a bag of IV saline out of the field pack and shook his head. “No, I’d rather not unless we have to. Bodies shut down for a reason, and Sherlock’s has more reason than most at the moment. If we can, I’d like to stay here and see if he wakes on his own.” He looked around, suddenly struck by the oddity of sitting in a bedroom, on a plane, on a runway. “Is that going to present a problem?”

Mycroft huffed impatiently. “Of course not. We will stay for however long is needed.” He watched while John rigged a drip with the saline, anchoring it to the light fixture above the bed. He hesitated again. “Should we… is there something else that I, that we…” He came to an uncomfortable halt.

John, despite his outrage at Mycroft for letting this happen, felt a grudging sympathy. “Now we wait,” he said simply.
It was an odd interlude, sitting in the quiet room on a luxury plane. The antibiotics and the blood work (which showed exactly what John expected it to) arrived less than half an hour into their vigil, and John quickly added the medication to the IV drip, along with liquid paracetamol for the fever. Sherlock never stirred, even when Anthea came in shortly afterward with gourmet sandwiches and tea for everyone. His pulse and breathing had improved, thankfully, but he continued to show no signs of rousing, which was troubling.

After an hour, John asked Mycroft to send Mary home. She went, protesting but exhausted.

Shortly after Mary’s departure, John checked Sherlock’s temperature again and was alarmed to see it had risen noticeably—39.9. John rose and went into the en suite, coming back with a plastic tub full of lukewarm water and the two towels from earlier. He called Mycroft, who had stepped out to answer another of his endless stream of phone calls. The British Government, as always, had many more demands on his time.

Mycroft came back to the cabin with gratifying speed. “Is anything amiss, John?” His smooth tone was at odds with his tense body language.

“I need your help with him,” John said, with as little irritation as possible. “We need to take off his shirt. His temp’s going up, and I need to see if we can get it down—the anti-fever meds I gave him aren’t working. Otherwise we’re going to have to get him to a medical facility somewhere.”

John had already unbuttoned Sherlock’s tightly tailored shirt and opened the remaining cuff. At his gesture, Mycroft slid an arm under Sherlock’s shoulders and lifted him so that John could slip the shirt off. That gave John a clear view of the ugly scars on his back, in addition to the dark pink, mostly-healed wound on his chest, crisscrossed by two surgical scars. John’s brows lowered, but he gestured Mycroft to lay Sherlock back down before he said anything.

He started wiping Sherlock’s torso, arms, face and hands methodically with the wet towels while he got his temper under control. Then—“Mycroft. Tell me about his back.”

Mycroft, who had settled back into his earlier position in a chair at the head of the bed, went very still. “I’m not sure that’s my story to tell,” he said carefully.

“Bollocks,” John spat. “I’ve been wanting to have this conversation with you for four months, and now’s the time, when he can’t hear us.”

He leaned over and resumed stroking the cool, wet towels over Sherlock’s face and chest before he continued. “After he came back, he was very, very careful to never take his shirt off when I was around. I thought that was odd, you know, since he’d never had the least idea of modesty before. But I let it go—figured it was just a new quirk. And then, that night, they cut off his shirt to check for an exit wound and I saw…” He took several harsh breaths before he could continue.

“The EMTs were shocked, you know? They didn’t say anything, couldn’t really, we were all too busy trying to keep him alive. But they were shocked, and so was I. So, weeks later, when he was in hospital and somewhat back to himself, I asked him one afternoon. He wouldn’t tell me anything. I pushed; I shouldn’t have, I know better. And Mycroft? He cried. He wouldn’t answer me, and he fucking cried, while I pretended not to notice. So I can’t ask him, much though I think he really, really needs to tell someone.” His voice dropped, low and graveled. “So you. Tell me. About his back.”

Mycroft face bore a frozen expression that John recognized from Sherlock; a Holmesian mask used in the face of strong emotion. “You must understand, John, that I will…I am obligated to tell Sherlock about this conversation.” John nodded. “Very well. I doubt he told you, but he did have
several sessions with an MI6 therapist, at my insistence. He stopped much too soon in my view, but he is, contrary to all indications, legally an adult and there is a limit to what I can force him to do against his will.”

John gave a reluctant grin. “Agreed.”

Mycroft gave one of his not-smiles and continued. “In the course of those sessions, he gave more detail of his experiences than I was previously aware of, and ultimately gave his consent for the details to be shared with me. I suspect he found that easier than telling me directly. The majority of the damage you see, though not all of it, is from his final mission, just before his return. Did he tell you anything of that?”

John nodded. “Just a bit. Serbia, yeah? He said he was held as a hostage for a while, until you negotiated for his release.”

Mycroft sighed. “Only the very first part of that is true. Serbia, yes. But he was a prisoner, not a hostage. And I did not ‘negotiate’ for his release; I went in with a small group of people, undercover, and extracted him. He had been held at least two weeks, possibly three; he was not sure, which should tell you the kind of conditions he was kept in. I know that he had missed his normal check-in signal a month before I found him, and he was unable to accurately account for all of the intervening time.”

John was appalled. For Sherlock to not remember everything, in detail…that spoke of either drugs, or illness, or injury extreme enough to put him completely out of his head.

Mycroft continued, studiously ignoring the expression on John’s face. “He was tortured, to a degree. Sleep deprivation, sensory deprivation—the last, as you can imagine, was the most difficult for Sherlock to bear. Regular beatings, with a fairly broad array of implements—you can see the results of that. I suspect…” and here Mycroft paused, swallowed, blinked, then made himself continue, “that there were sexual components as well, though thankfully nothing that left lasting physical marks. After his rescue he became hysterical when the medical staff tried to remove his clothing, so I authorized full sedation for the examination.”

John closed his eyes and breathed. Mycroft seemed grateful for the break.

Finally John spoke. “So how long was he in hospital before you brought him back to London?”

Mycroft gave him an annoyed glare. “He was never in hospital, John, though he certainly should have been. He spent 24 hours at a facility in Prague getting basic medical triage and care, and then we flew back to London together. He insisted on getting back immediately. He wanted… he was anxious to see you. He spent another 12 hours in my rooms at the Diogenes, getting cleaned up and eating a couple of decent meals, and then went to meet you at your dinner.” Mycroft looked uncomfortable. “I did try to warn him, John.”

John had come to a queasy realization. “So when I met him, when I hit him, twice, when I laid on top of him and tried to throttle him…he had those wounds on his back? Open wounds? And was 36 hours out of a prison cell?” His voice rose with each sentence.

Mycroft just looked at him silently.

John grimaced. “Oh, my God. My God. And that idiot didn’t say anything.” But then he caught himself. “To be fair, though, I never really gave him the chance.”

Mycroft surprised him by issuing a genteel snort. “John. He interrupted your proposal. It’s to be
expected that you wouldn’t be at your most forgiving.” He thought for a second, then continued. “Does it make you feel any better to know that he only damaged five stitches, which were readily repaired? And that he was already taking an impressive dose of analgesics, so the pain was substantially less than would otherwise be the case?”

John gave a watery chuckle. “Not a great deal, actually. Especially since that also means he was stoned at the time.” He paused, then continued, raggedly. “Thank you for telling me, Mycroft. And thank you for bringing him home.” Mycroft was silent, but gave a magisterial nod.

They lapsed back into thoughtful silence, John continuing to monitor Sherlock’s vitals while fretting over his failure to wake. One hour bled into two; Sherlock’s temperature didn’t drop much, but at least it stopped increasing. John was standing, stretching out his cramped back muscles, when Sherlock’s eyelids suddenly fluttered and opened, as he looked dazedly at the curving ceiling of the plane. No sooner had awareness seeped into his eyes, though, than his breathing ratcheted up and he scrabbled on the bed, trying to rise. Before John could reach his side Mycroft was there, his hand on Sherlock’s forehead, speaking in liquid French.

“No, my dear. You are not leaving. You are here for care, nothing more.”

Sherlock’s gasping eased, and he sagged back into the pillows. “Not going? They’ll let me stay?” he asked faintly, in the same tongue.

Mycroft smiled, ruefully. “Yes, brother. As I said, here be dragons.”

John understood very little French, but had no trouble figuring out the content of that conversation. He put his conclusions to the side temporarily, though, in the flurry of settling how things went from here.

Initially John wanted Sherlock back in hospital, at least temporarily; he needed a scan to make sure the abscess hadn’t returned, and would require IV antibiotics for at least the next few days. Sherlock’s reaction to that suggestion, weak as he was, was violent enough that even John agreed it would do more harm than good.

“I’m fine, John. I simply didn’t remember the need to continue the medication. I’ll take it now; I don’t need anything more.” The attempt at his normal haughty tones failed completely. Given that Sherlock was still lying flat on his back after trying once again to sit up, it was clear this was desperation.

John ignored him and turned to Mycroft. “So? What other options are there?”

Mycroft walked back towards the main cabin and returned with Anthea, complete with attached phone. “We will arrange a scan this evening, preferably back at King’s since his records are there. I presume, if that shows no abnormalities, Sherlock will be safe to stay at my home for treatment? Any necessary equipment and medication can be easily brought in.” He hesitated. “It will be less…confrontational, on several fronts, than taking him to hospital. And I will not return him to the holding facility. In any event, I am quite sure that the recent broadcast will have a direct effect on my brother’s immediate fate.” He left John to wonder exactly what that last statement might mean.

Sherlock gave a small sigh from the bed, then murmured, “Thank you.”

John gave an involuntary gust of laughter. “My God, you are sick, aren’t you?” He was rewarded by a surprised bark of laughter from Mycroft, and a tired, but amused, eyeroll from Sherlock.
Incubation: Part Two

Chapter Summary

Sherlock takes up reluctant residence with Mycroft, but the Moriarty situation pulls John and Mary along for the ride. A sudden revelation takes matters abruptly from the theoretical to the terrifyingly real.

By 10 that evening, they were ushered into one of the scanning suites at King’s. John stayed with Sherlock while Mycroft and Anthea left to ensure that everything was in readiness at Mycroft’s opulent Kensington home.

The IV fluids had improved Sherlock’s physical condition considerably in the short run. Though still running a high fever, he felt well enough to be scathingly rude, to the point where John felt obliged to step in. As Sherlock launched into his second diatribe against the (admittedly rough and not very professional) scan technician who was trying to shove six feet of miserable detective into an opening the size of a manhole cover, John stepped over and grasped one of the waving hands. “Enough,” he said quietly. “I know you’re ill, and upset. But it’s not his fault.” Sherlock closed his mouth with an offended huff, but laid sulkily back down on the trolley.

John turned back to the fuming technician, in full Captain Watson mode. “And you. He’s febrile, and in some pain still—what’s your excuse? If you can’t manage your job without handling patients like slabs of beef, go find someone who can.” The technician scowled but stayed silent. John noticed Sherlock’s smirk from the corner of his eye but chose to take silence as a victory.

The scan was completed without further incident, and they were then settled in a chilly private room to await the results. Sherlock sprawled across the cot and fiddled fitfully with his phone, but John noticed the unconscious frown that had settled across his brow. After the second time Sherlock stopped and rubbed his eyes, John sighed and stood up. Sherlock’s attention snapped over. “Where are you going?” he asked, with a distinct undercurrent of anxiety.

“You have a headache, don’t you? Does your chest hurt as well?”

Sherlock hesitated, then nodded.

“Right, then. I’m just going to get something to add to your IV. I’ll be right back—five minutes, no more.”

Sherlock frowned again, then spoke hesitantly. “John, I’d rather not take…pain medication isn’t…” he stumbled to a stop.

John reached out and put a hand on a thin shoulder. “Not a good idea right now, then?” Sherlock flushed and couldn’t meet his eyes. John gave him a slight shake. “It’s all right—I’m glad you told me. More paracetamol it is. It’ll hopefully work on the fever as well as the pain.”

John was back in the promised five minutes, and pushed the drug into Sherlock’s IV port. After it kicked in, Sherlock grew quiet and drowsy, his phone lying forgotten on his chest. He perked back up, though, when the consulting physician, Dr. Gupta, came into the room.
The doctor wasted no time. “Good news,” he said, as John felt a rush of relief. “No sign the abscess has re-established itself yet, though there’s certainly a very serious systemic infection.” He turned a stern look to Sherlock. “You were lucky. You understand that, I hope? You, of all people, should understand the danger of developing resistant strains of bacteria if you don’t complete treatment.”

Sherlock raised his chin. “It was not intentional. I had … other issues on my mind.”

Dr. Gupta, all too familiar with Sherlock’s moods after four months as his inpatient physician, resisted the urge to ask for details. “Can we at least get you to eat something? Your blood work is all over the map—borderline malnutrition, iron deficiency… you really don’t want to end up back in here for that, but you’re right at that line, especially given your generally poor health at present. You didn’t like the feeding tube much the first time around.”

Sherlock scowled. “My poor state of health is at least partly at your door, I would think. You’ve been treating me for four months.”

John reached over and firmly flicked Sherlock’s ear. He ignored Sherlock’s outraged “Really!” and looked apologetically at Dr. Gupta. “Sorry. His social skills erode when he’s ill.”

Dr. Gupta snickered. “I’ve met him, remember? Honestly, though, I’m happier when he’s well enough to be a problem. That first month I would have been pleased to see him with enough energy to be rude.”

John laughed. “Well then, you should be bloody ecstatic now.” He looked over at Sherlock, who had subsided into an affronted pout. “If we keep him on the antibiotic drip at his brother’s home overnight and I get a meal or three down him, are you comfortable with releasing him?”

The doctor nodded. “I think 48 hours on the drip, followed by two weeks of oral meds, should do the trick, as long as you’re religious about taking every dose. High-calorie, digestible, well-balanced diet. Protein, calcium—you know the drill, John. Start with 5 small meals a day—easier on an irritated digestive system. Don’t skimp—between the current malnourishment and the need for high doses of antibiotics, you could be set up for real problems if you start vomiting again.” He caught the scandalized look Sherlock directed at John. “Yes, Sherlock, he told me. Stress responses are not a weakness of character, you know.”

Sherlock glared. “It was not a ‘stress response’. It was a reaction to the frankly inedible food in the facility.” His look dared John to contradict him. John resisted the urge to point out that he didn’t actually eat much of that food, by all accounts.

Sherlock spent four days at Mycroft’s, snarky and bored the entire time but surprisingly compliant with most of John’s requirements for food and medication. Rest, on the other hand, was an entirely different story.

John spent the first night at Mycroft’s as well, monitoring Sherlock’s condition, though Mycroft pointed out, with some justice, that it wasn’t entirely necessary, given the presence of a terrifyingly competent nurse who appeared as soon as they arrived. Nurse Denny had spent a number of years working in MI6 facilities, apparently, and feared neither man nor woman, including Sherlock.
Holmes. Sherlock’s first (and only) attempt to intimidate her resulted in a bored stare from Nurse Denny and flushed annoyance from Sherlock. It was quite entertaining to see, actually.

By the next day, John had seen enough improvement that Nurse Denny was released to return to whatever medical facility (“dungeon”, Sherlock muttered, not quite loudly enough for her to hear) she normally inhabited. Sherlock was by then nearly fever-free and, reluctantly, committed to eating his required five small meals, served up by Mycroft’s resident cook. Sherlock sighed (a lot), sneered (a bit), but ate. He refused to stay in bed, rolling his drip stand resentfully from bedroom to kitchen to lounge, but he didn’t advocate for its immediate removal, which John counted as a win.

The real issue, in John’s opinion, was the work—or, to use Sherlock’s terminology, The Work, since Moriarty’s apparent return was definitely a “case” that fell under the capitalized version of the word. Late that first morning after Sherlock’s abortive departure, Lady Elizabeth Smallwood showed up, two bodyguards in tow, and was closeted in the study with Mycroft and Sherlock for nearly an hour, while John fretted over the phone to Mary. When the bureaucrat left, Mycroft came out of the study but Sherlock did not; John, concerned, walked in and found Sherlock, pale as parchment, sitting in one of the plush chairs with his head in his hands. John wordlessly helped him up and herded him and his drip stand, unprotestingly, to his bed. Then he marched off in search of Mycroft.

He found the Great Man still standing in the entryway, having escorted Lady Smallwood out. “He’s not up to this,” John said without preamble. “I had to half-carry him back to bed—he could barely stand.”

John expected Mycroft to sneer, or bristle, or ignore him. He did none of those. “I know,” he said simply. “And in a normal world, we would send him off to Baker Street or our parents’ house for a few weeks, and all would be well.” He sighed heavily before continuing. “We do not have that option now. Sherlock is here on sufferance; his…repite from exile is directly connected, obviously, to solving the mystery of the Moriarty broadcast, though I have every expectation of extending his stay. In the meantime, however, he must be shown to be actively pursuing a solution to this case. We can and will offer him every possible support, including, at present, masking the severity of his illness. But he, we, must be able to demonstrate reasonable effort and progress.”

“Would it help if I spoke to Lady Smallwood, as Sherlock’s physician?” John asked, not ready to give on this issue yet.

Mycroft gave one of his not-smiles. “You misunderstand, John. Lady Smallwood is our ally here—perhaps our only one, among those people with a vested interest in Sherlock’s fate. Much of the difficulty in this situation is only peripherally related to my brother; certain individuals view this as a potential opportunity to score political capital against me. I will deal with that aspect, but I have no desire to do anything that gives these…opponents extra leverage, since any move against me will also impact Sherlock.”

“So, what, he’s ‘collateral damage’?” John huffed angrily.

“More like a proxy, for those historically too timid to oppose me directly,” Mycroft said serenely. “In the end, this could be a positive—those who are openly involved in this endeavor have come out of the shadows and can be clearly identified for the first time. Believe me, John, I have a very long and exceptionally clear memory.” His expression made it very clear that that memory would be used to ensure that these previously hidden actors regretted their decision to come into the open. John didn’t often see that side of Mycroft; he had to confess it wasn’t his favorite. John knew all too well these days that Sherlock hadn’t been exaggerating when he referred to his brother as the “most dangerous man you’ll ever meet”.

John reluctantly conceded, at least for now. “So what’s the plan, then? I’m assuming there is one.”
Mycroft gave a magisterial nod. “Indeed. We have already confirmed what was our earliest consensus: there is no effective way that James Moriarty, the Moriarty we knew, could have survived. Sherlock tasted brain tissue that blew back into his mouth on the roof; the likelihood that even Moriarty would have thought to fabricate that particular effect is vanishingly small.” John cringed internally, but agreed. Not the least of that cringing arose from the conviction that Sherlock already knew what brain tissue tasted like.

“But that leaves two possibilities,” Mycroft continued. “First, that this is an elaborate hoax. We are currently pursuing lines of inquiry relating to that issue; it seems unlikely, but can’t be abandoned without further proof. Second, that someone is attempting to step into Moriarty’s shoes—a successor, if you will. The broadcast would have served as an exceptionally vigorous statement of intent. Both Sherlock and I agree that this is the most likely scenario; unfortunately, we have no viable ideas on who, or what, that successor may be—at least, none that can be verified by facts.”

“How can I help?” John asked. “Do we have papers, databases, anything like that, that you need an extra pair of eyes to review? Mary and I both are pretty good at that kind of thing.” He knew Mary would want to be involved; she had already expressed her dislike of “sitting around knitting while the world goes to shite”, as she put it.

“In the short run, at least for the next few days, your most valuable contribution would be in keeping my brother calm and on-track in his recovery. Our ability to do any true investigation is very limited while he is still essentially bed-bound, and he is already finding that wearing. None of us can afford a dramatic ‘escape’ on his part, no matter how well-intentioned; that scenario would be devastating to my ability to secure Sherlock’s eventual release.” He dropped his head slightly, looked at John through his lashes. “I would appreciate your convincing him of that; any attempt on my part will come across as self-serving at best. But I assure you, that is not the case.” And, to his surprise, John believed him; there was no trace of Mycroft’s typical austere artifice in his gaze.

“Yeah, of course. Mary will help as well,” John said simply. “But that’ll be a whole lot easier if we can offer him something worthwhile that he can do. So—laptops. Papers. Interviewees, if we can do it remotely, yeah?”

“A variety of materials are being gathered in the study, though I presume he will not be ready to resume work until tomorrow at the earliest,” the older man said, raising his brows inquiringly. John nodded; after this morning’s near-collapse, Sherlock would be staying quiet today, even if John had to slip a mild sedative in his tea.

As it happened, the sedative wasn’t necessary. Sherlock slept for 9 hours, rousing grumpily twice to consume the small meals John brought him before immediately pulling his blankets back up and rolling over. By dinnertime he was better; fragile still, but not quite as drawn and pale. He gave Mary a pleased smile when he saw her at the table.

“We’ve talked about this attention-seeking thing, Sherlock,” she said, with mock sternness.

Sherlock gave a dramatic sigh. “The woeful decline in the healing capabilities of the NHS is by no means my fault. I am simply a victim of that process.”

“Well, that and your complete disregard for everything your doctor told you to do,” John added snarkily. Sherlock gave a dismissive sniff and tucked into his soup.
By the time John thankfully removed Sherlock’s drip at the end of the second day, they had fallen into a routine—not a comfortable one, certainly, since everyone involved was conscious of the press of both time and circumstance. But familiar enough—the review of data (this time enlivened by the occasional presence of Mycroft, who invariably had some valuable insight or additional filip of info to add, but who also invariably ended up squabbling like a tall, repressed six-year-old with his younger brother), the rejection of multiple possible solutions (each time requiring Sherlock to sweep all materials relating to the rejected aspect onto the floor, clearly assuming elves would come in to pick it all up), the periodic extended Thinking Spells, when Sherlock would retire to lie corpse-like on the sofa while John and Mary wandered off for a snack.

By the end of the third day, frustration had set in for all parties (well, Sherlock had been frustrated almost since the outset, but now everyone else had joined him). The available information had been parsed, sorted, filtered and assessed in every possible permutation, but no definitive answers emerged. Two trends were posited (Mycroft’s term—Sherlock pointed out rudely that “posited” was simply bureaucrat-speak for “suspected”): first, something unusual was happening in eastern Europe, with large numbers of high-level criminal players abruptly relocating to other climes; and second, large numbers of Mycroft’s informants in that region were turning up with a severe case of Dead, leading to the conclusion that anyone becoming aware of information relating to the first item became a statistic of the second.

By the dawn of the fourth day, John was dreading another 12 hours trapped in the study with a Sherlock who was fast approaching meltdown. As it happened, though, he needn’t have worried. As the sun rose, John heard a commotion from downstairs (he and Mary had gratefully accepted Mycroft’s offer of overnight accommodations, complete with 1000-count sheets and complimentary bathrobes. Mary complained wryly about the lack of mints on the pillowcases). He was up and out the door before Mary had begun to stir beside him. As he reached the top of the stairs, he was stopped by a member of Mycroft’s usually-unobtrusive security detail. “Sorry sir,” the tall woman said. “We’re on lockdown—a large packing crate has been dropped on the road out front. Techs are in-route, but until we know more, everyone stays put.”

“But what if it’s a bomb? That would make your tactics remarkably short-sighted, don’t you think?” came Sherlock’s sardonic tones from below.

“We’ve already done an overhead scan from a drone,” the woman replied, with what John considered was surprising patience. “No metal or hard-surface components. Whatever’s inside appears to be organic.”

In the end, it was very much organic. It was a body—to be precise, the body of MI6’s local head of operations in Belgrade. And he had died, sometime in the past 48 hours, of a virulent, fulminating disease which proved to be unknown to current medical science.
The day was a confusing, terrifying jumble of half-truths, suspicions and, finally, grim realizations. The body was removed by a team in full HazMat gear by shortly past 8 am; the street had been blocked since dawn (to the frustration of residents and commuters alike), and was foamed with an unidentified substance, then washed down again with firehoses, before re-opening to traffic.

By the time that happened, though, the members of the Holmes entourage were already on the move. Mycroft’s staff had hustled the occupants to the kitchen while the investigations were still underway on the street, and everyone had tucked into a simple but ample breakfast. Mycroft’s cook seemed not the least fussed at suddenly producing a meal for 8, rather than the expected 4 (since the security detail was still trapped in the house, and even Mycroft wasn’t quite cold enough to eat without offering them a portion).

As soon as the meal was over, Mycroft stood and had the room’s instant attention. “We will leave through the rear exit in 10 minutes. Please ensure that everyone is ready; anyone not in the garage at the appointed time will be left behind.” Left carefully unsaid, but painfully clear, was what being left behind would mean to the employment prospects of any of the staff. Sherlock, as usual, managed to read John’s mind. “What a shame it is that he can’t fire us,” he said, just loud enough to ensure that his brother heard him. John didn’t even try to hide his chuckle, while Mycroft gave Sherlock a repressive glare and stalked out.

When John came out of his room five minutes later, dressed and ready to go, Sherlock was waiting at the foot of the stairs with Mary. “I’m staying here until a little later,” she said, before he had a chance to ask. “Mycroft’s giving me a car once the traffic clears up. Not much point in my waddling along to his underground lair, after all.” John, reflexively, said “You don’t waddle” simultaneously with Sherlock’s “Absolutely true,” which brought a crack of laughter from Mary.

John found himself both pleased and concerned to see Sherlock come striding from his room, fully dressed in his normal suit-coat-scarf “uniform”: pleased because it had been a rough week, seeing his friend so down-pin, concerned because he was afraid that Sherlock would take this incident as permission to forget all about his health issues. To that end, John had insisted on bringing along a
small rucksack, which contained all of Sherlock’s medication and a variety of non-perishable food items. Sherlock rolled his eyes but stayed silent; John considered that a victory.

Predictably enough, given the nature of Mycroft’s household, all the parties were assembled exactly on time in the basement garage (an area John had been unaware existed until this morning). Mycroft, in a de facto acceptance of Sherlock’s limited patience for drama at present, climbed into the first car with 2 members of his security detail, and waved John and Sherlock towards the second. Sherlock clearly couldn’t decide whether to be pleased or offended. As the two walked towards their car, the entire rear wall of the underground garage suddenly gave a mechanical groan and began to lift, exposing a paved ramp to the rear street. As John gaped, he heard Sherlock snicker behind him. “Yes, he has watched James Bond,” the detective said wryly, as he climbed into the back of the car.

The drive to Mycroft’s offices (his “situation centre”, as Sherlock referred to it—one of several offices the Great Man maintained around the country) took fifteen minutes, mostly spent in silence. Sherlock had evidently slid into his Mind Palace, and John had no real reason to interrupt his thoughts, other than his own (less than helpful) anxiety. They reached the office by pulling into yet another underground garage (though this one was secured by a stout security gate rather than a moving wall), and then rode up on a lift that opened onto dimly-lit corridors. It was clear they were still underground.

Mycroft’s Situation Centre proved to be pretty much as John expected—as he put it to Mary later, a mix of James Bond villain’s den and military headquarters. Lots of high-tech monitors, a backlit black tracking board ranging across most of Europe, and a host of silent functionaries who didn’t even look up from their monitors when the newcomers entered. Mycroft led the way through this nerve center to a discreet door in the back wall that opened onto an expansive meeting area, with a mahogany table that could seat at least 20. In this case, though, Anthea was the last person through, and closed the solid door on their group of four. She then touched a control panel imbedded in the wall to the right of the doorway, and a viewing panel dropped down from the ceiling against the front wall.

Mycroft dropped into the opulent leather chair at the head of the table with a slight sigh; John was reminded that this past week had been just as hard on him, in a different way, as it had on his brother. “We can speak freely now,” the older man said. “The dampener will effectively block any kind of listening devices, even those that may have been planted in this room.” John felt himself stiffen slightly; that sounded very much like Mycroft believed he had spies within his own organization. As was often the case, the Holmeses read his mind. “An internal plant is entirely plausible,” Sherlock said tersely. Mycroft nodded. “I have no definitive evidence either way, but I prefer not to gamble in these circumstances.”

Mycroft tapped at a touchscreen imbedded in the tabletop, and the viewer on the wall behind him lit up with a view of the street outside his home. In the predawn darkness, a nondescript van suddenly zoomed into view, popped open its rear doors, and dropped the packing crate roughly on the pavement before accelerating away at high speed. No human figures were visible at any point in the video.

“There are a variety of disturbing components to this event,” the bureaucrat began. “Not the least of which is the knowledge of the location of my home.” Mycroft noticed John’s surprise at that and deigned to offer some additional explanation. “There are perhaps ten people in this country, outside of my household staff (who know me only as a ‘minor governmental official’), who are aware of the address of my residence. Three of them are in this room. That information appears on no public database of any kind, and has never appeared in any external media. But the style of this delivery makes it very clear that the sender knew. Clearly, then, this individual or organization has inside access at a very high level indeed.”
“Or access to someone who does, either voluntarily or involuntarily,” Sherlock said tersely. “Which is the more likely option of the two. Can you identify the current location of the remaining seven members of your fan club?”

“Two are in Surrey, obviously,” Mycroft said with a tight smile. “And I would certainly have heard if they had been approached in any way.”

Sherlock snorted. “Mummy would have handled it herself, and sent you the remains,” he said with a feral grin, before sobering again. “What about the remaining five?”

“Four are the security team; you’ve just seen all of them. They have, of course, been vetted extensively, but another set of reviews is underway as we speak,” Anthea said calmly.

“And the fifth?” John asked, when the silence stretched on just a bit too long. “Who’s the fifth?”

Mycroft looked at his hands before responding. “That would be Lady Elizabeth Smallwood,” he said simply.

John was now completely at sea. “But you said she was your ally…” he began, before Sherlock interrupted. “She is an ally, insofar as any politician can be relied upon to be consistent in their loyalties,” the detective said. “But that doesn’t mean that everyone in her office, or everyone who has had access to her records or personal materials, is. While Lady Smallwood is extremely intelligent and employs generally competent security and IT staff, she herself is only marginally capable in computer usage—much like most government functionaries.” His sneering glance at Mycroft made it clear he included his brother in that assessment. “It is not out of the realm of possibility that she would inadvertently leave such information vulnerable, and given the other individuals in possession of the address, she is the only viable candidate for its release.”

“Agreed,” Mycroft said sourly. “But in the end, it doesn’t matter immediately, beyond letting us know that Lady Smallwood cannot be provided with critical information going forward, at least not until it ceases to be critical. Of more concern now are the implications of this ‘announcement’.” He flicked at the touchscreen again, and views of what was apparently the autopsy of the body popped into view on the large screen. He manipulated the view until close-ups appeared.

“John, I would appreciate your input on this. While of course all results are extremely preliminary, indications are that this corpse died of a variant of the Ebola virus. Do these views seem consistent with that diagnosis?” Mycroft asked, flipping steadily through the various views of the body in various states of dissection.

John stood and approached the screen, scanning each view as it passed. “Hard to say without tissue samples,” he said finally. “External view is pretty consistent, certainly. But there are a couple of issues with that.” Mycroft raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

John moved forward to point at the pictures of the corpse. “The hemorrhagic rash, here—that’s certainly typical of Ebola, as is the evidence of bleeding from the eyes, nose and mouth.” The pictures showed large, dark, blood-filled blisters covering much of the corpse’s torso and arms, with small trails of blood dried across the cheeks.

“But Ebola is transmitted solely by direct bodily contact with another victim. And it isn’t a disease that can survive in a northern European climate—this is strictly a warm-weather phenomenon. My understanding is that this individual was based in Belgrade—had he travelled in Africa in the past two weeks, or met with someone who had?”

Sherlock took that one. “Already asked and answered,” he said tersely. “No travel outside of
Belgrade in more than two months. No contact with anyone from there is known, and given his position, it would be known if it had occurred. And John, my understanding is that Ebola is spread solely by human-to-human physical contact, yes? No airborne transmission, or contact from clothing, etc.?”

“Mostly correct,” John replied. “Contact with contaminated blood or other bodily fluids will do it, but generally only if the victim ingests the substance or has an open cut or sore.” He paused, then continued with an uncomfortable coda. “But it’s certainly something that could be injected successfully.”

Mycroft touched the control screen and shifted to laboratory results, but was suddenly interrupted by an intact of breath from Anthea, who had picked up her phone in response to an alert. Her face visibly paled as she read. “There’s been an incident,” she said shakily. She rapidly keyed information to her phone, and the large viewing screen behind Mycroft switched to a large darkened room, the scene changing rapidly as the camera panned—apparently a head-cam used by an agent on site.

“This is the offices of the internal Security Services in Belgrade—a large meeting room. The Serbian press corps received an anonymous tip two hours ago, and passed it along to the police because of the nature of the information. Luckily someone there had the sense to require contamination gear before entering, or the potential results would be much worse.” She keyed in a closer view, this time a series of still photographs. “There are roughly 40 casualties—all fatalities, and all known to have been healthy and at work 24 hours ago.” The close photographs clearly showed the same kind of black blistering and bleeding from eyes and nose that was found in the packing crate corpse. Ebola, again, but under what would seem to be impossible circumstances.

Within the next 30 minutes, five more similar alerts came in, from locations scattered across eastern Europe—Bosnia, Montenegro, Albania, Bulgaria. All involved groups of 30-50 individuals, located in police or security force buildings, and all were dead from this disease that seemed to kill impossibly quickly. Mycroft and Anthea had been called to an emergency meeting, leaving Sherlock and John to pore obsessively over information from the autopsy and the photographs while awaiting new information.

The meeting took roughly two hours. When it ended, the bureaucrat and his assistant once again closed the conference room door and sank tiredly into chairs. “An Exclusion Zone is being created,” Mycroft said wearily. “Troops are being mobilized as we speak, and mandatory evacuations will begin within the next three hours. Virtually all of the region will be under martial law by nightfall, with movement severely restricted.” He paused and nodded his head at his brother, who, surprisingly, had said nothing. “And no, it was not my choice. I believe it will be of no value—clearly the transmission of the disease to these individuals was far from casual, and there is nothing to indicate that the general population is at risk at this juncture. This is a demonstration, not a pandemic. At least not yet.” He ran his hand roughly over his face, his exhaustion obvious.

Sherlock took up the staff. “But the Powers That Be must be seen to be doing something to address this, even if that something is a gross over-reaction that will most likely do more damage than an actual outbreak would. If this even is an outbreak in the conventional sense; it’s an attack, certainly, but on what? Or, more specifically, whom?”

Anthea’s phone chirped again; she picked it up, opened the link, and gasped. This time, when she keyed in the data and the wall screen changed, it morphed into a pixilated view that was dammingly familiar. The head on-screen blinked its eyes, turned to face the camera, then broke into a broad grin.

Appearing to look straight at them, the person tittered, in a high, artificial voice. Then, “Jim Moriarty,” it cooed. “Hiiii…..”
If you ever want to give yourself world-class nightmares, google "pictures of Ebola victims". You'll be very sorry you did. The descriptions I've included are accurate, but I have intentionally been a little vague on some of the worst details.

You're welcome.
Prodrome - Part Two

Chapter Summary

The initial rounds of play begin. Not all of the players abide by the rules.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

While Anthea grabbed a tablet computer sitting on the console along the wall and started frantically keying in information, the rest of them sat still as stone and listened. John noted that Sherlock had a rigid grip on the edge of the table, his spidery fingers white with strain, but he made no sound.

Unlike the last broadcast, this version made no attempt to continue in the “real” voice of Jim Moriarty. After that initial eerie greeting, it began to modulate rapidly through multiple voices—male, female, English, American, old, young, in one case a child.

“Well then,” the voice began, this time a young American male. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today—no, wait, not quite on topic. Soorryy. I do tend to wander when I’m excited, don’t I, Sherly dear?” The voice then tittered, disturbingly, in Jim Moriarty’s tones before morphing once again, this time to an elderly woman. “Oh, come now, dear, this is intended to be interactive, after all. I can’t do all the work.”

John glanced at Sherlock, who remained frozen and blank. Mycroft stepped towards the screen and answered, in a cold, patrician tone that implied near-painful boredom. “Can you both see and hear us? Or is this simply a tiresome speculative reel that masquerades as a real person?”

“Of course I can see and hear you. That’s the whole point. But I want to speak with Sherly, brother dear.” And that last bit, horrifyingly, was in Sherlock’s voice—Sherlock, who abruptly erupted from his chair like he’d been shot, knocking it roughly over as he went. Bone-pale and visibly trembling, he stalked towards the screen.

“Cheap theatrics always were Jim’s style,” he snapped. “But then, this isn’t Jim, but a cheap imitation of some kind, so that seems doubly appropriate.”

“Watch it, sonny,” the voice snapped, now a woman sporting a Jamaican accent. “I always appreciate a feisty attitude, but there are limits. And you may find there will be penalties as well.”

“Ooh,” Sherlock crooned. “Does that mean there are prizes if we win?”

“Well, in a way,” the voice giggled, now a small English girl. “If you consider ‘not losing’ a prize. Maybe it would be better to say you’ll have an incentive. I like that word, don’t you? In-cen-tive. Goes along with some of my other favorites—in-teresting, In-furiating.” The faux Jim head leaned in close to the screen and leered. “In-cest,” he moaned. Then he mock-cringed. “Oops. Sorry. In-appropriate!”

“In-sufferable,” Sherlock sing-songed.

“Inadvisable,” snarled the voice, this time as an American adult male. The view on the screen abruptly split; Moriarty’s face on one side, while the other now showed a CCTV view of a small
windowless room, dimly lit. A terrified-looking woman was seated, bound in an office chair, in front of a huge black video screen or TV that took up virtually all of the wall behind her. No sound came through the speakers that could be identified as coming from that room, but when the voice began to speak again, it was clear from the woman’s startled reaction that she was hearing the feed as well. A one-way link, then.

“Now,” said the voice, this time a soft-spoken Scots woman, “we’re going to play some preliminary rounds. Qualifiers, let’s call them. I’ll be fair—this first round, anyone can play. So—once play begins, you would normally have 30 seconds to tell her what to do. But because someone was rude, you will have, oh, let’s see, half that.”

“But—what do we play? When does play start? What does—“ They all spoke over each other. The dead psychopath on the screen grinned. “You’ll see!” he squealed, in a child’s voice again.

The little girl’s voice piped up again. “They’re heeere,” it chimed, and the woman’s head jerked up, looking rapidly around for whoever might be coming. A countdown suddenly popped up in one corner of the screen, counting down seconds.

The four in the conference room each reacted differently. Anthea stood and tried to signal to the woman, who, as it turned out, could hear but not see them. Mycroft muttered something under his breath, frantically scanning the scene for clues; Sherlock joined him, eyes darting rapidly. John found himself clenching his hands helplessly; it wasn’t clear what was coming, but it wasn’t good for the woman, who was now sobbing and wrenching at her bonds.

Suddenly the timer hit zero. “Ladies and gents, that’s time,” the voice caroled, now an elderly man. On-screen, the woman’s head jerked up as the huge screen behind her suddenly started to rise, an intense wind howling through the room, tugging at her clothing and hair. And then the screen slid the rest of the way up, and the view behind her was that of open sky and clouds—with no surrounding wall. Just as the inhabitants of the conference room realized the danger, realized that the “room” was actually inside the rear bulkhead of a plane, the front of the “room” tilted abruptly, and the chair, with the woman still bound to it, still fighting and screaming silently, rolled swiftly back and then dropped completely from view. Then the screen slid slowly back down, and the view of the darkened room, now lacking an occupant, returned briefly before being replaced by the full screen of Moriarty.

“Well, looks like you lost that round. Though I did cheat just a bit,” a French-accented woman said. “But I’ll be fair—since you didn’t quite know all the rules yet, you won’t have to forfeit a player.” The voice paused. “As you can see, though, pawns are fair game at any point.” The Moriarty head smirked.

“Now let’s get down to brass tacks,” the voice said firmly, in a voice virtually identical to Greg Lestrade. “We will play a round for each of you. You win, you get to compete in the big game. You lose, you’re out. Not permanently—I mean, no one gets hurt. Yet. But you can’t be part of the main game, and that’s, well, you need as many players as possible. So, let’s see. How shall we decide the order?” The mock Moriarty tapped a finger to his lips and looked to the ceiling. “Ooh, I know,” the voice squealed, once again a little girl. “Ladies first! Ms. Holder! Front and center—you’re up!”

Anthea continued to sit at the table, her fingers flying across the tablet screen. “Ms. Holder?” the voice said, a little miffed. “Can you—” Just at that point, Anthea hit one more sequence of keys with a triumphant little “Hah!” and the voice abruptly changed mid-sentence, to a male with a noticeable South African accent. “—step forward?” the voice continued, then stopped. After a few seconds, though, the voice continued, but not before John noticed Mycroft, off to the side, suddenly go very, very still.
“Well,” said the voice. “That was impressive. Just for that, sweetheart, I’ll give you a pass—you’re in. So, your turn rolls over to one of the Holmes boys.” Both of whom, at the moment, were staring at the screen, while listening intently. John was annoyingly aware that he had once again missed something.

Mycroft, at least, managed to shake off his stasis and step forward. “I will take the next turn, Mister Moran,” he said calmly. Sherlock, in his turn, continued to stand, frozen, next to John. Once he heard that name, though, John understood perfectly. Since, according to one of the few tales of his travels Sherlock had related on his return, they were currently speaking with a dead man.

There was a brief silence; perhaps Moran hadn’t expected to be identified. But then—“So, the Iceman cometh,” Moran chortled. “You do realize, though, that this is just delaying the inevitable. Baby Brother will be taking his turn. Or you’ll be doing without his services in the coming game, and I don’t think you can afford that. Weird and irritating he may be, but he’s good at what he does.” The Moriarty on-screen blew a kiss at the previously non-responsive Sherlock. “Thank you,” said Sherlock, in a distant voice, clearly only half-present.

“I am not inclined to games in general,” Mycroft said, in tones of profound boredom. “I find all of this drama rather juvenile, in fact. Would it be possible to prevail upon you to get to the point?”

“I doubt that the corpses in those security services offices found this juvenile,” Moran snarled. “You will either play the game, or I will consider you have forfeited and act accordingly. I think that would be very difficult to explain to your masters—well, those of your masters who survived, anyway. And I somehow suspect you’d find a post-apocalyptic world quite unpleasant; you don’t strike me as the ‘survivalist’ type.”

“And I think you would find that I have, in truth, very few ‘masters’, which should give you pause to consider that there is very little I cannot do if I wish,” Mycroft snapped back, then visibly controlled his temper. “However, in an excess of caution, I will continue with this charade for the time being. What is the nature of the challenge?”

The view on the screen suddenly split again, and a dark corridor appeared. It was evidently underground, more like a tunnel than a building—roughly-cut stone blocks for walls, covered with damp lichen and tree roots. The floor, however, consisted of dull metal plates laid in 3-foot squares.

At the entrance to the corridor, huddled against a wooden door, stood a sobbing man, hands bound and clad only in dirty khaki shorts. His feet were bare, and he appeared to have been beaten. “This is Mr. Bimidji,” Moran said, in a confiding tone. On-screen, the man jerked around and looked for the source of the voice. “He has been both greedy and foolish, and is now learning the penalty for that.” The countdown appeared in the corner of the screen again, this time set at 30 seconds. “Once I hit the timer, you will have 30 seconds to tell Mr. Bimidji what to do. If you are correct, he lives. If not…well.” Moran paused, then continued. “Mr. Bimidji—start moving,” he said dispassionately, and the clock started counting down. The terrified man didn’t move momentarily, then suddenly jerked and hopped, sobbing still, onto the next square, and then the next. Evidently the metal plates under his bare feet were electrified. Mycroft was now watching intensely, his eyes darting over the scene as the man moved haltingly forward. As time clicked down to the last 12 seconds, Moran spoke again. “I would like to think that those who have acted as Mr. Bimidji has would show a little penitence for their actions, you know? But that rarely happens unaided.” The clock ticked on as the man lurched forward. Just as the timer neared the last second, Mycroft saw something. Moran started to speak, and Mycroft suddenly barked “KNEEL!” in commanding tones. The sobbing man, startled, dropped to his knees, just as a glinting circular blade sliced out of the wall and all the way across the corridor at head height, missing the collapsing prisoner by a matter of inches.
And just like that, John knew. Above all, he knew that this next test was something Sherlock would almost certainly fail on his own.

Onscreen, Moran congratulated Mycroft in condescending tones, while armed men appeared onscreen and hauled the hapless Mr. Bimidji out. John, though, ignored all of that and stepped over to Sherlock, still watching silently. He put his hand on the small of Sherlock’s back and tapped out a rhythm, unseen by the camera (or at least he hoped so). His friend stiffened, gave a small sigh, and fell bonelessly to the floor.

Mycroft and Anthea spun around in consternation, while Moran sputtered “The fuck?” in an exasperated tone. While the other two knelt by the fallen detective, John stood and faced the screen. “I’ll take his turn,” he announced. Mycroft looked up, surprised (and John couldn’t repress a surge of joy at having shocked the un-shockable), but said nothing.

“I’m not sure that’s acceptable,” Moran began slowly. “You’re very much a side dish, little man. We haven’t dealt with the remaining main course yet.”

John ignored the slur; he was long past being sensitive about his size. “If you’re as all-seeing as you seem to be, you know why that happened, and how very ill he’s been.” Always worked well to let people like Moran think you were impressed. He handed Mycroft the rucksack full of snacks and Sherlock’s medicine before continuing, while Sherlock moaned quietly and tried to sit up. “Let his brother get some food and medication down him, and let me deal with your game in the meantime. If nothing else, you’ll get some comic relief.” Or I’ll solve your bloody game in a heartbeat, he thought to himself.

Moran was silent for a long moment before issuing a theatrical sigh. “Oh, all right. Never let it be said that I didn’t give everyone a chance to embarrass themselves.” The faux Moriarty on-screen looked down, as if looking at a keyboard—apparently a true avatar for Moran, then, simply overlaying the view of the real man with a CGI “mask”. The screen once again split; this time the view was of a smallish, metal-walled compartment, like one of the deep interior rooms of a ship. The walls were covered with a variety of unrecognizable equipment. At one end was a low bench with a terrified woman sitting on it. She was clearly restrained in some way that wasn’t visible on-camera, but her hands were free. A variety of equipment was piled around her: scuba masks and tanks, welding tools, a handsaw, etc. To her immediate left, at the same height as the seat of the bench, was a small control panel with two buttons, red and green. On the left-hand wall across from her seat was a thick bulkhead door, with a porthole window.

Moran began speaking, very quietly (which raised John’s hackles in and of itself). “This is Solange Debarge,” he murmured. The woman’s head jerked up. “Four years ago, she decided to sell out her employers to MI6 to save herself a prison sentence.” Onscreen, the woman shook her head violently, her mouth moving, pleading. “She then moved to a remote island off the northern coast of Scotland —apparently thinking that alienation from humanity would offer her protection from her past.” The woman on the screen suddenly stopped her silent pleading, and looked over her right shoulder, clearly trying not to move any more than necessary. The Moriarty avatar smirked, and the camera panned very slowly around to the far rear of the compartment, perhaps twenty feet away from the terrified prisoner. And there, lying flat underneath metal conduits running along the wall, was the biggest dog, or wolf, John had ever seen. It was almost skeletal-thin, its fur ragged and torn in spots. But its bared teeth were long and white, and its yellowish eyes were riveted to the woman on the bench, who had made herself look away but visibly shook. “He’s very hungry,” Moran observed, in a near-whisper that the woman nonetheless clearly heard. “We may have neglected to feed him. And he may be accustomed to hunting his own food.” The countdown clock popped up in the corner of the screen and began to move. “So, Dr. Watson,” Moran said. “What should she do?” The woman was now jerking at her unseen bonds, while the dog had inched forward a foot or more, totally
focused on her.

John knew this; he did. He had seen this, somewhere, sometime. Not quite the same, but... The clock continued to tick down. But then it came to him. “Solange,” he said, very, very quietly. “Quickly—pick up the diving mask and turn on the tanks.” He had to hope she knew how—no time to explain, even if he knew himself. The woman, shaking visibly, did as she was told, reaching immediately for the equipment. On the right of the screen, the dog was now inching forward, and the clock had reached eight seconds. As soon as the mask was over the woman’s face, John shouted, “Hit the red button!” Her hand jerked over and hit the button just as the dog gathered itself behind her-- and the door in the bulkhead slid open, followed by a blast of water that barreled into and completely filled the compartment, throwing the woman violently against her bonds as she clutched the dive mask to her face. Then the split screen disappeared, and the Moriarty avatar once more filled the view.

“Well,” the disembodied head said. “That was...surprisingly capable. I’m impressed.” The avatar smirked. “Not quite as dim as you look, then.”

“Evidently,” John ground out. “Is the woman alive?”

Moran sniffed. “For the time being. I have a crew ready to release her—she’s in a dive training chamber on the Irish coast. They may be able to get her out before the air tank runs dry.” He paused, clearly for effect. “I did tell you: I cheat sometimes.” John felt his face flush with fury, but he refused to give Moran the satisfaction of showing his feelings any further. He had given the woman a chance; that was the best they could do.

While the “game” had been underway, Mycroft had managed to manhandle Sherlock up into a chair. The avatar now looked straight at the detective. “Well, Sherly? Are you ready for your turn?” Ignoring Moran, John strode over and put his hand protectively on Sherlock’s back.

“My brother is ill,” Mycroft said. “Let me take his turn.” John ground his teeth; Mycroft meant well, but this wasn’t the way things needed to go. Luckily, Moran agreed.

“Not happening, brother dear,” Moran said firmly. “He plays, or he stays. It’s that simple. If he wants to go along on the big adventure, he has to earn it.”

“Enough,” Sherlock snapped in an exhausted rasp. John suddenly wondered exactly how much of that collapse had been faked. “Let’s get this over with, so I can go back to bed.”

“Super,” Moran enthused, and the screen began to split once more.

Chapter End Notes

OK, folks, hope these scenarios weren't too easy or familiar, though I have a lowering feeling they might have been. Extra, Super Duper Bonus Points to whoever can identify the source of each! Note that, in each case, there's a clue included.
Prodrome - Part Three

Chapter Summary

The final qualifying round takes place. But winning isn't quite what it's cracked up to be.

Chapter Notes

As promised, here's the list of sources for the scenarios from last chapter:

1. Poltergeist (the original version), where the little girl gets sucked into the TV screen ("they're heeeere....")

2. Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade (the key was in the comment about Moran expecting "penitence"--"only the penitent man shall pass")

3. Alien (the final scene where Ripley is in the escape pod and discovers the Alien is in there with her, and has to open the hatch to space. Obviously I had to adjust that one a bit. The key was in Moran talking about "alienation".

And I suspect this week's is pretty obvious, but if no one gets it, I'll give the answer next week.

The split screen flickered into focus on a dim, red-lit scene. The lighting was poor enough initially that it was difficult to see anything clearly. Moran swore and glared at something out of sight, and the scene brightened slightly, enough to show another ship-like compartment: metal walls covered at intervals with pipes, though without portholes this time. The walls were streaked with rust and what appeared to be filth—oil, sludge, perhaps sewage? As the camera panned back, a man came into view, standing near the center of the compartment. He was almost thigh-deep in dark, oily water or fluid, that roiled periodically as the scene itself shimmered; coming from some kind of movement of the compartment as a whole, then. There were stacks of metal and wood debris rising from the water randomly, in some cases piled higher than the man’s shoulders, in others barely visible above the greasy-looking liquid around his legs.

The whole compartment looked to be about 15 feet wide; the ceiling height wasn’t possible to estimate, since the darkness obscured it from view. It was high, however, based on the height of the man and the amount of visible space above his head.

The man himself was very different from the previous victims; despite his situation, this man held himself with a stillness, a watchfulness that said “soldier” to John, despite the lack of a uniform (or any clothes, in fact, beyond a pair of filthy shorts). His hands were free, but presumably his feet were not, given his position precisely in the center of the space, and his failure to move from that spot. Unlike the other victims he was not sobbing, nor was he visibly afraid; if anything, he looked furious, and judging by the bruises and scrapes spread across his bare chest, he hadn’t been a cooperative prisoner. He periodically shouted, but because of the video/audio setup they couldn’t...
hear him. John’s lip-reading wasn’t good enough to tell what he was saying, but Sherlock’s clearly was, going by the tiny snort of amusement the detective gave at one point.

Moran wasn’t pleased. “So happy you’re happy, Sherly,” he snapped. “But that’s not really the point of this exercise. Let’s get started, shall we?” The Moriarty mask looked down again, presumably while Moran worked a keyboard. When Moran began to speak again, the man on the split screen jerked—he could now hear them.

“This is Major Lewis Hampton, formerly of the Royal Marines. When he mustered out, he went to work for some friends of mine; they work in the export/import business, specifically of some… potentially troublesome chemicals for sale to the highest bidder. When he realized the true nature of his employment he looked the other way for a time; he was apparently desperate for money.” Moran snickered. On-screen, the bound man’s shoulders dropped, along with his face. “But then, most inconveniently, he grew both a spine and a conscience. He turned Queen’s Evidence on his employers, despite the knowledge that this would result in at least some prison time for him as well.” The man’s head came back up, and he stared defiantly ahead. “In the ensuing raids, two very valuable warehouses and their contents were destroyed, and one of our best regional heads was killed.” Moran paused, anger now evident in his voice. “Unlike Major Hampton, he refused to be taken alive, to inform on his compatriots.”

John suddenly realized, along, evidently, with Moran, that Sherlock had gone very quiet. The avatar smirked. “Yeah, Sherl, you weren’t quite as successful at breaking up the ol’ gang as you thought you were. And I’ve had almost a year, since you thought you’d fucking killed me, to beef things back up.”

Sherlock managed to rally, standing with only a brief wobble, stiffening his spine and raising his slumping shoulders. “The shoe was rather on the other foot, Colonel,” he said in a cool tone. “You had set the device in place, after all, hoping to catch me in the blast along with all of the occupants of the block of shops. I was just fortunate enough to find it and know how to reset the trigger for 12 hours earlier than planned, when the building was empty. The fact that I observed you going in just before detonation was just an added, and unexpected, bonus.”

“Semantics,” Moran sneered. “I’m quite sure you knew I would get an alert that the device had been tampered with. Not a difficult leap to assume that would bring me to the site.”

Sherlock sneered right back. “I’m brilliant—I’m not psychic. Certainly, I expected you at some point—that’s why I was waiting, observing. In truth, though, I expected the detonation to be what brought you.” He paused, as if thinking deeply, before continuing. “On reflection, I have to confess your apparent demise added an extra feeling of accomplishment to the whole proceedings. There apparently is such a thing as ‘happy accidents.’” He gave a cheery little fake smile.

The Moriarty face on the screen had an expression somewhere between a scowl and a smirk. “Let’s just say we have differing opinions on what the ‘fortunate’ part was. In my case, ‘fortunate’ meant that I went out through the rear doors to check the windows for a break-in location just before the blast. In your case, ‘fortunate’ meant that a broken leg and serious concussion kept me from hunting you down before you could slip back over the border. Because I would have done that, Sherlock. Really I would.”

John, for one, had no doubts. Sherlock probably believed the man as well—Moran, after all, had started his military life as a stalker and sniper before moving on to the assassin-for-hire ranks—but chose to ignore it.

“As an American acquaintance of mine used to say, ‘woulda, coulda, shoulda,’” the detective drawled. “But all of this reminiscing is tedious, no doubt especially so to your ‘guest’. Can we get on
with this farce, so he can be released?"

Moran gave an ugly chuckle. “Sweeping assumption in that statement, mate,” said the assassin. “But far be it from me to deprive you of the chance to lose embarrassingly. Especially in front of Big Brother.” Mycroft, to his credit, sighed and rolled his eyes dramatically.

The Moriarty avatar looked down again, presumably working on a computer keyboard. On the split screen, the prisoner jerked abruptly and looked around frantically as if in response to a signal or noise. The surface of the dark liquid around his legs trembled from vibrations from an unknown source.

“So, just about ready to start,” Moran said. On-screen, the prisoner’s head shot up—he was clearly still able to hear them. “Same rules as before. You’ll have 30 seconds to tell Major Hampton what to do. He may not find it easy, but he’ll be able to do what’s necessary once you tell him what that is. No second guessing allowed, and don’t hope for any ‘happy accidents’ this time.” Sherlock strode closer to the screen, and John sidled forward until he was once again behind the younger man, his hand on his friend’s back. Out of the corner of his eye John saw Mycroft move subtly over so that he could see what John was doing—clearly the elder Holmes had caught on.

“And here goes!” Moran said cheerily. The timer popped back up on the screen and began counting down from thirty. Major Hampton suddenly jerked wildly, his mouth open and shouting silently. “He says the walls are moving,” Mycroft said quietly.

On-screen, the Major reached his arms down into the liquid, wrenching violently at his tethered legs. “Oh dear, Major,” Moran chortled. “I have a bad feeling about this.” The walls on either side were visibly closer now, and the water level had risen by at least 6 inches. Sherlock looked over his shoulder at John, then spoke. “Major, can you hear me?” he asked, in a deceptively calm voice. The man in the water stopped tugging at his legs and looked up, nodding his head. “Excellent,” Sherlock continued. “I want you to bend over and reach out your arms under the water. Somewhere within your reach there’s a long, heavy-duty pole or pipe. It may be in front of you, or on one side or the other, but it is definitely there.”

The Major, to his credit, immediately flexed forward and dove under the water, reaching out as far as he could with his legs pinioned. He found nothing directly in front, though, and came back up momentarily, dripping oily fluid, before plunging back in on his right side. Again nothing, while the clock continued to count down. Finally, he pulled back up and fell frantically to his left. This time he came back up with his arms wrapped around a stout length of cast-iron pipe, perhaps six feet long and obviously very heavy. “Pick it up quickly and hold it across your chest,” Sherlock said. “Use it as a wedge. You can’t let either end drop or the walls will force it down on that side.” The walls were now, at most, eight feet apart, and the water was above the Major’s waist.

The Major, clearly struggling with the weight, managed to get the pipe to chest height, and braced his arms under each side as the walls crept closer, until they finally impacted the pipe itself and wedged it between them. The clock was now down to 12 seconds. John expected Moran to call the “game”, but the avatar remained silent. On-screen, the pipe abruptly shuddered and, as the participants on both sides of the screen watched in horror, began to bend slightly in the middle. The walls—the walls were still moving.

Sherlock looked back at John, looking the Holmesian version of panicked. John’s hand, after a moment, moved rapidly on Sherlock’s back. As the clock reached 4 seconds, Sherlock shouted, “Ask for the compactors to be turned off, Major!”, and the man on-screen instantly, silently, howled out the words.

There was a long, breathless pause—then the prisoner nodded gratefully and dropped his head into
his hands.

“Well, that was exciting,” Moran said in an acid tone. “What a shame that all that effort will come to naught.” And on-screen, a glint of light suddenly lit up from the darkened rear of the watery compartment as a small hatch opened—a hatch containing a man with a gun, who, with no preamble, pointed his weapon and shot Major Hampton in the head.

As the body dropped into the oily water, Sherlock stood frozen, his face that affectless mask he wore when Moriarty detonated the old lady. While John snarled and moved towards the screen as if to climb through and attack Moran with his bare hands, Sherlock staggered backwards and half-fell into his abandoned chair.

“You utter bastard,” John gritted out, while moving quickly to secure Sherlock in the chair before he tumbled off. “We won the fucking game.”

“I never said I wouldn’t cheat,” Moran said airily. “In fact, I pointed out that I did so more than once, if you’ll recall. And I was never going to let the Major walk away; people who actively work against me and mine end up dead, period.” The avatar lowered its head and looked up through its lashes. “You’d do well to remember that, Sherly.”

Sherlock was either unwilling, or unable, to respond at that point. The detective sat motionless in the chair, before suddenly leaning forward and resting his head on his folded arms and knees. John quickly knelt before him. “Faint?” he asked quietly. He got a breathy hum of agreement in return. Behind them, Mycroft stepped up to the screen, “coincidentally” blocking Moran’s view of his brother.

“So, where are we now?” the bureaucrat said coldly. “I would presume we have successfully completed your little game and are now ready to be told what you’re really looking for. Or would you rather waste more time on parlour tricks and grandiose speech-making?”

“Climb down, Iceman,” Moran snapped. “I chose to put this whole shindig together for my own amusement. I could just as easily choose to start my little game and tell you nothing. And believe me, the stakes are exceptionally high here—I truthfully don’t give a shit what happens, since I win either way. But you will, trust me.”

Mycroft stood silent, momentarily indecisive. John, his patience exhausted and his concern for his friend in the forefront of his mind, stepped away from Sherlock and faced the screen. “All right, Colonel, point taken. I’m sure yours is bigger, all right? We don’t need any more measuring contests. We’ll play your game. But if you want a fair game, this needs to wait 24 hours so all of the players are physically able to participate, because Sherlock just can’t right now. Unless you want to cheat on that as well?” John knew that was a calculated risk—Moriarty might just decide to drop Sherlock from the “player list”—but given that the detective couldn’t continue now regardless, it was a risk worth taking.

The Moriarty avatar stared at John, in a way far too much like the original. Finally, though, the head smirked and nodded. “Yeah, OK. Wouldn’t be as much fun without Sherly anyway. Shame he’s such a delicate little thing, innit?” Moran snickered. “We’ll pick this up tomorrow, same time. Just so you know, though, that’ll mean you’ll need to be on your way as soon as we go through the rundown. No delays—this is a bit time-sensitive, you know.”

The avatar looked down again, obviously keying something in again. “In the meantime, though, I’ll give you a little preview.” Suddenly the screen blanked momentarily, then was replaced by the old “green screen” view from the earliest days of computers: a black background with green highlights and blinking cursor. After a brief pause, words began to appear after the cursor, one line at a time.
> LET’S PLAY A GAME.

> LET’S PLAY GLOBAL THERMONUCLEAR WAR.
Prodrome - Part Four

Chapter Summary

Now that the parameters of the game are about to be made clear, the players are examining their hands, and not much liking what they see.

Chapter Notes

So sorry for the extra few days before posting, my dears. My older son had knee surgery this week (he's doing well, thanks!), so RL has been even more crazed than usual. I hope to be back to my regular schedule by next week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As it happened, they didn’t have time immediately to speculate on the new “challenge”. Just as Moran gave a smirking head-bob and the screen went blank, Sherlock slid soundlessly off his chair to the floor. Though he came around quickly, Mycroft and John tacitly agreed that their short-term priority was getting the detective tucked into a meal and a bed, very soon.

While Anthea went to secure a car and make sure that no additional information had been discovered during their seclusion, John and Mycroft helped Sherlock to the sofa at the far side of the conference room, while he batted feebly at their hands and complained.


“You’re also warmer than I like,” John said. “I’m hoping it’s just exhaustion—today was a bit of a stretch for your first full day out of bed. Just in case, though, I’m hooking your IV drip back up as soon as we get back to Mycroft’s.” Sherlock gave a moue of disgust but didn’t argue. By the time Anthea came back to let them know the car was ready, he was able to walk with minimal assistance (offered, with an ironic eyebrow lift, by Mycroft, once John mentioned pointedly how much closer he and his brother were in height).

Once they were on their way back to Mycroft’s (with Mycroft settled in the front beside Anthea, so that Sherlock had more room to lean against the side pillar), Anthea started her interrogation. John had noticed how silent she’d been through most of the “games”—apparently, she hadn’t wanted to give Moran any further ideas of her capabilities.

“All right, then. What was that all about, other than Moran’s obvious desire to rid himself theatrically of some of his outstanding problems?” she asked, directing her question pointedly at John. That was a little flattering, actually—John wasn’t used to being the focus of any conversation in which a Holmes took part.

“He wanted to take advantage of Sherlock’s, um, lack of interest in popular culture to score points. They were all adapted from scenes in very well-known movies, but Moriarty had told him enough about Sherlock’s…”
“Peculiarities, John,” Sherlock said sourly. “You were thinking it—might as well say it.”

“No I wasn’t. I don’t think you’re peculiar—never have. I think you’re exceptional—there’s a difference,” John said. “‘Peculiar’ is an elderly woman with 12 cats and tinfoil headgear. ‘Exceptional’ means ‘not like anyone else’, and that’s you.”

Sherlock nodded jerkily, a faint touch of pink on his cheekbones. “Be that as it may, he assumed, quite correctly as it happened, that I would recognize none of the scenarios. It was sheer luck that Mycroft was able to solve his by simple observation, unless he has been indulging secretly in moviegoing.” Mycroft curled his lip; it was the Holmesian equivalent of flipping his brother off.

“So your initial dramatic swoon was to enable John to step in,” Anthea said. She looked back to John. “How did you tell him the answer for his turn?”

“Morse code,” Mycroft interjected. Apparently he was feeling left out. “Tapped onto Sherlock’s back.”

“Yeah,” said John, with a sardonic look that Mycroft ignored. “We’ve used it pretty often on cases, actually. Works a treat when you’re on a stakeout and need to communicate.”

“Or when trapped in a boring meeting with my brother’s minions,” Sherlock muttered, eyes closed. Mycroft ignored him, but John caught a glimpse of a quick grin, suppressed almost immediately, from Anthea.

This time they entered the garage through the conventional entry, avoiding what John would always think of as the “Bond Door”. Sherlock roused himself just enough to give John a knowing smirk, which Mycroft pointedly ignored.

Once inside, Mycroft strode off towards his study, phone to his ear. Anthea, though, announced that she was going to have the cook set up a late lunch/early tea, and took off for the kitchen. John told her departing back that he thought that an excellent idea, and she waved her hand airily in acknowledgment.

Sherlock stood silently at John’s side—John suspected that was all he could manage at the moment. “C’mon then,” John said, lacing his arm around Sherlock’s waist. “Let’s go hook you back up to your drip before we eat. And you will eat, yeah?” Sherlock just sniffed and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

Once they reached Sherlock’s room, the detective tottered to his bed and sat down with an exhausted sigh, while John bustled into the en suite to gather up his medical supplies. When he came back with the IV materials and rolled the stand back over to the bed, Sherlock was stretched out on top of the covers, eyes closed. John poked his shoulder gently. “Sit back up for me. We need to get your jacket off so I can hook this up.”

“Use the back of my hand,” Sherlock said, without moving or opening his eyes. “If I sit up I’m afraid I’ll…I don’t want to sit up,” he finished softly.

“I still need the jacket off,” John said reluctantly. “Otherwise we’ll have to unhook you when you undress.” His only answer was an uninformative hum. John sighed and relented.
“All right, then,” he said, a bit crossly. “But in exchange you have to eat something, so you can take
the rest of your meds.” Silence from the bed. John quickly completed hooking up the drip, then
gently tugged at his friend’s arm. “Come on, up with you. You can come back to bed as soon as
you’re done eating something.”

Those pale eyes opened slowly. “I’m not… I really don’t think I can,” Sherlock said.

John stopped, struck by the sincerity in that voice. He decided this was a time to compromise. “Can
you manage a meal replacement, then? If I prop your shoulders up with an extra pillow?” Sherlock
hated the drinks, but they had served for those times when getting additional calories was a necessity
but Sherlock couldn’t be convinced to eat. There were still a few bottles in the mini-fridge beside
Sherlock’s bed.

Sherlock made a disgusted face, but nodded slightly. “Chocolate,” he ordered. “The vanilla ones
taste like laundry detergent.” And John was quite sure that Sherlock had actually tasted laundry
detergent at some point, so he couldn’t really argue.

After giving Sherlock his other medication, John went back to the ground floor, heading for the
kitchen. He heard Mycroft, apparently still on the phone with someone, from down the hallway
leading to the study. As he entered the kitchen, he saw Anthea chatting with the cook while fiddling
with something on the cooktop. It was a surprisingly domestic scene; somehow he’d subconsciously
envisioned Mycroft and his assistant subsisting on pure energy (or, sometimes, human blood,
depending on how annoyed he was at the elder Holmes at the time).

“We’re making French toast and bacon,” Anthea said over her shoulder, “since we didn’t have
lunch, and Mrs. Mason hasn’t had a chance to go to the shops today as she didn’t think we’d be back
here for dinner. We’ll have provisions dropped by before dinner, thankfully.”

“Don’t worry on my account,” John said. “This’ll suit me just fine.” He looked around the kitchen.
“Anything I can do to help?”

“Set the table?” she asked, pointing to an oak sideboard with her chin. As John pulled out silverware
and plates, Anthea finished up her efforts and started pulling slices of golden brown bread out of
large skillets. “And get Mycroft, if you would,” she added absently. It was stunningly informal, and
somehow quite charming. Sherlock would be horrified to hear it. Good job he wasn’t coming.

Fifteen minutes later, the three of them sat, replete and comfortable, over the remains of their meal.
By unspoken agreement, they’d deferred talking about their upcoming “game” while they ate. After
an initial inquiry about his brother’s condition, Mycroft had been almost silent, staring distractedly
into space—John presumed he was communing with his own version of Sherlock’s Mind Palace (his
“Mind Principality”, perhaps?). Anthea, though, was pleasant company—funny, in a dark sort of
way, and surprisingly warm.

As they finished up, Mycroft suddenly gave a little start and was once more “present”, in a way
identical to that of his younger brother returning from an extended stay in his mind. John found
himself smiling, and noticed Anthea’s knowing grin in return. Apparently Holmeses weren’t the only
ones who could read minds.

“For a variety of reasons, I am reluctant to undertake in-depth discussions of our situation without Sherlock’s input,” Mycroft said, as if they had been speaking for some time. John, well-accustomed to this kind of conversation, continued in the same vein.

“I’d like him to sleep until dinnertime, unless there’s a pressing reason to wake him before that. We need to give him as much recuperation time as possible, especially if he’s going to have to be active tomorrow in whatever we’ll be dealing with,” John said, concentrating on not sounding confrontational. Obviously, Mycroft had no motive for overriding John’s recommendations, but if there was something John was missing, he wanted to know about it.

“That seems reasonable, given that there’s very little planning we can do until Moran lays out the parameters of our task,” Mycroft said. “However—I presume you recognized this source as well?” He raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

“Yeah. Another famous movie—early 80s, I think. I saw it when I was a kid, I know,” John began. “War Games. I don’t remember all the details—I was, I dunno, 12 or 13? But I do recall the basics. A teenager in America manages to hack into one of the defence computer systems, and the system doesn’t understand the difference between simulations and real-world scenarios. So the computer almost starts World War Three. Don’t remember how it ends, though,” John admitted.

Mycroft looked at Anthea, who nodded and began typing briskly on her ever-present phone.

“Anthea will pull up a precis for us, and a copy of the script, both of which I will read through while we wait for my brother to awaken. She will send copies to you and to Sherlock as well, though I doubt he will bother to read them.” The Great Man gave one of his rare, true smiles. “He has apparently come to look on you as his repository of trivia, as well as, occasionally, his conscience.”

John grinned in response. “That’s me. Jiminy Cricket.” And was very pleased at the crack of laughter that drew from Mycroft.

By 7 that evening, John had read through both documents, and was all too aware of the numerous dangerous and terrifying ways Moran could spin this. None of the other scenarios had been identical to their sources, and clearly that would also be the case here. But since this was the “big” game, the stakes were presumably of the highest, so true nuclear war didn’t seem to be off the table. But if that was the case, where did the Ebola outbreaks fit in?

When Mrs. Mason let them know that dinner was almost ready, John went and roused Sherlock, though not without a certain amount of difficulty. The younger man groaned, whinged, covered his head with the duvet, and generally channeled his inner toddler until John pointed out that, if Sherlock didn’t get up, all decisions on their tactics for tomorrow would be made by Mycroft. That got him out of the bed, rolling his IV stand resentfully, in very short order.

As the two entered the kitchen, Mrs. Mason was laying out a relatively-modest dinner in large serving platters and bowls; clearly this was going to be a “family style” affair in which they served themselves. John would have preferred that even without the need for security. The older woman, a rather more-reserved version of Mrs. Hudson, sternly advised Mycroft to make sure he ate more than
a salad tonight (which brought a faint flush to his cheeks—Sherlock, damn him, was delighted), then gathered her things and left for the night.

Mycroft allowed everyone a few minutes to fix plates and settle in—beef stew, glazed apples and salad, with a cherry crumble to follow; good, simple choices and things Sherlock would usually eat, bar the salad—then pulled his laptop off the sideboard and cleared his throat. “Let’s get started, shall we?” he intoned, while Sherlock rolled his eyes.

“John was kind enough to identify the source for this final game,” he said, for Sherlock’s benefit. “Another well-known film, this one revolving around a hacker’s interactions with a defence computer which mistakes simulation for reality.” John quietly pulled up his copy of the precis on his phone and handed it to Sherlock—of course the detective couldn’t be arsed to open the files on his own.

“As John pointed out, none of the previous scenarios were identical to their source versions, though they were all recognizable,” Mycroft continued. “It is reasonable to assume that the same will be the case in this last game, if only because network security for servers of this type has been dramatically strengthened in the past 30 years.” Sherlock looked skeptical but stayed silent.

Anthea picked up the thread at that point. “We can make some reasonable assumptions of what the game will not entail.” She held up her hand and ticked off items on her fingers. “First, it is extremely unlikely it will involve the Americans in any way. The distance is too great, and Moriarty’s American involvement was never more than superficial at best, and largely secondhand. Second, hacking, at least on our part, will probably not be a requirement. Moran knows, because Moriarty did, that none of us claim to be more than reasonably competent with computers.”


“Third, the game will not occur here. We can expect to leave London, and, most likely, the UK. There’s a reason the Ebola incidents occurred in Eastern Europe, though we have no real data yet on what that reason is. And finally, we will not be able to rely on outside help; the game has clearly been structured to allow only those participants who ‘qualified’. We can most likely anticipate some form of severe threat against enlisting other ‘players’ or asking for assistance.” As she finished, she looked back at Mycroft and folded her hands in her lap.

“Well reasoned, my dear,” he said. “Now let’s address what likely will be included. You have touched briefly on parts of this, but I think it wise to summarize.” John expected a Powerpoint presentation to pop up on the back wall. Sherlock, surprisingly, was paying full attention to his brother; John found it unsettling to watch.

“First, as Anthea has pointed out, we will almost certainly be heading to Eastern Europe—if I had to wager, I would place my money on the Exclusion Zone. That being the case, I have set preliminary orders in place for transportation and supplies to be ready for use within the next 12 hours. Included in those preparations are five caches in secure spots in those countries, given that we don’t yet know what we will be permitted to bring with us. These have been put together under the cloak of supporting existing rescue operations in the Exclusion Zone—I feel confident we will be able to access them safely if needed.”

Sherlock gave an amused huff. “You are actually anticipating physical activity on your own part? I must make sure the camera on my mobile is working properly.”

“I’ll have you remember who gave you your initial field training,” Mycroft sniffed.

“And how many years ago was that, exactly?” his brother purred. Mycroft gave a not-smile and went
“Second, our access to transport, and indeed the need for it, is unclear. I have arranged for armoured vehicles in several different locations in the Zone; while one would hope we will be able to arrange travel direct from the UK as usual, I don’t want to rely on Moran’s sense of fair play. In the unlikely event that he does allow that, we will load one of my security vehicles on an MI6 transport and fly to a landing field near our required destination.”

Sherlock gave a not-very-subtle snort of derision. “I doubt ‘fair play’ is ever going to enter this equation. And I’m not sure if I agree with your conclusion that the game will definitely occur in Eastern Europe. Likely, I’ll grant; but wouldn’t it be wise to discreetly arrange for resources to be available elsewhere?”

Mycroft gave his brother a “teach your grandmother to suck eggs” look. “Tentative plans have been made for other areas, including America, however unlikely. In this summary, I was focusing on our most-likely requirements. Feel free to get with Anthea for the more exhaustive list if you wish.” Sherlock waved a hand dismissively and subsided.

“Finally, I strongly suspect that Moran will insist on a communications blackout—it’s clear he will not allow us to enlist other resources. With that in mind, I have secured small, localized transmitters, much like updated walkie-talkies, that we will be able to use amongst ourselves. They have a range of roughly 2 miles, give or take. The advantage of these units is that they can’t be picked up on other listening systems; while the signal can be perceived, the sound itself is impenetrably scrambled. We will not be able to use them to contact anyone who doesn’t hold a unit—that is, they can’t contact conventional radio or other electronic media—but we will at least be able to talk to all members of the team safely. The units will be waiting for us when we reach the office in the morning.”


Sherlock spoke first. “Do the caches contain any form of decontamination materials, or protective gear against infectious environments? We know the Ebola outbreaks are directly related to all of this; I would prefer that none of us become infected, especially given that I am unaware of any effective treatments, especially for this particular variant.” John nodded; he’d been thinking of something similar, though he hadn’t thought of adding materials to the caches.

Anthea fielded that one. “The caches each contain a broad range of medical materials, including hazmat clothing and gear. And our laboratories are using DNA sequencing and other exploratory methods on the virus; we hope to have preliminary results soon on its source and potential treatment. The first steps have been in identifying where the engineered version differs from the wild infection type—we know the differences are considerable— and where it’s the same. It’s unlikely those conclusions will be available by the time the game begins, but we have created a hopefully secure drop for data that we may be able to access. I will send the access information to everyone shortly; it should be memorized before we leave.” Unspoken but implied was the fact that any one of them might end up the ‘last man standing’; they all needed to know the critical information.

“What progress has been made on identifying your internal leak?” Sherlock asked next. “In the short run, the identity of the traitor may be moot, but I would prefer not to find ourselves successfully completing the game only to encounter an assassination squad composed of our own people as we reach the finale.”

Mycroft nodded. “Indeed. Very discreet investigations are underway; I managed to get a private message directly to Lady Smallwood, who will be leading the hunt from well behind the scenes. I do not expect an immediate resolution; several test scenarios must be developed and run before we can expect results. But it will happen. We cannot guarantee, however, that it will happen in time to
prevent further meddling in our situation.” He looked mildly troubled, which, in John’s experience, usually meant some sort of natural disaster or small war was imminent.

John had his own question, one he’d been chewing on for several hours now. “Can we manage to get a secure message to Mary? I know it’s not safe to call her, but I don’t want her wondering where I am. She’ll be fine with minimal detail, but I’d prefer not to leave the country without her knowing.”

Mycroft nodded again. “I’m certain that can be arranged. If you’ll let Anthea know the text, she can take care of it for you.” He took another look around the table. “If there’s nothing else, I believe we’re done here, until the morning.”

By unspoken consent, Sherlock and John migrated to the media room after dinner. Anthea had gone home, presumably (not before telling Sherlock sternly to take better care of himself—clearly there was history between the two of them. John resolved to corner Sherlock at some point and winnow the details out of him). John searched through the video offerings and landed on an old episode of Dr. Who—Sherlock enjoyed “critiquing” the show, which was always entertaining to hear. After the third jaw-cracking yawn, though, John hectored his friend back to his bed, IV stand and all.

When John came back down the hall to the public rooms, he was surprised to see Mycroft standing in the doorway of his study, clearly waiting for him. John raised his eyebrows enquiringly, and Mycroft politely ushered him into his inner sanctum, a bastion of old wood, leather furniture and terrifying disclosures.

“How is my brother, John?” Mycroft asked, as soon as John was seated in one of the comfortable chairs.

“Depends on what you’re talking about,” John answered bluntly. “Is he getting better? Yes, though slower than I’d like. Is he ready to take on a physically-active role in this upcoming mission? Almost certainly not.”

Mycroft dropped into his own chair, roughly—clearly the bureaucrat was feeling the strain of the past few days much more than his public persona would reveal. “Do we have any options? Anything that might improve his condition more quickly?” That was the concerned older brother speaking, not the British Government.

John shook his head. “Time, food and rest,” he said simply. “But you knew that before you asked.”

Mycroft gave him a rueful smile. “Knowing everything does not always mean that one wants to hear it confirmed. There have been a number of times in Sherlock’s life when I would have preferred a truly convincing lie, I think.” The older man leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes briefly.

John found himself in the peculiar position of wanting to comfort an entirely different Holmes than usual. “If it helps at all, he’s in no imminent danger, medically speaking. There have been a number of times in Sherlock’s life when I would have preferred a truly convincing lie, I think.” The older man leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes briefly.

John found himself in the peculiar position of wanting to comfort an entirely different Holmes than usual. “If it helps at all, he’s in no imminent danger, medically speaking. And if we can manage to keep him from a complete collapse through over-extending himself, I think he’ll be fine in the short run. We just need to keep his limitations in mind—he certainly won’t.”

Mycroft snorted. “He doesn’t admit such things exist, John. One of the many reasons why my parents were convinced he would never make it to adulthood.”
“That assumes he is one,” John said slyly, and Mycroft gave an appreciative smirk.

Chapter End Notes

How about that? NOT a cliff-hanger!
Acute Infection - Part One

Chapter Summary

The details of the Big Bad become clear. It's every bit as bad as everyone thought.

Chapter Notes

Apologies, my dears--I'm running woefully later than my norm for posting this. The dual stress of dealing with my son's surgery recovery and the holidays. We should be back to normal for next chapter (at least I hope so!)

Ironically, of all of them, John suspected that Sherlock was the only one who actually slept that night. John certainly didn’t, and he heard movement downstairs—Mycroft and possibly Anthea— for many hours after he finally retired to his own room to toss and turn in privacy. When he checked on Sherlock last, though, the detective was still lying in exactly the same position he’d left him in hours earlier, breathing evenly and deeply. John pulled up the duvet, switched off the lamp and left him to his exhausted peace.

John must have dropped off at some point; the next thing he knew, early morning light was shining in his eyes and he could smell breakfast wafting up from below. When he got downstairs, he wasn’t surprised to see that he was the last arrival; Mycroft and Anthea were deeply engrossed in evaluation of a report on her tablet, and Sherlock was daintily nibbling at tea and toast while scanning his phone. John sighed; at least none of them were dressed to leave yet. It was just past half-six; they had roughly four hours before the next “meeting” with Moran.

Without looking up, Anthea waved a hand in the direction of the oven. “Cinnamon buns and sausages in the warming drawer.” John wandered in that direction, picking up a plate.

Sherlock was still dressed in yesterday’s crumpled clothes. He looked better rested, if a bit brittle; John noted, with not an ounce of surprise, that he had already disconnected himself from his IV drip. John put an extra two sausages on his plate and dropped them onto Sherlock’s as he passed; the younger man frowned, but picked one up and ate it nonetheless.

John chewed and swallowed quietly for a few minutes. When it became clear no one was going to initiate conversation, though, he finally lost patience. “Right, then. What’s the plan? I mean, I understand about all of the contingencies you’ve put in place, Mycroft. But what exactly are we likely to have to do?”

Sherlock answered before his brother could. “We don’t know. And you may recall, I don’t like not knowing.” He gave a sour imitation of a smile.

Mycroft matched him. “Nor do I,” he said. “We can speculate as much as we’d like, but in the end, we will only be as successful as our reading of Moran allows us to be. Neither Sherlock nor I have ever physically met the man, though we have tracked his movements extensively, and Sherlock certainly saw him at a slight distance in their encounter. We can access our profile, completed when
Sherlock began the operation of dismantling Moran’s portion of the Moriarty empire. But beyond that… We are currently reviewing his military records,” he continued, waving his hand absently at Anthea’s tablet. “I would appreciate your input on that, John—it is possible that you will pick up some nuance that we missed.”

Well, that was surprisingly flattering. John took the tablet and began to page methodically through the entries. Sherlock got up and came to look over John’s shoulder, but stayed quiet while John read.

After reading through the entire file, flipping back and forth several times to confirm what he’d read, John looked up to see three identical, razor-sharp expressions of interest on the faces of his audience. Sherlock, of course, lost patience first.

“What did you see?” the detective demanded. “Clearly something of importance. Something my brother missed.” That last was added with just the tiniest bit of a smirk—he never could resist the chance to poke the bear where Mycroft was concerned.

John gave a bit of thought to how to phrase this. “I don’t know how important it is, exactly—it’s certainly not surprising based on what we already know of him. But the one thing you probably didn’t pick up on, given that you haven’t dealt with military records as much as I have, is that his superiors were afraid of him.”

Mycroft’s eyebrows rose fractionally. “Do tell,” he murmured.

“Yeah, well, it’s not something that would ever be entered in plain language, at least not until after some sort of serious action had been taken,” John began. “But there are several red flags here. Incidents of suspected violence against civilians, vague suspicions of abuse of young enlistees—one of it is fleshed out, and under normal circumstances, it wouldn’t be entered into the record at all unless substantiating evidence could be included and punitive action taken. But you’ll notice that, in each case, Moran was transferred shortly thereafter.”

Sherlock gave a little “oh” of enlightenment. “They were giving the next commanding officer a warning,” he breathed.

John nodded. “As much as they could.” He held up the tablet. “And there are other indications that something shady was going on—my best guess would be that Moran had influential backers within the Army, probably Moriarty’s people.” He flicked through pages until he reached the important file. “Here’s the important one. He was referred for a psych evaluation after a suspected ‘friendly fire’ event—a sniper shot that happened to hit his company commander instead of the intended target thirty feet away. But…,” and here John held up the tablet and flipped through each file, “…if the evaluation ever took place, it’s not attached—and it would be, if it had been completed—and there’s no further mention of it, or the incident, at any time.” He looked at Mycroft to see if he understood the implications of that.

The Great Man did, of course. “And presumably, unless the psychological profile had shown demonstrable mental impairment, there would have been criminal charges filed and severe disciplinary action. But none of that occurred either. The commander survived—I did review that particular report and trace through the subsequent events—but retired from service shortly thereafter and raised no official protests about Moran’s release from culpability.” He paused. “In retrospect, that, in and of itself, was suspicious.”

John nodded. “There’s more. He kept getting shifted from one command to another, with no disciplinary comments other than the ones we’ve mentioned. But then, in 2008, he gets what is clearly a minor foot injury—’hit by a ricochet’, minor surgery—but is given a medical discharge with full pension. There are two things about that that are suspicious: first, that they wouldn’t make every
effort to retain one of the top-rated snipers in the world; and second, that he would be given the medical discharge for an injury that was most likely self-inflicted.” Mycroft lifted his brows enquiringly, and Sherlock jumped in, with perceptible smugness.

“It’s a common enough thing in combat, used as long as there have been weapons and wars, and soldiers who no longer want to participate. Give yourself a minor injury to an extremity, often with your own weapon, and voila! You’re invalided out and go safely home.”

“Well, yeah,” John interjected. “But the thing is, from the description, this wound was almost certainly from his service revolver, and the medics knew it, at least from reading between the lines on the medical report. But no one said anything formally.”

Anthea, who to this point had been a silent audience, joined the conversation. “All of this is informative, certainly—tells us that he has, or had, friends in high places in the military, which is something to keep in mind given that the Exclusion Zone will have a high military presence. But, in the end, it really doesn’t tell us anything actionable about Moran, does it? We already knew he was a killer; we knew he was likely a psychopath; we knew that he had picked up the threads of Moriarty’s operations, so he presumably also retained influential players in that arena. Knowing that his military superiors recognized the first two is confirmation of our suspicions, but nothing more.”

“Largely true,” Mycroft intoned, while Sherlock huffed in irritation. “In the end, though, it means that we can’t afford to rely on military aid if our expedition takes us personally into the Zone, given that some senior personnel may have been compromised by Moriarty’s people. A negative value, perhaps, but a value nonetheless.” He turned an only-slightly-condescending smile on John.

“Ta, I guess,” John muttered.

After another hour or so of obsessive evaluation and discussion, the group went off to dress for their confrontation. John wasn’t surprised to find winter camo gear waiting on his bed, including boots, a hooded coat, goggles and gloves. He was, however, surprised when Sherlock wandered in shortly thereafter, already completely dressed in his new outfit (well, the jumper, trousers and boots, at least) without protest. The younger man looked glacially pale, in large measure due to the white/grey tones of the outfit. But he also seemed to be, well, preening just a bit, with a tiny little strut to his step.

“Like that look, do you?” John snickered.

“Shut up,” Sherlock said, spots of pink appearing atop those sharp cheekbones. “I needed your help with the boots. I remembered your saying once that the conventional lacing method wasn’t optimal for actual use.”

John grinned and let the teasing tone drop from his voice. “Yeah, I did. Watch me do mine and you can copy me.”

It was odd, lacing up combat boots again, even those so unlike his desert boots. His hands fell instinctively into the right motions without his brain getting involved in the process. Sherlock watched closely, then imitated his actions perfectly on the first attempt. Of course.

“I’m assuming we’re not trying to bring along firearms?” John ventured, when Sherlock stayed silent just a little too long.
“They’re in the vehicle. The odds that Moran will let us keep them are vanishingly small,” the detective replied. He seemed to be considering something, before finally speaking again. He looked directly at John. “You realize Moran doesn’t intend for us to succeed, and will rig the deck as needed to see that we fail, most likely painfully?” he asked abruptly.

“Yes and no,” John said. He’d been thinking about just this issue, actually. “I mean, yeah, he wants us dead, certainly. But he also wants something—something he presumably can’t, or won’t, get by himself. To me, the spookiest part is that he wants your brother along for the ride. Why? I mean, seems like that would be very risky—you’ve said it yourself, your brother is ‘the most dangerous man I’ve ever met’. Even without help, I’d lay your brother’s ability to put something over on Moran up against anyone’s, including you.” That earned him an offended glare from Sherlock, but he continued. “So, thinking about it from a military point of view, apparently Mycroft’s an asset he can’t afford to do without, despite the risk.”

Sherlock shot him a look of mild surprise—a little insulting, but John let it pass without comment. “An excellent point, actually, though I’m sure Mycroft has already considered that aspect. I have my suspicions about the answer, but I’ll wait to see what Moran proposes. I’m quite sure my own involvement will involve puzzles in some form. Real-world versions, most likely—none of the ersatz scenarios of yesterday.”

John suddenly had an inkling of what Sherlock was here to say. “Are you trying to point out that I have no real function in this expedition?” he asked, carefully avoiding any hint of accusation in his tone. Sherlock colored and blinked. “I wouldn’t…that is to say…there is no reason to put yourself at risk,” the detective finally blurted, while staring at his own fidgeting hands.

John felt a rush of affection for the self-styled ‘sociopath’, currently pleating the fabric of his jumper nervously between his fingers. “There’s every reason,” John said simply. “Of all of us, I’m the only soldier. I know the rest of you have ‘field experience’, whatever that means, and I know you’re all dangerous in your own special ways. But Moran is ex-military, Sherlock. That means he thinks like me, in some ways—the non-psychotic ways, at least. That’s an advantage we can’t afford to give up.” He reached over and gently punched Sherlock’s wiry arm. “Plus the fact that I am never letting you go off on your own like this again. Didn’t work out well for either of us last time, did it?”

Sherlock considered that, then relaxed into a slight smile. “No, I suppose it didn’t,” he said slowly. Then he looked up at John through his lashes. “But you have to promise me not to get yourself killed.”

“Done,” John laughed. “If you’ll promise the same.”

By half-nine, they were all dressed and assembled in the garage. A Land Rover was waiting for them, packed with duffel bags and mysterious bundles of equipment. John had added his own small rucksack to his gear, and stuffed Sherlock’s medication, a first-aid kit and a variety of nonperishable food items in it. None of them necessarily believed that Moran would let them take their chosen equipment along, but if need be, John could conceal the rucksack under his hooded coat.

Seeing Mycroft dressed in camo was a revelation. Sherlock smirked derisively at the view. But John noted that Mycroft suited the clothing well; he looked comfortable, fit and capable, with none of the awkwardness usually found in civilian observers who only wore such gear when required to do so.
Removed from his typical uniform of a three-piece suit, the older man’s physical resemblance to Sherlock was much stronger. He was almost as thin as his brother, with the same long legs and narrow profile. Sherlock’s shoulders were broader, but Mycroft was perhaps an inch taller—all in all, quite a match for each other.

Anthea, on the other hand, looked…like Angelina Jolie in that video game movie. Sherlock caught John looking and grinned; Anthea caught him at it and raised a sardonic eyebrow. “Grow up,” she mouthed silently. “Why?” Sherlock mouthed back, adding a head-toss for emphasis.

Mycroft sniffed and pointed at the car. “Children, please,” he said, and climbed disdainfully into the seat next to the driver.

When they reached Mycroft’s command center (which John privately thought of as the “Batcave”), it was surprisingly empty—no more than four other people visible in the outer control room. None of them so much as blinked at seeing their usually suit-clad leader in combat gear, lending credence to John’s private belief that Mycroft did rather more field work than his little brother believed.

Anthea apparently read John’s expression. “We have a skeleton staff on-site until further notice. It’s unwise to expose a broader audience to the fact of Moran’s infiltration of this facility. Identification of the leak is in process, but we want to be very sure we’ve traced all weaknesses back to the source before acting,” she murmured.

John nodded. “Hopefully that might lead us to intel on Moran’s location as well,” he added quietly.

“Unlikely,” Sherlock interjected. “The feed is almost certainly routed automatically through an infinite number of servers, many of which are unaware of a hidden intrusion through their systems.”

Mycroft nodded. “Our IT group are waiting for a proper opening. The information will come, but likely not in time to do us any immediate good. Moran is certainly aware of our electronic ‘pursuit’, and will have taken appropriate measures to obscure the trail.”

“Translation: the question is who has the better hackers, us or Moran. My money is on Moran,” Sherlock added with a sneer.

Walking into the “secure” conference, John was surprised to see the video screen already flickering. Motion sensors, apparently—that was a hell of a “back door” Moran had found. As Anthea brought up the rear and closed the door, the screen focused and showed Moran-as-Moriarty, smirking over a cup of tea.

“Good morning, gents and lady,” the Moriarty avatar crooned with Moran’s voice. “And don’t you all look nice in your little outfits. I’ll give you points—the choice of gear is probably wise, and I’ll
even let you keep it—though not much else. So all the little toys stashed in the Rover are verboten, I’m afraid.” Yet another subtle little dig to let them know Moran was aware of everything they did, or so it seemed.

“Will personal items be acceptable?” Mycroft asked politely, as if discussing Sunday dinner plans.

“Depends,” Moran said lazily. “Personal weapons—eh, probably not. Toothbrushes, eyedrops, hair curlers for Sherly—sure, why not? If I were you I’d take a change or two of underwear as well. Just sayin’.”

“Canes?” Mycroft continued, as if Moran hadn’t spoken. “Dr. Watson has a pre-existing injury to his leg which periodically causes him to limp heavily, especially under stress. And I recently had minor knee surgery.” The last was a lie, going by Sherlock’s momentary glint of suspicion and surprise. And John couldn’t remember the last time his own limp was an issue—certainly before Sherlock’s return, anyway.

“Yeah, OK,” Moran sighed. “Are we done now? Because I’m starting to get really bored, and I’ve noticed lately that my being bored means that I’m tempted to screw with the parameters of things. Probably not optimal for your mission, ya know?”

“By all means,” Mycroft purred. “We are at your disposal.”

“Yes, you are, aren’t you?” Moran chortled, enormously pleased with himself. “And your dislike of that is just the cherry on top, truly it is.” He busied himself briefly with something not visible on the screen. When he finished, six small windows popped up around the edges, all showing bulky concrete structures in various snowy fields.

“So, take a look,” Moran said, watching Sherlock and Mycroft both staring avidly at the screens as if trying to suck in more information by osmosis. “These are the locations of your little tasks. For each location, there’s a different pair of puzzles to solve. In this case, though, the puzzles aren’t something I created—they were in place for at least the past five years, and in some cases more than twenty. And these puzzles all have a lovely little payoff for me, and for you. Though I suppose yours is more of a negative—preventing something ‘bad’, as opposed to securing something ‘good’. I don’t get involved in those little moral judgments myself. Never quite understood the concept of ‘morals’ in general, actually,” he added philosophically.

“No surprise there,” John muttered quietly.

“Never claimed otherwise,” Moran said. “But then, I’m not the one who shot an unarmed, elderly man, am I?”

“An unarmed, elderly serial killer,” Sherlock added calmly. “The details are always relevant.” He paused, then walked up to stand directly in front of the screen. “But like you, I’m now becoming bored. So, let’s cut to the chase, shall we, and dispense with all of this ludicrous ‘super villain’ posturing. What do you want us to do, and where do we have to go to do it?”

There was a long, pregnant pause, while Mycroft looked annoyed and Moran looked murderous.

Finally, though, Moran’s face relaxed into a resigned grin. “You always were an annoying little bastard,” he observed. “Jim really enjoyed that about you, Sherl. Me, not so much. But in this case I suppose you’re right—time is a bit of an issue, and I’m tired of faffing about.”

He manipulated something off-screen again, and the views of the concrete bunkers was replaced by a single inset screen showing documents in Cyrillic.
“I’ve just forwarded copies of these documents to Big Brother’s phone,” the sniper began. “You’ll need those to solve the puzzles, as well as the accompanying info that shows you how to access the locations. All of them, as I’m sure you’ve guessed, are in the newly-created Exclusion Zones.” He bestowed a warm grin on Mycroft. “And thank you so much for those, by the way—that’s made everything soooo much easier.” Mycroft gave an ice-cold not-smile but stayed silent.

“As I suspect Big Brother, at least, already knows, these are former nuclear stations of the former USSR. They’ve been taken over by the host countries, who truthfully don’t have a whole lot of interest in them. According to official records, the sites were decommissioned at least 20 years ago, and solidly locked.” Moran’s avatar looked at Mycroft expectantly. The Great Man did not disappoint.

“One can only presume the official records are wrong,” Mycroft said primly. “And I’m sure you are about to tell us why and how.”

The Moran avatar bobbed its head happily. “Yup. And it’s one of my favorite kind of stories. See, there are multiple layers here. First, the Russians tried to hedge their bets and hide nuclear material in their former satellite countries for later nefarious use. Then, the leaders of those satellite countries found out, and managed to secret some of it away from the Russians, who were understandably too busy imploding to do anything about it. And finally, Jim came along and got his own little Irish fingers in the mix. So, bottom line, we have six sites, in six different countries, that no one has been able to break, because each prior thief added their own layer of protection and/or encryption, and every bloody soul who knew the codes, any of them, is now stone cold dead. We don’t even know for certain what’s inside, but based on the ones Jim opened, this is prime—warheads, radioactive material, the works. Granted, the tech is so outdated it’s useless, but the basics are choice. And I have buyers just panting for the opportunity. I mean, one of the last caches Jim sold paid for our world-wide operations for three months, you know?” He beamed.

“You can’t possibly believe we will give you nuclear material,” John said.

“Well, here’s the thing,” Moran smirked. “You remember my little demonstrations with the security offices? The ones where a whole lot of people became abruptly and messily dead? We happen to have more of that—a lot more, placed in roughly 30 different locations throughout Europe. Even I don’t know all the locations—we had subcontractors handle the placement, and some of them, sadly, weren’t as careful in contamination procedures as one would prefer. Good help is so hard to find these days, you know? But each placement has a dispersal unit linked to a transceiver, and that transceiver is linked to this handy little randomizer. I hit a button, the randomizer spins, and there you go, dead people. So I’m presuming you’d prefer to avoid that in general, and the only way that happens is if you do what I tell you to. You have to understand, I really don’t give a shit if the worst happens. I just want what I want.” He smiled, deceptively benign. When the silence stretched a little too long, he leaned into the screen a bit. “I can always give you a demonstration if you’d prefer,” he purred.

“Enough,” Sherlock snapped. “Why us? Or more specifically, why both of us?” Since clearly neither John nor Anthea were critical to the process.

The Moriarty avatar rolled its eyes. “A little too disingenuous, Sherly. I wouldn’t have thought you were shy about your capabilities. You are perhaps the greatest recognizer of patterns in the world today—you see relations between things no one else does. And that’s going to be important when you’re looking at multiple overlays of encryption—you need to be able to see which layer belonged to which group, so that your brother, also well-known as the premiere active cryptologist of our age, knows what assumptions to use in his calculations. Either of you will not succeed without the other; believe me, we’ve tried, with people almost as capable as one or the other of you separately. And I’m
going to assume here that you each know how the other thinks.” He looked from one brother to the other. “Even if you don’t like each other much.”

The avatar looked down again, fiddling with something unseen. “So that’s the scenario. You will go to each of these locations, in tandem with my transport and security people. You will find out how to open each installation and assist in the identification of what’s included once you’ve opened them. You will decrypt any necessary operational codes and transmit them. And you will do all of this within the next 6 days.”

“And then the flip side—never let it be said that I didn’t offer my tools value for their services. For each installation you decode and open, I’ll disable 5 of my virus locations. I can’t pass on the specific locations beyond the city since I don’t know all of them, but I won’t try to stop your people from disabling them thereafter. Having said that, though—for any infraction of the terms of our agreement, including any attempt to pass on information outside of this room, I will set one off, instantly. The ‘terms’ include keeping in contact via my people at regular intervals; failure to report on a regular timetable will be presumptive of non-compliance.”

“So, to summarize—you fail, people die. You interfere, people die. You piss me off enough for any reason—ah, hell, I think you catch my drift.”

The Moriarty avatar on the screen looked up with a wide grin. “Any questions from the class?”
Acute Infection - Part Two

Chapter Summary

The Great Adventure begins. Their transport arrangements are first-rate, but they discover that their traveling companion leaves much to be desired.

Chapter Notes

Running a day or so late this time--still trying to process S4 so far (and trying not to hate John. That beating scene--my God). Clearly this story is going to be even more AU than I realized.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Any questions from the class?”

Mycroft took up the gauntlet. “What will be considered ‘success’ in this endeavor? If we open a facility vault and discover it empty, will there be a penalty?”


Anthea, surprisingly, jumped in at that point. “What contingencies are in place if we are unable to proceed, or unable to contact you, for reasons beyond our control?” A very good question, that—they were travelling into a perilous area, in the dead of winter, with limited resources. Some form of delay was almost unavoidable.

“Depends,” Moran drawled.

“On?” Anthea responded, still icily polite.

“On whether you can get some sort of message to me, or my people, within a very short time of discovering whatever your impediment is. I make no guarantees. If you have a flat tire in my vehicle, that’s probably not an issue—my driver will confirm. If Sherly has another dramatic swoon, tough shit. Pick him up and shove him in the car, and get on with it.”

Sherlock started to respond before Mycroft’s right hand, out of Moran’s view, reached over and worked in the small of his back. He scowled, but subsided. Moran saw the look, though, and sighed.

“Look, I’m the bad guy—I talk, you hop to it. Spare me the histrionics. You have the ability to do this, and I want it done. End of.” The Moriarty avatar turned away to look at someone, or something, off-screen before turning back.

“Now. There is a vehicle waiting for you at an address I have just texted to Big Brother. You will take public transportation to get there—no private cars. You may take your winter gear and one small
bag of other essential materials, but no weapons. Big Brother can keep his phone since that will be my primary contact forum when necessary, but no one else, and no other electronics of any kind. My driver will check each bag’s contents and dump anything I wouldn’t approve of. You can include the damn canes, but nothing else. The driver will let you know the required checkpoints as you go—for the time being he’ll be the conduit. He’ll be taking the plane with you—and yes, it’s my plane, or technically Jim’s plane—and there’ll be another truck waiting at your destination.”

The avatar looked at something off-screen, then faced them again with a sardonic nod. “So, that’s it, then. You have twenty minutes to get to the car. Any last words?”

Anthea, speaking to no one in particular, threw “I’ll get our coats” over her shoulder and strode out. Sherlock, unable to resist one last chance to get in a dig, stepped up. “Once we’ve opened all of the vaults, I hope you realize that our next mission will be you. A bit of an anti-climax, I expect—you’re only an ersatz ‘Jim’ after all, so I don’t expect it to present much of a challenge. Did he set up this sequence ahead of time, or did he explain it to you in painful detail before he met me on the roof? Were there diagrams and flash cards? Let’s face it, this is well above your typical simian strong-arm tactics, so I’m sure Jim would have had heavy going walking you through it.” He raised his eyebrows in a blatantly obvious sham of polite inquiry.

The Moriarty face congealed in poorly-disguised fury. “Well, Sherly, the way I see it, those ‘simian’ tactics helped me rebuild Jim’s empire while you were giving up two years of your life to destroy it. I count that as a win.” The avatar leaned forward and glared directly at Sherlock. “But the one thing you have always been exceptionally bad at is doing what you’re told, and in this situation, that’s going to have penalties. So you, sweetheart, take nothing but the clothes on your back. If you want so much as a toothbrush, you’re going to have to ‘liberate’ it yourself. We won’t even go into needing clean pants.” The avatar sneered, then looked back at Mycroft and John. “Any further questions? Keeping in mind that your allotted travel time started five minutes ago?” Mycroft shook his head in an imperious manner; John managed to resist the urge to make a rude hand gesture, but it was a near thing. Going by Sherlock’s smirk, he had once again read John’s mind.

As Anthea hustled back in with her arms full of parkas, Moran nodded. “All right. Our next contact will be in six hours. Ciao, baby.” And the screen went blank.

John sidled over to Sherlock. “Probably not your best move. I’m not letting you borrow any of my clean pants,” he said. “Worth it. I’ll just steal Mycroft’s,” Sherlock added airily. Mycroft rolled his eyes and nodded towards the door, while Anthea passed out parkas.

As they left the conference room, Anthea pointed them towards a nearby table laden with the two canes (why two?) and three rucksacks, one of which was the small one John had brought with him, though it now looked fuller than it had originally. “I added basic toiletry and clothing items to yours,” Anthea piped up. “I presumed you’d wish to use your own bag rather than one of our pre-packed one.” She cast a quelling look at Sherlock. “And I put an extra toothbrush in mine. If you behave yourself, you can have it.”

As they picked up their rucksacks, John expected them to all have a de-briefing of sorts once outside, but it clearly became evident that wasn’t going to happen, at least not yet. Mycroft picked up on his hesitation, speaking without slowing their walk towards the exit. “Not a luxury we can afford right now. Our destination is 11 minutes away under optimal traffic conditions, which are not guaranteed. I don’t wish to test Moran’s determination to enforce his protocols this early in the game.”

As they stepped out onto the pavement, Sherlock walked briskly to the kerb and gave what John thought of as his Magic Cab-Summoning Wave. Predictably enough, a black vehicle slowed and pulled over. But out of the corner of his eye, John saw Anthea waving down a second cab. Sherlock
stuck his head into ‘his’ cab, snapped “Never mind” and slammed the door, then stalked off to climb into Anthea’s candidate, while John and Mycroft followed along.

Once settled in the cab, Mycroft pulled out his phone, opened the back to remove the battery, and tossed the battery out the window while the driver barked a quick “Oi!” in protest. Anthea pulled a replacement out of her pocket which Mycroft slapped into the phone. “The phone almost certainly has some form of tracking and/or monitoring inserted by Moran’s people, and the battery is the most likely candidate. We can assume he can’t pick up voice signals any other way, given that we avoided the mock cab that stopped first; we have until we reach our destination to talk,” the Great Man explained. John reflected on the fact that he himself would have made a terrible agent; a fake cab never entered his mind, but the other three presumed it as a matter of course.

“There’s not that much to talk about,” Sherlock drawled. “Aside from the fact that we will need to come up with a safe mode of contacting our own people, but we can deal with that once we’re in the field.”

John did have one important question, while he could get a word in edgewise. “What about the communicators? How are we going to get those past Moran’s driver?”

“They’re inserted into the lining of the hoods of our parkas,” Anthea replied calmly. “That’s what I was doing when I went to get them. I’m confident Moran’s people won’t pick them up—they have no metallic parts, just a form of flexible polymer and tiny ceramic bits.”

Well, that was reassuring. Anthea being ‘confident’ was especially so—she didn’t strike John as the kind of person who used that word lightly, especially given who she was employed by.

“The only other item of business is a reminder that we can discuss nothing so long as we are contained in Moran’s vehicle, aeroplane or in the presence of his driver,” Mycroft intoned. “We must remain open for opportunities to subvert that surveillance as necessary; a certain level of improvisation will be required.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “It must have hurt for you to say that. Activity that doesn’t include written authorization—how déclassé,” the detective said smoothly.

“Not at all,” Mycroft responded calmly. “I have found it a necessary skill in cleaning up after you, for most of your life.” John grinned but managed not to laugh; Anthea wasn’t so successful. Sherlock sniffed and turned to stare stonily out the window, giving them all his offended back.

They reached their destination with two minutes to spare. Mycroft threw a handful of bills on the front seat as they climbed out and grabbed their equipment from the floorboards. They didn’t have to spend any time looking for their vehicle; within seconds of their cab’s departure, a very large man in a good suit stepped out from a nearby alleyway. “Mr. Holmes,” the man said, in an astoundingly deep voice. “This way, please.” Then he turned on his heel and strode away, without bothering to check if they were following. Sherlock looked at his brother, their eyebrows raised in identical fashion. Mycroft shrugged slightly, then followed Moran’s man, with the rest of them trailing behind.

A short distance down the alleyway stood a Land Rover—dark green, not especially new, nothing to
mark it as either special or suspicious. The driver opened the rear door and gestured for their rucksacks. “Put them here,” he rumbled. “I’ll check them over.” They deposited the three bags and the two (mysterious) canes, and the huge man took an electronic device from his pocket and passed it over the outside of each, then did the same for each of their bodies (while John waited anxiously to see whether the communicators would pass the test).

The driver nodded silently, then zipped open each bag in turn and rummaged through them. When he opened John’s, he fished out the bottles of Sherlock’s medication and looked carefully at each before tossing them out of the car to land in the gutter. When John huffed and went to pick them up, a huge paw shot out and grabbed his shoulder. “The younger Mr. Holmes takes nothing,” Moran’s thug said smugly.

John jerked his shoulder away while Sherlock made an abortive move forward, stopped by Mycroft’s firm hand on his arm. “He’s recovering from a very serious injury and illness,” John gritted between clenched teeth. “He needs those.”

“Then he should have kept his mouth shut,” the driver said with a bland smile, and slammed the back hatch closed. He then opened each car door in turn and gestured for them to enter. Sherlock, surprisingly, climbed into the front next to the driver, and proceeded to latch his pale blue, laser-like stare onto the man. The rest of them trundled into the rear seat, Anthea in the middle. After almost five minutes of Sherlock’s silent scrutiny, the driver finally broke.

“You can call me G,” he mumbled, as he put the car in gear and moved into traffic. Sherlock blinked, as if someone had pushed his “start” button, and spoke in rapid-fire fashion. “Guiseppe Arcari. Born in Sicily; family emigrated to Liverpool in the late 80s. Age 37; 6 feet, 4 inches tall, 19 stone. Three prison sentences of varying lengths and severity, beginning at age 17. Longtime abuser of anabolic steroids; compulsive body-builder and martial arts competitor. Moriarty enforcer for 4 years. Specialties are close-order combat and light torture. Addicted to online gambling and the odd spot of pornography involving underage girls.” He paused, then gave a sly grin. “And known for being terribly afraid of spiders,” he finished, with a not-very-subtle snicker.

“G” didn’t react, but John noticed a dark flush rise up the back of his neck. More disciplined than John had hoped, then. Clearly Sherlock had been both testing the man’s control (using himself as a potential punching bag, of course—never let it be said that Sherlock showed any concern for his own safety), and letting them all hear whatever information he knew about their companion. It also let them know that distracting this man would likely not be easy.

After a few uncomfortable moments, G spoke again, in an impressively calm voice. “It’s an hour’s drive to the airstrip. Then the flight itself is between two and three hours. There will be food available on the flight, but once we land we’ll be limited to provisions we carry in the vehicle.”

An uneasy silence fell over the group. Sherlock abandoned his scrutiny of G and stared moodily out the window. An unspoken conversation began between Anthea and Mycroft, and then Mycroft’s hand snaking silently between the side door and seat to touch Sherlock’s arm, out of view of the silent driver. John couldn’t see well enough to tell what message was being communicated. Shortly thereafter, though, Anthea began to shift uneasily next to John, finally emitting a small moan of discomfort. John, assuming this was his cue, put his hand on her back. “What’s wrong?” he asked, loud enough to ensure that G heard as well.

“I get car-sick if I sit in the back,” she said breathily, looking somewhat pale and sweaty. Excellent actress, Anthea—John was impressed. In the front seat, Sherlock gave a huff of annoyance and poked G’s arm. “Pull over,” he commanded. “We need to switch seats.” G gave him a baleful glare and kept driving. Anthea emitted a woebegone little hiccup and put her hand over her mouth.
“Look, mate,” John said peaceably, “unless you want to mop up the back seats, you’d better pull over and let them swap.” Anthea dropped her head limply to her knees. G sniffed in annoyance, but grudgingly pulled over on the verge and stopped. Sherlock popped briskly out and waited while Mycroft handed Anthea out as if she were made of spun glass. She tottered to the front and collapsed in the seat, making soft little noises of discomfort. G eyed her warily. “All right, then?” he finally ventured. She lifted her head carefully and gave him a wobbly smile, which the driver hesitantly returned.

In the back seat, Sherlock observed the interaction and rolled his eyes at John. Bony fingers reached out to John’s leg and tapped out a message. *I always tell her not to overplay it. She never listens.*

John grinned and tapped a response. *Can’t argue with success.*

After five minutes of silent travel, Anthea sat up and began a hesitant conversation with G. Her mien was soft, hesitant, and very, very young (startlingly so, for a woman past 30). Sherlock noticed John’s bemusement—John didn’t know this Anthea at all—and tapped another quick message. *Porn with underage girls, remember?*

John could feel his face flush, but managed not to make the sound of disgust that wanted to emerge. Sherlock gave a pragmatic shrug—every agent learned to play to their audience—before turning to his brother and beginning an unexpected, silent conversation.

That, too, was unexpected. While Anthea chattered childishly with the thug in the driver’s seat (evidently a perfect distraction), the Holmes brothers had a lengthy talk using only their hands and facial expressions. An argument, at least in part (if the occasional scowls were anything to go by). This was clearly a method they’d used often—John had a deaf mate on his pickup rugby team, and this was like watching Ken and his wife natter on about dinner plans. Completely fluent, the both of them. John tucked that one away to ask Sherlock about later.

They arrived at a private airstrip northwest of London at just past 2 pm, where a handful of small private jets were parked in front of three hangars. G pulled the car up to the farthest hangar, then hopped out and told them to wait. The driver trotted over to an exotic-looking jet sitting on the tarmac, it’s sides painted in an abstract design of swirling colours, and pulled out his phone. Moments later, the side door of the plane popped open and a set of stairs slowly folded out. G trotted back to the car, gestured them all out, and unloaded the gear from the back before heading back to the plane with it. They all dutifully trailed after, despite (on John’s part, anyway) a fair amount of misgivings.

They were greeted at the top of the steps by a smiling attendant with a French accent, who guided them to seats, then gathered up their parkas and proceeded to take drink orders. “I’ll be bringing in sandwiches and soup shortly,” she said. “We won’t take off for another 15 or 20 minutes, depending on when the clearance comes through.” John and Mycroft asked for Scotch, Anthea white wine. G, who had disappeared (presumably stowing gear away) came back clutching a beer in one hand. Sherlock settled for tea (which suited John just fine—the detective had a very low tolerance for alcohol, even without antibiotics in his system). The younger man was a bundle of anxiety, though, exhibiting many of his nervous “tells” and walking fretfully up and down the aisle, making the attendant have to work around him to bring in the food. John, when Sherlock’s back was turned,
raised his eyebrows inquiringly at Mycroft. The older man looked over at his brother and frowned, then reached into an inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a small pill container, from which he removed one small, blue capsule. On Sherlock’s next turn, Mycroft held out the capsule, and Sherlock took it, with every indication of relief. He popped it instantly into his mouth and washed it down with a mouthful of tea, before setting off on his next rotation.

John, slightly concerned, leaned back over to speak quietly with Mycroft. “Why? What was that?”

Mycroft answered, if a bit obliquely. “Have you ever flown with my brother, John?” John shook his head; they’d come close a couple of times, but in the end, Sherlock had made his flights alone since John had known him.

Mycroft nodded. “I expected as much. He would prefer you not be aware of his difficulties with flying. But to the best of my knowledge, he hasn’t travelled unmedicated on a plane in at least 25 years. My parents learned, to their sorrow, that aeroplanes and Sherlock’s sensory issues just do not mix well. He finds it both overwhelming and sickening, and as a child had a tendency to panic because of it.”

“But what did you give him?” John asked again. Surely Mycroft wouldn’t give his brother an opiate…

Mycroft gave a slightly-superior smile (actually one of his least-offensive versions). “Prescription strength antihistamines. I keep them on hand for myself, as I often struggle with allergies on overseas trips. My mother, however, viewed them as her Nuclear Option for Sherlock as a child—he is exquisitely sensitive to them, and quite a small dose will put him to sleep in very short order.”

That proved to be an accurate prediction. By the time the sandwiches and soup had been dealt with (John was very grateful it was tomato, Sherlock’s favorite), the detective was blinking heavily and nodding. The attendant, very good at her job, took the empty plates away and returned with a pillow and soft blanket, which she placed in the seat next to Sherlock without comment. Ten minutes later Sherlock’s head was back, his eyes were closed, and he had started to slide to one side. Mycroft sighed, stood, and walked over to recline the leather seat, tuck the pillow under his brother’s head, and cover him with the blanket. When they took off 5 minutes later, Sherlock never moved.

The flight was actually quite pleasant. John had never flown on a private jet before; he was pleased to find that it was pretty much like what they showed in the movies. Posh seats, lots of top-notch drinks and petite nibbles on tap, everything clean and spacious. Anthea had moved over to chat with G again; truly dedicated, that woman. That left Mycroft and John to make occasional awkward conversation with each other, in the moments when Mycroft wasn’t scrolling through his phone. G had made a point of mentioning that use of the phone was restricted to browsing, nothing else—no outbound or inbound messages of any kind were permitted, and jamming technology was in place on the plane to prevent it anyway. Mycroft rolled his eyes but stayed quiet.

After 90 minutes, John gave up trying to read the French-language magazines and dropped himself into the seat next to Mycroft. “So, sign language?” he asked, not really expecting a straight answer but bored enough to try anyway.

Mycroft was apparently also bored. “He didn’t speak until several months past his 4th birthday,” the older man said softly. “Sign was his first language, prior to that time, so he was most comfortable in it for several years thereafter. We have used it often in the intervening time, if only to keep in
practice.” He gave John a genuine smile, something John had rarely seen. “As Sherlock has been known to say, it’s proven very handy.” John rolled his eyes at the pun and smiled back.

By the time they landed, at yet another secluded, private airfield, it was nearing full dark, despite it being not yet 6 PM. John went to rouse Sherlock, who sat up and looked around groggily while they taxied to a brightly-lit hangar. Snow was piled along the runway and heaped on the roofs of the buildings; it looked bitterly cold. As soon as they stopped, G came bustling into the cabin with their gear and parkas. “We need to get going,” he rumbled. “We have to phone Mr. Moran as soon as we reach the first location, and it’s more than an hour’s drive. We couldn’t land any closer because of the Exclusion Zone.” As soon as the plane came to a halt, G pushed buttons by the door and waited while the stairs folded out, then waited for their little entourage to follow.

Parked over by the hangar was a white American Humvee with (probably spurious) UN logos on the doors—cumbersome, certainly, but presumably durable enough for use in rugged conditions. G waited impatiently while his charges and their gear were transferred to the vehicle, then fired it up and took off across the tarmac to the exit.

After twenty minutes of travel across marginal roads covered with ice and snow, they reached a checkpoint—apparently the outer edge of the Belgrade Exclusion Zone. It consisted of a tiny guard shack, lit by a generator, and a weighted wooden arm across the rutted road. As they pulled up, a tall, weedy boy of perhaps twenty stepped out, a rifle slung across his arms. He showed no inclination to let them pass, despite the United Nations markings on their (presumably stolen) vehicle.

G turned and looked to his passengers. “I know at least some of you speak Serbian. Who’s the best?”

“I am,” Sherlock said without inflection. He stepped out of the truck and walked towards the boy at the gate. The boy, though, was clearly nervous. He gestured for Sherlock to stop, then waved towards the truck and shouted something to Sherlock. Sherlock shook his head and replied; the boy moved closer, raised the rifle and repeated his demand.

Mycroft, who clearly understood, spoke to G. “He wants us all out. He insists on checking everyone’s papers.” The older man peered curiously at G. “Do we have any papers?” G didn’t reply, but motioned for everyone to step out, while pulling his own parka on.

They all walked carefully up to the checkpoint, while Sherlock continued to argue in incomprehensible Serbian and the boy continued to wave his rifle threateningly. G came forward until he stood at Sherlock’s side. “Ask him to show us his own identification,” he said. Sherlock stared momentarily, then turned and spoke again to the boy, who argued briefly but then looked down to fish around in his coat pockets.

And that’s when G stepped forward, pressed the gun he pulled out of his pocket to the boy’s forehead, and pulled the trigger.

Chapter End Notes

The "handy" joke comes from a deaf friend of mine in high school. I've waited years for the opportunity to use it!
Acute Infection: Part Three

Chapter Summary

The gang undertake their first mission objective. It goes well--until it doesn't.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sherlock gave a hoarse shout and lunged for G, who danced back out of reach as John and Mycroft jerked forward in tandem. The detective's intent to pursue, however, was stopped in its tracks when G suddenly raised his gun again and pointed it competently between John's eyes. All of the players jerked into a frozen tableau, that was finally broken by G's deep drawl.

“Aright then, folks. Let's review the lineup. We need Little Brother,” he flicked the tip of the gun briefly at Sherlock, “and we need Big Brother,” a tip to Mycroft, “but we don’t need the Little Tin Soldier one bit.” He nodded contemptuously at John, while Sherlock glared death from his eyes. “So let’s agree that you three are going to get the fuck back in the car, and Little Brother is going to haul the body into the trees and prop the gate open, and we’ll be on our way.” He surveyed his audience. “Any questions?”

After a beat, Mycroft shook his head, and he, John and Anthea slowly backed to the car. Sherlock continued to glare until G took a step towards John. The detective then jerked himself over to flip up the weighted arm and grab the dead boy under the arms. John didn’t miss the slight grimace the younger man gave as the weight of the body pulled against his chest, but Sherlock just kept moving, dragging the body off into the trees behind the shack before stalking back, arms wrapped tightly around himself. He climbed silently back into the car as G gave a pleased huff and got back behind the wheel. “Now, then,” G said with a pleased smirk as he put the car in gear, “wasn't that easy? Mr. Moran will be so pleased.”

The next half hour on the road was largely silent and toxically unpleasant. Anthea resumed her position in the front seat, but angled her body away from the driver and stared stonily out the window. Mycroft had retreated into his head, his face blank but his eyes occasionally flickering. Sherlock hunched in the opposite corner, with John squeezed in between the brothers. John noted, a little worriedly, that the younger man continued to keep his arms laced around his torso, but a quiet “All right, then?” met with no response. John made a mental note to check him over closely that evening—and if they passed a chemist at any point, John would be “liberating” antibiotics and stocking a full med kit, even if he had to have Sherlock read all the labels for him.

It was eerie, barreling across the countryside in the chilly darkness. This area was relatively remote, so they passed no true towns—some farmhouses, dark and abandoned, once or twice a tiny village, similarly empty. They were now perhaps thirty-five kilometers from the center of Belgrade. The Exclusion Zones extended across a fifty-kilometer diameter around each of the affected cities; it wasn’t possible to evacuate the whole of eastern Europe, and the thought was that eliminating major population concentrations was the only workable solution. They had seen no living things, other than
that poor boy, in their entire journey. The refugees had been dispersed to many small camps spread across the region, with no one site intended to hold more than 5,000 souls. As a physician, John was aware that even that many people, collected in one spot with limited resources, presented a risk of any number of dangerous infectious outbreaks other than the hybrid Ebola; the hope was that none would be as lethal.

G abruptly slowed the vehicle, looking carefully along the right-hand side of the road until an overgrown track, leading off through the trees, came into view. He swung onto the unmarked rutted path, avoiding the occasional fledgling tree in the middle, until they came to a stout, though rusty, gate. G stopped the truck and reached back to roughly prod Sherlock’s knee. “Get out and…” he began, just as Anthea slammed her door open and stalked towards the gate. G looked stunned momentarily before opening his own door and shouting after her. “I told him to do it,” he snapped.

“So shoot me,” she snarled, without turning around. G scowled, then jerked the door closed and sat down. Anthea shoved the gate wide (not without effort—it clearly had been little-used for some considerable time), then stomped back to the car and got in without a word. G glared at her, but drove on up the drive, which was actually in better shape than the road they’d left—fully paved, though laced here and there with weeds visible through the spotty snow cover.

After roughly ten minutes, they approached a large, snow-covered hump at the end of the track. Bright security lights surrounded it, but there was no evidence of human activity at any time in the recent past, going by the unbroken snow cover. G pulled up to within 20 feet of the structure and parked the truck before pulling a satellite phone out of the center console. He held it up before dialing. “We’ll use Big Brother’s phone when we get closer to cities with mobile towers, but for the time being, this will do.” He tapped a button and hit the “speaker” tab, and electronic ringing filled the car.


Silence, broken finally by G. “We had a little hang-up at the first checkpoint,” he offered, in an emotionless voice.

“Anything I need to be concerned about?” Moran asked sharply.

“Nah,” G responded. “A kid in a hut. Didn’t have cameras. It’ll be at least 12 hours before anyone even comes looking.”

“A boy who could easily have been placated by the most superficial of false documents,” Mycroft said, in an arctic tone. “His death was completely unnecessary. If nothing else, it will alert the local authorities that someone has infiltrated the zone.”

Moran sniffed. “Like I care. The zones encompass hundreds of square kilometers. Even the stupidest of those bureaucrats are aware that the borders can’t be enforced. Unless we start burning buildings or setting off bombs, no one’s going to care.”

“The boy’s family might,” Anthea muttered under her breath.

“I’ll send flowers to his funeral,” Moran sneered. “Now, moving on. The structure near you is your first objective. It shouldn’t be exceptionally difficult; to the best of our knowledge, the Serbs never got around to adding additional layers of security, so it’s likely still just the Russian stuff—Jimmy never got around to this one either. But the downside of that is that all of the technology dates to the late ’80s, so it may or may not still work correctly. There’s power, and water—we checked on that, made sure it had never been completely abandoned. There was a guard detail until the Exclusion Zone was created, but I presume they left or G would have mentioned dealing with them.” No one
had any illusions about what “dealing with them” meant.

“I sent the specs on the facility to Big Brother’s phone earlier,” Moran continued. “We do know the entry code to the main door; that’s in there. After that, you’re on your own. You need to identify everything contained in the facility, including confirming any info in the systems with an ‘eyes on’ confirmation that the material or equipment is still there. You need to unlock all security protocols, so my people can come behind you and get what they need without hindrance. And it probably goes without saying, but I’m going to say it anyway: you will do all of this without alerting anyone to your presence. Clear?”


“You have six hours,” he chuckled. “Knock yourself out.” G ended the call and put the phone back, then raised an arm and beckoned towards the dark mound.

“On your way, folks. Clock’s ticking.”

When they reached the opening in the side of the dome that indicated the location of the doors, G made Sherlock start to clear away the drifted snow and debris, despite the detective’s increasing pallor and his tendency to push his right arm against his side (a move John recognized from his convalescence—an indicator of pain). When it became apparent that the remaining brush, snow and rubbish would have to be forcefully shoveled away from the base of the doors, John came up behind Sherlock, pushed him out of the way and took over. G gave an offended “Oi!” but let the changeover stand.

Five minutes later, the opening was cleared, and the large grey metal blast doors were exposed. A little further excavation revealed a touchpad on the right-hand casing of the doors, with a push-button numbered keyboard. A tiny red bulb at its base indicated the pad still had power; that was encouraging.

Mycroft glanced at his phone, then stepped up to the pad and punched in a series of 8 numbers. The rest of them waited expectantly. And waited. And waited. Mycroft frowned, looked at the phone again (while Sherlock raised his eyebrows in the background) then entered 8 digits again. This time the red light briefly flashed green before flickering back to red, and the doors made a muted creaking sound.

“Well, that’s encouraging at least,” Anthea commented. Sherlock smirked, and Mycroft scowled, then moved over to punch the numbers in once again, this time rather violently. The red light flickered green before flickering back to red, and the doors made a muted creaking sound.

“G scowled and stalked through the open doors into the cave-like opening. “C’mon,” he snapped.
The first thing one became aware of in the facility was dampness—it smelled of moisture, and cold, and abandonment. A combination, perhaps, of rotting paper and fabric, with an undertone of mouse droppings. Red emergency lights glowed around the walls, with additional dimly-lit touchpads at several doorways along the central corridor. Mycroft stopped them in the entrance to the corridor, though, and pulled up the information on his phone again. “We want to take the last doorway on the right,” he said, “Main Control Room.”

They set off at a slow pace; there were occasional piles of small debris scattered at their feet, and the red light made for limited visibility. G was decidedly skittish, flinching at tiny noises off in the dim distance and keeping one hand firmly on the corridor wall at all times. John caught Sherlock’s eye—the driver was either claustrophobic, or wary of dark spaces. Not something they could take advantage of immediately, but they both filed it away mentally as potentially useful at some point.

The keypad at the doorway to the control room was much more cooperative than the entranceway—it opened smoothly and silently the first time Mycroft typed in the numbers. Unfortunately, whatever lighting the room originally contained had failed; the door opened into a pitch-black space. John started to enter but was stopped when he ran into G’s back—the big man had stopped in the doorway, staring into the darkness. John gave him a mild shove to get him moving, and that seemed to release G from his paralysis. “There are portable lights in the back of the truck,” he stammered, and spun on his heels and fled.

Sherlock’s scornful, disembodied voice floated out of the blackness of the interior. “Moron.”

Ten minutes later, the Holmes brothers were seated in ramshackle chairs in front of an ancient computer console—rows of dials and buttons that ranged in front of a host of hulking metal arrays in the dim distance. The portable lights from the truck were sufficient to light a 10-foot circle around the console, casting the remainder of the large space in deep shadows.

Mycroft took the lead here; given that no overlay of later security equipment had been added, this would be pure cryptography (well, that and figuring out how the elderly equipment worked). John recognized very little here, and those things he thought he did understand were labelled with impenetrable Cyrillic labels—well, impenetrable to him, anyway. Clearly none of the other three had that issue. G, of course, didn’t speak or read Russian either, but the driver had chosen to stay back in the entranceway to the dome to “look out for trouble.” Sherlock’s eyeroll spoke for all of them.

Mycroft spent roughly ten minutes powering up the systems (complete with an old, “green screen” monitor and clacking keyboard), which brought up a flickering prompt.

“Did Moran give you a password?” Sherlock asked quietly. Mycroft shook his head and stared intently at the information on his phone before closing his eyes, his hands still resting on the keys.

Sherlock turned back to his own keyboard and took an alternate approach, thinking momentarily before entering something in Cyrillic characters. A flash showed on the screen and a white bar appeared below the prompt, along with an electronic voice saying something in Russian. Sherlock scowled, then tried again after a moment’s thought, with the same result. Before he could make another attempt, Mycroft’s eyes popped open and his hand shot over to grab his brother’s wrist.
“We only get three attempts before the system locks,” he snapped. “Restrain yourself.” Sherlock pulled his hands back with a huff, rose and started pacing around the room. Anthea dropped into his seat with a sigh. “It’s your own fault,” she tossed over her shoulder at the detective. “You know better.”

“A little irritation speeds up Mycroft’s thought processes,” he sniffed. “I was simply applying the necessary stimulus.”

From John’s perspective, at least, he appeared to be correct. No sooner had the words left his mouth than Mycroft suddenly sat up, leaned back over the keyboard, and typed letters confidently into the keyboard. There was a pleasant electronic chime, and a list of access prompts scrolled onto the screen. Mycroft checked his phone again; the folders listed at the access prompts were apparently included in his data. He began to open each systematically, noting down indecipherable information in a notebook he produced from somewhere in his jacket.

Sherlock stopped briefly in his perambulations and walked over to John. “We might as leave,” he said, walking towards the door. “This will take a while, and he actually does need silence for this part.” Anthea nodded absently but stayed in her seat.

“Let’s take a look around,” John said. He didn’t particularly want to go sit in the car or “chat” with G, and there might be something they could use stashed in the facility somewhere. Weapons were extremely unlikely—most things of value would have been taken when the Russians left—but no telling what could have been overlooked. Sherlock seemed mildly interested in the prospect, and stepped back into the control room to grab one of the battery lanterns G had brought in, in addition to the portable electric lights. Then they set off down the corridor.

The layout was somewhat like a squared circle—the corridors all ultimately led back to the entrance door eventually, after a number of turns. Many doors were equipped with keypads—they didn’t bother with those, since they lacked the codes (though Sherlock was certain he could deduce them, John didn’t want to spend the time waiting while Sherlock tried 700 combinations. The man was nothing if not determined). He was hoping they might find an infirmary—most medications would be useless, of course, but aspirin and the like would probably still be fine, and John would feel better with a full bandage pack and perhaps a bottle of antiseptic or two.

The first few open rooms were crew quarters, empty of anything except decaying cots and derelict chairs. They found a couple of working toilets—those would definitely be helpful. They passed a staff room with an ancient television set and a few mildewed books, but nothing more. Finally, though, they came upon the mess room, and here they struck gold—well, sort of.

“They’re almost as old as we are, John,” Sherlock whinged, as John carted the boxes of field rations they’d found in a storage cupboard out to the main room and plopped them down on one of the metal tables.

“Doesn’t matter,” John responded. “This stuff is designed to be shelf-stable for decades.” Sherlock made a disbelieving sound, and John shook his head.

“No, I know it is,” he continued. “When I was a kid, my dad brought home a box of Korean-era stuff one of his American mates had given him. Contained all sorts of stuff—spaghetti and meatballs, preserved meat—most of that was a bit manky, but it was definitely edible.” He rummaged through the boxes and starting spreading the tins out on the table. “Read me the labels,” he commanded.

up and rolled a thin metal strip around the top of the tin. He popped off the lid, while Sherlock tried to peer over his shoulder while appearing disinterested.

Inside were at least a dozen chocolate bars, appearing untouched, in their original wrappers. John pulled one out and peeled off the paper. The chocolate inside wasn’t broken or melted, but was largely covered in a thin whitish sheen. John raised it to his mouth and took a big bite, while Sherlock cringed in disgust. “It’s moldy, John!” he said, appalled.

John chuckled through his mouthful. “Nope. It’s called ‘bloom’. Happens to chocolate when it’s sat for too long—the fats and sugar rise to the surface. You can get rid of it by just re-melting and then cooling it if you want, but it’s fine as it is—the texture’s just a bit wonky.” He took another big bite, watching as Sherlock gave a longing (though still suspicious) look—Sherlock loved chocolate, in every form. John reached into the box and pulled out another bar, unwrapped it and held it out. Sherlock watched, wary as a stray dog, but finally broke. He took it, bit off a tiny piece, and screwed up his face in anticipation of disaster—then broke into a pleased smile as the taste registered.

“Told you so,” John said smugly.

They went through all of the boxes, and ended up filling two with their selections (including all of the chocolate, of course), which they carried out to the car under G’s baleful glare. The driver made a point of looking at each tin, but given that he couldn’t read Russian, he ultimately took the chocolate bar John offered him and shoved the boxes in the back.

They went back inside and found Anthea and Mycroft, still in their same positions at the keyboards. Mycroft had progressed to pulling pages from his notebook, laying them out in an array covered with complex calculations. Anthea had a group—a much smaller group—as well. Sherlock touched her shoulder and handed her a chocolate bar, then dropped one in front of his brother, who started slightly before giving his brother an almost-smile. “You can help, if you would,” he said, and Anthea slid out of the chair and let the detective take her place. Mycroft selected four pages and slid them over, and Sherlock got to work.

It took hours. Felt like days, to John, but still, hours. He showed Anthea the areas he and Sherlock had explored; they emptied tins to use as cups and took Mycroft and Sherlock water, which was consumed without conscious recognition on either part; they played endless rounds of poker with a pack of cards John found in the staff room. G came in to check on them twice before wandering back out (John made a point of not telling him where the loo was—let him find it on his own, the bastard).

Finally, after roughly four hours, Mycroft suddenly jerked in his chair. “Of course!” he said, and starting tapping information into the keyboard. Sherlock, Anthea and John watched as the green screen blinked in recognition and began rapidly scrolling down a lengthy list—from Sherlock’s reaction, it seemed to be the materials list they were looking for. Mycroft, a triumphant smirk on his face, reached for new pages in his notebook, tapped a key to stop the rapid scrolling, and starting jotting down information.

Sherlock stood, stretched, and announced that he was going to go let G know they were in. But as he and John turned towards the door, an abrupt flicker blinked on the monitors, and the information briefly disappeared, replaced intermittently by a line of large type. The view fluttered back and forth several times—file listings, then large type—and then a loud electronic buzz roared through the room, and red lights flashed ominously around the walls. A tinny speaker sputtered to life, and a
voice started a rhythmic litany in Russian. Mycroft sat frozen in his chair, his eyes darting across the array and keyboard, while Sherlock and Anthea stared at each other in horror.

“What is it? What’s that voice?” John asked frantically.

Sherlock looked at John, his face ashen. “It’s a countdown,” he replied.

Chapter End Notes

Welp, here we are, back on the cliff again. Maryagrawatson says she'll bring the s'mores.

The incident with the ancient field rations actually comes from my own childhood. My dad was in the military, and one day he brought home this big box of Korean War-era rations they were getting rid of. It included all kinds of stuff, including spaghetti and meatballs, which we didn't eat after we accidentally dropped one of the meatballs and it BOUNCED. But hey--the chocolate bars were fine, once you got past the weird texture.
Acute Infection: Part Four

Chapter Summary

Their first mission comes to an explosive conclusion, though not quite in the way you might think.

As the blaring Russian voice continued its ominous countdown, Mycroft slapped frantically at the keyboard, typing in streams of text that were accepted, but vanished moments later. Without raising his eyes from his flying fingers, the Great Man spoke. “Run, all of you. Do it now.”

Sherlock made a rude noise and dropped into the second chair, his hands flying over the myriad controls but having no effect. Anthea hovered uncertainly but with a determined set to her jaw, while John looked helplessly from one to the other of his companions.

G abruptly clattered into the room, apparently drawn by the flashing lights and bleating loudspeakers. “What the fuck’s happening?” he asked wildly, looking around for something, someone to shoot with the very large gun gripped in his right hand.

John suddenly knew what he could do—whether it helped or not, it apparently couldn’t hurt. He reached deftly for G’s arm, wrenched it in a complicated but effective movement (while G gasped in pain and staggered back) and pulled the weapon from his hand. Then he reached over, shoved Mycroft roughly out of the chair, and emptied every round into the console, while sparks, electrical arcs and small gouts of flame shot in every direction.

When a last round of violent electrical arcing flashed through the room, the power failed completely—the console and monitor went black, the warning lights stopped flashing, and the countdown voice gave an odd croaking sound and subsided. John turned cautiously around in the small circle of light cast by the lanterns, halfway afraid to move for fear of setting everything off again. He looked at the Holmes brothers—Sherlock, eyes still round and shocked, and Mycroft wearing an expression that made John long for a camera, just to retain it for posterity (or blackmail).

Anthea, though—Anthea looked at John, then the gun, then the still-smoking console and keyboard. When she looked back at John, her face scrunched into a smirk before she gave an indelicate snort and pointed at the gun, and then the console. “Star Wars,” she chortled, and broke out into gasping, hooting laughter that set John off as well. G, still nursing his wrenched arm, gave a sour chuckle, while the Holmeses glared in unison (which just set Anthea off again).

John had subsided to helpless giggles, and dropped the gun on the console table, by the time Mycroft managed to drag his dignity back around himself. The older man squared his shoulders, raised his chin and looked down his nose with disdain. “Are you quite done?” he sniffed. Anthea gave another little snort, then clapped her hand over her mouth penitently. Mycroft aggressively ignored her.

John gave one last titter and wrestled himself back under control. “Yeah. Yeah, that’ll do it, I guess.” He avoided looking at Anthea—no sense pressing his luck. “So, that happened.”

“Yessss…,” Mycroft drawled. “You do realize your shots could have caused whatever catastrophe I was working to avert?”
Sherlock had been left out of the conversation long enough. “We had three seconds left, Mycroft. Hardly would have mattered, would it? And we don’t really know what would have happened when the countdown ended.”

Mycroft’s eyebrows rose. “Do you have any thought that it would not have involved explosions and death?”

“Touché,” John said with a grin. Sherlock scowled and sat back down next to Anthea, who had dropped into Mycroft’s vacated seat.

At that point G, recovered from his shock (and his twisted wrist), forced himself back into the conversation. “We need to call Mr. Moran,” he announced firmly.

Mycroft gave him a look that would have sent his underlings running for their boltholes. “Why?” he asked, in disdainful tones. “The code was broken; the information, most of it, was obtained. We have met our objectives insofar as was possible. What else need be reported?”

G stalled momentarily, his mouth unattractively open. “The, um, the countdown and the shooting… thing?” he finally ventured.

Mycroft waved his hand dismissively. “A mere bagatelle. Doctor Watson simply accelerated the solution; I was preparing to disconnect the power even as he did so in a more… expeditious fashion.” Sherlock looked at John and rolled his eyes behind G’s back. “Liar,” he mouthed silently. Anthea snaked a hand over and poked him roughly in the side, which was almost enough to set John off again.

Mycroft forestalled any further interjections from G by picking up his papers, including the notes he had made while the data scrolled, and waving it under the driver’s nose. “The only remaining task to be completed is the ‘eyes on’ verification of what this data indicated. In this case that should be exceptionally easy; based on the limited information I was able to secure before the system failed, the only remaining materiel, other than the now-defunct launch and targeting systems, consists of conventional explosives and detonators. The nuclear materials were evacuated in 1987.” He turned and strode confidently towards the door, picking up one of the electric lanterns on the way. John looked enquiringly at Sherlock, who shrugged his shoulders, rose and followed his brother out the door. John mockingly offered Anthea his arm, and they followed as well. G, clearly fearing he was losing control of the situation, picked up his gun and joined them.

Following Mycroft Holmes’ bobbing lantern through the lightless facility was one of the eerier experiences John had had in quite some time. The emergency lighting was gone, as were the tiny red lights in the electronic door locks. That loss made the corridor feel more abandoned, more “dead” than on John’s first expedition with Sherlock. It didn’t help that G, with his phobia about dark spaces, jumped at every sound and practically climbed up John’s back every time they slowed down.

After an uncomfortable length of time walking carefully along debris-strewn corridors, Mycroft stopped in front of a set of double doors. These, like most that they had passed, had been protected by a keypad in the doorframe, but this one, too, was dark—no power. Since Mycroft was holding the lantern, Sherlock stepped up and tried the doors, giving a pleased huff when they opened without resistance. “It was a 50-50 shot,” he said simply. “Either the loss of power would have locked
everything down, or it would have unlocked them all. We were lucky.” Mycroft gave a non-smile of acknowledgment, then followed his brother through.

They all stopped just inside the doors, mildly stunned by the view. This was a vast chamber—clearly excavated into the existing hillside at some point, it extended as far as the eye could see in the area illuminated by the lantern, and presumably much farther. The ceiling was almost 30 feet high—much like an aircraft hangar, in fact. Mycroft held the lantern as high as he could, and the light caught on huge gantries—empty, thank God, but once containing missiles and components of destruction.

“I thought these were supposedly research facilities,” John said, his voice echoing.

“They were, but only in part,” Mycroft said austerely. “Clearly the Russians were embedded more in-depth than the West was aware of at the time. That explains why this facility was completely stripped—they couldn’t afford for the European powers to become aware of what had really gone on here.” He turned to look at G. “We will be having a conversation with Mr. Moran when we’re through here after all,” he said. G looked as if he wasn’t sure whether to be pleased or not.

Sherlock had wandered slightly away, using the light from his—from Mycroft’s phone, rather. Mycroft realized his pocket had been picked the same moment John did. “Really, brother mine,” the older man sniffed. “You weren’t using it,” Sherlock replied, and kept walking.

Anthea, silent up to this point, touched Mycroft’s arm. “Did the information you scanned tell where the conventional explosives were stored?” She looked over at G. “And do we even need to concern ourselves with them, once we’ve confirmed no nuclear materials remain?”

“No, and I hope not,” Mycroft said absently. “I would be surprised if they were contained in this room; storing explosives in the same chamber as missiles seems exceptionally risky, even by the standards of the 1980s.” John noticed, though, that the Great Man found something about this unsettling.

“What’s bothering you?” John finally asked, while listening to Sherlock stumbling around on the far side of the chamber. “There’s something about this being empty—why is that an issue? Didn’t we expect that some of the facilities might be?”

Sherlock chose that moment to walk back into their little bubble of light. “Well, the question is, where did the missiles go? It would have been easy to conceal the movement of containers of radioactive material—while profoundly dangerous, they would have been neither especially large nor especially heavy. But missiles, even the relatively small ones that would have been housed here? That requires exceptional measures—large cranes, large flatbed trailers, heavy-duty trucks. Even in the chaos of the USSR’s collapse, people would have noticed. It would have been reported, and those reports would have ended up, at some point, on the desk of one of Mycroft’s predecessors, or at least with MI6—which means this facility would have been flagged and examined long ago. But none of that happened.”

Mycroft took up the gauntlet now. “So, there are three questions: When were the missiles removed? By whom? And where were they taken? It’s clear that the movement wasn’t recent—this facility has been largely untouched for many years, and the roads, while used more recently, don’t show evidence of the kind of equipment that would have been required, so enough time has passed for that evidence to fade away.”

“I can see why that’s unsettling. And ideally, we, MI6, someone would follow up and find out, hopefully,” John said. “But, in the grand scheme of things, does it matter? For our purposes, there’s nothing here. That’s all we’re required to establish, so we’re done, and we can move on.”
John was then treated to matching Holmesian expressions of discontent. “I suppose so,” Mycroft finally said, in an uncharacteristically uncertain way. Sherlock, though, moved on to the next issue.

“We can’t leave the explosives, either,” he said. John noted the anticipatory gleam in his eye with misgiving. “Imagine some poor peasant wandering in here and accidentally setting them off,” the detective continued, with a passable attempt at true concern.

“Oh, please,” Anthea sniffed. “You just want to blow something up.” Sherlock, of course, rose up in affronted dignity, before suddenly dropping his shoulders in a sigh.

“Well, yes,” he said finally. “I would try to convince you otherwise, but I’m just too tired.” And he looked it, suddenly. John was forcibly reminded that his friend was far from well, and this had been an exceptionally long day.

Mycroft raised his eyebrows but made no comment, simply holding out his hand for his phone. “Let’s go see if we can contact Mr. Moran,” he said, and headed back towards the entrance, with the rest of the party trailing along behind.

When they reached the vehicle parked outside, Mycroft held up his phone and peered at the display, giving a pleased smile before typing briefly and holding it up to his ear. After a brief wait, John heard an indecipherable voice before Mycroft put the call into “speaker” mode.

“Connect me with Mr. Moran,” he commanded, while G looked alarmed in the background. The voice on the other end said “one moment”, and a brief silence ensued. Then the confident, sneering tones of Sebastian Moran rang out.

“Well, well—got service again, I see. And you calling me—dare I hope you’ve cracked open our first little Easter egg successfully?” the ex-sniper asked cheerfully.

“Hardly an Easter egg,” Sherlock drawled. “Unless you count the powdered ones we found in the mess hall storage.”

“Piss off, sonny. The grown-ups need to talk,” Moran snapped. “Now, Big Brother—what have you got for me?”

“An empty hangar, and a defunct computer system,” Mycroft said. “Any nuclear materials were evidently evacuated many years ago. There were missiles at one time, but they, too, have been removed.”

“G, can you confirm that?” Moran asked. “I mean, not that I don’t trust you, Mikey, but…”

“Yes, it’s true,” the driver interjected. “And the fucking computer system almost blew us all to Hell, but it’s toast now too.”

“Well, that’s a little disappointing,” Moran sighed. “Here I was hoping to make your first time really special. On to your next target, then, I guess.”
“Not quite yet,” Mycroft interjected, before Moran could hang up. “Two things. First, there is a quantity of elderly conventional explosives placed in the facility. We intend to detonate them before our departure; leaving them in place for someone to stumble across could bring more attention to this kind of facility than I think any of us would prefer.” John was surprised to see Mycroft being willing to help Sherlock in his desire to play with high explosives, but didn’t comment.

There was a pause from the other end while Moran considered. “Yeah, I guess so,” he said, finally. “As long as you know what you’re doing, and don’t damage either of the main players.” John didn’t miss the manic grin Sherlock gave his brother at that comment. “What’s the second thing, then?” the criminal continued.

“We need to stop for rest before continuing,” Mycroft said. “You know my brother is ill, and it has been a very long day for all of us. We need at least 8 hours downtime. I anticipate no difficulty in finding a safe place, even if it lacks power or water.”

Moran gave a disgruntled huff before responding. “It’s 1 a.m. your time now. You can have until 8. So you’d better find someplace to crash quickly. No extra time allowed for travel. You hear that, G?”

“Yes, sir,” the driver said respectfully. “8 am.” There was an electronic click, followed by a dial tone. Mycroft switched off the phone and put it away.

Sherlock raised his eyebrows enquiringly at his brother. “So, now?” If he’d felt better, he’d have been bouncing in anticipation. John knew the signs.

Mycroft sighed and nodded. “I suppose. We’ll have to find—”

“Already know where they are,” Sherlock interrupted. “I found them when you were wandering around with the lantern. They’re through the rear doors of the missile room. Blocks of plastic explosive, set in three places along the rear corridor. They have detonators in place, but I disabled them temporarily while we were inside—figured an accidental detonation would be unfortunate. I can re-rig everything in five minutes or so,” he said rapidly. “John, would you like to assist?”

John blinked, but nodded. He was quite sure he’d be of little help in setting explosive charges, but by the same token, he had no intention of letting Sherlock play around with them unsupervised. He was astonished that Mycroft would consider doing so.

Mycroft handed his lantern to John. While G went to collect the remaining portable lights from the control room, John and Sherlock headed back down the black corridors to the missile room, then traversed the length of it and came out the other side. Roughly 30 feet down the corridor from the doors, Sherlock came to a halt and set the lantern on the floor so that it shone light on the back wall.

“There,” he said, pointed to a series of bulkheads set into the wall.

This was far from the setup they’d seen in the Underground carriage: no containers of sinister liquids, no snaking wires, no blinking lights or readouts. In its way, though, this was worse—simpler, giving less scope to avoid immolation. Large grey blocks of plastic explosives were stacked together in three locations along the wall, connected by snaking black wire—detonator cord, presumably. Next to each stack was a black metal box with a keypad. John could see that the wire connectors that would normally attach the explosives to the (presumed) detonators had been detached—Sherlock’s
work. So, the detonators could be reconnected. But—

“Sherlock,” John said slowly. “I don’t know if we really want to trust any timer we could set with 30-year-old equipment, you know? Especially given our recent experience with the rest of the equipment here.”

Sherlock huffed. “Well, of course not,” he said. “That’s why I disconnected them in the first place. It makes more sense to set up a direct link to set them off, without worrying about timers. That’s why I was glad when I found this.” And he held up an object from the floor next to the detonators—a large spool of black wire. “Detonator cord. We’ll just run this outside, and set it off from there.” He smiled, that crooked one that told John he was truly pleased with himself.

“But, erm, is that safe?” John said. “I mean, in the train, you didn’t know—neither of us knew—I mean…”

“Really, John,” Sherlock sniffed. “It was forcefully borne in upon me that there was a serious gap in my knowledge base. Did you really believe I wouldn’t rectify that as soon as possible?” Because of course he would, John realized. Never let it be said that Sherlock would neglect learning data that had proved its utility.

“So, you’re an explosives expert now?” John asked. “Or did you just learn enough to defuse things?”

“I assure you, I applied myself to learning all of the basic techniques and principals. I devoted nearly a week to it,” Sherlock said, in a mildly offended tone. To be fair, that was a substantial investment in time for the younger man—most things he could achieve basic mastery of in, at most, a day or two. It was clear he’d made a serious study of this particular subject.

“OK, fine,” John replied. “You’re an expert. So, what do we need to do?”

In the end, “we” actually meant “John,” for the most part. While Sherlock did the initial rigging of the cords, the wince he gave upon bending over to start rolling out the large spool of additional cord led John to shove him gently out of the way and take over. Sherlock picked up the detonator and the lantern and followed him, taking a shorter route to the exit than the way they’d come in.

Three minutes later, they emerged through the main doors to find the rest of their party waiting anxiously. John rolled the spool out to the end of the length of cord, ending roughly 50 feet from the doorway. “Is this far enough away?” he asked Sherlock.

“It’ll have to be,” the detective said shortly, as he grabbed the end of the cord and, using a small folding knife he’d found somewhere, spliced it onto the detonator. He then pulled the battery from the electric lantern and used a small length of wire to connect it to the detonator as well. He pushed a sequence of buttons and gave a pleased noise as the keypad of the detonator lit up.

He turned and looked at G. “I’d suggest moving the truck further away,” he said. “I don’t think it’s likely, but it’s possible that some debris could be thrown out.” G blinked, but complied.

Sherlock then looked at the rest of his companions. “I think you should move away as well. I believe the blast will be self-contained, based on the placement, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.” Unspoken in that was the fact that Sherlock himself would have to remain in place to start the detonation.

“We’ll take our chances, brother,” Mycroft said simply, while Anthea nodded and went to stand on Sherlock’s far side.
John knelt next to Sherlock and the detonator. “What do you need me to do?” he asked.

Sherlock looked a little uncertain momentarily. “I’m. It’s….” he began. “Just—I’m a little unsteady. Fatigue. If I give you the sequence, can you punch it in? We can’t afford to make an error—one wrong sequence will lock the unit, and we’d have to risk going back inside if we wanted to try again.”

And no, that was so much not happening. If Sherlock tried to go back inside John would do whatever was necessary to stop him, and he was quite sure Mycroft would help him. So, yeah, John would do the typing.

John nodded, then bent down over the unit, hands at the ready. Sherlock leaned back on his heels and began to softly call out numbers, then waited while John entered each. Just before the last digit, he turned to Mycroft and Anthea. “Cover your ears and open your mouth,” he said, then gave John the last number.

The blast wasn’t as large as John expected. As he punched in the final number, the detonator gave a brief electronic buzz, the keypad flashed red, and then a great, booming thud came from deep inside the mound, followed swiftly by a huge gust of hot wind and grit that thundered out of the doors and blew all of them roughly onto their backs.

John’s ears were ringing loudly as the wind died away, but the first thing he heard was Sherlock—Sherlock, laughing, slightly hysterically, from his position flat on his back by the detonator. “That was marvelous!” he hiccupped, as John rolled over and crawled over to his friend.

The younger man was still grinning widely as John bent over him. “Can you get up?” John asked quietly.

“Maybe?” Sherlock said uncertainly. “I…perhaps a little help,” he continued, holding out his arms. Mycroft, who had come silently up behind John, reached over and grabbed his brother’s forearms, pulling him to his feet, where he wobbled but managed to stay up.

Looking for the first time back at the mound, John was stunned by the level of devastation. The entire structure had collapsed in upon itself; the rounded roof was now rubble, and the doorway was completely blocked by a huge block of concrete that had once formed the top of the span. Anyone wishing to enter now would need both heavy equipment and luck.

“Well,” said Mycroft, holding onto his brother’s shoulders still. “I think that answers the question of what would have happened but for John’s timely intervention.” He gave John one of his rare, true smiles, while Sherlock blinked at the piles of debris. Anthea gave the detective a quick look and caught John’s eye. “I think we’d better be going, don’t you agree, John?” she said, while Mycroft nodded. It was telling that Sherlock gave no objection when G rolled up with the Humvee and gestured them inside.
Finding a place to bivouac for the rest of the night was laughably easy. G steered the vehicle back out onto the main road, and within five minutes they came across a prosperous-looking farmhouse set close to the road. As they pulled into the barn lot, Mycroft pointed out the large generator sitting next to the house. “That’s helpful. G, would you check the barn for petrol? We could use part to run the generator, and put the rest in the truck.”

Couched in those terms, G could hardly refuse. He parked the truck and headed towards the barn while the rest of them piled wearily out. Sherlock, apparently exhausted beyond speech, simply stayed in his seat until John came around, laced his shoulder under Sherlock’s arm, and pulled him gently out.

Anthea had gotten the door open, while Mycroft pulled their bags and the lanterns from the back of the truck. When Sherlock and John reached the house, Anthea took a lantern and steered them through the kitchen to a bedroom she’d found, and helped John fold the exhausted detective into the bed. Sherlock closed his eyes without a sound, and never moved. They left the lantern there, so that he wouldn’t awaken to darkness.

When John and Anthea got back to the kitchen, Mycroft was there, rummaging through cabinets. “A few things we can use in the morning,” he said. “No milk, obviously, but tea and the makings for porridge. Running water, so we can make either tea or coffee, and have useable toilets. There’s bread—it’s stale, but edible, and if we get the power working we can toast it. If we can’t, we have the stove—it uses bottled gas, so we can improvise.” He looked around, as if just now noticing the cold. “And we need to light all of the fires—they seem to all have wood available.”

“I’ll do that,” John said. He’d lit many a wood fire in Afghanistan—had it down to an art. He checked each room for a fireplace, and lit every one that he found, including the small wood stove in the corner of the kitchen. The last was in Sherlock’s bedroom (the house had four, surprisingly—a prosperous farm indeed). The detective still hadn’t moved, but his breathing was slow and steady, and a quick check of his forehead didn’t indicate any fever (much to John’s relief). He considered trying to strip his friend of his coat, but decided to wait and see how much the house warmed up with the fires lit first.

When he returned to the kitchen, Anthea was gone. G had managed to get the generator going, so warm lights now burned in the kitchen and lounge. Someone had made tea, and Mycroft was sitting at the kitchen table nursing a cup. He waved John towards the stove, where a cup sat waiting. John took it gratefully and slumped into a chair.

“Well,” said the older man. “I’m glad we were able to find this refuge so quickly. I confess to being very tired; I can’t imagine how Sherlock is feeling.” That, John realized, was actually a diplomatically-phrased question.

“He’s flattened. You saw that,” he began. “He’s not running fever, so that’s encouraging. But I’m very concerned about his level of fatigue. We need to find a chemist we can loot tomorrow—I may not be able to find the right antibiotics, but at least we can find a stopgap of some kind, and maybe some mild analgesics. I know he’s still having pain.”

Mycroft nodded wearily. “I will do my best to manipulate the driver into taking a route that passes through an urban area. I’ve checked the location for the next site—we will be travelling for at least four hours, which will give Sherlock additional time to rest. He will unfortunately be required to participate in the decryption tomorrow—this site has at least two layers of prior intervention.” He sighed and subsided, staring into his tea.

John felt a twinge of sympathy for the man—he was bearing a tremendous load right now, with no quick end in sight. “Why don’t you get some rest?” he asked. “There’s no point in keeping watch.
I’m quite sure either G or I will hear anyone that approaches—once you’ve had the training you can’t turn it off in situations like this. We can deal with my being a little tired. But it won’t help any of us if you’re exhausted tomorrow as well.”

It spoke to Mycroft’s own state that the man nodded, stood, and went.
Acute Infection: Part Five

Chapter Summary

The group encounters some of the side effects of the Exclusion Zones, and find that the route to their next challenge won't be quite as simple as you would think.

Oh yes--and Sherlock and G don't play well together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

John wandered off to bed himself shortly thereafter; he wasn’t sleepy, exactly, but was aware of an undercurrent of exhaustion that he knew would suck him under once he laid down. It had been decided, with no real discussion, that he would share Sherlock’s room—that would leave Anthea with a room to herself, and prevent Mycroft from having to share with G, which neither man would have found comfortable (though it did make John chuckle a bit to contemplate it). When John finished in the loo and climbed into the other side of the bed Sherlock already inhabited, the detective’s steady breathing never altered; it was the last thing John heard before the wave of tiredness rolled over him.

Morning came with Anthea shaking his shoulder—John had luckily been sleeping lightly, or that could have ended badly. He managed to suppress his instinct to react; Anthea seemed to realize her mistake, and gave him an apologetic smile before gesturing behind her and mouthing “breakfast” silently. Sherlock never stirred; he had rolled onto his back during the night but remained soundly asleep. To John’s mind, that was both good and bad; good because the younger man needed the rest, bad because this depth of unconsciousness was profoundly uncharacteristic, and somewhat troubling.

John made a quick trip to the loo before heading to the kitchen, where the rest of the party was already assembled, working on toast, coffee and scrambled eggs. Mycroft saw John’s raised eyebrows at the two skillets full of eggs on the cooktop. “Anthea checked the barn this morning; the owners have chickens which were apparently released before their departure, but the birds have continued to roost in the hay. We found 20 eggs, and used some of the powdered milk from the facility stores. It’s vile in tea or coffee but disguises well when cooked.”

“I’m quite sure I’ve had worse,” John said with a grin. Nothing could surpass the taste of some of the questionable “meals” he and his fellow soldiers had had to choke down when out in the field. Fresh scrambled eggs, even made with powdered milk, were ambrosia by comparison. He wandered over to the cooktop, where Mycroft was efficiently stirring while G buttered toast. “Need another pair of hands for anything?”

Anthea looked up from where she was setting out plates and glasses. “Go wake Sherlock? Everything’s just about ready.”

“And we need to be moving in 45 minutes, tops,” G chimed in. Everyone studiously ignored him.

Waking Sherlock felt almost abusive; it was like trying to rouse one of his fellow surgeons in Afghanistan after an 18-hour shift. The same blank stare, brief disorientation, and exhausted sighs—clearly 5 ½ hours’ sleep hadn’t been enough for Sherlock to recover fully from his exertions.
yesterday. The detective finally pushed himself to a seat on the side of the bed, rubbing his hands roughly over his face and through his jumbled hair. “What time is it?” he finally rumbled, yawning.

“About 7:15,” John said. “Breakfast is ready; go hit the loo and come on. It’s a red-letter day: your brother cooked,” he finished with a smile.

“It’s the only way he can ensure a never-ending stream of calories.” Sherlock muttered sourly, then staggered off.

Breakfast was one of the odder meals John had eaten. There they were, in a rustic farmhouse kitchen that just sang of domesticity, eating scrambled eggs and toast. But then, when you took a step back and considered the participants, you had: a criminal enforcer; a shadowy Government official; his “assistant”, beautiful in a Bond-ish sort of way but a superbly effective agent in her own right; a doctor-cum-soldier-cum-biographer; and the World’s Only Consulting Detective (who was sitting at the table but was clearly absent, mentally). It was like something out of a particularly outlandish television series, one of those that started with loud music and explosions.

John, following the soldier’s creed of eating when you had the chance, shoveled the fare into his mouth methodically, after giving Mycroft a congratulatory eyebrow lift—the eggs were delicious, despite the use of powdered milk. The others ate with similar enthusiasm, with the exception of Sherlock—they hadn’t eaten since yesterday afternoon, since they were all too exhausted to do so last evening.

Sherlock, however, sat blankly in his chair, his plate untouched. John finally caught Anthea’s attention—she was sitting next to the younger man. She took one look at Sherlock’s face, then carefully picked up his fork, fitted it into his fingers, and moved it to his plate. She looked back at John with a triumphant grin when the detective continued the movement, picked up a forkful of eggs, and placed it in his mouth. Clearly, John wasn’t the only one aware of Sherlock’s propensity for “automatic eating” when distracted.

Ten minutes later, everyone had eaten their fill (even Sherlock, who managed over half a plateful before coming back to himself and blinking in surprise at his still-moving hand, at which point he glared at Anthea and dropped the fork disdainfully). They cleared away the plates, and Mycroft dropped a large handful of notes on the table by way of compensation to the owners for their unknowing hospitality, before they all headed to their rooms to gather their things.

No one bothered with a bath; while there was a large clawfoot tub in the bathroom, hot water was only available if heated on the stove, and none of them were willing to wait. They each gave themselves a quick once-over with a damp flannel and one shared bucket of hot water before re-donning their outdoor gear to head out. Anthea came out of the loo just as John was going in. “Thank God I brought a change of underwear,” she sighed. “I have a feeling we’re going to get very tired of these clothes.” John had to agree—he was already weary of being back in combat boots again.

Of course, Sherlock didn’t even have the luxury of clean pants, though Anthea did give him her spare toothbrush. “You could let me have your extra pair,” he whinged when John pulled the rucksack away from him. “Or not,” John replied. “You can rinse yours out tonight when I do mine.” Sherlock scowled and stalked off to the bathroom.
By the time they were all dressed and outside, G was huffily pacing in the barn lot. “We should have left 10 minutes ago,” he snapped, as Mycroft and John tossed the rucksacks in the back. “I told Mr. Moran we would be on the way by 8. I need to call him and let him know you’ve delayed us.”

Sherlock, as always, rose to the bait. “Of course. Like any well-trained puppy, you must present yourself for discipline. I wonder, does it involve submissive urination when necessary?” And before anyone could react, G’s arm shot out and backhanded Sherlock on the side of his jaw, hard. The detective staggered and would have gone down had his brother not caught him.

John was striding towards the driver when he was preempted by Mycroft, one arm still supporting his sibling. “I will be contacting Mr. Moran myself momentarily,” he said, in tones that could strip paint. “I doubt he will be impressed to hear that you have laid hands on one of the two people necessary to complete this mission—the one who is already ill and needing special care.” Sherlock, at his side, tried to push the supporting arm away, his pale, furious face reddened by the clear imprint of G’s hand. Mycroft’s arm, though, moved down to grip his wrist firmly, preventing him from moving closer to his attacker.

Mycroft took out his phone and stalked back into the house alone, while G stood indecisively beside the car before trotting in after him. Sherlock snickered, loud enough that G certainly heard him, going by the sudden rigid set of his shoulders.

“You’re an idiot,” Anthea sighed, before dropping into the rear seat to wait. “He started it,” Sherlock huffed. John shook his head at both of them, then walked back into the house to get a cold, damp flannel to put on Sherlock’s flame-red cheek. He didn’t search for Mycroft or G, though he could hear raised voices coming from the lounge as he entered the kitchen.

John was batting Sherlock’s hands away and pressing his makeshift compress to the younger man’s cheek when Mycroft returned, with G trailing silently in his wake. One look at Mycroft’s slightly smug expression told the tale of who had been the victor in the conversation with Moran.

“We will be taking a somewhat less rural route to our next target than originally planned,” Mycroft announced, before settling in the front seat next to a disgruntled G. “I pointed out to Mr. Moran that we had been promised the opportunity to forage for additional supplies as needed; our ability to find edible food is much higher in more concentrated population centers. Our total route will take roughly 4 hours, but we have clearance from Moran for a half-hour stop at our chosen point to search.” John’s head shot up at that, while Sherlock gave him a questioning look that morphed into a frustrated scowl when John ignored him.

John had to bide his time until their first toilet break, roughly an hour later. While each of them normally headed for their own personal clump of trees to relieve themselves, John hustled off in Mycroft’s general direction. As soon as the older man emerged from the brush, John intercepted him and stopped him by the simply mechanism of parking himself directly in the man’s path.

“Did you set that up?” he demanded. Mycroft’s eyebrows climbed towards his receding hairline in an expression of affronted inquiry. “Did you tell your brother, your injured, ill brother, to goad that Neanderthal into attacking him so that you could change the route? That doesn’t meet my definition of ‘manipulating’ G into making the change, and it’s a pretty shit thing to do.”

Mycroft pulled himself up into the picture of offended dignity. “I will confess to taking advantage of the situation; I did tell you I planned on ensuring the route changed. However, whatever you may think of my role in Sherlock’s life, it has never been my intent for him to intentionally injure himself, and it never will be. I would have had no difficulty in achieving the same ends if my brother hadn’t indulged in his usual practice of suicidal defiance, but I saw no reason not to use the opportunity when it presented itself.”
John surprised himself by agreeing. “You’re not wrong,” he said. “But I hope you understand why I asked the question. It was a little too convenient, and your brother doesn’t have the strongest self-preservation skills at the best of times.”

Mycroft gave a dignified chuckle. “Agreed. In this case, though, coincidence was unlikely, but not impossible. I have learned, over the years, never to underestimate Sherlock’s capacity to create chaos, and never to waste whatever benefit that chaos may inadvertently supply.”

John laughed, somewhat ruefully, and they walked back to the truck in companionable silence.

Sherlock was waiting, obviously hoping to pump John for whatever had been discussed. He had apparently rummaged through the back in G’s absence; the container of ancient chocolate bars was open on the seat beside him. He offered one to John and (reluctantly) to Mycroft as G pulled the truck back onto the road.

“You were talking about me. Why were you angry?” he asked, while crunching away on his treat. He paused to drop a bar into Anthea’s lap, while pointedly ignoring G.

John shook his head. “Nothing, really. Just a misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding about me? How? That makes no sense,” Sherlock persisted. His brow was crinkling into what John privately termed “Incipient Strop”.

“No,” John said, looking significantly at the back of G’s head. “I misunderstood something Mycroft had said. Not important, and not really about you. Not everything is, you know.”

“Just most things. Ask him; he’ll tell you,” Anthea said snarkily. Sherlock huffed and subsided into his corner to chew on his chocolate bar in glowering silence. Less than 10 minutes later, though, John looked over at his friend and found that he was once more asleep, head dropped against the side pillar. Monotony, exhaustion and a full stomach had done their work.

After roughly another 90 minutes of travelling along back roads, they turned onto a more modern route and began to see sporadic buildings—petrol stations and small shops, mostly. Mycroft cleared his throat and pointed off into the distance.

“We’re nearing the outskirts of Szeged. It’s a largish city, with all of the typical conveniences. We won’t go into the city proper, but we should be able to find grocers and chemists along this route that either haven’t been abandoned or completely looted. We will split into two groups, to save time—John, you and Sherlock” (who blinked and sat up at the sound of his name) “will take the chemists, and the rest of us will look for shops selling food.”

“No one gets out of shouting range,” G interjected. Sherlock made a rude gesture, which G luckily couldn’t see.

Shortly thereafter, they reached a semi-urban area built around a large, open square that was completely empty, even though Szeged was outside of the Budapest Exclusion Zone’s 50-kilometer range—apparently, the inhabitants had fled on their own, perhaps as a result of the passage of large numbers of true evacuees. At Mycroft’s behest, G parked the truck and they all climbed out. “There’s the chemist,” Mycroft said, pointing for John’s benefit—certainly, Sherlock could read
Hungarian. He turned and gestured to the opposite side of the square. “And there’s a bakery and a grocer. The rest of us will head over there. Meet back here in no more than 30 minutes.” He and Anthea strode off; G scowled and followed, but not without throwing a threatening look at Sherlock over his shoulder.

As Sherlock and John neared the chemist, they saw the first indications that this area had not seen a completely calm evacuation. They passed several shattered doors and windows on the shops lining the square, and small piles of goods left on the pavement or dropped on the broken display fronts. When they reached the chemist, though, they both smelled it—someone had died here. Died, and been left where they fell.

John found himself reaching futilely for a gun he wasn’t carrying. Sherlock melted into the side wall of the building, gliding silently, lethally through space in a way John had never seen him do before the Fall. There was no power—either the utilities had been cut off at the time the Exclusion Zone was created, or had failed in the interim due to lack of maintenance. Some light streamed into the buildings from the square, but the deeper they passed into the building, the less visibility they had. Even though that had seen no living inhabitants, though, John was reluctant to look for another light source.

They found the first body behind a counter—an older man, dead perhaps a week—hard to tell exactly, given the state of the corpse. The murder weapon had been a large cutting implement—machete or bayonet. Blood-stained footprints were scattered across the walkway—more than one person had been involved. Boxes and bags of goods were strewn across every surface, with display racks dumped haphazardly, either in the struggle or in random destruction.

The smell intensified with each careful step into the dimly lit interior, to the point where John pushed his forearm over his nose and breathed through the material of his sleeve. They came to the blocked-off counter and backdrop that marked the storage area for drugs; here, the devastation was much more extensive. Two bodies, both women, had been dragged to one corner and left; both had been attacked with the same kind of weapon as the older man, but their missing clothing made it likely their death had not been immediate. The glass-and-wood barrier of the dispensary was in shambles, and piles of medical debris littered every surface.

As John and Sherlock climbed over the remains of the last barrier, though, they found yet another corpse—this one a man, fully clothed and clutching a hammer in one hand. A large syringe protruded from his chest. “They fought back,” Sherlock said softly. “This is one of the looters.”

The remains of the controlled substances cupboard were obvious—a large wooden box had been chopped to kindling, with nothing but the shelves remaining of its former contents. “So much for pain meds,” John sighed. He turned and gestured to the piles of spilled drug packages littering the rest of the space behind the body of the dead looter. “Read these labels for me. We’re looking for antibiotics—tablets only, in undamaged packaging, I don’t trust anything else to be safe under the circumstances. If you see any kind of analgesics, that would be helpful as well. I’m sure all the opiates are gone, but they might have missed the milder things. Just pull out whatever you find—I’m going to put together a fuller med kit of bandaging and the like.”

John moved off to put together his collection, grabbing a cloth carryall from a pile lying under a spilled display case. He spent ten minutes putting together packaged bandages, cleaning wipes, a handful of stitch packets, a digital thermometer, some small surgical tools in a leather case—anything he came across that was both portable and potentially useful. He startled violently when Sherlock came silently up behind him and put a bony hand on his shoulder.

“Christ! I really need to put a bell ‘round your neck,” John panted, while Sherlock grinned
unrepentantly beside him.

“It’s good for you. Keeps you from getting too comfortable,” the detective said. John gave him a two-finger salute.

Sherlock held out his finds, but John shook his head. “Let’s look at it outside. It’s too dark in here, and the smell…”

They spread Sherlock’s gatherings on the pavement outside the shops, and John had Sherlock translate each label. John was disappointed at the selection of antibiotics—none were ideal for Sherlock’s treatment, and would be a poor stopgap. But he was pleased to note the two packets of a paracetamol-equivalent—not much use for real pain, but good for fever in a pinch. He picked up those, and two bottles of the chosen antibiotics, and shoved them in his carryall before turning to walk back to the Humvee across the square.

Their timing was accurate—Sherlock pointed across the plaza at his brother and Anthea leaving one of the shops, with G trailing behind. Each of them carried several bags.

“Were you successful?” Mycroft asked, as they all met at the truck. “We secured cooking oil, some tinned meats and fruit, salt and sugar, bottled juice. Almost everything else had been previously looted.”

Sherlock responded before John could. “The chemist had also been looted, but violently. Apparently, the policing aspect of the Exclusion Zone didn’t extend to these outlying areas. There are numerous victims; I suspect this is the case throughout the area.”

“Indeed,” his brother said. “Mr. Moran has a great deal to answer for.”

G made a rude noise. “People killing people to get what they want? That’s life. You don’t see any of our group here, do you? These were just free-lancers who saw an opportunity.”

“An opportunity created by the creation and release of an engineered virus,” Anthea snarled. “You don’t get to opt out of that responsibility.”

“Way above my paygrade, and still not my problem,” G said airily, and threw the carrier bags into the back. The rest of them climbed into the truck in glacial silence, but not before John snaked out one of the bottles of juice and a packet of antibiotics. He popped both open and handed them to Sherlock.

“Take this,” he said. “And drink as much of the juice as you can manage. It’s apple; you know you like that.”

“Do you have a lolly for me, if I drink it all?” Sherlock asked sourly. But he did drink perhaps a quarter of the bottle, so John still counted that as a win.

After perhaps 10 minutes of uncomfortable silence, Mycroft pulled out his phone. “Our destination is 32 kilometers northwest of Budapest, in a forested area that is lightly populated. We have perhaps another hour of travel time; should we perhaps stop for a brief meal if we see a likely spot? We may not get another chance before beginning the encryption.” He looked significantly at his brother; John picked up the cue.

“We need to, actually—otherwise that medication won’t sit well, and might actually be less effective.” John ignored Sherlock’s scornful look and raised his eyebrows at Anthea, who sighed but took up the gauntlet.
“Could we stop, please, G?” she said, in that very young voice. “I’m getting very hungry.” G huffed, but 5 minutes later pulled off the road into a layby, where they broke out a selection of tinned meat, cups of applesauce and more juice and shared it. Then they took another al fresco toilet break before piling back into the truck.

An hour later, they had followed a route that skirted the deserted urban areas of Budapest (including cutting wire and going off-road to avoid passing a checkpoint) and headed back out into the countryside. Sherlock was once again dozing in the corner, and Anthea had borrowed Mycroft’s phone to play Sudoku, while the rest of them stared glumly out at the passing scenery.

As they passed a large hunting lodge, Mycroft reached over and took the phone back from his aide. “It should be only a few minutes ahead,” he said. He held the map up to G. “Take this next right turn—it should have a gate of some kind, but most likely well off the road.”

Sherlock yawned and sat up, ready to engage now that something interesting was happening. He, like all of them, was ready to get this next challenge started.

G slowed as they came around the next turn, and angled the truck off the road and onto a rough track that veered off into the trees and headed uphill. Sure enough, they met a heavy metal gate a few hundred yards down the track. Mycroft opened his door and approached the gate; surprisingly, it wasn’t locked, and moved open easily, though it carried a fair coating of rust on each strut.

Mycroft walked back and sat down, looking troubled. “That is unexpected,” he said. “I can see the gate being unlocked, but it has seen recent use.”

“Probably just like the last one,” G said, unconcerned. “They probably keep a skeleton crew here. They’ll have gone, just like the last bunch. Bugged out with the evacuation.”

And they might have believed him—until they rounded the last curve, and saw the armoured personnel carrier parked on the grass in front of what was presumably the “abandoned” facility.

Chapter End Notes

Just a note about mass evacuations in general. I read something one time to the effect that evacuations of huge numbers of people almost always kill more people (in sometimes unexpected ways) that the original disaster probably would have, and that the effect extends far beyond the formal "evacuation zone". I thought it made sense to include a bit of that here.
Acute Infection: Part Six

Chapter Summary

Their new mission brings on a new player.

Oh, and Anthea stars in a bodice-ripper. Sort of.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

G, to his credit, didn’t panic and fishtail the truck back down the track. He carefully, cautiously shifted into reverse, turned around at low speed, and crept back down until they were roughly 300 yards from the facility. Then he pulled off the track into the trees and turned the engine off, and they all piled out to consider the situation.

“What the fuck do we do?” he said, addressing all of them rather than just Mycroft—rather flattering, John thought.

Mycroft was, of course, the first to respond nonetheless. “We’re going to require more information. It is not immediately obvious who’s inside: if it had been a strike force of some kind, we would have been instantly attacked. The fact that that didn’t happen seems to indicate either poor training or some sort of issue inside that has captured their attention.”

That last one was unsettling. “Is it…could the Ebola have reached here for some reason?” John asked, knowing it was unlikely but unwilling to ignore the possibility.

Sherlock shook his head. “If that were the case, the vehicle wouldn’t still be out front. Any survivors would have fled, and they would have used any available transport. It’s also vanishingly unlikely that the infection would appear only at this semi-abandoned installation when the surrounding areas are unaffected.”

“So, what do we have, then?” Anthea chimed in. “Really lazy, really stupid, or really dead?”

Well, that was succinct and to the point.

“I would prefer Option A—less scope for getting shot through sheer idiocy,” Sherlock said. “But Option C would work in a pinch, I suppose.”

Anthea frowned at him but didn’t respond.

“So—what do we do?” G asked again.

Anthea turned to Mycroft. “Let me?” she asked, while G and John looked on, mystified. Mycroft simply nodded. The young woman pulled off her parka and handed it to Sherlock, then reached up and jerked sharply at the corner of her off-white jumper, hard enough that the entire left side sagged open and exposed part of her bra, the sleeve dropping partway down her arm. She pulled her hair out of its tidy arrangement, so that it stuck out in random messy coils and draped over her shoulders. Finally, she pulled back her hand and slapped her right cheek, hard. The resulting red mark was highly visible.
Preparations completed, she looked to Mycroft, who gave her a critical eye before nodding again. Then she turned to G and held out her hand. “Gun,” she said firmly.

The criminal blinked, then knitted his brows and shook his head.

Anthea sighed. “Look, I need a weapon just in case, but I probably won’t have to use it. You can get the rifle out of the back and provide cover—that would be helpful to have anyway. But I want the handgun.” She stuck her hand back out firmly. G looked around at the rest of them, in an agony of indecision, before slowly handing the gun over. Anthea gave him a blinding smile and took her parka back from Sherlock, tucking the gun into one of the large interior pockets, and G wandered morosely to the back of the truck to haul out the large-caliber rifle strapped along the left-side interior wall.

Five minutes later, they had crept their way carefully back up the track to the facility; the personnel carrier was still there, parked on the lot out front. John noticed now that it had clearly been there for some time: there were small piles of snow blow up on the bumpers and at the base of the windshield, even though it hadn’t snowed in several days and the ground was almost clear of it.

There was no indication of movement from within the facility; John wasn’t sure if that was reassuring or not.

John and Sherlock positioned themselves behind a copse of trees to the left of the doorway to the facility; G and Mycroft vanished into the brush on the other side. Once G was out of earshot, Sherlock gestured to John’s parka. “Put your hood up,” he said, doing the same with his own. “She’s carrying her coat, and it has the communicator in it, remember? Might be needed, but I’d prefer G wasn’t aware of the existence of those.” John complied, and Sherlock helped him find the tiny toggle that turned the units on.

And then Anthea’s stage show began.

“Oh, help!” she cried, in perfect Hungarian. “Please help me—please…” she continued, letting her voice trail off into a tearful moan. She staggered pitifully across the clearing, passing the vehicle in the open lot before tottering towards the doorway. Then she raised one shaking hand and slapped at the metal doors, still making little broken sounds, before sliding bonelessly to the ground at the doorframe.

There was a long, breathless pause. The doors stand resolutely shut, and Anthea continued to lie, draped like a blushing Victorian heroine, across the threshold. But John saw her head suddenly lift, and she spoke, again in Hungarian, to what must have been someone inside. Neither Sherlock nor John could hear the conversation, but Anthea stayed in character and didn’t seem especially alarmed. She suddenly rose to her knees and pulled her parka on, flipping the hood up. John jerked as the tiny communicator in his hood crackled to life.

“Tell me the entry codes,” Anthea said softly. Sherlock calmly responded, listing off a string of numbers in a low voice—evidently Mycroft had shared information, this time. Good thing—it wasn’t likely that the Great Man himself could have responded without giving the game away to G.

Across the open lot, Anthea stood and reached for the numbered keypad to the right of the door,
talking inaudibly to whoever was on the other side of the door the whole time. She made what were
evidently intentionally incorrect entries twice, resulting in a spark of red light from the keypad. But
finally, she punched in numbers again, and the doors slid slowly open.

Anthea, when the movement started, abruptly straightened her posture, moving rapidly to stand fully
out of the opening doorway, and pulling G’s large gun from the pocket of her parka. She extended
her arms competently, the weapon steady as a rock, and called out in Hungarian.

John stood, hyperaware of the movement from inside the facility, braced for gunfire and possible
casualties. He was startled, then, to see Anthea move forward and grab the figure barely visible in the
doorway—and to hear Sherlock suddenly burst into laughter behind him. Because, as it turned out,
the figure Anthea pulled forward, still chattering in Hungarian, was a 12-year-old boy—a boy who,
as soon as he stepped outside, launched himself at the startled woman, hugged her tightly, and burst
into overwrought tears.

The boy’s name was Andras—Anthea had established that through the door, though she’d had no
idea, until he stepped out, how very young he was. It took almost 10 minutes of crooning and patting
to calm him down—Anthea couldn’t detach him from her chest for the first 5 of those minutes. The
child was violently opposed to going back into the facility, breaking into hysterical cries when the
woman tried to gently steer him inside. In the end, they all walked back to the truck and climbed in,
if only to get out of the cold.

Sherlock, surprisingly without prompting, dug into his treasured stash of chocolate and handed one
of treats to the boy, who took it and devoured it in three bites. The food had a calming effect,
thankfully—this time, when Anthea asked him a question, he answered without tears.

As the boy talked, Sherlock translated for John. “He came here three days after the evacuation. His
parents are dead, and he lives with his much-older cousin. The cousin worked as a guard here, and
knew the entry codes. When the order to evacuate came, all of their neighbors left, but the cousin
decided that this would be a golden opportunity for him and his friends to take whatever was worth
stealing, leaving the doors open afterward as if looters had managed to force their way in. He
brought Andras along because the boy is very good with electronics—the cousin and his cohorts
thought Andras could override any security systems other than the doors.”

The boy pointed back towards the personnel carrier as he spoke. “They rode up here in the vehicle
out front—the cousin had charge of it so that he and the rest of his squad could make it to his post
even if heavy snow fell—but had to abandon it here when it ran out of petrol.”

The boy was becoming visibly upset again; Anthea put a consoling hand on his shoulder.

“The child managed to get the main system online, though they had difficulty making use of it since
none of them had more than rudimentary Russian skills. It was taking a long time; his cousin and the
other men went outside to smoke while leaving Andras inside to continue working.”

The boy was sobbing openly now; Sherlock passed him another chocolate bar, which was refused. Sherlock laid it on the seat beside him before continuing.

“Somehow Andras made a mistake,” Sherlock said, his voice quieter now as the child’s distress
grew. “The system suddenly closed and locked the doors, with him inside, and his cousin’s code would no longer work to open them—apparently, there are hierarchical levels of entry codes, and the cousin’s version wouldn’t override security protocols. And so, after what was evidently a short period of time, the men outside left—and never came back. He has been here, by himself, for 4 days now.”

There was an appalled silence in the car, save for the boy’s desolate sobs. Finally, “Poor little sod,” G said.

“Just so,” Mycroft added bleakly.

When Andras finished speaking, Anthea gave him a brisk hug and handed him the second chocolate bar, which quickly went the way of the first. When he finished, the child wriggled awkwardly in his seat; John, more familiar with children than the others, knew what that meant.

“He needs the loo,” he told Anthea, who turned to Andras and spoke to him quietly. The boy blushed and nodded, so Anthea opened the door and ushered him out. The rest followed; they might as well get back inside and get to work, and it would be dark before long, this time of year.

Andras had just returned from his visit to the bush when G stepped forward, raised the rifle, and said “Sorry, kid” before preparing to fire. In the blink of an eye, though, Anthea glided over and shoved the barrel of the handgun into the nape of his neck, while Sherlock grabbed Andras’ arm and shoved him roughly behind the truck, barking a command in Hungarian. John could hear Andras’ panicked breathing from where he stood, but the boy didn’t run, thank God.

G jerked his head angrily and held the rifle in position, aiming roughly behind the truck. “What the fuck are you doing? We can’t let him go, and we sure as hell can’t take him with us. We’ve no choice.” He glared at Mycroft, since Anthea was still firmly behind him.

“But he needs the loo,” Mycroft said coolly. “We can and will release him, once we get back into a populated area. He doesn’t pose any danger, either to us or this operation.”

“No!” G barked. “Hell, no. That’s not your call to make. You say how this goes, and I say he has to go. Get Mr. Moran on the phone—we’re going to sort this out, right now.”

“No!” G snapped. “You need to understand some things first. Item one: you are not in control here. You are a functionary at best, a flunky at worst. You have no function in this operation beyond transport and, in a minimal sense, security. If anything happens to either my brother or myself, the mission fails—and you fail with it. It is very unlikely that Moran would be forgiving, don’t you think?” He reached over and grabbed the barrel of the rifle; after a brief battle of wills, G reluctantly surrendered it.

“Item two,” the Great Man continued, “this child poses no danger, either to our mission, or to us personally. He was here as a thief, and his only local contact has abandoned him. To expose our presence here would be to expose his own, and that would go badly for him just as much as for us.”

He moved over and handed the rifle to John, who took it and held it loosely at the ready. “And finally, item three: I will remind you that we now hold all of the weapons. If you harm this child, or tell Moran of his existence when next we call, I will personally blow your head off and bury your
body where it will never be found—in fact, if the boy were not standing right here, I might have already done so. I would report your loss to Moran as the result of an attack by looters, and we would continue on our way as if you never existed. Do you believe for one second that Moran would do anything other than ignore what happens to you, so long as he gets what he wants?"

G stared for a long, long minute—and then, reluctantly, shook his head. Mycroft responded with a gracious smile.

“Excellent,” he purred. “We understand one another.” He tilted his head at Anthea, who pulled the barrel of the gun carefully away, while remaining alert and on guard.

Anthea was finally able, after much coaxing, to convince Andras to come back inside the facility (but only after John helped G haul a heavy metal locker across the main doorway, so that the doors couldn’t close). The boy never strayed more than 4 feet from her side, going so far as to hunch outside the doorway to the toilet when she used the facilities. The young woman took it all in stride, though she did gently tease him when she came back out to find him clutching her parka to his chest as a makeshift security blanket.

And Andras proved surprisingly helpful. He led Mycroft and Sherlock to the control room, and was able to explain clearly what he had done before the doors slammed shut. The brothers looked mildly impressed at what the child had managed to accomplish before disaster struck; Sherlock noted that it was particularly unlikely that Andras had gotten as far as he had without any kind of formal training. Mycroft nodded and watched the boy with a considering sort of look.

Once Mycroft and Sherlock got involved in breaking down the various historical overlays of encryption on the equipment, there wasn’t a lot for the rest of them to do. John knew from experience that Sherlock, at least, wouldn’t surface until he had either solved everything, broken from frustration (and threw something, generally) or collapsed, and it was reasonable to expect that Mycroft was just the same.

After a couple of hours spent wandering through the empty hallways, finding nothing more interesting than bunkrooms, a dining hall (once again stocked with ancient rations, mixed in with more-modern fare), and an abandoned supply of porn, John went looking for Anthea and Andras, finding them playing games on Mycroft’s phone in the entranceway.

“Should we try to pull together something for dinner?” John asked. “You know those two will never think of it, but it’s nearly 7 and I’m getting peckish.”

Anthea turned to Andras and said something in Hungarian; the child smiled and nodded his head. “Let’s, then,” she said. She stood and started walking down the corridor towards the dining hall. “I hope you know how to cook, though,” she continued. “My skills start and end at scrambled eggs, sausages and French toast.”

“Certainly,” John said, with a mock bow. “I have cooked my way across a couple of continents, at this point. Campfires, mess halls, London flats—have saucepan, will travel. It’s not fancy, but I’ve never had any complaints.” Well, not strictly true—but then, Sherlock complained about everything.

Forty minutes later, the four of them (G having stalked into the kitchen area halfway through the
preparation—it was unclear where he’d been, but Mycroft had confiscated his satellite phone, so there wasn’t much damage he could do) sat down to a meal of pasta (with a sauce made from tinned, evaporated milk, ground parmesan cheese and pieces of bacon cut off a slab John found in the still-operating refrigerator) and tea, supplemented by a concoction made from tinned pears collected from the grocer’s in Szeged. Anthea had also rummaged through the storage room of Russian rations and come back with another metal canister of chocolate bars—Sherlock would be thrilled.

Andras ate like a starved dog, shoveling in food as if fearing it would evaporate at any moment. Anthea noticed John watching.

“He didn’t really know how to cook anything on his own, and he couldn’t read the Russian labels,” she said softly. “The last two days, he just opened tins and ate whatever was inside.” John suppressed a shudder at the thought of what would have happened to the boy if they hadn’t come. One life saved in all of this mess, anyway.

When they were finished, John left the other three to clean up while he took plates to the Holmes brothers, still ensconced in the control room. Both men were frowning at their respective computer screens; Mycroft, at least, looked up at John’s entrance and gave a distant smile.

“Oh,” he said. “You cooked—I know the extent of Anthea’s skills.” Another small, wry smile. There was a story there, perhaps.

John placed the plates on the desktop in front of each of them, as well as bottles of juice. “Nothing fancy, but it tastes pretty good. And it’s something Sherlock normally likes, but for the lack of peas.” He nudged the detective’s shoulder as he spoke, and got nothing but dropped eyebrows and an irritated huff.

Mycroft picked up his fork and dug in, while Sherlock continued to ignore his portion. John dug into his pocket for one last remaining item before pushing the issue.

“Here,” he said, holding out the next dose of antibiotics. “You need to take these, and you have to eat something with it, or you’ll start having stomach issues again. And juice isn’t going to cut it,” he added, as Sherlock reached for the bottle. The dropped eyebrows segued into a full-blown scowl.

“I can eat it later…” Sherlock began, in a long-suffering tone.

“No, you can’t,” John countered. “We can put it in the fridge, but we have no way to heat it back up other than on the stove, which you will never do. And you know how much you hate it cold.”

“Sticky,” Sherlock shuddered, while still casting his eyes back to his computer screen.

“Yep, sticky,” John agreed. “So, eat at least half of this, and I’ll go away and let you get back to your puzzle. Although I did make pudding if you want it.” He had, actually—a crumble made from the tinned pears and a package of pre-made bread dough he found in the refrigerator. From behind him, Mycroft made a mildly interested sound, and John chuckled.

“Here,” he said, handing the medication to the older man. “You keep him eating, and I’ll go get some for both of you. I know he’ll eat it once he smells it.”

When John returned with the sweet, Sherlock had managed to eat roughly a third of his portion and was still picking fitfully at the remainder. He perked up, though, at the smell of brown sugar and honey wafting off the bowls in John’s hands.

“Knew that would get you,” John laughed. “There’s more in the kitchen as well—midnight snack, maybe.” Or, knowing Sherlock’s tastes, breakfast. Either way, extra calories were all to the good.
After cleaning up from their successful meal, John, Anthea, G and Andras settled down in the staff quarters, where there was an old, battered sofa and a plain wood table and chairs, as well as a non-working telly that looked older than any of them. Andras trotted off shortly after they arrived, and came back with an armful of games—checkers, chess, and a pack of greasy cards. G, who had been sulking throughout the meal preparations and cleanup, sneered but stayed silent.

They played, in varying combinations, for the next 3-odd hours, interrupted only by John’s period (compulsive) checks on the progress of the brothers, who didn’t always seem aware that he was there. John wasn’t sure if that was good news or bad. Anthea and Andras migrated to one of the bunkrooms at about 10, after Andras eyelids grew noticeably heavy. John and G eventually headed towards the larger, second room an hour or so later, Anthea had loaned John Mycroft’s phone (and the charger—he could use the phone only so long as he stayed close enough to the electrical outlet so that it could stay plugged in), and he had managed to download a copy of a book he’d been meaning to read.

G slept right through it, but the brothers woke John when they came to the bunkroom at midnight—Mycroft was essentially herding his brother, who continued to look longingly towards the door (and, presumably, his computer terminal).

“We agreed,” Mycroft said firmly. “When your headache reached the point where you could no longer calculate without a pencil and paper, you would stop for the night. And we were at that point, weren’t we?”

Sherlock nodded sullenly before dropping onto one of the unoccupied bunks, still in his clothes, while Mycroft settled down on another. Within ten minutes, all was quiet again, and John drifted off.

John wasn’t sure what awakened him; it was very late, most likely between 4 and 5 am. He glanced over for the phone, and found it had been unhooked from the wall charger. Rolling over, he saw the two Holmes brothers, sitting on Mycroft’s bunk with the phone between them, using it as a nightlight of sorts. Their hands were flying, in a silent, sign-language argument—the nature of the conversation clear from the expressions on their faces.

Mycroft suddenly looked over and saw that John was awake. With a wary look over at the still-snoozing G, he gestured for John to come join them.

As soon as John sat on the edge of the bunk, Mycroft reached out and began tapping Morse code onto his arm.

*There is at least some nuclear material remaining here*, John “read*. **My brother was intending to sneak back and sabotage the installation prior to our departure, so that our breaking of the encryption won’t leave that material in Moran’s hands. But to do so would mean that G would know of the sabotage, and the only way to keep him from telling Moran would be to kill him. I*
have no qualms about that, but I would also have to lie to Moran and tell him that yet another facility was empty. And the likelihood that Moran wouldn’t almost immediately hear about such sabotage, given that it occurred as soon as we departed, and draw his own conclusions…you see the issue.

And John did. They couldn’t put usable nuclear material in Moran’s hands—not without doing everything possible to prevent its use, at least.

John looked at Sherlock, and started tapping on his leg, while Sherlock “translated” into sign language for his brother. *How were you planning to sabotage the site?*

Sherlock, looking very-so-slightly guilty, edged over and took his parka from a hook on the wall, fishing his hand into one of the deep pockets contained in the back lining. When he pulled his hand back out, he was holding a brick of plastic explosives—the same kind of brick that had lined the walls at their last location.

John felt his mouth gaping embarrassingly before managing to close it with a snap. *You stole explosives. And have been carrying them around. In your coat pocket,* he tapped, wishing there was a way to shout in Morse code.

Sherlock nodded, in that “why on Earth is there a problem with this?” sort of way that he always tried on when he knew he was in a losing argument. Mycroft rolled his eyes.

John took a long, steadying breath before continuing. *All right, then. You want to bring this place down, so the stuff can’t be used, even after we unlock everything. So, you hook everything up and set a timer for, oh, 3 or 4 days from now. How will Moran link that with us? Why is that a problem? It would look like looters broke in."

Sherlock looked at his brother before answering. *There are no timers. I only just had time to grab the explosives and hide them from G. I have a remote detonator, but it must be manually operated, and the operator can’t be more than roughly 50 yards away.* He wasn’t still signing for his brother, but Mycroft already knew this, clearly—hence the argument earlier.

John could see why Mycroft was not buying this. *So, there would be two options—either we blow this as we’re ready to leave, so we would have to deal with G, and Moran would know virtually immediately what was up. Or someone would have to stay behind and do it."

Sherlock belatedly signed for his brother; the older man nodded when he was finished, then reached out to tap on John’s arm again. *Sherlock was proposing that he detonate the explosives as we were leaving, and that we deal with G and make up some tale that makes him responsible for the damage. Moran is many things, but “stupid” is not among them. I can see no way in which this approach will succeed.* This time Mycroft translated for Sherlock, who scowled and folded his arms across his chest. John had no illusions about what “dealing” with G meant.

The brothers, after a pause, returned to their BSL argument, hands flying. But John—John had had a thought. He didn’t like it, knew that Anthea wouldn’t like it, felt like an unmitigated bastard for even considering it. But the more he thought about it, the more he saw it as the only possible answer.

He reached out and tapped Mycroft’s leg for attention—in this instance, Mycroft would certainly be the more rational of the two (well, the more cold-blooded, certainly). *I know how this can work,* he tapped, while Mycroft belatedly signed for Sherlock. *We can use Andras.*
"Hierarchical levels of security" in computers is a real thing. It's like when you get one of those dreaded "you do not have administrative rights" messages--you and the admin are both authorized to do stuff with whatever program you're working on, but the admin's permissions supersede yours.
Acute Infection: Part Seven

Chapter Summary

The Holmes boys explain their plan to use Andras, including what is to happen to Andras thereafter. It is, after all, an ill wind that blows no good...

And, in news that surprises exactly no one, no one likes G anymore.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After their silent “conversation”, John and the Holmeses laid back down and at least pretended to sleep for the reminder of the night. John was quite sure Sherlock was the leading pretender, since the detective was already up and pacing when John awoke at just past six to hit the loo. When John returned to the bunkroom both of the brothers were gone, though G continued to snore from his corner cot. John felt a certain amount of satisfaction in giving the criminal’s cot a kick with his boot, barking “breakfast” as he wandered off towards the dining hall without looking back.

Anthea and Andras were chattering away in Hungarian when John walked in, and Mycroft (Mycroft!) was working at the stove on something that smelled wonderful. Sherlock was glowering at Mycroft’s phone, holding it out to John in outrage when he entered.

“Those idiots are trying to extend the Exclusion Zones,” he complained. “As if that will somehow prevent any recurrence of the virus, even though not a single new outbreak has been reported in the intervening week.”

“It’s political in-fighting between Russia and the former satellite countries,” Mycroft said, without looking away from his skillet. “The Eastern Europeans are terrified that Russia will use the ‘epidemic’ as a pretext for moving in troops to ‘prevent a breakdown of order’.” He turned around, spatula in hand, and raised his eyebrows. “Ironically, they are very likely correct. And, as I have attempted to explain to my brother,” (several times, John thought, going by the hints of exasperation in Mycroft’s normally bland tones), “in the end, it does no real harm, beyond spending a few million additional Euros, and keeps people out of our way for the time being.”

Sherlock sniffed his disdain. “God save us from politicians.” He looked scornfully at his sibling. “Present company included.”

G trudged in as they were organizing plates and silverware, dropping into a chair with a scowl. “We need to call Mr. Moran. We were supposed to be finished with this location already, and on our way to the next.”

“In due time,” Mycroft said coolly. “We have to eat. Anthea and I have made arrangements for Andras’ departure; my brother and I will complete our last few tasks and upload the necessary codes.
while Anthea drives Andras to the edge of the Zone and sees him on his way.”

G’s scowl deepened. “She can’t leave without me. Non-negotiable. If my truck goes anywhere, I’m in it.”

Mycroft gave a mildly theatrical sigh. “I see no reason why not, though it’s nonsensical. What is she likely to do with a 12-year-old in tow?”

“I don’t know. That’s the problem,” G snarled. “I don’t trust you on anything to do with that little bastard.” He glared at Andras, who looked startled and a little alarmed, moving subtly closer to Anthea.

Mycroft held up one pale, aristocratic hand. “Enough. If it will ease your concerns, we will translate our conversation for you when we explain to the boy where he is to go. Will that suffice?”

“Wouldn’t hurt,” G huffed, before subsiding in the face of the plates of food Mycroft dealt out to the group. It was certainly a rustic meal—a form of hash made from onions, potatoes (both bags found in the storage room, past their prime but edible), and the last of the bacon John had used for dinner earlier, washed down with strong tea and followed by servings of leftover pear crumble. Much of the latter ended up on Sherlock’s plate; Anthea succumbed to the detective’s longing looks and refused her portion, and Mycroft sighed and passed his over as well. John slapped his hand when the younger man reached for his, too.

“I took my medication, and you always want me to eat more!” Sherlock complained, an incipient strop apparent in his tone.

John opened his mouth, closed it, sighed, and pushed the bowl over.

When everyone finished, Anthea moved Andras over to the battered chairs and sofa across the room, and the rest of them followed. John dropped onto the sofa and was surprised to see Sherlock park himself there as well, quite close. The reason, though, became clear as soon as Anthea started to talk.

The ensuing conversation was one of the stranger ones John had ever been a part of. As Anthea put her hand on Andras’ shoulder and began to speak in Hungarian, Mycroft simultaneously began a quiet translation into English for G. Sherlock, whose arm had mysteriously found its way behind John’s back, began to tap out yet another translation in Morse code—and John quickly realized why, as the disparity between the versions became clear.

As Anthea spoke to the child, Mycroft began to “translate”: “We will be dropping you at the border of the Exclusion Zone. Anthea will explain that we found you, abandoned, as we were evacuating, and we’ve been stranded for several days as one of us was ill. We will give you a sum of money to pay for train fare to your aunt’s house in Germany.”

Sherlock simultaneously tapped: When you reach the border of the Exclusion Zone, Anthea will use a special code to identify herself to the authorities, and will then use their phone to contact help. We will give you the telephone number she will be calling as well. Anthea will have to leave, but someone will come and collect you within a couple of hours.
Mycroft said: “You should ask the authorities at the border to call your aunt. If your aunt then calls the phone number we will give you, the British consulate will arrange for a German passport for you.”

Sherlock tapped: *The person will take care of you for the next couple of days, and then help with the detonator. Afterwards, as Anthea told you earlier, they will take you to the school we spoke about. I know you don’t want your aunt to know where you are; if you like, we can send word that you were killed once the bunker explodes.*

Andras spoke, and Mycroft translated: “What will happen if my aunt doesn’t answer the phone? Who will take care of me?”

Sherlock tapped: *How can I reach you if anything goes wrong? What do I do if no one comes?*

Anthea spoke soothingly, and Mycroft continued: “The authorities will make sure you’re cared for until they can reach her. Don’t worry.”

Sherlock tapped: *You can call back on the same number, and tell whoever answers that you have been travelling with the Ugly Duckling, and require immediate assistance as per the earlier message. Someone will come, I promise. And you will always reach me, eventually, on the other number I had you memorize.*

Andras nodded solemnly, his eyes suspiciously bright, before launching himself at Anthea and gripping her like a drowning man. The young woman glared at the rest of them over the boy’s shoulder, and motioned them out of the room with her eyes.

As Anthea helped calm Andras and gather his few pitiful things into one of the rucksacks, Mycroft pulled the phone out of his pocket and motioned John and Sherlock back towards the control room. G trailed moodily along behind.

Mycroft ticked the phone over to “speaker” mode, dialed, and when the line was answered, simply barked “Moran,” then waited.

After perhaps five minutes, Moran’s drawling tones boomed from the speaker. “Well, where are you? Got my goodies yet?”

“Not quite,” Mycroft answered calmly. “We have perhaps another hour of work to complete the decoding; my brother identified an unexpected, fourth level of meddling late last night—perhaps Croatians, we’re not certain, but in the end, we were able to prevent the intended effect of the safeguards.”

Moran gave a huff of annoyance. “The deal was, you do one of these places a day. You’re falling behind, and I’m not noted for my patience.”

Mycroft was not impressed. “Your man can verify that we have been working diligently—long hours after he went to bed, in fact. Identifying and revising thirty years of inexpert tampering is not an exact science, no matter how talented the investigator. I assure you, we have as much motivation as you to be through with this process.”
Sherlock spoke up suddenly. “Our next location is just over the Bosnian border. We can easily be there by just after lunchtime. I believe that location is expected to have been populated only by the Russians—it should be easy enough to return to our intended schedule, I would think.” He sounded profoundly bored with the whole thing.

“Ooh, another party heard from. How’s it hangin’, Junior? Still the little delicate flower?” Moran asked jovially. John could see the man’s smirk in his mind’s eye.

“At least I’m not afraid of the dark,” Sherlock observed drily, looking over at G, who flushed with rage but stayed silent.

“Oh, G has other redeeming qualities,” Moran said with a chuckle. “Not the least of which is his willingness to do basically anything I tell him to. And in this case, I’m telling him to make very sure that you DO make your visit to the next site by no later than, oh, 1 PM. He can call to confirm once you arrive. G, you got that?”

“Yessir,” G said. “1 PM. We’ll call you.”

In rapid time thereafter, Andras and Anthea were bundled in the truck, with additional calm assurances from Mycroft that all would be well. G snarled and slammed the doors, and spun off in a hail of gravel and old snow, while Sherlock blew him a kiss ironically.

“Must you antagonize him?” Mycroft sighed. “Dealing with open animosity is so tiresome.”

“It passes the time,” Sherlock said, and wandered back towards the entrance to the bunker.

While the Holmes brothers went back to finish up their tasks in the control room, John busied himself with packing up their remaining food supplies and equipment, stacking it in the entryway for easy loading into the truck. Then he went back to the dining hall and made three cups of strong coffee (extra sugar in Sherlock’s) and carried them to the work area.

Mycroft looked up with every indication of real pleasure when John walked in. “Oh. Thank you, John. Just what the morning needed.” He took a long swig before leaning back, to hold the cup between his palms.

“We just finished,” Sherlock added, making a last few keystrokes before powering off. “All we have to do now is pass on the encoding details on the phone, and we can leave.”

John dropped into one of the extra chairs—this would likely be his only chance to get a straight answer out of the two, given G’s rare absence. “So, what else did you give Anthea to give to Andras? And what did you do about the detonator? I’m sure it wasn’t in his rucksack—even G would have checked that before letting him go.”

“Sewn into the lining of his coat,” Sherlock replied. “It’s not all that big, and the hood of his parka is quite bulky.”

Mycroft took up the reply from there. “She has placed an encrypted message there as well, which Andras knows to hand off immediately to his rescuer. It gives the location of each of our remaining sites—I have cautioned them against making any move against the locations without hearing from
me, but also given a failsafe—if we go silent for more than four days, they will take steps. It is a gamble—we can’t guarantee this won’t alert Moran’s insider, but we have to take the chance we’re offered.” He paused, a concerned frown flitting briefly across his face before he continued. “Andras can tell them about our preparations for this site, and give them the detonator.”

“Yeah, speaking of,” John interjected. “I know you set the explosives. But won’t that just release the radioactivity into the surrounding area? We told Andras no one would be hurt.”

Sherlock shook his head. “No, that amount of explosive isn’t sufficient to destroy the whole bunker. But I have placed it in the keystone of the archway of the entrance—it’s all stone, in case you didn’t notice. The blast will collapse the entire arch and drop several hundredweight of large stone blocks into the entire threshold. That will keep the bunker, and the materials, out of reach of Moran’s people until the Hungarian military receives an ‘anonymous tip’ to investigate the explosion. That kind of information will bring troops round, despite the Exclusion Zone, and chances are the whole thing will be emptied out and deactivated.”

“So long as the insider doesn’t cotton onto the trick,” John said.

“Yes. That,” Mycroft said solemnly.

After a pause, John turned back to the other thing that had been tickling his mind since that schizophrenic “conversation”. “What was that about a school? And Andras not wanting his aunt to know where he was?”

Mycroft opened his mouth to reply, but Sherlock beat him to it. “This is how Mycroft collects some of his minions,” the detective smirked. ‘He breeds them, essentially. There’s a boarding school in Frankfurt that caters to the children of ‘diplomats’—read ‘spooks’—and also has a sizable budget allocated to charity students. Orphans, that kind of thing. When my brother or his group encounter a likely prospect on field operations—a child with the right kind of raw talents, and no viable caregiver—a place is made available if the child wishes. Of course, it’s not required—there are also sympathetic foster parents available, if need be. But most of them are so grateful they cheerfully toddle off to indoctrination, like good little pre-spies.”

John nodded—he’d suspected something like that, and it had been clear from the first that both brothers had been impressed by Andras’ ability. “But what about the aunt? Why wouldn’t he want her to know where he was?”

Mycroft’s face took on that stillness that John was learning hid anger. “When the boy’s parents died, she tried to wrest control of him from the cousin. She is a devout Catholic—a member of a fundamentalist sect of very strict rigour. She made it clear that she would ‘cleanse’ Andras of the influences his parents had allowed him to become ‘contaminated’ by.”

“Such as?” John asked.

“Oh, attendance at a non-Catholic school, for one,” Mycroft said dryly. “And exposure to such ‘dangers’ as the internet and computers.”

“And tolerance for the ungodly,” Sherlock sneered. “Especially Andras’ online friends in a gay-friendly chat room. I suspect that Andras himself is questioning his orientation; I’m certain that he is painfully aware what reception he would have from his aunt in that area.”

“Good Lord,” John blinked. “No wonder the school sounded like a better plan.”

“And Mycroft gets another new recruit. It’s a good day all around,” Sherlock chirped, with a
mocking smile.

Something in Mycroft’s stillness, however, made John ask one additional question. “And whose idea was it first? Who talked to Andras and found out about his aunt? Anthea?”

He was not surprised to see a tiny flush of pink touch Sherlock’s cheekbones, before the detective stood and fussily smoothed down his jumper. “It was…I was questioning him about his cousin’s departure. It was a normal offshoot of the conversation,” he said stiffly. “The school seemed a logical alternative to an unpleasant prospect; to overlook him would be a waste of valuable potential.”


The truck was back in less than an hour. G came stomping in first, followed by a seethingly furious Anthea, complete with red eyes. Sherlock raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

“He wouldn’t let us stay more than five minutes,” Anthea snarled. “That poor child was crying his eyes out when we left, and that sadistic son of a bitch dragged him away and shoved him towards the border guard, and then hauled me back to the truck.”

“And?” Sherlock said after a moment.

“I kicked him in the balls in the process. Twice.” She nodded graciously at Sherlock’s appreciative look before marching off to collect her things for departure.

“That is one formidable woman,” John said after a moment’s pause (managing, just, to avoid reflexively covering his crotch).

“One of her many sterling qualities,” Mycroft said with a wry smile.

Their departure, when it came, was decidedly anticlimactic, considering the drama that preceded it. John watched as Mycroft pulled up Moran’s website ‘front’ on the phone, and entered a string of numbers and letters in as Sherlock read them off from a handful of scribbled notes. Then the older man powered off the phone and placed in back in his coat pocket before they all started grabbing rucksacks and boxes to load the truck. Five minutes later, they were underway.

It was chilly. Very chilly. Both physically—the temperature had dropped overnight, and new snow now fell steadily as they wound their way on back roads, heading for the border—and emotionally. Anthea looked wrung out; she stayed in the front seat beside G, but stared stonily out the window. G, in his turn, jerked the wheel roughly around corners, gunned the engine relentlessly, and ignored all of them.

By contrast, the rear seat inhabitants were at least not furious with each other. John was admittedly
getting rather tired of sitting in the center for hours at a time—his legs weren’t that short (unless compared to the stork-like appendages of the Holmes brothers). But it was a large truck, so it was bearable.

Mycroft had retreated into his head within ten minutes. It wasn’t quite as obvious as when Sherlock did it—the older man was able to give coherent responses to the outside world when prompted, unlike his brother (who had been known to stay oblivious to police sirens when sufficiently engrossed). But he was largely absent—a placeholder in a car seat.

Sherlock, on the other hand, was a bundle of agitation. Something, perhaps the lack of sleep last night, perhaps the antibiotics, had him edgy and anxious, and his tics were in full flight, his fingers fluttering restlessly against each other, his legs shifting constantly.

After the third time Sherlock bodily jerked and changed his position in the seat, John touched his arm.

“What’s wrong? Can I help?” John asked it very softly; Sherlock was much more likely to be honest if he didn’t have to play the stoic for his brother or Anthea.

“Nothing,” the detective muttered. “It’s just…I’m not…I don’t think the antibiotics are agreeing with me.” He waved a hand fitfully towards his forehead. “Headache. Stomach, to a degree, though nothing major. Some muscle pain. And no, before you ask, nothing centered on my chest—the incision is fine.”

John doubted that last, given the number of times he’d seen Sherlock’s arm resting against his side—that, too, was a ‘tell’. But it wasn’t worth making an issue of right now.

He slid his palm up and rested it on Sherlock’s forehead, while the man frowned but allowed it.

“No fever, at least,” he said with relief. “But the muscle pain—that’s not good. Could be the beginnings of an allergic reaction. The stomach and head as well. We’ll get you some of the paracetamol when we stop. But I think we’d better stop the drug for a day and see what happens.”

Sherlock gave a tiny sigh of relief. “Thank you, John,” he said quietly, before turning to the side and bracing his head against the side pillar, closing his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Extra super-duper bonus points to the first one to recognize the tiny little call-back to HLV...

Oh yeah—and NOT a cliffhanger. So there. (Maryagrawatson now has a chance to replenish her marshmallows).
Chapter Summary

The group encounters their first true opposition. John's skills help, but not enough, in the end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a long, chilly ride, and might have been painfully dull but for the glorious scenery out the car windows. John had always been impressed by mountains—raised in southern England, he’d been astounded by his first view of the towering ranges of Afghanistan, and he still retained that sense of awe at high, snowy peaks in pale blue skies. These mountains were very different from the brown, rocky terrain of the Middle East, but had their own kind of majesty—snow, forest and grey ragged stone as far as the eye could see. At one point, they passed the tumbled blocks of a medieval tower off in the distance; Sherlock perked up enough to regale them with gory tales of the Bosnian resistance against the invading Ottomans in the 14th century, trailing off only when they made their first rest stop.

John and Anthea rummaged in the back and produced juice, some tinned brown bread and the last of their tinned ham, and some of Sherlock’s precious stash of chocolate (the last given with a huff and a frown).

“We’re going to have to stop for food again soon,” John said in G’s general direction. “We don’t really have enough protein to keep us all going in this cold—we need to be taking in at least 3000 calories a day if we’re going to spend much time outdoors. Maybe we could just go to a small town outside of the Exclusion Zone and buy supplies?” John knew G, at least, would disapprove of that idea, but was surprised when the first negative response actually came from Mycroft.

“It’s too risky,” the bureaucrat said, shaking his head. “While Sherlock and I have exceptional language skills, we nonetheless will not pass as native speakers without considerably more recent practice than we’ve had. And a group of obvious foreigners, lacking the appropriate transit documents to match our UN truck, would raise questions with the local authorities that we simply can’t afford.”

“So, more pillaging and looting, I guess,” John said with a sigh. “Where’s the next likely area in the Zone we can hit? We need to do that as soon as we can or we’ll be dining on tinned peaches, powdered milk and chocolate.”

Sherlock pulled out Mycroft’s mobile—he’d apparently pickpocketed his brother again at some point in the trip. He scrolled through several scenes before responding. “Our location is near Tuzla. Once we finish the decryption, we could reach the edge of the Sarajevo zone in 90 minutes or so. There are numerous towns and villages that would serve.”

“That’s assuming the decryption is quick and easy,” Anthea chimed in. “Our track record to date doesn’t inspire confidence in that area, really.”

Sherlock scowled, and Mycroft made a small, discontented sound. “It’s hardly our fault,” the
detective sniffed.

“No, of course not,” Anthea said soothingly. “But the point is…”

“The point is, we’re going to have to decide what to do about food once we finish the job,” John said firmly. “But if the choice is between doing a little breaking-and-entering to steal ham and cheese in Tuzla at 2 AM or driving 2 hours to find an abandoned store in the Zone, I’ll vote for Option A.”

“Right there with you,” G piped up. No one responded.

As it happened, neither option applied in the end.

Their newest location was rather closer to civilization than the last two had been; the area around Tuzla had grown in population in the past 35 years, and what had once been a remote outpost was now less than 10 kilometers from the outermost suburbs. This location was also the furthest from one of the Exclusion Zones—Sarajevo was the nearest impacted city, and the edge of that zone was still 55 kilometers distant, so most of this area still retained at least a portion of its normal inhabitants.

They did approach from the least-populated side, so they encountered no more than the occasional anonymous vehicle. As they neared their destination and turned onto the road that headed up into the mountain pass where the site was located, though, they started noticing other things: evidence of the movement of heavy vehicles along the snowy roads.

“Did they bring troops into Sarajevo from here?” John asked, looking at what were clearly tracks from military vehicles of some kind—personnel movers, perhaps. “It looks like a concentration of trucks came through. Is there a base nearby?”

“Tuzla was the largest military airbase in the region during the Bosnian troubles,” Mycroft said. “They have reopened it to use it as a staging area for resources to support the Exclusion Zones. It’s not surprising that some of the equipment off-loaded there would be dispatched through this area on their way to Sarajevo.”

“But why these back roads?” John asked. “Why not just go the direct route?” He looked again at the muddied tracks. “Honestly doesn’t seem quite enough to have been a real caravan, either. Two, maybe three heavy vehicles, no more than that.”

“It’s a fair point,” Sherlock said, in a tone that indicated he was bored with the whole conversation, but endeavouring not to say so. “But in the end, it doesn’t matter. Let’s just get up the road and get this over with.” And so, despite John’s misgivings, G turned onto the next track that headed further up into the mountains.

The first intimation of trouble came with a glint of light through the trees. It was only just past 2 PM, still full daylight, but they now travelled through dense trees and deep snow, with heavy shadows
from grey clouds overhead. John, perhaps because of his earlier unease, saw it first and grabbed onto G’s shoulder. “Stop, now!” he snapped, while leaning far to the side to see out Mycroft’s window. G slammed the wheel over and spun to a stop.

“What? What’s the matter?” the criminal shouted.

“I saw something,” John said, still staring off into the trees. “A flash. A signal, maybe.” Mycroft and Anthea were now craning their necks, also looking for the source of the signal. Sherlock was doing something mysterious to Mycroft’s mobile. The detective continued fiddling for several more moments, before suddenly becoming rigid. “Oh,” he breathed, in a tone that had John turning right around, hackles raised.

“We have a problem,” Sherlock murmured, holding the mobile out, showing what seemed to be an overhead view of an area suspiciously similar to this one. John looked closer, and noted a cluster of vehicles dotted in openings in the tree line. Sherlock pulled the phone back and touched it briefly, changing the resolution.

“Here,” he said, pointing. “This is us, roughly. I managed to tap into a NATO satellite feed from an overhead pass made half an hour ago. You can’t see our truck, obviously—we weren’t here yet.” He tapped on the phone again before shoving it back over. “But here, here and here—you can see a gun emplacement, and several military vehicles. Someone has decided to move forces in to guard this facility. There’s no way we’ll get in, and we’ll be very lucky to get back out of here without being noticed. It may have already happened, in fact.” John took the phone and looked closely—it was just as Sherlock said. To forestall any objection, he handed the phone over the seat to G, who also looked closely before noticeably paling.

“We gotta get out of here,” the criminal said. “Right now.”

Sherlock had closed out of the satellite view, and was now ranging through topographical maps. “Don’t turn around,” he said. “Continue on for another 300 yards. There’s a small access road that will lead us more directly downhill and away from the site. It’s rough, but should be passable unless the snow is too deep.”

“Go slowly,” John added. “Noise carries up here, and the faster we go, the more we make. I don’t know if that signal means that they’d seen us. If not, let’s not do anything to call attention to ourselves.”

It was a good idea, and it might well have worked—if the signal hadn’t been exactly what John had feared it was. They had been seen. As soon as they pulled back onto the track and headed cautiously forward, they heard the roar of engines, multiple engines. Not close enough yet to pose immediate danger, but coming up fast.

G abandoned any attempt at stealth—clearly the veteran of many a car chase, he gunned the powerful engine and sent the big vehicle rocketing down the rutted track, slithering around the turns on the mix of snow and mud. When he reached the opening for the access road Sherlock had described, he barely slowed into the turn, and the truck lurched around and fishtailed dangerously before settling back on all four wheels.

The pursuing vehicles were closer now, the howls of their engines echoing across the forest. Looking back, John caught glimpses of movement through the trees, and a flash of a small jeep-like vehicle with a top gunmount in the lead. He had no sooner recognized that unit when a flurry of shots boomed out, and debris flew from the brush on the side of the trail to their rear.

“Getting the rifle,” John snapped, and crawled over the seat back into the cargo area. Anthea still had
G’s handgun, but that wasn’t going to be of much use at this distance, and would expose her unnecessarily. The rifle, though—that could give their pursuers cause to hesitate before getting too close.

The rifle was expensive and well-balanced; John was no true sniper, but he was competent, and the first-class scope on this gun would help. What wouldn’t help, though, was the violent bouncing and jerking along the rough trail; it couldn’t be helped, but it was like riding a bucking bronco while trying to hold steady and aim.

Because the rear windows didn’t open, John was forced to climb back (and over Sherlock, who shimmied to the side as John slid back over) to the side window and open it to shove the rifle through, while leaning out far enough for it to be a little alarming. He was gratified to feel Sherlock get a firm grip on his belt to hold him in place.

This whole process was complicated by John’s need to not actually injure anyone. He had no intention of shooting directly at legitimate military forces, guarding a facility in their own country. But he did need to find a way to stop the chase, or at least slow it down enough that G could break away from the pursuit.

His initial thought was to aim for overhanging tree branches; at close range, the rifle was powerful enough to drop a sizable branch that could block the track, at least until someone could stop the pursuit and drag it aside. That might be long enough for G to get them clear.

Four successive shots, though, proved the futility of that approach. The bouncing and jerking of the truck, combined with the need to quickly identify branches that could serve the purpose, was too difficult. Two shots were clear misses; a third was a glancing shot that did nothing more than break the chosen branch so that it swung in the breeze, and the fourth hit directly—and had no visible effect beyond a spray of bark.

Fine. He would have to shoot, very carefully, at the vehicles themselves (since he couldn’t shoot at the soldiers riding in them).

By now, the approaching jeep was visible at every turn, and shots (from only rifles, so far) periodically pinged off the armour of the Humvee or threw up snow and mud on the sides of the track. That track now angled down at an increasingly-steep angle; as they came around yet another sharp turn, their route suddenly opened out onto the side of the mountain and narrowed until it was just wide enough for one vehicle. On the outer edge, there was a sheer, stony drop-off to a barely-glimpsed river below.

John pulled the rifle back inside and changed sides, shuffling Mycroft and Sherlock aside to reach out the other window; the last thing he wanted was to be hanging out on the side that was nearly brushing the rough stone on the “mountain” side of the track. He once again carefully fed the rifle out while Sherlock held tight to his belt. He forced himself to ignore the all-too-clear view of open air below him, with the icy stream at the bottom.

Leaning carefully out and putting the sight to his eye, he stilled his breathing and waited for the pursuing jeep to round the corner, then squeezed off a shot, aiming for the left-side front tire. He missed, just—the shot slammed into the bumper, hard enough that the vehicle briefly lurched towards the drop as the driver frantically adjusted. The passengers in the jeep redoubled their efforts to shoot John, or, failing that, to return the favour by blowing out their tires. They were unsuccessful—either they weren’t very well-trained, or the constant jouncing and bobbing of the Humvee, coupled with its thick armour, foiled their efforts. One shot, though, ricocheted off the door a foot below John’s head and caused him to briefly drop back inside.
“We need a bit more distance,” John panted at G. “Can you give us just a little more speed? I want to put us out of range of their rifles, but not out of the range of ours.” It was a solid plan—G’s rifle was much more high-powered than the standard-issue version the pursuing troops were working with. It might give them enough of an advantage to be able to pull away while the jeep was busy dodging.

G nodded silently, and hit the gas. The Humvee lurched, bounced, and tore its way around the edge of the mountain, spitting mud and snow behind it, pulling noticeably apart from the jeep. John seized the moment and shoved the rifle back out, snapping off shots that just missed their intended target: the increase in speed had come with an increase in instability, unfortunately. One shot, snapped off just as the Humvee leapt up off a large bump, shattered the windshield on the jeep, as John held his breath in dismay. The driver wasn’t hit—John could see his startled face, now that the glass was gone. But he could also see movement on the top of the jeep—in the area of the large gun mounted on the back.

“Oh, Christ,” John spat, and dropped back into the seat. “Go, go, go!” he shouted, and G took him at his word.

“Everyone, get your belts on,” John added, strapping himself in as he spoke, watching to make sure the others complied. “Don’t know exactly what caliber that thing is, but it’s a lot bigger than anything we’ve got. Stay well down, below the windows. G, whatever happens around us, keep going—it’s our only chance with that thing.” The criminal bobbed his head and tightened his death-grip on the wheel, and the truck barreled its way downhill.

The first shot, when it came, gave an indication of the firepower available—a tree, clinging to the side of the hill above the track roughly 50 meters away, abruptly exploded and rained bits of burning wood and branches on the roof as they tore past. John could hear G, under his breath, muttering a constant litany of “fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck,” as the big man wrestled to keep the truck on the road. The rest of the passengers were silent, holding their breath and clutching the seats with sweaty hands.

The second shot was wide, sailing off into the void beside them before exploding eventually against the far side. G continued to swear.

The third shot—they had reached a brief stretch of more-level roadway, and G had urged the Humvee to its highest speed yet. They pulled away from the underpowered jeep, and John almost, almost leaned back out with his rifle. And then he heard a sound he thought he’d forgotten, once he left Afghanistan—that piercing whistle of a close, incoming shell. As he flinched, as they all flinched, the shell sailed over their heads, impacting the track perhaps 30 feet ahead—and as they hurtled towards the impact site, they watched as the track trembled, and crumpled—and fell away down the side of the mountain, as they pitched into the opening and followed it down.

The next thing John was aware of was a grip on his wrist, and a voice in his ear. “John. John. Wake up, John. Please wake up.” It was Sherlock, using that high, tight tone that indicated panic, his breathing much too rapid.

John opened his eyes to distortion—a view so unexpected that it took his brain a moment to process what he was seeing.

He was still secured by his belt—they all were, thankfully, and aside from some minor bleeding and...
obvious bruising, they all seemed to be intact. The same could not be said, unfortunately, for the truck, which was now nestled on its side, cradled by a dark mass that proved to be tree branches. The wheels were still spinning—as John shook his head to clear it, G reached out and turned the engine off, and it was suddenly quiet.

“Try not to move,” Mycroft said into the silence. “I believe that we are balanced rather precariously, and I also suspect our pursuers are making sure that we are no longer mobile. It would be wise to pretend to be dead for a time, until we’re sure they’re gone.”

They had landed with John’s window facing the bottom of the gorge—he could see, now, that they had rolled perhaps halfway down the drop before catching up in the trees (thank God). That rolling explained the minor injuries they all bore—even secured with belts, that kind of tumbling had banged all of them repeatedly against the hard surfaces of the inside of the truck. John, perhaps because he’d still been clutching the rifle, had been less successful in bracing himself before the fall. He was aware, now, of a throbbing above his left eyebrow; lifting his hand, he encountered a pulsing goose-egg with a trickle of blood onto his fingers. That explained Sherlock’s panic, then.

Assess the situation. “Anyone hurt?” John asked. “Pain? Trouble breathing? Bleeding I can’t see?” The quiet chorus of “No’s” was reassuring.

After a quiet bit, G spoke. “So, what’s the plan?”

Sherlock took that one; his breathing had calmed, once he was assured of John’s wellbeing. “We wait, at least another ten minutes, to make sure they don’t decide to fire another shot at us. Then, assuming we don’t tumble the rest of the way down the mountain in the interim, we extricate ourselves, very carefully, and take whatever we can carry, which won’t be much in these conditions. We can head downhill in the short run—there’s certain to be some sort of walkable pathway along the river. We’ll have to climb back up to the road eventually, though—we need to get somewhere that we can steal transportation.”

That wasn’t exactly spectacular news. Losing everything but what they could carry in their rucksacks meant leaving most of the remaining food and supplies behind. And climbing—not one of John’s strengths, and not something he wanted to see Sherlock attempting in his current condition. Hopefully they’d be looking at 20 feet, not 200.

After an uncomfortable 10 minutes—now that the engine was off, the cold was increasingly noticeable—they heard an engine start, far above, and their pursuers drove away. Mycroft had the only view of the road, because of their position—he waited another 5 minutes before giving an “all clear”, and they each carefully undid their belts (not without a certain amount of fumbling and sliding. John ended up briefly in Mycroft’s lap, which drew a snort of amusement from Sherlock and a faint pink flush to Mycroft’s cheekbones). “Mature,” John muttered. “Very mature.” Sherlock smirked but subsided.

The truck was wobbly but secure, it seemed—no alarming lurches or slips when they moved, which made them feel brave enough to climb carefully out. They couldn’t immediately reach the ground—they had come to rest perhaps 8 feet in the air, wedged between two large trees. In the end, they set up a relay. Anthea, as the lightest, went first, dropping deftly from Mycroft’s extended hands to the snowy ground. When she moved out of the way, G followed. Mycroft also dropped, then turned and
looked up. “John, can you and Sherlock reach the back? It might be best to not open the back hatch. Since we know the open door didn’t destabilize things, we can use that as our unloading point.”

And so it proved. John, being smallest (as Sherlock couldn’t resist pointing out, again) climbed over the seatback and started handing over rucksacks, which Sherlock then dropped to G and Mycroft. The rifle was handed down rather more carefully. John looked longingly at their remaining food, but realized that any benefit would be outweighed by the effort they’d need to carry it. He started to climb out when Mycroft’s voice stopped him. “The canes, John. Don’t forget the canes.”

Ah yes, the mysterious canes, that both he and Mycroft supposedly “needed”. He’d largely forgotten about them. But he dutifully handed them over, and Sherlock dropped them to his brother before the detective climbed out and hopped to the ground. John took one last look, then climbed over and jumped down as well.

The trip down the hill was surprisingly easy—not too steep, and the packed snow cushioned their many slips and falls. It was cold, though not unbearable—but John was painfully aware that they had to be inside before night fell, or things would get very difficult indeed. For the time being, though, the exertion and their cold-weather gear kept them warm enough.

When they reached the bottom of the gorge, Sherlock gave a satisfied huff—just as he’d predicted, there was a flat area along the shore, just wide enough to act as a footpath. It was relatively smooth going—they occasionally had to climb over felled tree branches or large rocks, but it wasn’t especially strenuous.

They started off single-file, with Sherlock in the lead (he had stowed the topographical maps in his eidetic memory before their mad dash down the mountainside, so he had the clearest idea of where they were, and where their most-favourable exit point would be). John followed closely, just because he was well aware of Sherlock’s tendency to mentally “check out” during this kind of trek; he’d had to haul the detective out of bogs and away from steep drops too many times for his own comfort. Anthea and Mycroft stayed close, and G brought up the rear—it was clear that the criminal was out of his element here, a city creature stranded in the wilderness.

They stopped for a rest after an hour; John reached out and grabbed Sherlock’s arm, startling the younger man out of whatever reverie he’d been inhabiting while walking unconsciously along. They had reached a small cove that gave enough room to sit down on the scattered small boulders. Anthea dropped onto one with a grateful sigh, and the others followed suit. John took off his rucksack and dug around, coming out with a handful of Sherlock’s cherished chocolate bars, the one food item John had thought worth the effort to carry. The pleased expressions of his fellow travelers told him he’d made the right call.

“So,” John said, once he’d swallowed his last bite. “How far? And how high are we going to have to climb?” He was sure Sherlock knew, though the detective hadn’t bothered to share that information yet.

“Perhaps another 2 kilometers,” Sherlock said. “And I suspect the climb will be roughly 27 feet. But it’s the best exit spot—brings us up at the point where this track intersects with the main road.”

“We had best be moving, then,” Mycroft said. “Dusk will be coming in another couple of hours, at
this time of year, and temperatures will drop rapidly. And given our need to acquire alternate transportation, our best chance at that will also be before dark, when the number of passing vehicles drops.”

None of them could argue with that assessment; they quickly finished their snack and got back onto the trail. No one wanted to be navigating through this kind of terrain in the dark.

Over the next kilometer, the path, and the gorge itself, gradually narrowed and became more choked with branches and the occasional patch of heavy snow and ice. John was worried; this was exhausting for all of them, but was certainly hardest for Sherlock, who was far from his best (though he knew the younger man would literally walk until he dropped, before admitting that anything was wrong). Hopefully they’d be able to steal a vehicle quickly once they reached the main road; John had already decided to ask Mycroft to petition Moran for a “rest day”—all of them would need it, after this effort. Even G was struggling; his usual workouts apparently didn’t include hikes in sub-freezing weather.

By the time they reached their destination, the pathway had narrowed to a stony slip no more than 2 feet wide and covered in most spots by a thin sheet of ice. The sun had now dropped below the level at which light shone directly into the gorge, so the temperature had begun to drop. The narrowing of the gorge itself had also narrowed the river they walked beside; that narrowing had also increased the speed of the flow, and what had been a smooth, transparent sheet of water was now a barreling, roiling whitewater juggernaut that splashed icy cold draughts across their boots as they walked.

Up ahead, Sherlock came to a stop in front of a sheer grey wall of rock, with the river coursing only a foot or two from its base. “Here,” the detective said. “The intersection with the main road is up above, and this is likely to be our best point of approach.” He gave the wall a critical eye, then turned to Anthea. “What do you think? Good enough placements for beginners?”

Anthea stepped closer, and ran her eyes over the rock face. “Probably,” she said. “We’ll have to watch for rock shears from all the ice, but the climb itself won’t take long. Pity we don’t have any ropes, though.” She turned back to her audience and noted John’s bemused expression, then grinned. “It’s my hidden talent, John. I started climbing when I was 10, and I’ve kept it up. I taught Sherlock a bit, but he doesn’t practice enough.” John noticed Sherlock’s dismissive sneer from the corner of his eye.

She looked over the group dispassionately, clearly judging capabilities. “I’ll lead, of course. John, you can follow me—all you need to do is duplicate my hand and foot placements, and you’ll be fine. Sherlock next, so the others can mimic him. G last, I think—he’s heaviest, and the most likely to bring down small rock spalls that the rest of us might not set loose.”

Anthea insisted that everyone tighten the straps on their rucksacks, zip their parkas all the way up, and pull their gloves on (since John, at least, had chosen to keep his hands in his pockets rather than wear the slightly-too-small gloves). She laced the canes onto her own back with the rucksack’s straps.

They lined up in the correct order, edging down the narrow rock ledge, and then Anthea stretched out her arms, selected her first handholds, and started to move up the sheer face.
When she was roughly 8 feet up the wall, she called down for John to begin, and he moved into place below her, slotting his hands and feet into the positions she had used, and pushed up. He knew that letting his legs do most of the work was critical; he was also concerned about dealing with the rifle slung across his back, which made his balance awkward and periodically thumped against his ribs. He quickly found that he was very glad Anthea had insisted on the gloves; even through the protective fabric he could feel the glacial temperature of the stone. Anyone climbing bare-handed would find their fingers numb and icy within minutes.

He was aware of Sherlock starting off below him, though he didn’t take his eyes off Anthea to look. The higher they rose, the more nervous he was of making a wrong move. The young woman continued to climb smoothly in front of him; he wished it was as easy as she made it look.

He heard Mycroft grumbling below him; apparently, the older man wasn’t a fan of heights. When John took a quick glance below when Anthea took a brief rest stop, though, he saw Mycroft and Sherlock both moving up smoothly. G stepped into place, preparing for his turn.

They progressed smoothly up the face, quicker than John would have thought. Anthea reached the top, pushing up with her legs to launch herself over the edge on her belly. When she lifted up one booted foot to the side to shove herself further over the top, though, there was a sudden harsh cracking sound that startled both of them. John watched as a fist-sized rock split off from the surface and caromed quickly down, narrowly missing John’s shoulder—and then, with one vicious bounce, cracked into Mycroft’s forehead before he could move out of the way. As John and Sherlock watched in horror, the older man’s eyes rolled up, his hands loosened, and he flew backwards into the churning river below. And Sherlock—Sherlock gave John one quick, apologetic glance, and dropped into the river after his brother.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know--cliffhanger. Literally.

Maryagrawatson knows where the good marshmallows for s’mores are; she might even share her shock blankets (since this particular cliff is pretty darn chilly).
Chapter Summary

In the wake of disaster, they all have their own roles to play. But Mycroft may have opted out.

**Sherlock**

Sherlock’s first sensation, on dropping into the torrent below them, was *pain*—searing, burning, covering every extremity. His first desperate action was to suppress the surging instinct to gasp in the face of that pain. A distant part of his mind was surprised—he had been told, by a former client who had nearly drowned in the North Sea, how overwhelming the knife-like agony from the cold water was. He disregarded it at the time—he made a mental apology to the client, who had been precisely accurate.

The cold remained an immediate issue, and he had to exert considerable effort to shove it to the far, deep reaches of his consciousness. But the more pressing concern was to get to the surface—he was tumbling, glancing violently off the bottom, off boulders as he passed. He was a strong swimmer, but the ferocity of the flow, combined with the cold, was making it difficult to maneuver. He had a sudden moment of stark terror as he remembered Mycroft’s eyes rolling up—how could his brother manage this process when only half- (or un-) conscious?

Shove that thought away as well. *Focus!*

The water was not especially deep—perhaps ten feet, on average, though that was certainly more than enough to drown in. The strength of the flow, though, made the depth immaterial—the constant tumbling of the water around every obstacle often made it difficult to be sure which direction to push towards the surface, and the disorientation made it harder to remember his immediate goal—finding his brother.

Finally, just as his vision was starting to darken at the edges and his lungs’ demands had reached the breaking point, he banged off the bottom once again, and managed to give a violent thrust with both legs—and his head finally, finally broke the surface.

**John**

As Sherlock dropped into the river below, John turned his body outward from the wall, preparing to follow—and was stopped by Anthea’s iron grip on his collar.

“No!” she shouted. She had dropped onto her stomach on the edge and put her whole body weight into holding him in place. “The last thing we need is one more wet, freezing body. You’re a *doctor*, John—they’re going to need you warm, dry and coherent when we get them out. Think!”

And she was right. Of course, she was. The last thing they needed was *three* hypothermic patients, without being able to bring John’s medical knowledge to bear. John still fought his instinct to follow the other two, but ultimately drove himself up and over the top of the rock face, while Anthea
frantically urged G to hurry.

As John scrambled up, Anthea turned east, towards the edge of the river. “Go,” she said, pointing along the rim. “You can follow them on foot, while G and I get a vehicle. We’ll find you.” She turned to give G a hand up, then looked back over her shoulder at John. “Don’t forget to put your hood up.”

That answered the question about how they’d find him. John had almost forgotten about their transceivers. He flipped up the hood, and hit the tiny toggle to turn on the transceiver. He broke into a trot, heading as swiftly as he could along the low rock bluffs over the river, looking frantically for heads or, God forbid, bodies as he ran.

Sherlock

Sherlock took a great, gasping breath as his head popped out of the water. He allowed himself a few seconds to bask in the newfound ability to breathe before moving on to the next order of business.

Mycroft had to be nearby. There had been no more than 7 seconds between the time the older man fell into the water, and the time Sherlock dropped. The current was rapid and strong, but Mycroft weighed slightly more than Sherlock, which would theoretically be enough to slow his progress a bit. Taken as a whole, then, it was unlikely that his brother was more than twenty to thirty feet distant. (Unless he had been caught on an underwater obstruction of some kind, and was even now—no. Push that thought back down with the others. With the cold).

Shouting would be of no value; even if Sherlock could make himself heard above the rush of the water, there was no way his brother could slow his progress downstream. Sherlock, then, needed to expedite his own movement, while casting out his arms in search of Mycroft.

Leaning slightly forward, he stretched his body into an approximation of a normal swimming posture, while stretching his arms wide to either side. This new, more-aerodynamic position let him almost skim along the surface. At the same time, he made rapid, quick dips under the water, casting his limbs wide each time, kicking hard to make sure he traversed a wider radius than would otherwise be the case.

It was exhausting. He had already been tiring rapidly when he entered the water, and had been conscious of increasing pain in his chest; the largely-healed incision hadn’t appreciated the effort required to climb the rock face. Thankfully, that pain had been largely subsumed into the larger issue of the cold; less advantageous was the fact that his extremities were quickly becoming numb. Agonizing as the cold had been, losing awareness of that cold was an indicator of Bad Things, as John would put it. He had to get out of the water soon, or he might not be able to do so at all.

John

John couldn’t remember the last time he’d run so far, under such difficult conditions. He ran flat-out wherever he could, but was forced to slow often to go around or over obstacles, sometimes having to veer well away from the rim to bypass boulders or copses of trees. The cold air sawed through his lungs, and the rifle smacked him rhythmically across the shoulders with each step.

He was (briefly) pleased to see that it wasn’t quite as late as he’d feared; daylight would likely hold on for at least another hour, and the sun felt deceptively warm after their trek through the shadowed
corridor of the river below.

He fell, twice; might have bunged up his arms or knees in the process, but couldn’t stop long enough to check. He just picked himself up and ran again.

He started, violently, when he suddenly heard Anthea’s voice, before he realized it was coming through the tiny transceiver in his hood. “No,” she said, clearly not speaking to him. G, most likely. “We need something bigger—something we can transport unconscious passengers in, if need be.”

There was a long pause, while John panted and ran. Then—“Oh! That one, definitely.” Anthea was doing some panting of her own, now—running, most likely. “Get over behind the trees, and don’t come out unless I call you.”

Anthea continued to speak, but John’s attention abruptly shifted to the scene below him. Because there, in the water, at the edge of the river perhaps 150 yards downstream, he saw—he was almost sure—he saw heads.

*Sherlock*

He was losing the plot. He could feel it, but couldn’t stop it. The cold was seeping into his brain, now, and his mostly-numb arms were no longer sliding through the water as smoothly as they had. He was aware of counting his breaths; his oldest, most primitive self-soothing method, used as a child when he became overwhelmed with stimuli. Now, it seemed, his subconscious had decided that this was the preferred method to avert panic.

He was barely able to avert a tumble towards the bottom when he caromed roughly off a boulder protruding far out from the bank, but finally managed to reorient himself downstream, in his “skimming” posture. It was rather like a water strider, he thought idly. He’d seen video of them as a child and been fascinated—seeing the delicate insects actually run across the surface of the water. It had led to a disastrous experiment in the river that summer; his fabrication skills, at 7, were not up to the technical challenges of designing useable flotation devices. Mycroft had—

Mycroft. He was—he had gotten lost in his head again. He had to find Mycroft, and soon, or neither of them would survive this.

He struck out again, reaching desperately in every direction, forcing himself to extend as far as possible, knowing that he was reaching the end of his strength. He was so focused on his effort to reach, to grasp, that he almost missed what came into view as the river took a sharp jog to the left. For there, clinging to the husk of a half-submerged tree, was his brother.

He almost drowned himself in his efforts to move out of the current, to force his way to the tree before he was thrust past it by the power of the water. He submerged for longer than he could easily bear, and kicked to his left with all his might. Just as he feared he would sweep past, just as he thought he might not be able to surface after all, his fingers touched something, and latched on despite their numbness. He dropped down closer to the bottom again, where the current was slightly less, and swung his body around far enough to grab on with his other arm. Then he braced his feet against the gravel river bed and pushed—and found himself just above the surface, wedged firmly in between two great limbs of the fallen tree, staring into his brother’s half-open eyes.

Sherlock grabbed onto the limb nearest his brother and hauled himself bodily across to him. “Myc,”
he panted. “Are you hurt?” He realized immediately that that was an idiotic thing to say—the large purpling welt on his brother’s forehead was obvious, and he’d been submerged in icy water for the better part of 10 minutes now. “Hurt” didn’t begin to cover it.

Mycroft looked at him, but that striking intelligence was absent from his gaze. “Sherlock,” he said faintly. “Why...how did you get here?” He looked around, as if expecting some answer from the rushing waves washing past them.

Sherlock was abruptly conscious of the cold again. He was wracked by violent shudders that threatened to dislodge his grip on the branch keeping him from being swept downstream. They had to get out of the water, right now.

Sherlock looked at the remains of the tree they currently clung to. It maintained at least a partial attachment to its remaining roots along the shore, though it wasn’t clear how firm that attachment was, given the to-and-fro motion of the branches in the water. It was the best route they had, though—he feared that letting go and allowing the water carry them further downstream, in hopes of a better landing place, would end in their being pulled under. He, at least, could feel his remaining strength bleeding out of his muscles by the moment, and he doubted that Mycroft was any better off.

“I need you to help pull us to shore,” he told his brother, reaching out and grabbing Mycroft’s left hand and placing it on the large branch next to him. “We need to move together; I don’t know how long the tree will stay in place.” He was dismayed to see how long that took to sink into his brother’s frayed consciousness, and even more dismayed when Mycroft simply blinked at him, as if unclear on the concept of motion.

“Myc,” Sherlock near-shouted, hearing the panic now flooding through his voice. “You have to help me. I can’t do this by myself. You out-weigh me, and I’m very tired.” Mycroft continued to blink. “Please, Myc!”

Sherlock’s desperation finally got through. Awareness, of a sort, crept back into his brother’s hazy eyes, and with a last blink, Mycroft was once again himself. But—“I don’t think I can,” he said slowly. “...it’s very cold, isn’t it?” The older man looked around again, as if surprised to find himself still in the river. “You go,” he continued, in a slurred voice. “Perhaps you can come back for me later.”

Sherlock was distantly surprised to find himself weeping. “You have to help me, Myc,” he panted. “I won’t leave you. I won’t.” He grabbed his brother’s arm again and tried to pull him along, only to stop as a burst of agony ripped through his chest along his incision. “Myc,” he gasped.

That cry seemed to have broken through Mycroft’s confusion. His brother blinked again, then furrowed his brow and reached out to touch Sherlock’s face. “Don’t,” he said. “Don’t...” He shook his head, as if to clear it, then moved his arm around to grasp the branch and give an experimental tug. Sherlock hurriedly moved across so that he was largely wrapped around the bigger man and pulled as well, and they slowly, slowly began to inch closer to the banks of the river.

John heard a burst of confused voices through the transceiver as he hurtled along the top of the gulch, looking for a safe (or at least not suicidal) way down. He listened with half an ear as Anthea spoke to someone, her voice alternating between commanding and pleading. Then he resolutely ignored her—he had found a large diagonal crack in the rocks that could be used as a rough track down to the river below.
Once he left the top and started down, he had to try and keep track mentally of the relative distance between his current position and the heads (he refused to think otherwise—it had to be heads) in the water. The climb down wasn’t too treacherous—the split was old, and the rocks had long since settled into their altered positions. The only real issue was the cold—spray from the river, and melting snow, had settled into the smaller nooks and crannies and then frozen as soon as daylight no longer shone directly on the area. He had to move carefully, and much more slowly than he preferred—he couldn’t afford to fall, not now.

It took perhaps 5 minutes to reach the bottom—the height of the stone walls here was only 25 feet or so, thankfully. There was still a narrow ledge just above the water itself, wider, now, than where they had begun their ill-fated climb. But it was damp, and icy, and had few hand-holds, and his nerves were screaming at him to go faster, faster, faster. He had to fight the urge to hurry.

The banks made a sharp left-hand turn up ahead, and the ledge above the water narrowed to near-nothing. He debated trying to climb back up to negotiate the turn, rather than risk that foot-wide expanse. But as he got to the corner, he looked around the edge—and saw two dark shapes huddled against the bank, no more than 15 feet away.

“Sherlock,” he shouted. “I’m coming. Hang on.” He raised his arms above his shoulders and wedged his gloved fingers tightly into the small cracks, then faced the rocks and inched his way along, with his heels hanging over the edge.

As he rounded the corner, he saw with relief that the two figures were both half-out of the water; this sharp turn in the banks had created a tiny cove, with a miniscule gravel beach bisected by the remains of a large fallen tree. He navigated the remaining stretch of stone ledge before stepping quickly out onto the tiny beach and darting to the fallen figures, immediately grabbing arms and pulling as hard as he could. Neither man responded, but they didn’t fight him; within a minute he had both brothers lying side-by-side on the damp gravel.

He made a rapid-fire check of vitals—both breathing, both with heartbeats (though slow, much too slow) before yanking his hood up sharply and howling for Anthea. “I found them,” he shouted. “Both alive, but both unconscious, mostly. We’re two klicks downstream from our original location—don’t know how far from the road, but the map will tell you.” He looked over his shoulder. “The banks here are only about 15 feet; I think we can haul them up if you find some rope. Talk to me so I know you’re on your way. But, for the love of God, don’t be long,” he finished, then turned back to his patients.
Acute Infection: Part Ten

Chapter Summary

The team encounters help from an unexpected quarter, and get some well-earned rest. But, as it turns out, that help was a harbinger of a new disaster in the making.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As John registered a blurred response from Anthea, he turned his attention back to the men lying at his feet. Of the two, he was more concerned about Mycroft—given that he had been only semi-conscious when he hit the river, it was much more likely that he had inhaled large quantities of cold water in a reflexive gasp at the extreme cold. Lacking any kind of medical gear, there wasn’t much John could do beyond monitoring breathing and pulse, but he decided to roll the older man into the recovery position in case he woke with breathing distress from fluid in his lungs or throat.

He briefly considered stripping the wet clothing off of both patients, but decided not to—lacking anything dry and warm to put them in, their exposed skin would be at greater risk from the frigid air than from the damp clothes (at least, so long as Anthea arrived soon). Both men were shivering heavily; not really a bad thing, since it indicated that their systems were still able to combat the cold to a degree.

After one of Sherlock’s more-memorable falls into the Thames, in a cold November, had resulted in unforeseen complications, John had signed up for a day course in cold-water rescue offered by the London police academy. He’d learned two very surprising things: first, that true hypothermia took much longer immersion that most people (including John) assumed; and second, rough handling after rescue could actually worsen the patient’s situation (hence Sherlock’s terrifying cardiac arrhythmia five minutes after landing in the rescue boat).

John situated the brothers close enough together so that he was able to drape his own parka across both of them—it wasn’t much, but it could help retain at least a little of their remaining body heat. He had just finished doing so when Mycroft suddenly jerked, opened his eyes, and disgorged a large quantity of cold water and bile onto the gravel. John scrambled over to hold the man’s head and shoulders steady while he continued to cough and gag, then used the corner of the parka to wipe his face before settling him back down on the gravel perhaps six inches away from the mess. He was surprised to look down and see cold blue eyes staring intelligently back, incongruous below the soaked hair and blue-green lump on Mycroft’s forehead.

“Sherlock?” Mycroft croaked, in a ravaged voice.

“Unconscious, but no worse off than you are, from what I can tell,” John responded. “Cold and wet, but steady pulse and breathing.” He looked over at the detective. “Could be mostly exhaustion; he’d had a very hard day before all of this happened.”

Those knowing eyes fluttered closed briefly in relief before opening once more. “Do we have a way out of here?” the bureaucrat asked, through violently chattering teeth.

“Anthea’s got it sorted,” John said confidently. Rather more confidently that he actually felt, but
dwelling on that would serve no purpose. “She knows where we are—we’re only a couple of kilometers from where you fell, and she has the map, the phone, with her.”

Right on cue, John’s transceiver sputtered to life. “John!” Anthea shouted, and John cringed at the noise.

“Quieter, please,” he begged. “I can hear you. Where are you?” He looked down to see Mycroft watching intently.

He abruptly heard sounds from above, and jerked around to look. “Here,” Anthea said triumphantly from the top of the bank.

Getting the two patients up the banks was surprisingly anticlimactic. While rope hadn’t miraculously materialized, G marched up with long lengths of garden hose(!) cradled in his arms, and proceeded to put together a makeshift loop that proved sturdy enough. Logistics took some negotiation; initially, John thought that G should essentially carry the brothers, supported by the hose noose, while John and Anthea pulled from up top. Anthea, the experienced climber, pointed out the flaw in that reasoning: while neither Mycroft nor Sherlock were particularly heavy, when you combined either man with G’s solid 18 stone, it was clear that John and Anthea would struggle to support that much weight.

John, then, laced the hose length under his legs and pulled it snug, before reaching out and placing all 6’2” of Mycroft Holmes (shivering still, and turning slightly pink in what John was astounded to realize was embarrassment) in his lap, then “walking” up the wall of stone while G and Anthea hauled with all their might. As soon as John had placed the older man on the ground, he stepped back to the edge and nodded at G to spot him while he belayed back down.

Sherlock was a little more difficult; unlike his brother, the detective remained profoundly unconscious, those long arms and legs flopping limply, his head lolling on John’s shoulder. John wrapped his arms around his friend as tightly as possible and relied on G and Anthea to do most of the work.

John unhooked himself from the hose array while Anthea helped G lay Sherlock down next to his brother, then draped his and G’s parkas over them. That couldn’t last for long—the sun was now starting to drop, and John could feel the cold ripping through his jumper and trousers, despite their heavy fabric. They needed to be indoors, soon.

John had just started to do a re-check of vitals on the brothers when he heard movement coming from the edge of the trees, and was shocked to see a tall, older man step hesitantly into view. He looked to Anthea, and was relieved to see her turn to the man, smile and nod.

“This is Bertie Markham,” she told John, beckoning the man forward. “He and his wife own our new transport.” The man smiled and nodded, his crop of wild grey hair waving in the breeze. John had a brief flash of Sherlock, thirty years hence. Then John shuttled Bertie to the back of his consciousness and returned to the matter at hand.

“So, how far do we need to go?” he asked Anthea, while carefully helping a glacially-pale Mycroft sit up. The older man shuddered violently while pulling one of the parkas closely around himself, then handing off the second one to Anthea.
“Only a hundred yards or so,” she said, while wrapping Sherlock tightly in the second parka. “The road followed the river pretty closely.” In the background, G had bundled up the garden hoses and handed half of them to Bertie, who blinked and took them. The two turned and headed back through the trees towards the road.

“G, wait!” John shouted, and the big man turned inquiringly. John gestured towards the brothers with his chin. “I’m going to need help transporting them—don’t think either of them will be able to walk out.”

G hesitated, then turned and handed the remaining hoses to a bemused Bertie. “Yeah, OK,” he said, and trotted back over.

It took some doing, getting everyone to the road. Mycroft insisted he could walk, and actually managed a yard or two before his knees started to fold under him. Anthea tutted, sighed, and slid herself under the tall man’s arm, wrapping her arm around his waist and hauling him matter-of-factly to the tree line.

Sherlock—John was worried about Sherlock. The younger man still shivered, which was good (in the grand scheme of things), but he’d given no indication of returning consciousness. John suspected, hoped, that this was a form of very heavy sleep, brought on by exhaustion. But he couldn’t be sure without a medical kit, which, of course, had been lost along with everything else in the truck. John fretted as G leaned over and picked Sherlock up like a child, and continued to fret as they moved into the trees towards the still-invisible road that, Anthea assured them, was no more than a five-minute walk now. John heard Mycroft groan in response.

They walked through cold, quiet trees, stepping around snowdrifts and small outcroppings of rock, as the light began to fail and the temperature dropped steadily. Suddenly the trees stopped, and John realized that the surface under his feet was now tarmac rather than dirt. Anthea and Mycroft came to a stop in front of him, and he peered around Anthea’s shoulder and saw that they had finally, finally, reached the road. Anthea threw up her free arm, and John heard a large engine grind, startlingly near, and then saw movement coming from the left—movement which resolved into a large motorhome, with Bertie grinning from the drivers’ seat. A very large motorhome—something more typically seen in films from America or Canada, in fact. The truck, bus, really, ground to a halt in front of them with a blast of hydraulic brakes, and the driver’s door popped open.

“How is everyone doing?” Bertie chirped, in a startlingly high voice for such a tall man. “Siobhan’s pulling out some extra bedding—figured it would be useful.” As he spoke, a side door on the bus opened, a set of stairs slid automatically out, and a rounded, shortish woman appeared. She trotted down the stairs to join Bertie, radiating concern.

“Oh, bugger,” she said, in a deeply Irish accent. “How awful. Let’s get inside quickly, shall we? It’s really feckin’ cold.” Bertie shook his head fondly and moved to help the newcomers in—Mycroft required a discreet boost (about which he and John thereafter Would Never Speak, no doubt); Sherlock was handed in from G to Bertie and John, and carried towards the rear while Siobhan fluttered about, her arms full of bedding.
Five minutes later, Sherlock had been stripped to his pants, wrapped in two duvets and a towel for his soaked hair, and tucked into the large bed in the rear cabin. Mycroft had refused to join him, and had chosen instead to strip in the tiny loo and then sit, in a puffy “mummy” sleeping bag, on the comfortable sofa up front. The bureaucrat was warming up fast, clearly—his teeth had stopped chattering, and if he was still shivering, it was no longer quite so visible.

When John came back from settling Sherlock, Bertie met him in the tiny kitchen, with a startlingly-well-stocked medical kit in his hands. Seeing John’s surprise, the older man grinned sheepishly. “Siobhan insisted. We’ve been abroad for almost three weeks now, and she wanted to be prepared. She, well, we, actually, are both M.D.s, though we’ve never practiced. Solely research. Virology and Infectious Disease.”

John saw Mycroft’s head pop up—that was very surprising information indeed. Anthea smirked in the background—clearly, she had already known. This required further investigation—but not now.

John stuck out his hand. “Dr. John Watson—former combat surgeon, but not for some time. That’s Mycroft Holmes,” he said, pointing at the bureaucrat, “and his brother Sherlock in the back. Anthea and G you already know.” He paused, while Bertie and Siobhan made the appropriate greeting noises. Then he caught Bertie’s eye.

“Listen…do you feel comfortable giving the elder Mr. Holmes here a quick once-over for me, then? Just the basics—I think he’s fine, but I’d feel better if someone checked his lungs and core temp. I need to do a little more in-depth on his brother -- he’s recovering from a very serious injury and illness, and he’s been down for at least 30 minutes now.”

Bertie reached into the med kit and fished out a stethoscope and an old-school glass thermometer. “Certainly. Nice to get a bit of practice in,” he said amiably. He handed the rest of the kit to John. “There’s another stethoscope in there, I’m pretty sure, and I left you the digital thermometer. Just let me know if you think of anything we’re lacking—we’ve some other bits and bobs stored about the place that might serve.”

Siobhan bobbed her head in agreement. “Yeah, it is a nice change. Bein’ in the lab all the time makes us too feckin’ lazy to keep our hands in, y’know?” She looked around, then pointed up towards the driver’s cab, where G had dropped into the passenger seat. “Unless you think we shouldn’t, I’m gonna drive us on to the campground, yeah? We can hook up to straight power and water there, and they even have a bathhouse—it’s a sty, o’ course, but it might set these two right, quicker than anything else. We can take some bleach to the tub before we turf anyone in.”

John stopped paying attention at that point—just took the kit and went back to the cabin, to his other patient.

Sherlock hadn’t moved visibly, still wrapped tightly in his bedding bundle. John was pleased to see that a little color was returning to his face. When John found the digital thermometer and poked it gently in Sherlock’s ear, he noted the reading was still quite low, but not alarming. Tiny shivers wracked the detective’s thin frame, but the violent juddering of earlier had stopped, as had the chattering teeth.

He decided to stick with the basics for now, and worry about anything deeper once they’d stopped for the night. The stethoscope was reassuring—Sherlock’s heart sounded firm and steady, though still a bit slower than normal. His lungs had a slight rasp, but nothing alarming. He’d probably end up with a cough for a day or two, but hopefully nothing more serious.
John sat down on the edge of the bed with a thump, his knees suddenly refusing to hold him. He realized with a start just how tired he was, and how much tension he’d been carrying for the past couple of hours. It swept over him in a rush, now—he was sorely tempting to drop back on the bed next to Sherlock, and never get up again. Well, at least not for a day or two.

Sherlock made a snuffling noise behind him, and John turned to see the younger man shift onto his back and emit what was clearly a small snore. John felt a broad smile break across his face—real, deep sleep, then, just as he’d thought (hoped). Best news he’d had all day.

John stayed long enough to be sure that Sherlock was settled, then forced himself to get up and wander back up to the rest of the group, leaving the door to the cabin open just in case. The big vehicle was lumbering smoothly along the road in the deepening twilight; Bertie had pulled bottles of juice out of the small fridge and passed them around; he handed one to John, who took it gratefully.

“So, where are we going?” John asked. Siobhan seemed to be sure of her directions, but it would be nice to have some idea where they were.

“Lukavac,” Bertie replied. “It’s another 5 kilometers or so. Just the other side of Tuzla. There’s a lake, a small shop, and the bathhouse—not a bad camp for this part of the world. Oh, and a coin laundry—we’ll be able to get your things clean and dry.”

“If you have the coins,” John said wryly. “I don’t know if any of our wallets survived. I know mine didn’t.”

“I have mine,” Mycroft said, his voice still graveled. “But I’m not sure how well credit card magnetic strips hold up to extended cold water immersion.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Siobhan said from the front. “We can afford it—don’t own a house anymore, and our spawn are grown, so we’ve naught to spend our coin on, for the most part. And things here aren’t what you’d call pricey, anyway.”

“Mr. Holmes is fine, by the way,” Bertie piped in suddenly. “Forget to tell you. Temp’s approaching normal. There’s a little moisture in the lungs, but nothing he can’t cough up. Surprising, from the look of that knot on his forehead.”

“I was never completely unconscious,” Mycroft said calmly. “I did swallow a quantity of water initially, but not thereafter. It was just very cold.” He gave an involuntary shudder, then looked surprised—it wasn’t often that his body did things without his consent, apparently.

John suddenly had a thought—he had no idea what they were going to do, once they got the initial crisis dealt with. “So, what’s the plan?” he asked, directing the question mostly to Mycroft.

Bertie took that one, surprisingly. “We’ve been chatting,” he said. “The camp has some cabins available, with spots we can park the bus on next to them. We can get one for however long it’s needed; you’d be more than welcome to stay here on the bus, but there’s not really room for everyone. You can use the bathhouse, and get your clothes clean and dry—I can loan the two Mr. Holmeses something in the interim. And we can use the kitchen in the cabin to throw together some food.”
“Seems like a plan,” John said. “Maybe the bathhouse first? Get that last bit of cold out of their bones. G and I can take bath duty while supper’s cooking.”

“I am quite able to take care of myself now, John,” Mycroft said stiffly. Remembering that boost into the bus, no doubt.

“No, you’re not,” John answered firmly. “Both of you are at risk for secondary drowning, because of the circumstances. It happens hours after a near-drowning; the water you had inhaled leads to pulmonary edema—fluid in the lungs. And it can be just as deadly as the standard form of drowning. So I’m not letting either of you out of my sight for the next 12 hours.”

Mycroft looked a little taken aback. “I’ve never…that is new information to me,” he said slowly.

“Yeah, you rarely hear about it,” John replied, managing not to say something snarky about Mycroft not knowing something. Sherlock would be so disappointed he’d missed it. “We had a bloke go for a weekend conference in Kabul when I was in Afghanistan—spent a lot of money to stay in one of the old tourist hotels, complete with a swimming pool. He came back Sunday night—seemed fine, if a little tired. Then we went to dinner at the mess hall, and he suddenly started coughing and couldn’t stop, then keeled right over. If he hadn’t already been at a medical facility, he probably would have died. We found out later that he’d had a near-drowning in the pool earlier in the day—slipped while walking past, fell in and inhaled a lot of water. But he’d been fine in an hour or so, and took his normal ride back to camp.”

Mycroft blinked, and Bertie looked concerned. “Well,” Mycroft said finally. “We are at your disposal, I suppose.”

By the time they reached Lukavac, it was fully dark, so it was hard to tell anything about the camp. Anthea had looked it up on the phone (which would shortly be an issue—the phone had survived as it had been in Anthea’s coat pocket. The charger had not), but there was very limited information available. There was a lake; there was a playground; there were cabins and a bathhouse (the one that Siobhan insisted was a “sty”). That was it.

Siobhan had stopped at a tiny guardhouse at the entrance and had a brief, spirited conversation in some incomprehensible language (well, incomprehensible to John, at least; Mycroft clearly understood, and even emitted a genteel chuckle at one point. Apparently, Siobhan had come off very much the victor). She accepted a slip of paper and exchanged it for a handful of bills, the gate was opened, and they turned onto a narrow dirt road leading into the campground.

After a couple of minutes, they reached an area covered by intermittent security lights and spotted with an assortment of caravans, tents and cabins. Siobhan maneuvered the bus into place in front of one of the latter, then turned off the engine with a sigh of relief. “It’s a bastard tooling this great beast down that grotty road,” she sighed. “Has a mind of its own. Don’t let anyone tell you different.”

Anthea led the way to the cabin (while Sherlock and Mycroft stayed on the bus—no one wanted to deal with semi-ambulatory patients before they had to). The small house was acceptable, for the most part—at least marginally clean, with what looked like comfortable seating in the small lounge area, a functional kitchen, a small loo, and two bedrooms. One of the two had a pair of twin beds.
“We’ll put them in here,” John said. “I can use one of the sleeping bags and stay with them. That gives you the other room,” he waved his hand at Anthea, who mockingly curtsied in reply. “G, looks like the sofa’s yours,” he added blithely. G gave him a two-fingered salute, but didn’t argue.

John went back to the bus, with G grumbling behind him, to see about transferring his reluctant patients to the bathhouse. While Siobhan stayed with Anthea to see about putting dinner together at the cabin, Bertie tooled the bus around and crept along the dirt track to a small, well-lit building. “Here we are,” he chirped. “It’s not fancy, and it’s not especially clean, but we can take care of that. There’s lots of hot water, though—hot springs in the area, apparently.” The older man bent down to pick up a bottle of bleach and a scrub-brush that had been set out on the kitchen counter, grabbed an armful of clothing from the sofa, then nodded to Mycroft. “Shall we go, then? You can lean on me if you can walk.”

Mycroft stood, tottered momentarily, then firmed his stance and nodded regally. “Lead on. I’m quite capable, with perhaps a bit of help on the steps.”

Once Mycroft was safely down the steps, John turned his attention to his other patient, while G hovered impatiently in the kitchen. Sherlock was still blissfully asleep, curled now like a shrimp in his duvet cocoon. John knelt on the bed and gently shook one bony shoulder. There was no immediate response. He waited another minute, then tried again, this time calling “Sherlock” at the same time.

After a long pause, Sherlock’s deep breathing shuddered, and he gasped and opened his eyes, looking frantically around the room briefly before settling on John’s face. “What…where’s Myc? Why are you…I’m naked?” His eyes closed again, then opened with a bit more coherence. “I don’t feel well,” he groaned.

“No, I’m sure you don’t,” John said sympathetically. “Your brother is fine, and you should be as well once you’ve had a warm bath and something to eat.” Sherlock’s mouth writhed into a disgusted moue; food was apparently not on the agenda right now, then.

“Can you sit up, if I help?” John asked. Sherlock blinked at him, then writhed in his cocoon, getting both arms free before collapsing in exhaustion. “Um…no,” he panted. “Evidently not.” His brow furrowed in mild distress.

“Don’t worry about it,” John said, then beckoned to G, hovering in the doorway.

“But you’ll have to carry him again,” he told the big man. “Not far—just into the bathhouse.” G gave a theatrical sigh, then reached over and grabbed Sherlock’s waist, pulling him to the edge of the bed. Sherlock gave an outraged squawk, and John barked “Oi!”, but the criminal simply upended the detective and flipped him over his beefy shoulder in a fireman’s carry.

“That’s too rough!” John said, hurrying along behind. G made a rude gesture with his free hand, while Sherlock flailed his arms and coughed. G thumped down the steps, and had just reached the well-lit doorway to the bathhouse when Sherlock gave a distressed gurgle and vomited down G’s back.

“Bollocks,” G groaned, and slowed his pace dramatically. But to his credit, he didn’t drop Sherlock,
“In the end John had to be content.”

Once inside, John saw that Mycroft was making use of a shower stall, with Bertie discreetly standing guard with his back turned. All seemed well in that direction, then.

Bertie greeted John with a smile. “There’s a tub over there,” he said, pointing with his chin. “Mycroft insisted his brother needed it more. I just finished cleaning it and running it full—not too hot, but warm enough to do him some good.” He looked at Sherlock, wilting in his upside-down position on G’s befouled back. “Oh dear. Maybe he needs it a bit more than I thought.”

“He’ll be fine,” John said soothingly. “G, over here, please.” A towel had been spread as a bathmat beside the filled tub, and G grudgingly unfurled Sherlock from his duvets and deposited him on the mat. The younger man rubbed his hands miserably over his face before looking up at John.

“Do we have to?” he whinged. “I’d just as soon sleep. I’m warm enough,” he said, then was betrayed by a wave of shivers.

“Yeah, no,” John said, and wrangled the protesting detective into the tub. Sherlock started to protest again, before realizing how very, very good the warmth felt. He slid as far down into the water as possible and closed his eyes.

“’S nice,” he slurred.

John lurched forward. “Nope, nope, nope,” he said, grabbing Sherlock under the arms and hauling him back up a bit. “Can’t sleep here, no matter how good it feels. One near-drowning a day is enough, thanks.” He turned to G, who had removed his soiled jumper and was wiping at the mess on the back of his legs. “Go ask Anthea for some tea, yeah? Not too hot, but lots of sugar.” The criminal scowled, but went.

John was aware of movement behind him, and turned to see Mycroft Holmes, clad now in a pair of track bottoms and hoodie. The older man smiled wanly, then turned to his brother. “You really must learn to resist this impulse towards self-sacrifice, little brother,” he said gently. “Of the two of us, I have always been the stronger swimmer.”

“Not when you’ve had your head split with a rock, you’re not,” Sherlock said sternly. “Piss off. I’m trying not to vomit, and you’re not helping.”

Mycroft nodded, and went, with Bertie in train. G came back in immediately thereafter, with a mug in his hand. He passed it to John, then stomped silently back out.

“C’mon then,” John said, as he held the mug to Sherlock’s lips. “I know you’re queasy, but it’s probably partly low blood sugar. Take a few sips and we’ll see.”

“See what? Whether you have to empty the tub and start over?” Sherlock said sourly. But he did take the required sips, then settled back with a sigh.

“Mycro’s right, you know,” John said softly after a minute. “You’re entirely too apt to try to rescue people, at your own expense.”

“He’s always right. It’s his least attractive characteristic,” Sherlock sighed. “But in this case, it’s only logical. Of the two of us, who would be the greater loss to the world? Certainly not me.”
“Depends on who you ask,” John replied.

An hour later, dinner (hot sandwiches for most; beef broth, sipped reluctantly, for Sherlock) had been dealt with, and the brothers had been tucked into their beds side-by-side. “We haven’t done this since Sherlock was 7,” Mycroft remarked. “I hope he doesn’t still sleepwalk.” He smirked at his brother, who managed to ignore him by dint of already being mostly asleep.

John and the others made desultory conversation in the lounge until Bertie and Siobhan noticed the increasing yawns from the remainder of the party. “We’ll be going, then,” said Siobhan, collecting coffee cups as she went. “I’ll come to fix breakfast over here at about 8, if that’s OK. We have to be on our way in the morning, but we want to make sure you lot are in good nick before we do.”

John, Anthea and G collected their bedding (John’s consisting of his thick sleeping bag, and a cushion off the couch), then tottered off to their respective rooms. John gave his patients a quick check—all normal, sleeping soundly—then turned in himself, leaving the door to the hall open so there was sufficient light to do checks later on without waking anyone. He set himself a mental alarm for two hours, and closed his eyes with a grateful sigh.

When he woke, just on time as per his watch, he turned first to Mycroft. The older man’s bed was more directly in the light, and as he did a quick check, he was struck by something on the man’s face. The beginnings of a beard were obvious—two days now without a shave would do that to any man (well, any man but Sherlock, who took weeks for any growth to be apparent). But that growth—it was a bright red-gold, completely at odds with the dark-brown wavy hair remaining on the bureaucrat’s head.

He was startled by a deep, croaking voice from behind him. “He dyes it,” Sherlock said, as John spun to see the younger man’s pale eyes glint in the shadows. “He has for years.”

“Why on Earth?” John asked, as quietly as possible. He didn’t especially want Mycroft awake for this conversation.

“The rest of his hair is that same color,” Sherlock continued. “He felt it allowed people to not take him seriously when he was quite young, and then he was required to continue colouring it, or he’d look like an idiot.” His eyes closed, starting to drift back into sleep. “He said it made him look like a clown. He hates clowns,” he slurred, then subsided. As John bent to check his pulse and feel for fever, Sherlock’s breathing slowed and he was under again. John shook his head, smiled, and crawled back into his sleeping bag.

John woke (with a groan—he was no longer accustomed to sleeping on the floor) at just past 8 to the smell of frying sausage. He looked over his shoulder and saw that Mycroft was already gone—feeling well, then. Sherlock was still asleep, but (according to John’s quick check) without fever, and breathing normally. John reached over and shook him, and received a protesting groan in response.

“You don’t have to get out of bed just yet,” John said, “but you need to wake up now. Calories are required. Lots of calories. Then maybe you can sleep en route to wherever we’re going from here.”
The younger man cursed under his breath, but rolled onto his back and stretched, while John headed to the loo.

Siobhan had outdone herself—sausages, eggs, porridge, scones, and both orange and cranberry juices. “I went a bit mad at the shop,” she said. “We have five boys, you know, so I’m quite used to cooking for the ravening hoards.” They all tucked in with a will—even Sherlock, who came staggering in five minutes after the rest of them, ate a respectable amount, then pushed back from the table and dropped onto the couch with a moan.

Once the plates were rinsed and everyone dressed (Siobhan had also nipped out and done the laundry last night—the woman apparently never slept), they convened their conference on “what the fuck do we do now?”, as John mentally called it.

“We could, I suspect, hire transport in Tuzla,” Mycroft began, clearly wary of revealing too much to their hosts. “But, on balance, I believe we would be better served to prevail on you two,” he nodded cordially at Bertie, “to give us a lift to Zagreb, in Croatia. We have…supplies awaiting us there, and it would save time. I understand that you are heading to Vienna, and it is almost directly on your route.”

Bertie nodded. “Of course. We’d also be happy to take you on to the U.N. headquarters in Vienna, though, if you’d prefer.” He lifted his eyebrows enquiringly. Anthea had explained to the pair, before the rescue, that their party was part of a U.N. security detail searching for clues to the source of the outbreaks. John only wished it was the truth.

“No,” Sherlock said hoarsely from the couch. “It would be far out of our way—our next stop is near Sofia.” He paused, then remembered there should be more to that statement. “But thank you.” Mycroft raised an eyebrow at John—Sherlock had learned something from him, clearly.

While their pitifully few things were being bundled up, and Siobhan and Bertie were readying the bus for departure, John dropped onto the couch next to the brothers, now sitting testily beside each other while Sherlock reluctantly accepted Mycroft’s help in tying his boots. “So, what’s in Zagreb?” he asked quietly.

“One of our caches,” Mycroft replied, while continuing to fiddle with bootlaces. “After consideration, I’m no longer concerned if G knows about them. We still have his weapons, after all. It would be foolish to take the risk in hiring anything, and I don’t want to continue across the area in a stolen vehicle.”

Both good points, John thought. But the one thing they’d yet to deal with was contacting Moran—the phone was dead this morning. Hopefully the cache would contain a workable charger, or a substitute phone.

Five minutes later, all was prepared. They all gathered in the lounge, making last checks and idle conversation. John thought of a question he’d been meaning to ask. “Bertie,” he said, laying his hand on the man’s shoulder. “You mentioned you’re headed to Vienna. Have we interrupted your holiday?” Certainly, it was a strange time to be holidaying in Eastern Europe. But people did strange
things all the time—just ask Sherlock.

“Oh, no,” the older man said seriously. “I thought you realized. We’re not here on holiday—well, not now, though it started that way. We were already in Poland, touring, when we got a request for epidemiological scientists to work on the outbreaks. We’ve spent the past two weeks working in Kosovo, but things had come to a standstill so we started making a roundabout trip back to England—doing a bit of sightseeing en route, where it’s safe, you know. But then yesterday we got the call about the events in Vienna, and we headed off—well, until we found you.”

Sherlock gave him a piercing look. “Events in Vienna?” he asked, very carefully.

“Oh, yes,” Siobhan said. “It was awful. Here we thought the outbreaks were over with. But now—over 100 dead, we’re told, same way as the others. Locked up in a conference hall, thank God, or it might be much worse.” She trailed to a stop, looking at the stunned looks on their faces. “Oh, dear—hadn’t you heard?”

Chapter End Notes

Some quick notes--first, there really is a campground in Lukavac, pretty much as described (which struck me quite funny--for some reason, I tend to think of those kinds of things as peculiarly American). Second, secondary drowning (and its counterpart, delayed drowning) are real things, and just as dangerous as described. The info about circum-rescue collapse in cold water rescues is also true (I actually watched some Canadian training videos about it. What can I say? I'm a slave to the Goddess of Accuracy).

The beard bit is a nod to Mark Gatiss' actual coloring--he's a bright ginger, both hair and beard.
Chapter Summary

John sees a glimpse of the real Mycroft, but that's not necessarily a good thing. The group gets back on the road, and gains very welcome resources. But there's also a very unpleasant phone conversation, and the beginnings of a realization for John.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

All of the air had been sucked out of the room. Bertie and Siobhan looked at their audience, and both began talking at once.

“It began at about noon yesterday,” Bertie began.

“It was at the Vienna Marriott,” Siobhan continued. “A meeting of international health advisors and physicians—we knew some of them slightly,” she added, her mouth turning down and her eyes filling.

“The meeting was heavily secured, given the nature of the past attacks and the lack of solid information about potential terrorism links. There had been a dinner and reception in the ballroom the previous evening; the first illnesses showed up just after breakfast, apparently, and as soon as those involved recognized what was happening, they locked down the entire hotel. We got a call from our contact at the WHO asking us to come immediately,” Bertie said. He paused and cleared his throat before continuing. “When I checked for the latest information this morning, all of those affected were either dead or dying.”

“Have there been any demands made? Any official claims of responsibility?” Mycroft asked, in a tight, cold voice.

Bertie shook his head. “Not that I’m aware of, though they wouldn’t necessarily have made that public.”

“What about the notification you received—was that an email? A telephone call? What information was included?” John asked. Mycroft seemed to be pulling into himself; John noticed Sherlock watching his brother out of the corner of his eye.

“Phone call first,” Siobhan replied, pulling her phone out of her pocket. “Then an email. They’re…the pictures are quite graphic,” she said soberly, and handed the phone to John, who carefully held it so that Mycroft and Sherlock could see.

“Graphic” was certainly an accurate term. “Horrifying” was also in the mix. John clicked through each attachment, pictures detailing the initial treatment of the victims, progressing through more-desperate efforts as more and more were affected. The final item was a short video; John watched only a few seconds of it before closing the link with a shudder. No one needed to see more film of dying patients, hemorrhaging from eyes and nose before convulsing in agony.

John was aware of a sudden flurry of movement behind him, as Mycroft Holmes spun and charged
out the front door of the cabin. John handed the phone quickly back to Siobhan and started to follow, before Sherlock caught his arm.

“No,” said the detective. “Me, I think.”

_Sherlock_

People tended to think of the Holmes brothers as impervious; Mycroft, especially, gave off an air of impenetrable indifference to every sort of upheaval or setback. It was part of what made him so well-suited to his position.

What people didn’t think about, didn’t know, was that it was a mask—a learned behavior, honed in the fires of many, many crises over the past twenty years or so. Sherlock distantly remembered Mycroft before—before the intentional creation of this austere, indifferent persona. Oh, his brother had always been reserved, self-contained, awkward with people (until he fully came into his frankly stellar ability to manipulate others). But Mycroft’s adamantine front had now been in place for so many years that Sherlock found himself surprised whenever a sliver of the real Mycroft peeked out from behind it.

That real Mycroft now stood, breathing heavily, his back to the cabin, staring sightlessly towards the trees. A slight movement let Sherlock know that his brother had registered his presence, but the older man said nothing.

“It pains me to voice what sounds like a platitude, but this was not your fault,” Sherlock said. Mycroft continued to ignore him.

“This is self-indulgent,” Sherlock continued. “We both have incidents in our past that have resulted in the death of innocents. That is...regrettable, and I fully understand your dismay at the current circumstances. But you mustn’t romanticize this; Moran told us himself that he had no solid knowledge of the location of the containers of virus. Much though I hate to admit it, the fact that this incident targeted physicians and health officials is, in all likelihood, an unfortunate coincidence. And, in the grand scheme of things, would you feel any better if the dead were, oh, chartered accountants? They would still be innocents; boring innocents, granted, but still innocents.”

“Well,” Mycroft said bitterly, “God forbid the dead be boring. I know how disappointing you would find that.”

Sherlock flinched as if his brother had hit him; Mycroft wasn’t the only one thrown out of his normal mien, apparently. “That’s unfair,” he managed, after a second or two.

Mycroft wrapped his arms around himself and turned to Sherlock. “You’re right,” he said. “I apologize.” His face gave away nothing; that very blankness told Sherlock much about his brother’s inner state. Sherlock was suddenly aware of being woefully out of his depth.

“Even you aren’t perfect,” he finally said. “Nor protected from miscalculation. But in this case, there was absolutely nothing you could have done differently. Our pursuit was not predictable, nor was the result. This entire incident lies at Moran’s door, no one else’s—the locations and the requirements were defined by him, after all.” Logic; logic was usually helpful with Mycroft.
Not this time.

“*Do you think that helps?*” Mycroft snarled, a glimpse of the fury inside forcing its way out. “I calculated that there was a lower risk in playing along with Moran’s game, at least in the short run, until we could identify the targets and find a way to subvert the process. I believed that would take no more than three days, and that we could turn the tables on him immediately thereafter. Instead, we have all been exposed to severe risk; the two of us nearly drowned, we are nowhere near being able to pin Moran down, and now over 100 people are dead, because I made a *miscalculation*, as you called it. What would have happened if I had made a full-on *error*, do you suppose? World War III?” He came to a shuddering halt and squeezed his eyes closed, fighting for control.

Because that was the other thing people didn’t realize about Mycroft—his temper. His once-ungovernable temper, that had led, in his childhood, to no less than 3 complete destructions of his room in 5 years, and one fight in uni that left Mycroft’s opponent in hospital for 2 days. Only the Holmes name and connections had kept him from being formally charged. Sherlock hadn’t fully understood how serious it was until well after the fact—he’d been not quite 10 at the time, and knew only that Mycroft had been sent down from uni for two weeks, spending most of that time sequestered in his room. When he heard more about the incident, years later (one of his own uni classmates also had an older brother, who had been a year behind Mycroft), he went digging for information, and came across an initial report by the on-campus security force. He’d been impressed by the amount of damage his brother had done, and astounded by the idea of Mycroft, completely out of control.

Mummy had evidently sat Mycroft down, when he finally emerged from hibernation, and had a very pointed conversation, in which she told him that he had to get his temper under control, or it would end up controlling him. He had taken it very much to heart, clearly—Sherlock couldn’t remember a single instance of Mycroft truly losing his temper after that incident.

Now, though—now, he was close to the edge and, though Sherlock relished a bit of chaos as a rule, in this case they simply couldn’t afford it. Particularly since the potential consequences of Mycroft’s loss of control, given the scope of his power, were terrifying to contemplate.

Mycroft shuddered, then squeezed his eyes closed momentarily before looking back at this brother. “I need to walk,” he said. A pause, then—“Will you come? And not talk?”

Sherlock nodded, and fell into step beside him as he strode off.

John looked out the front door just in time to see the Holmes brothers stalking away. He hesitated, wondering if he should follow, before Anthea put a hand on his shoulder.

“They’ll be back,” she said quietly. “Mycroft finds it helpful to walk when he’s at his limit.”

“Happen often, does it?” John said hesitantly. He realized that, in the past few days, he had been rearranging his mental concept of the older man, understanding now that most of what he’d seen in the past had been a persona crafted for his consumption, rather than the “real” man.

“More than you’d think,” she said, with a wry smile. “Those two are more similar that either of them cares to admit. Mycroft’s just more obsessive about hiding things, and better at it, generally.”
“God, that’s strange to contemplate,” John chuckled. “Someone more phobic of open emotion than Sherlock. The mind boggles.”

“I can peel him open like an orange when I have to,” Anthea said, in a matter-of-fact tone. “If I’m worried about him, I just slip a hefty shot of brandy into his coffee, cancel all his appointments, and wait. He knows I’m doing it, of course—it’s not like he wouldn’t notice the smell, or the taste. But it gives him permission to talk, you see? An allowable reason.” She shrugged her shoulders. “We’ve known each other a long time. He knows I’m safe.”

John watched as the two tall men vanished around a curve in the rutted track leading towards the lake, and thought about that. Did Sherlock consider him “safe”? He hoped so, but he wouldn’t lay money on it.

Twenty minutes later, John, Anthea and G had finished helping Bertie and Siobhan load everything onto the bus (including those damn canes, and the rifle that Bertie refused to touch) and were almost ready to leave when Mycroft and Sherlock walked back around the corner. Neither man looked relaxed, certainly, but that air of barely-restrained violence had left Mycroft, who now simply looked tired.

“Apologies,” the older man said stiffly. “I allowed the situation to cloud my judgment. It won’t happen again.”

Bertie and Siobhan tutted and fluttered, and no more was said about it. When they got under way, Sherlock sat up in the passenger seat by Bertie while Anthea and Siobhan used Siobhan’s phone to track the best route to the cache site. Mycroft sat by himself on the couch for a bit, then wandered up to stand near his brother, chatting politely about the state of the road with Bertie. John picked up a newspaper he’d found on the floor and dropped onto the couch with it—he’d begun to feel out of touch with the rest of the world, and seeing a current paper brought that home. He was surprised, though, when G dropped into the seat beside him.

“Surprising, innit?” the criminal said softly.

“Hmm?” John murmured, only half paying attention.

G pointed at Mycroft with his chin. “Him. Not quite what he seems. All prim and proper, yeah. But that look he had? Not something you usually see on an office type, ya know?” It was clear that G, too, was reappraising Mycroft, and wasn’t entirely comfortable with what he saw.

“What ‘look’?” John asked. He was quite sure he knew, but wasn’t positive G did.

“That look like he’d like to set the world on fire, and just might be able to do it,” G said soberly, before wandering over to the kitchen table and pulling out a deck of cards.

Seemed like G did know, after all.
The trip to Zagreb took a little over 4 hours. They stopped for lunch in Kutina; G was beside himself with delight when they found a diner and were able to have their first restaurant meal in far too long. Bertie and Siobhan insisted on paying (which was helpful, given that Mycroft, though he had his wallet, couldn’t risk using a credit card, and had no useable cash). John noticed with a frown that Sherlock ordered a sandwich and chips, and proceeded to push his food around his plate without actually eating much of it. While the rest of the group chatted, John spread two pieces of bread from the basket on the table with honey, dropped them next to Sherlock’s plate, and nudged his arm. The detective frowned, sighed, and took a bite.

At just before 2 in the afternoon, they pulled up to a nondescript warehouse building in a sleepy industrial area outside of Zagreb. Bertie and Siobhan helped them unload their few possessions before standing hesitantly on the pavement in front of the bus.

“Are you sure we can’t take you on to Vienna?” Siobhan said, for the third time. “I know you have your orders, but your brother’s not well, and you took such a beating yesterday, Mycroft. Can’t you talk to your UN superiors there and get some help?” Sherlock bristled a bit before Anthea stared him down; Mycroft just sighed.

“We greatly appreciate everything you’ve done,” the Great Man said graciously. “But, as I’m sure you can imagine, time is of the essence, even more so after yesterday’s events. We can secure everything we need here; all will be well.” He held one elegant hand out for Siobhan’s phone, and typed briefly. “If you run into any kind of difficulties on the rest of your trip, call that number and mention my name—help will be dispatched very quickly. And please send a text once you arrive so that I have your number,” (as if he didn’t have it already memorized, John thought), “and I will let you know that we’re OK, as soon as it’s safe to do so.” He paused, then continued in a more-sober tone.

“Unless there is some kind of emergency, it would be best if you don’t mention having seen us,” he continued. “As I’m sure you understand, we have no way of knowing who is involved in this affair. It’s critical that we stay under the radar.” He gave the two an earnest look, one that John recognized as a version of the one Sherlock used when trying to appear trustworthy.

Bertie nodded. “Of course. Doesn’t surprise me at all.” He paused, looked at Siobhan, then cleared his throat heavily. “Be careful, won’t you? Don’t want that grand rescue to be for naught.”

Mycroft nodded and smiled. “We’ll do our best.” Then he held out his arm to Siobhan and led her to the bus door as if she were the Queen.

Once the bus had pulled away, amid much hand-waving and smiling, Mycroft immediately turned to the group and got down to business.

“The cache is in two locations within the facility. The vehicle is stored around the back—there is a bank of small garages against the rear fence. The rest is in a locked compartment inside. This facility is completely self-service—no staff on-site, so the only things we need concern ourselves about are the main gate code, and the security codes for each internal location, all of which I have. There are CCTV cameras, but they aren’t monitored—they’re only used after the fact in the event of a break-
in.” He stepped up and entered the code for the gate, which gave an electronic “cluck” and slowly swung open, then pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Anthea. “Here is the code for the garage door. You and G can go secure the vehicle and bring it around the front, while the rest of us open the storage area. Don’t forget to fill it with petrol—there are tanks back by the garage, and the garage code will unlock the tanks as well.”

Anthea raised her eyebrows but nodded, then tapped G on the shoulder and strode off towards the rear. The rest of the party walked over and entered the main building, consulting a layout schematic before heading down a corridor lined with blue metal rolling doors secured by touchpads.

“So, why didn’t you want G with us?” Sherlock asked suddenly, as Mycroft stopped in front of one of the doors. “He’s not precisely stupid; he’ll be aware that there are almost certainly weapons in here. I thought you had decided that it didn’t matter if he knew.”

Mycro left reached up and tapped in a code, then, once the touchpad shone green, grabbed the bottom handle of the rolling door and slid it up. He didn’t enter, though, instead reaching his arm behind him, into the deep pocket in the back hem of his parka. When he brought it back out, he was holding a small, thin laptop computer and charger. “Bertie gave me a gift, though I’m sure he didn’t realize why it would be so critical,” he said. “This gives us a secure method of contacting outside help, and safely researching whatever we may need.” He looked over the piled boxes in the storage room. “I’m not naïve enough to believe that any phones or other electronics we find in here aren’t tapped—whoever Moran has on the inside is very good, and the creation of these caches, of necessity, involved too many people.” He turned and handed the laptop to Sherlock. “You’re a bit better than I am at computers—find an excuse to slip away at some point and see what progress you can make on tracking down our interlopers. You know my access codes—feel free to use them, or invent your own.”

“The latter, I think,” Sherlock said absently, opening up the computer to make sure it worked. “Yours are almost certainly flagged in some fashion.” He closed it, then shoved it into his own rear pocket.

“We’ll give you whatever electronics we find in here—you can presumably link them up to your laptop to backtrack the tracking equipment on the cached ones. Another helpful data point.” Mycroft walked over to the right-hand wall of the unit, where a red clipboard hung from a peg. He pulled it off and handed it to John. “This is a list of the contents, with box numbers. Let’s get started, shall we?”

It was like a demented version of Christmas. They each looked at the list and headed for their desired items, digging through the boxes and setting items aside. John pulled out a field medical kit with a sigh of relief; he hadn’t realized, until he had it in his hands, how much he’d felt the lack of one in these circumstances. “Field medicine” was all very well, but only if one actually had “medicine” to offer. Sherlock was most excited by the boxes of clothes; washing out his pants every night was beneath his dignity, apparently.

Mycro left dug through several boxes of high-tech equipment, and gave a small huff of relief when one such foray yielded a car charger compatible with Moran’s dedicated phone. He put it carefully in his pocket, then went back to his search.

After putting his medical kit aside, John took the clipboard from Mycroft and went to look for hand weapons (larger weapons were included as well, evidently—what looked like a shoulder-held rocket launcher rested against the back of the storeroom. Fun, but impractical). He pulled out three pistols and set one next to each of his companions, but no more—Anthea already had G’s gun, and no one wanted G to have one, after all. The rifle they already had was adequate, but they had no extra
ammunition—that had gone with the truck, as had the shells for G’s gun. John did find a box of ammunition for the latter, but not for the rifle. He selected a smaller rifle he was familiar with from his time in the service and put it on his growing pile of items, along with a box of shells.

“I don’t think we need any grenades,” he said. Mycroft’s head popped up; Sherlock was still digging through clothing. “Too much scope for disaster if you’re not trained. I did pick up a couple of limpet charges, though. I can see those being handy,” he continued. “I’m going to hide them from G. Put them in all those clothes you’re bundling up, Sherlock. You do know we’re not taking a delivery truck, right?” Sherlock gave him a two-fingered salute and kept digging.

By the time G and Anthea arrived, John, Mycroft and Sherlock were done with their search and had shoved their gleanings into 5 large military duffle bags they’d found. The largest two bags held an extensive selection of MREs and other shelf-stable foods; John didn’t want to spend any more time searching for obsolete tinned goods or digging through ransacked shops.

“I think we’ve got everything we’ll need,” John said as the two entered. “How’s the vehicle?”

“Sub-par,” G said with a scowl. “Older Land Rover. Tatty seats—no leather. No on-board GPS. No air conditioning.”

John blinked. “It’s January. Why would we need air conditioning?”

“Not the point,” G snarled, and stalked over to pick up one of the duffle bags.

“Oh,” crooned Sherlock. “Is it not big and manly enough for you? I mean, you have to have some means to compensate.”

Quick as a flash, G flew towards the detective with murder in his eyes. Mycroft, surprisingly, was quicker, stepping smoothly into his path. “No,” he said simply. G stood, breathing hard, and tried to stare Mycroft down, while Sherlock, the bastard, smirked behind him.

The criminal finally looked away, glaring over Mycroft’s shoulder at his unrepentant brother. “Your time will come, arsehole,” he snapped, and stomped out with the duffle bag in tow.

“Looking forward to it,” Sherlock caroled after him.

“Idiot,” John sighed.

Loading up the truck took less than 10 minutes. G was right—it was a bit tatty, which was probably intentional. The last thing they wanted was to travel in a big, flashy, noticeable truck, that people would be bound to remember. John had never been happy about the UN Humvee for that very reason.

John and Mycroft had done a final inventory before loading; they now had clothing, food, weapons, toiletries (none of the men wanted to be unshaven any longer; even Sherlock was starting to look a bit spotty), and a charger for the phone. Now, though—now they had to use that phone, and call Moran.

Mycroft plugged the phone charger into the outlet in the console, while G started the engine. “We should have done this first thing,” G grumbled. “Why didn’t we call him as soon as we found the charger?”
“Because I couldn’t guarantee that I could control my reactions at that juncture,” Mycroft said coolly. It said something about G’s new assessment of the bureaucrat that he didn’t argue, or ask why that was important.

Mycroft put the phone on “speaker” and dialed; when an anonymous voice answered, he said simply, “Get me Moran,” and waited. Moran picked up less than five minutes later.

“About damn time,” Moran said darkly. “How the fuck do you think you can get away with not contacting me for two solid days?”

“It should have occurred to you that we might be unable to do so,” Mycroft said, in arctic tones. “And you seem to have anticipated the issue anyway—or was the incident in Vienna simply an unfortunate accident?”

Moran gave a huff of laughter. “Well, you have me there,” he said, in a sly tone. “I did tell you that I have a tendency to get bored. And I had already pointed out to you that I wasn’t pleased by your falling behind schedule. I decided that an object lesson was in order.”

“You do realize that this lack of adherence to our agreement makes us less inclined to continue in this effort, I hope,” Mycroft said coldly. “If you intend to set off containers on a random basis, our incentive to comply is gone, which means we would be free to turn our attention to other efforts.” He left it to Moran’s imagination as to what those efforts would be; John, for one, had no problem figuring out what that meant.

“Back up, there, bucko,” Moran sneered. “You do that, I might just decide to hit all the buttons at once. If I lose, you lose.” He paused, then continued in a more-reasoned tone. “Let’s not go off on a tangent unnecessarily. You tell me why you went off-piste, and maybe we can come to a better understanding.”

Mycroft considered, then gestured to G. “I’ll let your man tell you. I wouldn’t want you to accuse me of overstating things.”

“The site was occupied, sir,” G began. “Local military, heavy arms. We didn’t get clear in time—they blew the truck off the road, and we ended up coming out on foot. Iceman and his brother damn near drowned. The phone was dead by the time everyone was safe and sound—the charger and everything else was lost in the truck. This is the first chance we’ve had to charge it and call you, unless we wanted to use a non-secure line. Didn’t think you’d appreciate that.”

“Noooo,” Moran murmured. “Probably not.” He paused dramatically, while John mentally rolled his eyes. He was so sick of all of this figurative cock-waving.

“OK,” Moran finally said. “So you do have a fairly good excuse. Hope Sherly didn’t have one of his turns—how ya doing, Junior?”

“Spiffing,” Sherlock drawled. “Tip-top. Tickety-boo.” John stared; who had shown Sherlock a book of 1920s slang? And why on Earth had he not deleted it?

Moran laughed. “Well, ain’t that the bee’s knees? Who told you about my little habit?”

“A mutual acquaintance,” Sherlock said. “She said it was your most annoying trait, and that was saying something.” John blinked. “She” couldn’t be…surely not. Judging by the smirk on Sherlock’s face, though, probably so.

Moran laughed again. “How that woman can talk about annoying traits…I mean, whips and scolding? How annoying is that? Though I suppose it depends on the context, and the amount of
clothes you’re wearing.” G tittered; no one else made a sound.

Finally, Moran sighed. “You’re a tough audience,” he finally said. “So, we need to get back to business. Your next location is outside Sofia. You have a day.”

“No, we do not,” Mycroft replied instantly. “It will take us an entire day to drive there—at least 9 hours. We have narrowly escaped death, and are in various states of poor repair. If you want us to be capable of decryption, it will not be at 2 in the morning, after a 9-hour road trip.”

Moran was silent for a moment, before replying in a sarcastic tone. “You have balls, Iceman. But in this case, I suppose you’re right—it would be inconvenient if you got yourself killed, or blew up my materials because you were poorly. So, what do you propose?”

“We will leave now,” Mycroft said. “We will arrive at our location in the early hours of the morning, and find a place to sleep, and we will stay there for at least 8 hours. At the end of that time, we will head directly to the site and start work immediately. We will notify you, if we can, of any impediments, but you will wait a full 36 hours after last contact before initiating any kind of punitive action. Are we in agreement, or do we both declare war as of this moment?” That last was delivered as if Mycroft were asking the time of day; John had heard that tone from commanding officers before, and it rarely boded well for anyone involved.

“Like I said—balls,” Moran replied. “But I suppose it’s acceptable. Just so you know, I’m setting an alarm for 36 hours from now—if that alarm goes off, whatever happens after that is your responsibility. Ta-ta, folks,” he finished, and the line went dead.

In a strange way, John was glad of G’s presence. Not the man himself, exactly, but a driver—someone who could keep them moving towards their objective while the rest of them wilted in their respective exhaustion. G was also the healthiest of all of them at the moment, and thus the most likely not to fall asleep at the wheel.

Anthea, in the front seat with G, was clearly tired, but physically OK. She made desultory conversation with the criminal, though not, John noticed, in the baby-girl voice she had affected earlier in the trip. John was also tired, and the knot on his forehead from the crash ached. He considered climbing into the back and stretching out between the duffels, but wanted to reserve that option for one of the Holmes brothers, if it was needed.

Neither of the two looked well. Mycroft was as pale as John had ever seen him, but for the livid blue-purple lump above his eyes, and was developing a heavy cough—not unexpected, and not terribly alarming, but wearing on the man himself, who was already exhausted from his ordeal. And Sherlock—John was worried about Sherlock. While John now had an extensive medical kit, it nonetheless didn’t contain antibiotics specific to Sherlock’s infection, and John was afraid to experiment with any additional stop-gaps given the results of the last attempt. The detective’s reluctance to eat was returning, and his skin had an ashen tone to it. Sherlock would sleep much of this trip, if John had to drug him to make it happen. It might not be enough to fix the problem, but it would give his friend’s system additional strength to help fight off the remnants of infection on its own.

As it happened, he needn’t have worried—both Holmes brothers faded quickly once they were
underway, and ended up wedged in their respective corners, sound asleep, within an hour of their departure. They stayed that way until their first rest stop, three hours later.

John, though, found his desire for sleep waning; tired though he was, he couldn’t relax. He finally asked Anthea for the phone, once it was charged, and started reading internet reports of the Vienna incident. He had progressed to the first-person accounts included in one of the tabloids when he noticed something that stopped him short. He re-read it, then paged back and checked two pages he had read earlier. Then he opened another series of pages on the first attacks, as well as the edited medical reports on those victims. And then he thought, and thought, and thought some more.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, Mycroft. It's always been clear to me that Mycroft has a well of fury in him--we've seen glimpses of it several times, most recently in the scene early in TFP, when he tears the governor a new one. As it happens, I, too, was a child with a lethal temper (though I never destroyed my room--I retained enough self-preservation not to go that far, since my mother would have probably killed me). And the speech Mummy gives is one I heard from my 6th grade teacher. As an adult, there are many people I've worked with for years who have never heard me so much as raise my voice. But I can tell you first-hand that the temper never really goes away, you just learn to control it. And in extreme situations, it WILL come out.

Note that I'm assuming that Mycroft went to uni very early--16 or so.
The gang makes it to their refuge for the night—it's rather more upscale than what they've seen in recent days. Pastries are consumed, the Holmes brothers strip down, and John does a little more doctoring than expected.

They stopped for dinner in a small town near the northern edge of the Belgrade exclusion zone, where the proprietors of the family-owned restaurant were embarrassingly glad of their patronage—even though this area was presumed “safe”, it was essentially almost as deserted as the evacuated areas. They were plied with vast quantities of food for a very small cost (paid, surprisingly, by G, given that Mycroft was hesitant to use his own card and potentially give away their location).

They all ate reasonably well. John was relieved to see that Sherlock ate more than half of his plate of pork cutlet and potatoes, though he did so with an aggrieved expression on his face that let John know he was doing so under duress. As long as he ate, John didn’t care how much he sulked.

When they finished, Mycroft proposed someone make a quick foray to the shops—while the MREs would be very useful, it would be nice to also have fresh bread, cheese and perhaps fruit to take along. Sherlock, looking exhausted, declined, and went to sit in the truck; Mycroft joined him, despite his brother’s scowl. Anthea sighed, looked at the handful of bills G had given her, and said, “I’ll just go then, shall I?” and stomped off; John, seeing his opportunity, waved a hand at G and trotted after her.

The shop, like the restaurant, was thrilled to have customers, and the owner hovered anxiously nearby until Anthea finally gave him a tight smile and said something rather curt in Serbian. The owner blanched and scuttled off. John wished, not for the first time, that he spoke a language other than English and a smattering of Pashto and Dari.

Once they were alone, John moved close to Anthea. “I need you to do something for me, without letting either G or Mycroft know,” he said. Anthea raised her eyebrows in surprise but said nothing. Waited patiently.

“I need you to give me Bertie’s contact info—either his email or his phone number. I don’t want to ask Mycroft—it’s too difficult finding a chance to speak to him without G around, and I don’t want to discuss what I’m thinking without a whole lot more technical knowledge than I currently have.” He reached into one of the interior pockets of his parka and pulled out a phone—one that no one but he, and now Anthea, knew he had.

“Mycroft wasn’t the only who received a gift from the Markhams. Siobhan picked this up at the shop and handed it to me—she wasn’t concerned with privacy, especially, she just happened to catch me when I was alone, thank God. It won’t last forever—she prepaid for the equivalent of about £100 worth of service, and once that credit’s used up, it’s useless. But given that I have a means to communicate that I’m certain can’t be tracked, I want to use it to confirm something.” He looked earnestly at the younger woman. “Can you trust me? Even though I don’t really want to give you
any additional information yet, not till I’m sure?”

“John. If we didn’t trust you, you wouldn’t be here,” Anthea said simply.

“Ta, I guess,” said John.

When they came back to the truck, laden with two bottles of cider, a loaf of rye bread, a large chunk of some kind of local cheese, and a bag of depressed-looking apples, G was sitting on the front bumper smoking a black Turkish cigarette (while Sherlock watched longingly from the back seat). Mycroft was pacing, almost military-style, back and forth next to the truck, and gestured impatiently for them to hurry as soon as they came into view.

“We need to get going,” he snapped. “If we’re not on-location by 2 or so, we’ll be forced to limit our downtime, and I don’t think any of us want that.” He looked at John and then, very slightly, cast his eyes towards his brother without turning his head. John looked at his friend closely, and saw what Mycroft was trying to indicate—Sherlock was in pain, and trying to hide it.

Sherlock had always wanted to believe he was impenetrable to others, and in many ways, that was true. But Mycroft, John, and (probably) Anthea knew his “tells”—those tiny mannerisms the detective unconsciously used in stressful circumstances. The twitching fingers, the restless knee—those were anxiety. The rapid-fire blinking (what John and Mary referred to, privately, as a Reboot)—that was confusion. But a furrowed brow coupled with arms held tight to his torso—since his injury, since the shooting, that was pain. Not always from his incision, thankfully, but still, after yesterday, very worrisome.

Going by the glower on Sherlock’s face, however, he wasn’t going to be receptive to any kind of care right now. The best they could do would be to follow Mycroft’s suggestion and make the best possible time to a safe haven for the night, and deal with any necessary treatment then.

Their trip took much longer than it would have done a month earlier—they had to make a wide detour to avoid the Belgrade Exclusion Zone. Sherlock had argued for continuing on through, but G was reluctant, and John (hard though he found it) agreed—they certainly didn’t want to encounter any checkpoints, given their lack of papers, and they didn’t know if any of the bands of looters they’d seen evidence of several days ago were still in play. All in all, better to go around and not take the risk.

By half-eleven, they had all grown quiet—Anthea had fallen asleep and dropped her head into the corner between the door and the seat; Mycroft was awake but silent, playing fitfully with the phone but not giving John the impression he was actually accomplishing anything. Sherlock stared out the window, brows still drawn down and body language tense. Finally, John couldn’t stand it—he reached over the back of the seat and rummaged in the medical kit, pulling out a bottle and grabbing two capsules before returning it to the kit. Then he pulled one of the bottles of cider out of the shopping bag and held it and the medicine in front of Sherlock, waiting until the younger man
noticed and turned towards him.

“Take them,” John said. “You need to rest, and staring out the window for three hours isn’t going to do it.” He saw his friend’s mistrustful look and continued. “No, it’s not a sedative. It’s just paracetamol, basically, with a bit of antihistamine in it. Should be just the ticket.”

John wasn’t sure if he was concerned or relieved when Sherlock took them without protest, and subsided soon thereafter into an exhausted heap in the corner. John stayed awake a bit longer himself, then finally leaned against Sherlock and let his chin drop to his chest.

It was the absence of noise that woke John, an indeterminate time later—the truck had stopped. It was very late, clearly. John had just started to ask where they were when Sherlock stirred. “Sofia,” that deep voice said, a little rusty from sleep. “We’re in the Sofia Exclusion Zone—how did that happen?”

“We went back roads, and a bit off-road, to avoid any checkpoints,” Mycroft said. “Given that our next location is quite close to the outskirts of the city—only 20 kilometers or so—I saw no harm in getting us accommodations of a rather higher caliber than our previous locations.” He pointed out the window, towards an arc-shaped building, illuminated by security lights, but without any vehicles or people in sight. “This is the Hotel Berlin Park—modern, very comfortable, and, best of all, currently abandoned. I was certain that the grand hotels in the city center would have illicit guards at best, or looters at worst. But these newer hotels on the outskirts are more often owned by foreign investors who have no sentimental attachment to them—so they would be far more likely to be left as they were.”

Anthea opened her door and stepped out, stretching luxuriously. “And the best part is, Sofia was one of the second round of evacuations, so they’ve only been gone 3 days. So, chances are, everything in the restaurant kitchen is still edible. Four-star cuisine,” she said, rubbing her hands in mock glee.

John groaned. “It’s,” he glanced at his watch, “currently oh-fuck-me o’clock. I don’t know about you, but a meal, even a gourmet meal, doesn’t sound anywhere near as attractive right now as a hot shower and a warm bed.”

Mycroft gave a little nod. “Agreed—though perhaps tea and pastries as a nightcap first? I can testify to the skills of the pastry chef.”

“He really can, you know,” Sherlock snarked. “He came home from his last trip with four pastry boxes.”

“Those were gifts,” Mycroft said stiffly.

“They were,” Anthea chimed in, with a stern look at Sherlock. “Two of them were for me, and two for your parents. Which you’d know if you’d called them like you were supposed to.” Sherlock sneered but subsided.

By unspoken agreement, lugging in the bags was left to G and John. Anthea was carrying the rucksack of things put together at the Markham’s, and John didn’t really want Sherlock carrying anything anyway. Mycroft, however, apparently felt that his self-appointed role as Tour Guide exempted him from portage duties.
The hotel had a few lights left on—probably on a timer. Mycroft led the way down a corridor with elaborate glass on both sides and on the peaked roof—the view must have been beautiful in daylight. They passed a large glass room with artificial stars visible on the ceiling and a huge blue-tinted indoor pool. “It’s a pity it’s so late,” Mycroft said regretfully. “The pool really is delightful.”

They finally reached broad wood doors which opened to a dining room with white-painted furnishings and finely-made inlaid wood floors. John dropped his bags with a thump and heard G follow suit; then they followed Mycroft as he wound around the tables to another set of doors which led to the huge, modern kitchen.

Mycroft flipped on the overhead lights, exposing a vast expanse of chrome, marble and wood—three room-sized freezers along one wall, an array of top-grade cookers, multiple ovens and every kind of mixing, chopping or frying implement known to man. At one end of the long marble counter stood a large, glass-fronted refrigerated case, which proved to contain a sizable number of delectable-looking pastries—cakes, tortes, cheesecakes and the like. Beside the glass case was a wooden stand with a wire front, filled with many kinds of bread and stacks of dinner rolls.

Anthea was first in line at the refrigerated case, grabbing a plate from the other side of the counter and filling it with her selections. G turned to the refrigerators first, pulling out a selection of cold cuts and condiments, then grabbing two of the rolls before settling to craft a sandwich. Mycroft busied himself at one of the cookers, starting on both tea and coffee, while Sherlock pushed plates to the others and then grabbed a variety of sweets for himself. John wanted his tea more than anything else, but settled on a piece of decadent chocolate-almond torte to go with it.

Fifteen minutes later, they were all replete, and realizing just how exhausted they were. John and G grabbed the bags, and Mycroft led them back out to the corridor, heading to the front desk, where he efficiently hacked the computer system and handed over room keys for everyone. “They’re all together,” he said. “It’s easier if we don’t have to worry about whether the lifts are working, so they’re all on the ground floor.”

John felt his jaw cracking in a great yawn, and started towards the rooms before he remembered. “Mycroft, Sherlock—I’d like to give both of you a quick check before bed, if you don’t mind. We didn’t take the time this morning, but I’m sure you both have a great crop of bruises by now, if nothing else.” He saw Mycroft’s look of hesitation, and held out his hands calmingly. “Five minutes, no more. Promise.”

The Great Man pondered, then reluctantly agreed, and his brother silently followed. Sherlock, still groggy from the antihistamine, gave the impression of a sleep-walker, rousing only to make the occasional snarky remark before lapsing back into silence.

John’s room proved to be nicer than any he’d ever stayed in—very modern, but also very posh. Lots of chrome, neutral colours, moody lighting and a state-of-the-art en suite, complete with a stone-lined shower with 6 showerheads. John could hear it calling his name.

He dropped the bag with his med kit on the king-sized bed and popped it open, then turned to the brothers. “Strip down,” he said. “Pants are fine, but everything else off, please.”

“All right,” they both said at once.

“Is this where I say ‘I usually get dinner first’?” Sherlock asked drily. John rolled his eyes and started to pull out the tools of his trade while the brothers complied.

He had planned to start with Mycroft first, but that plan flew out the window when he turned and saw Sherlock’s back as the detective stooped to pull his trousers over his feet. Mycroft’s gasp confirmed that this looked just as bad to him as it did to John.
When John examined him yesterday evening (well, two evenings ago, actually, given that it was now just short of 3 am), he had noted several reddened areas and bluish spots that would certainly develop into bruises, but nothing that gave immediate cause for concern—no grossly swollen areas or heated skin indicating continued bleeding. There had been no sign of...this.

“This” was a great, blue-black bruise that ran from the crest of Sherlock’s hip, right across his back to the bottom of his left shoulder blade. John was astounded, both at the amount of development from the faint blue tinge he’d seen earlier, and at the fact that Sherlock had endured the entire trip without ever mentioning this. Sitting in the car would have been excruciating; no wonder his face had borne that pinched expression all day.

“Why didn’t you say something?” John finally asked, when he could get his mouth under control.

“What could you have done?” Sherlock replied, closing his eyes briefly and dropping down onto the bed with a sigh. “I didn’t want pain pills, and paracetamol does nothing on its own.” He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees with a grimace. “I wouldn’t reject some form of pain relief now, however.”

“I can do that,” John said, still concerned. “Um...give me a minute,” he continued, and stepped out into the hall to knock on the next door down. Anthea answered, wrapped in an extremely posh robe with the hotel’s crest on the pocket. When he told her what he needed, she nodded and trotted off back down the corridor.

Re-entering his own room, he ignored the perplexed looks of the Holmes brothers (identical raised eyebrows and tucked chins), digging into his kit for pain medication before prepping a syringe and moving to stand in front of Sherlock.

“I’m going to give it to you this way, for a couple of reasons,” he began. “First, it’ll work much faster than oral meds. And second, if you took pills at this juncture and immediately went to sleep, the odds of vomiting would be pretty high—your stomach is tetchy enough as it is. So stand back up and turn around.”

Sherlock frowned but complied, and John winced again at the close-up view of the massive bruise. He quickly pulled down the waistband of Sherlock’s boxers and injected him, then folded the discarded syringe in a flannel before dropping it in the bin by the desk. Just as he finished, a knock at the door led him over to admit Anthea, clutching a large plastic tub filled with ice and a handful of plastic bags. He took the supplies from her and started putting together ice packs.

Anthea, in the meantime, had taken in the detective’s injury, and was just as appalled as the rest of them. “Sherlock,” she breathed, reaching out to carefully touch the top of the purple mark. “Why didn’t you say something, dear heart?”

Sherlock turned and hunched his shoulders, not willing to meet her eyes. “It would have done no good,” he said crossly. “What did you always say—‘what can’t be cured, must be endured’?”

“Yes,” she replied, “and then you usually threatened to punch me if I said it again.” She gave a wisp of a smile, and Mycroft joined her. Shared history once more, John thought.

John went into the en suite and returned with a handful of small towels, which he wrapped around his makeshift ice packs. He prodded Sherlock’s shoulder, pushing him gently towards the bed. “Lie down on your stomach,” he said. “You’re going to have to stay with me tonight anyway because of the pain meds, and I want to ice you down during the night.”

Sherlock, his eyes already going bleary from the drug, huffed and stretched out on the bed, tucking
his arms under the pillows, and John draped two ice packs across him (drawing an offended yelp in
the process), then shoved the extras into the small fridge next to the desk. Anthea touched Sherlock’s
shoulder in farewell and got a blurred hum in response, then waved goodnight before returning to her
room.

While Sherlock sank quickly into sleep, John turned to his brother. “Let’s check you over quickly
too,” he said, picking up a stethoscope. “You haven’t been coughing much, but I want to take a
quick listen to your lungs. I see you have your own crop of bruises, though nothing alarming,” he
continued, glancing over pale, freckled skin dotted with a number of blue-purple spots. “Need
anything for pain? You took quite a beating, too, and you’re not as exhausted as you were last night,
so you’ll notice once you lie down.”

Mycroft nodded. “Ibuprofen, perhaps? I’m aware of stiff muscles here and there, though nothing
like…well.” He gestured towards his dozing brother.

John pulled the bottle out of his kit and handed three tablets to the older man, passing over a bottle of
water from the fridge before moving in with his stethoscope for a quick check. Nothing worrisome,
thankfully—a slight rasp still, but better than yesterday. John stood back up and waved at Mycroft’s
clothes on the chair. “You’re all set,” he said, and turned to pack up the kit.

Mycroft dressed quickly, but didn’t immediately leave, instead digging into his pocket to pull out
Moran’s phone. “I’m going to call Moran now,” the older man said. “He will almost certainly be
absent, but this way we can ensure we are meeting the contact deadline without having to shorten
our allowable down time. I rather think we need all of it,” he added, and John couldn’t disagree.

While Mycroft punched in the number, John started stripping down—that shower was calling his
name. In deference to Mycroft, though, he pulled on the plush hotel robe that had hung on a hook by
the bathroom door and waited.

The phone rang four times before someone picked up, and a drowsy voice said, “Yes?”

“I have a message for Mr. Moran; you know who this is. Tell him that it is currently 3 am local time,
and we are located no more than fifteen minutes from our next objective. As per our agreement, we
will now have 8 hours of rest. We will leave here no later than 11:15 this morning to proceed to the
site, and we will contact him again once we have finished our decryption. Good night.” Mycroft
disconnected briskly and shoved the phone back into his pocket, before nodding to John and leaving.

The shower was very nearly a religious experience; if John hadn’t been so exhausted, he might well
have spent an hour there, but, under the circumstances, he had a very happy 10 minutes before
tottering back out to the bed. Sherlock hadn’t moved, and was emitting deep rasping breaths. John
gently tugged the duvet and sheet out from under him before covering him back up, then fished
Siobhan’s phone out of his coat pocket and plugged the charger into the outlet, in the hope that
Anthea would have Bertie’s contact information for him in the morning. He set an alarm on the
phone to rouse him in four hours, and sank thankfully into oblivion.

Chapter End Notes

The Hotel Berlin Park actually exists, and the pictures (especially of the pool) make it
look pretty darn spiffy. Well out of MY price bracket!
Acute Infection: Part Thirteen

Chapter Summary

The team leaves their upscale refuge and heads to their next location. Mycroft reveals his hidden talent (and hobby). And John gets to work on resolving his suspicions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was one of those frustrating nights; John slept, without stirring or dreaming, for a solid four hours before being awakened by the chimes from the phone. He changed Sherlock’s ice packs (the detective never so much as moved, let alone roused), laid thankfully back down—and never went fully back to sleep. It was the curse of both the physician and the soldier—the learned ability to be fully asleep one moment, fully awake the next, but, once awake, very likely to stay that way for several hours thereafter. Excess adrenaline sucked, when you had no way to dissipate it.

After tossing and fidgeting for half an hour, John finally gave in and picked up the now-charged phone, flipping through screens and checking news feeds. Nothing new had been reported on the latest outbreak in the past day (well, nothing beyond the constant rehashing of the same news items under slightly-different titles, anyway), but one tiny tidbit, a late one-sentence update posted six hours ago, only reinforced John’s intent to contact Bertie as soon as possible.

After playing many rounds of Candy Crush and several games of Scrabble, he finally started to grow drowsy again. He had just started to drift off when someone knocked on the door.

Climbing quietly off the bed and padding to the door, he tried to be as quiet as possible—he didn’t expect Sherlock’s awakening to be a pleasant one, and he hoped to be able to delay it a bit past—he checked the clock on the nightstand—9 am, given how late they’d gone to bed.

Anthea stood in the hallway, holding out a cup of coffee that smelled fantastic. “He’s still asleep, I hope?” she said, as she held out the cup.

“Yup,” John said quietly, stepping partly into the hallway. “I want to run a hot bath before I get him up—he’s going to be very sore and stiff, almost certainly, but I don’t really want to give him any more pain medication. What’s the plan for the morning?”

“Mycroft’s started cooking breakfast—well, brunch, I suppose. He’s currently rambling through the walk-in refrigerators and making little pleased noises, so I assume something special is in the offing. I expect we’ll eat in an hour or so—why don’t you plan on coming down to the dining room by no later than 10? I just wanted to make sure you didn’t need me to collect any more ice before I went to act as untrained kitchen help.” She smirked, then continued. “I’ve actually made a point of not learning how to cook,” she said. “It serves two purposes—first, it doesn’t reinforce peoples’ stereotypes of females. Second, it gives Mycroft a chance to cook—he secretly loves it, you know, but he’s always on a strict diet so he needs an excuse to indulge.”

“Oh, God,” John said. “Whatever you do, don’t mention the diet in front of Sherlock. He’ll never let it go.” She started to leave, but he reached out and touched her arm. “Hey. Did you manage to get the contact information for Bertie? It’s important I get in touch with him soon.”
Anthea gasped and reached into the pocket of her trousers. “I completely forgot—too much conversation about food and too little sleep.” She pulled out a slip of paper. “Here’s his phone number. I don’t have his email, but you can presumably text him and ask for it.” Her face sobered as she looked at John sternly. “I need your word that you’ll share whatever you’re concerned about as soon as possible, John. I can’t keep Mycroft in the dark about something potentially critical. He needs to know whatever it is so that he can roll it into his projections for both our and Moran’s future actions.”

John nodded. “Yeah, I get that. It’s just…I’m not…,” he sighed. “Just trust me a bit longer, OK?” Anthea nodded, and left.

Back inside, the conversation had partially awakened the detective—he no longer slept on his stomach, but had rolled to one side. It was clear he would wake soon, though—a flicker of pain swept across his face with the movement, though he didn’t immediately rouse. John took that as his cue to go start a bath in the sybaritic marble tub (big enough for two adults, equipped with multiple water jets and a shaped holder for an inflatable pillow at one end).

He had just finished running the tub full when he heard a loud thump and a groan from the bedroom, and walked out to see a disgruntled Sherlock on his knees next to the bed.

“I did not anticipate my legs and back stiffening to this degree. I overestimated my ability to compensate,” Sherlock said sourly, in response to John’s raised eyebrow. The younger man placed both hands on the bed and pushed himself into a standing position. “God,” he moaned, and tottered towards the en suite.

“Well, you’re in luck,” John said as he followed Sherlock in and pulled towels down to set them next to the tub. “I did anticipate it.” He pointed to the tub and left his friend to it. A relieved groan shortly thereafter told him his efforts were appreciated.

John pulled a set of clothing out of the duffel for Sherlock and left it on the bed before heading down to the dining room. The younger man was still blissfully soaking, but had acquiesced begrudgingly to appearing in no more than 20 minutes for breakfast.

When John entered the dining room, he heard voices carrying from the kitchen area, and pushed through the service doors to find Anthea and Mycroft busy at the large industrial range, while G sat at the service table playing with Moran’s phone. That gave John pause for a moment, before he realized that taking the phone would do G very little good, given his current lack of armaments. Well, that and the fact that G didn’t seem to be the most ambitious of criminals; he’d certainly been remarkably accepting of the changes in his personal status on this trip, save for his ongoing antipathy for Sherlock.

John watched as Mycroft moved deftly from one station to the next, seasoning, stirring and tasting as he went. The older man’s face reflected that “quietly pleased” expression Sherlock sometimes wore when deeply involved in a satisfying puzzle. Anthea, busily picking up used pans and utensils, looked up and noticed the direction of John’s gaze and gave a conspiratorial grin. Neither of them said anything, but Mycroft suddenly did, in that near-psychic way both Holmeses exhibited.

“My parents gifted me with a three-month course at Le Cordon Bleu on my completion of my first
undergraduate degree,” he said, answering a question that hadn’t been asked aloud. “I find cooking both satisfying and soothing, though I don’t have the opportunity to practice as often as I would like.” He looked over his shoulder at John with a small smile. “Sherlock was my sous chef at 10,” he said. “Has he ever demonstrated his knife skills for you? He was quite the dab hand at vegetables.”

John nodded. “Yeah—I used to re-direct him on bad days by asking him to help me fix dinner. Calmed him right down if I could actually coax him into the kitchen.” It had, indeed. John had long suspected that the detective was a much more capable cook that he was willing to admit; though John had taken advantage of that skill largely as a distraction for a fretful Sherlock, he sometimes wondered what Sherlock would create in the kitchen if given the tools and the incentive.

The man in question walked through the service doors at that juncture, moving stiffly but not in obvious pain like yesterday. He noticed John’s searching look and grimaced. “Still stiff; pain is much better,” he said succinctly, then moved to peer over Mycroft’s shoulder at the offerings.

“Oh,” he said, in pleased surprise. “I haven’t had those in years.”

“I thought of them when I saw the truffles,” Mycroft said, clearly happy with his brother’s response. “There’s satsuma-and-pineapple juice in the cooler as well.” He moved deftly to pull a tray of fresh scones (cinnamon, going by the smell) from one of the ovens and hand a bowl and a small spoon to his brother, pointing with his chin. “Drizzle, please.” Sherlock complied, while Mycroft moved to the next two ovens and pulled out a quiche and a tray of slices of toasted dark bread with a delicious-looking melted spread topped with honey and crushed nuts.

Shortly thereafter, the whole spread was arrayed on the service table, and Anthea was passing plates around while Mycroft went down the line of dishes. “Scrambled eggs with truffles, cream and pancetta,” (the dish Sherlock had been so pleased to see); “cinnamon and almond scones with cream cheese drizzle; rocket and pistachio pesto quiche; and ricotta, sourwood honey and chopped almond spread on toasted sweet oat bread.” He looked around at his audience, waiting to attack the food. “I didn’t include a meat; the sausages smelt a bit suspect.”

They all fell to with a vengeance. John had a bit of everything, and finally pushed away from the table with a groan.

“God, Mycroft—that was fantastic,” he said, reaching out and grabbing one last scone for the road. “You’re wasted running the country—you should open your own restaurant.”

“He thought about it, actually,” Sherlock said, while forking in the last of his scrambled eggs. “But he decided that spending days around food was probably not the best environment for a compulsive eater.” Anthea grimaced and smacked his shoulder, hard. “What? It’s true,” the detective said defensively.

“It is, actually,” Mycroft said, giving Anthea a chastising look that she completely ignored. “Sherlock and I both inherited our father’s height. But I also inherited our mother’s metabolism. I have learned over the years that thinking about food is much better for me than actually eating it. I occasionally design dishes for acquaintances in the London restaurant scene as a hobby.”

“Oh? Would I recognize any names?” John asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Yes,” Mycroft said repressively. Sherlock smirked behind his back.
Packing the truck for their departure was the work of mere minutes, but none of them were in a hurry to go. John wished he could take just one more long shower, at least.

John took advantage of Sherlock’s grudging agreement (after two requests) to carry his own duffel bag down and used the number Anthea had given him earlier. He sent off a quick text asking for an email address, emphasizing that it was critical that John hear from Bertie as soon as possible. He had just put the phone back into hiding when Sherlock came back.

“You’re concealing something,” his friend announced. “You haven’t let me carry anything this entire trip if you could help it. But you just insisted I carry my own 10-kilo bag out to the truck. Conclusion? You wanted me out of the way. But you’re not conspiring with my brother—you’ve had ample opportunities to speak to him in my absence. That means you either have a task you want no one to know about, or you want to hide something from me in particular that the others are aware of. That seems very unlikely—you are not my brother’s natural ally, unless you’re mutually involved in a campaign ‘for my own good’.” The detective made ironic air quotes before continuing. “Not applicable in this case, clearly. You also lack that unfortunate expression you wear when you believe I will be unhappy about something you’ve done. Ergo—you have a secret, but not one directly affecting me. So, what is it?” Sherlock seemed more intrigued than angry.

John sighed in resignation. “It’s not a secret in the conventional sense. I’m…let’s just say I’m pursuing additional information to confirm or refute a hypothesis. And that’s all the information I’m going to give you.” He folded his arms and waited.

“John,” Sherlock said, with exaggerated patience. “You know you can’t keep secrets. You’re terrible at it. Why not just tell me? As you say yourself, it’s not really a secret—you just wish to avoid looking foolish if you’re wrong. You shouldn’t worry about that—you’re often wrong, after all.”

“Ta for that,” John said drily. “But you’re going to have to wait nonetheless. God knows, I don’t especially mind being wrong in front of you, even if you are an utter prat about it. But I’m less willing to be wrong in front of your brother, mainly because…it’s a big deal, Sherlock, this thing. And if I’m wrong, and it leads your brother down the wrong path—it’s not just us at risk. So, no. You’ll just have to wait. I’m hoping to have an answer, at least a partial one, soon—maybe this evening.”

Sherlock frowned, and emitted a sound that was half sigh, half frustrated groan. “Very well. But I reserve the right to continue to probe, and if I’m correct in my deductions, you’ll acknowledge it.”

“Fair enough,” John said. “Now let’s get going—we have nuclear weapons to steal.”

The trip to the new site was quick indeed—only twenty minutes’ driving took them up in the hills southwest of Sofia, towards the town of Rudartsi. Here it was obvious that it was still very much winter; unlike the area around Sofia, the higher they rose into the hills, the more snow packed the ground. The temperature was frigid as well; G cranked up the heat in the truck, and they were all glad of their winter gear.

The site proved to be imbedded into the base of a natural outcropping of stone at the top of one of the
hills, an area that also held the remnants of a small medieval holding, its stones now tumbled across the landscape. What may have originally been a cave had been excavated, and steel blast doors built into the surrounding rock. As had been the case in their previous locations, this one had a keypad lodged in the upright steel beam next to the doors.

G parked the truck on the flat area near the doors, and Mycroft walked over towards the keypad, Moran’s phone in his hand.

Unlike their earlier forays, entry into this particular facility was completely uneventful. Mycroft typed in the appropriate code; the red lights flashed to green, and the great doors split and slid back into their tracks. The inside was lit with red security lighting, but as soon as the doors finished their movement, those lights flickered off and were replaced by the glare of ancient fluorescents fluttering into life along the ceiling. Perhaps half of the bulbs were dead, but the remainder were more than enough to navigate by.

The place smelled stale but not abandoned; someone, perhaps the Serbian officials, had performed enough maintenance over the years to keep the place in minimal working condition. It was surprising that evidence of the regular presence of guards was absent; the floors had a light layer of dust and dirt that hadn’t been disturbed in some time.

Finding the control room took 5 minutes; it had a convenient sign that said, “Access Forbidden,” according to Sherlock, which was as good as a flashing light announcing its importance. Once again, the keypad on the door yielded on the first try, and they found themselves at a familiar-looking array of ancient computer terminals and antique equipment. It did seem, however, that the computers had had more recent updates than some; while old, these dated from sometime in the 90s.

Once Sherlock and Mycroft had ensconced themselves at the terminals and started their initial examination, John suggested that Anthea and G go on a search for the nearest loo, while John went to bring in his medical bag and the leftover food from the truck. Once the two had headed off down the corridors, John trotted back outside, climbed into the truck, and pulled out his secret phone. He was pleased to see that Bertie had texted back, giving his email address. John opened the email application, typed in Bertie’s address, and started his question.

“It’s urgent that I get some information from you,” he began, after letting Bertie know who he was. “I won’t be able to access this phone constantly, but I’ll make sure I check no less frequently than every four hours; time may be critical, though I can’t be sure. I can’t give you a great deal of background information; I’m sure you understand the need for security. But I need to know about genetic manipulation in viruses, and, specifically, the likely incidence of replication deficiency.”

Chapter End Notes

I know not a whole lot happened here, but it was necessary to advance the plotline. Just consider this a bit of a breather--it won't last (insert evil chuckle).

And yes, I will explain what that last sentence is all about.

Eventually.
Acute Infection: Part Fourteen

Chapter Summary

After realizing the potential significance of this particular site, the gang goes on a hunt of their newest location. In the process, Sherlock makes an unfortunate discovery that could change the nature of their mission.

There was a strong element of déjà vu at work here—once again, the four of them were ensconced in a sterile, dank facility complete with dodgy fluorescent lighting, ancient computers and abandoned rooms. When John wandered back into the control room (after one last check to see if Bertie had responded) it was to find the Holmes brothers seated at their respective terminals, handing sheets of scribbled notes back and forth and engaging in occasional “conversations” that consisted of one- or two-word statements, followed by more scribbling and/or significant frowning. John stood vigil for five minutes, during which neither brother noticed him; then he sighed and left to do a little exploring, before going to look for Anthea and G.

The “exploring” bit took longer than he expected; he was startled to realize just how big this facility actually was. Unlike their previous locations, this one extended far into the mountainside; corridors ranged off into dimness, with no indication of their purpose. John was wary of getting lost; he hoped the transceiver in his parka would still work, but would prefer not to put it to the test.

He was relieved, after 30 minutes of careful wandering (during which he used a pocketknife he had placed in his pocket at the cache to nick an “X” on each corner, to ensure that his route could be followed if necessary) to hear voices ahead—he had found the remaining members of the party, in a large storeroom off the main corridor.

“It’s all marked ‘ruined’, Anthea was saying as he entered. “Every bit of it. But why wouldn’t they just empty everything out?” She turned her head as John entered, waving him forward.

“Come join the party,” she said. “We found this stash of material, but it’s all marked ‘obsolete’ or ‘contaminated’. I can’t figure out why it’s still here, if that’s the case.”

“I say it’s laziness,” G said. “Just can’t be arsed to cart it away.” The big man was still digging fitfully through crates, tossing items aside to lie strewn around the room.

John moved forward to take a closer look. Most of the material seemed to be military equipment—no handguns, no explosives, but a host of knives, boots, helmets, and the like. He was hard put to visualize what would make a helmet “contaminated”. That led him to what seemed the most likely conclusion.

“It was probably destined for the black market, back in the day,” John said. Anthea raised her eyebrows inquiringly.

“There’s not a lot to do for entertainment when you’re isolated in a secure location for months at a time. And, for better or worse, sometimes soldiers’ thoughts turn to larceny, under those circumstances.” John pointed at the box of boots. “It looks like this place was used up until the time the Soviet bloc imploded. These troops might well have been essentially abandoned here, at least for a time, with a pretty sizeable stock of valuable material around them. It’s not that big a reach to think
that they found a way to capitalize on that.”

He walked over to one of the unopened boxes, and indicated the numbering and writing on the top. “In the army, in any army I’ve ever heard of, everything has a number, and everything appears on someone’s list, somewhere, telling the system where everything is, and who’s responsible for it. But the army knows that things happen—shipments are lost, crates fall off trucks and are damaged, things stored near each other somehow cross-contaminate. In those cases, the unit in possession of the items notes the identifying information of the damaged material, and sends back a report on what was damaged and how. Someone at headquarters makes a note, and the equipment is taken off the master list of items noted for that location. But here’s the thing—“ John opened the box, noting the folded uniform shirts, still in their plastic bags—“no one ever comes and asks to look at the damaged stuff. Ever.”

G got the point first. “So, who’s to say if all, or any, of that stuff was actually damaged, or if it just found its way out of the facility and onto somebody’s truck for sale?”

John nodded. “Yup. Looks like someone had a pretty sweet deal going here, but the facility was closed before they could empty out their last ‘inventory’.”

“You know the oddest things,” Anthea said, wonderingly.

“Says the woman who works for Mycroft Holmes,” John retorted. Anthea grinned and went back to her boxes.

John wandered back to the control room—he was planning to start putting together a meal shortly, and wanted to get a take on what Mycroft would prefer, and what he might be able to convince Sherlock to eat. He found the brothers in much the same status in which he had left them, with one notable change: they were both typing furiously into their terminals, while frowning at the displays.

“Bad news?” John asked, looking over Sherlock’s shoulder at the text scrolling past.

“I’d say so,” Mycroft sighed, hitting a key that froze his display in place. “This facility has earmarks of Moriarty’s intervention. He must have felt that this place merited his personal touch, or at least his personal design. A masking algorithm has been inserted into the code—a variable version, which causes the information to phase-shift on an irregular cycle determined by the whims of its creator.”

John blinked, wondering if that had actually been English. Sherlock sniffed and translated. “The programs have been altered, in such a way that they can’t be accessed. The inserted pattern has to be broken first, and that’s a very lengthy process.”

“But possible?” John asked cautiously.

“Yes,” Mycroft said. “But not by the end of the day. I can insert a Trojan routine, of a sort, but it will take at least 10 hours to complete its work. We will be forced to contact Mr. Moran and inform him of the need for additional time. And I can think of no way to accomplish that without alerting him to the fact that this is a potentially high-value site.”

“We knew the odds were, we’d encounter one eventually,” Sherlock said. “The issue here is, we are running out of subversive ways to deprive Moran of the proceeds. And we need to find out for
ourselves what, exactly, this facility contains, before we tell Moran about it. That will inform our decision on how to proceed.”

“Well, then,” John said, “sounds like it’s time for a scavenger hunt, doesn’t it?”

In the end, they delayed the “scavenger hunt” until after dinner—given the size of the facility, it wasn’t going to be a quick process. Their late start to the day meant that it had already been past 5 by the time they came to the conclusion that the search was necessary, and none of them needed to miss any more meals, given their exertions over the past couple of days. Mycroft inserted his Trojan code into the programming before leaving his terminal, and they sat down to a meal crafted in the elderly facility kitchen from provisions taken from the hotel. The cooker, luckily, operated on bottled fuel, so it still worked despite the long lapse of time since the facility’s decommissioning. They had no milk, but had brought along bottles of beer, cider and (on Mycroft’s part) wine, which he shared only with Anthea.

After a tolerable meal of steak, potatoes and broccoli, they pushed away from the benches and made their way back to the entrance doors. Mycroft pulled out Moran’s phone and brought up a large schematic.

“This purports to be a floor plan of the entire base,” the older man began. “I have my doubts, given that I noted at least one corridor earlier that does not appear here. But it gives us a basic grid pattern to start with. As we’ve all noted, it is much larger than the size of the entrance would imply. I strongly suspect, in fact, that there is another door on the far side of the mountain. I can’t imagine a facility this size, which must originally have held in excess of 100 soldiers, having only one. That exit, however, is also absent from this diagram.”

He passed the phone to each of them in turn (with the exception of G—it was understood that the criminal would be partnered with Anthea, rather than proceeding on his own). Sherlock studied the map with an intent stare for thirty seconds before handing it on to John (who, not being a Holmes, required rather longer). He studied the plan until he could relate it to his earlier explorations, then handed it off to Anthea.

“So, I think I’ll take the arc that proceeds from where I left off,” John said, pointing out the rough location on the map in Anthea’s hand. “It’ll take me a bit to get to my starting point, but at least all of that area has already been searched. I can just take that whole lower right-hand component.”

“And I’ll take the next portion over towards the center,” Sherlock said. “I want to see that large open area at the very back—might be the other door.” He took the phone back from Anthea and pointed at the map for John. “We can meet up here if need be—can you see where your route and mine meet back up?”

John nodded. “Just call me on the transceiver if you get there before I do. I’m not sure how far back my area goes.”

They set off shortly thereafter, armed with one of Anthea’s finds in the storeroom of “ruined” goods—spray cans of military-green paint that were perfect for marking turnings (much better than John’s
pocketknife, anyway). John made quick work of following his earlier path—now that he had compared those wanderings with the map, it was easy to see where he next wanted to go. He was going to intentionally head for the edge of the marked area—the corridors he had seen, but which, according to that map, didn’t exist.

John was amused to hear Sherlock grumbling to himself after a while. Apparently, the detective had turned on his transceiver out of boredom, and was now treating John (and, presumably, the rest of their party) to a running commentary. “Oh, imagine that,” the detective said sarcastically. “Warning labels on the incinerator doors. How stupid were these recruits? Wouldn’t they want to eliminate the ones not smart enough to avoid immolation? I wouldn’t want that lot protecting my country, anyway.”

“They were Russians, Sherlock,” John inserted snarkily. “It wasn’t their country—they were just renting it, essentially.”

“You know I pay no attention to politics, John,” Sherlock sniffed.

“Or world history, evidently,” the senior Holmes interjected. “No wonder your marks for that were so abysmal.”

“Just like yours in sport,” Sherlock said nastily. “Slightly better, in fact.”

“All right then,” Anthea chimed in. “Calling a truce. Blood drawn by each side; honour has been satisfied. Agreed?”

After a pause, Mycroft gave a dignified “Agreed.” Sherlock maintained a sulky silence, but that was apparently good enough. John snickered, but subsided.

After roughly ten minutes, John reached the end of his earlier explorations and headed off into the unknown. Unlike the areas nearer the main door, which held communal rooms—kitchen, dining hall, dormitories—this sector was composed of functional areas—labs (complete with ancient equipment—Sherlock would be interested in these), briefing rooms, equipment storerooms (though most were empty). As he worked his way further off the mapped pathways, he started encountering more areas marked with warning signs and, in some cases, guarded by keypads and security doors.

Sherlock’s muttering was once again drifting over the transceiver, but most of it was barely audible—apparently the detective had no intention of accidentally engaging his brother again. He just found it impossible to examine new things in complete silence.

John had let the sub-vocal commentary fall into the “background noise” category in his head, as he continued to walk down corridors filled with flickering lights and a thick coating of dust, when he heard Sherlock give a sudden quick, noisy gasp. John stopped in his tracks, hesitating. “Sherlock?” he asked. “Everything OK?”

There was a long, fraught pause. John was already heading back up the corridor towards what he knew to be Sherlock’s area when the younger man finally responded. “I think…perhaps you should come here,” Sherlock said slowly. “You recall the large open area I mentioned? Are you clear on where that is, in relation to your search field?” Sherlock didn’t sound distressed, exactly, but there was definitely a strange undercurrent in his voice.
“On my way,” John replied, already moving quickly back towards the mapped areas.

Between 10 and 15 minutes later, John reached the corridor that ended in the open “room” that Sherlock had been so intrigued by. He faced large swinging doors protected by a touchpad. The doors each had large windows in their top panels, and John noticed, as he got closer, that the window on the right-hand door had been roughly broken out. A fire extinguisher lay on the floor next to the doors—evidence of Sherlock’s chosen mode of entry, evidently.

John peered through the gap from the broken window—the main lighting for the room had failed, and the only illumination came from dim red security lights on one of the walls. All he could see were dark shapes—nothing definitive, nothing immediately alarming. He poked his head through the opening.

“Sherlock?” he called quietly, though he realized immediately afterward that there was no real need for caution. He called again, louder this time. “Where are you? What’s got you spooked?”

Sherlock abruptly popped up in the opening, scowling (and, of course, leading John to startle violently). “I am not spooked,” he said stiffly. “I have merely found something that is, well, concerning, under the circumstances.” He reached long arms through the opening and beckoned John forward towards the open window gap. “Come on, then. It’s best if you see in person.”

John huffed, but levered himself up and through the opening, using Sherlock as a prop to slide through without falling. When John had both feet on the floor, he started to move forward, but Sherlock stopped him.

“Wait a bit,” the younger man said. “It’s dark, but your eyes will adjust, given half a chance. There’s quite a lot of abandoned equipment on the floor that you’ll need to avoid.”

They stood in silence for one minute, two, before John nodded. “Got it. Not great, but clear enough. So, what did you want me to see?”

Sherlock didn’t immediately reply. Instead, he turned and moved off across the chamber, beckoning John to follow. Even with the dim lighting, it was clear that this was a very big room—the ceiling was tall enough to be invisible, and, as they moved further in, the walls receded from view as well. John concentrated on keeping Sherlock in sight. The detective moved steadily, only once tripping over an invisible obstacle on the floor (complete with a muttered curse—he hated to appear clumsy or awkward, even though he often was, in private).

Finally he came to a halt, and John stopped with him. Nothing was immediately obvious—huge, dark shadowed shapes loomed in the half-light, but nothing alarming was visible. Sherlock, though, grasped John’s arm and pulled him forward, and the shadows came a bit more into focus.

“These,” Sherlock said. “You remember our first site, and Mycroft wondering about the abandoned silos—where those missiles had gone?” John nodded, moving closer again to the looming structures, now almost close enough to touch.

“I think we found them.”
Chapter Summary

Plans are developed to deal with the presence of armed missiles in the site. But, as often is the case, the best-laid plans can be overtaken by events, and they discover that there really is no such thing as honor among thieves, after all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Bugger,” John breathed.

“My thoughts exactly,” Sherlock responded. “I have no idea how they got them here—evidently Mycroft was correct and there’s another door. A very big door, presumably—and a door that Moran could use to get them back out, for sale to the highest bidder.”

“And we can’t, under any circumstances, let that happen,” John said. He walked forward and put his hand on one of the hulking shapes. Cold, smooth metal hid its hellish purpose. Despite its age, John was quite sure it remained as lethal as it was 30 years ago. “It’s safe to assume that these could easily be readied for use, yeah?”

John could just see Sherlock nod in the dim light. “No question. Nuclear physics is not my specialty, obviously, but the warheads will last as long as their casing holds; the only portion of these missiles that would be a concern would be the engine and the control mechanisms. I’m sure whichever lunatic fringe options this equipment will have technicians who can assess and repair those as needed.”

“So, what do we do?” John asked. “You said it yourself—we’ve run out of ‘creative’ ways to deprive Moran of what he wants, and this particular site is the absolute height of what he wants.”

Sherlock gave a bleak little sigh. “No idea. Much though it pains me to admit it, we need to get Mycroft. Perhaps he’ll have something to offer. Failing that, we’re going to have to head for the nearest cache, load up on explosives, and blow the place to kingdom come. If Moran sets off the rest of the disease sites, we’ll have to accept that as collateral damage.” Unspoken between them was the likelihood that they, too, would be collateral damage, either now or when Moran tracked them down.

That made John’s contact with Bertie all the more critical. “Look,” he said, “you call Mycroft on the transceiver and get him here. I need to head back to the entrance and check on that, um, secret I told you about. It’s… I may have something to offer that will change our thinking about Moran,” he stammered, and trotted over to climb back through the opening in the door before Sherlock could protest.
When John returned to the missile site, he found not just Mycroft with Sherlock, but Anthea and, unfortunately, G as well. Anthea caught his eye as he slid down from the doorway opening and gave an apologetic shrug—unavoidable, apparently.

“There’s no way of telling if these are still viable or not,” Mycroft was saying as John neared the group. Which was odd, since Sherlock had already told John that they almost certainly were. This conversation, then, was geared for G’s ears.

“We need to get back to the terminals, then, and see how much progress your program has made. We’ll have to check in with Moran shortly, if only to give him a status report,” Sherlock said, in a “reasonable” tone so different from his normal speech that John was astounded that G didn’t catch on.

They all headed back towards the blocked door, but G stopped them abruptly. “Hang on,” he said, braced himself, and gave a sharp, violent kick to the latch in the center of the two doors. There was a metallic “clang”, and the doors bent slightly and came apart by perhaps four inches. He set himself again, gave another violent kick, and the doors sprang apart. G marched through first, a triumphant smile on his face.

“Well then,” John said, into the silence as the criminal strode out of earshot. “That answers any question I ever had about his skill level.” Mycroft raised an imperious eyebrow and strode through the ruined doorway; Sherlock scowled and followed, and John and Anthea brought up the rear as they headed back to the control room.

Mycroft didn’t immediately enter the control room, instead veering off towards the dining hall. Sherlock, by contrast, continued down the hallway towards his terminal. Anthea stood indecisively in the hallway before sighing and following her employer, with G close behind. John had no particular desire to hear Mycroft’s presumed call to Moran, so he turned and headed after the detective.

When John opened the doors to the control room, he saw Sherlock seated in front of his terminal, scowling at the text scrolling rapidly across the screen. “This still has hours to run,” the younger man said with a disgusted huff. “Of course, it doesn’t really matter—we’re not going to actually try to break the encryption anyway.” He leaned back, pulled his parka off the back of his chair where it had been discarded earlier, and fished inside the rear pocket until he located the small laptop Mycroft had given him at the cache.

“What are you planning to do with that?” John asked. He knew Sherlock intended to use it to try and flush Mycroft’s spy out of the woodwork, but there hadn’t exactly been a wealth of time available for that effort.

“Mycroft and I had a conversation over the transceiver while you were outside,” Sherlock said absently, while flicking through multiple screens and typing at manic speed. “He has come to the conclusion that we need to put a failsafe in place for this site. Won’t ever come to fruition, unless
we’re spectacularly unlucky. But I’m going to complete the setup pending our success via some other mode.” He went through one more lengthy flurry of screens and typing, before slamming it shut with a disgusted huff. “Blast it. It’s dead, and I realized this morning that the charger was left behind. We’ll have to use the phone instead, going forward.”

“So, the failsafe,” John said, raising his eyebrows. “Do tell.”


“An OCD Holmes. Imagine that,” John said. Sherlock frowned, certain he was being teased, but let it go.

“So, I would imagine Mycroft has moved into the next arena of this farce. Let’s go see how Moran takes the news that we’re going to need an additional two days to crack this cypher, unless we want to risk one of the warheads going critical.” Sherlock sauntered casually through the doors, while John sputtered in his wake.

“What, really?” John said, before the other penny dropped (and before Sherlock could turn and eviscerate him for denseness). “Oh. ‘Farce’—for Moran and G, then. But what’s our real intent here? We can’t possibly turn this over to Moran, no matter what happens.”

“Our primary concern is delaying a response from Moran,” Sherlock said. “We can’t have him setting off canisters because we drop out of contact. So, the ‘two day’ nonsense gives us time to act. This evening, after G has toddled off to bed, I’m going to use the phone to set a chain of information into play. In the end, that chain will lead to the Bulgarians receiving an anonymous tip, roughly 12 hours from the time the message is sent, about the existence of these missiles—though I must say, they’ve been extraordinarily lax in not realizing they existed for 30-odd years.”

“Who knows?” John replied. “Maybe they did know, but were well-paid to leave them here. We know that Moriarty had his hand in here, at least to some degree.” He thought for a moment before continuing. “But—what are we going to do in the interim? We’re going to have to find some excuse to leave with the decryption unfinished—what are we going to do about G? And Moran, once the two days have passed?”

A crease appeared between Sherlock’s brows. “We’re working on it,” he said, and then stalked away down the corridor.

They beheld an interesting tableau when they reached the dining hall. Mycroft was just placing Moran’s phone carefully in his pocket, while Anthea stood silently at his shoulder. G was facing the bureaucrat, a look of repressed fury on his face which Mycroft was ignoring.

“It’s bollocks. I don’t know what you’re playing at, but it’s bollocks.” G spat as John and Sherlock walked in. “You’re supposed to be the top cypher guy on the planet, but it’s going to take you two days to decode someone else’s work?”

“The ‘someone else’ in question was James Moriarty. I’m quite sure you’re familiar with his skill
set,” Mycroft said calmly. “And the issue isn’t with a cypher, it’s with a masking program that has been inserted into the computer’s operating system. I am extremely competent on computers, as is my brother—but we are neither of us the best in the world at that particular activity.”

“Too boring,” Sherlock chimed in. “Not worth the effort, generally—I can hire someone better than me at computers for coffee and sandwiches, in London, and not have to spend the time.”

“We just have to hose the flat down afterwards,” John added. Sherlock’s “experts” were part of his Homeless Network, generally.

“Then why bother with decoding anything?” the criminal snapped. “Just shut everything down so there’s no power, and then the warheads can just be hauled out of here. They can’t blow up if there’s no power.”

Mycroft gave an impatient sniff. “The missiles almost certainly have an internal power source—a battery of some kind. Think about it, man—these are designed to fly across continents. Do you envision some sort of extra-long power cable flying along in their wake to keep the targeting computers working?”

Sherlock snorted, and G directed a death glare at him before continuing. “I still don’t buy it. There must be some way…”

“This is not your area,” Mycroft said coldly. “Mr. Moran has heard and understood the issue, and has no apparent concerns, beyond requiring regular updates, which I will endeavour to supply. Your task is to provide support as needed, and nothing is currently needed. I believe we’re done here. It’s getting rather late—I believe we should go investigate the sleeping arrangements.” He strode out of the dining hall without looking to see if the others followed—they did, of course, though Sherlock took the opportunity to raise a mocking eyebrow at G as he passed.

They settled on a sleeping area located just down the hall from the control room—while it was true that they had decided the full decryption of the command protocols was never going to take place, Mycroft nonetheless wanted to see the basic contents of the computer databases once the Trojan program completed its work, preferably when G was not in the immediate area. The big man was an exceptionally sound sleeper, so a middle-of-the-night check seemed to be in order.

John carried his rucksack in from the dining hall, where it had originally been dropped, and put it on one of the dusty mattresses (which seemed relatively clean, if a little dusty and slightly damp). The others were still wandering back and forth from the control room and the dining hall—well, except for G, who seemed to have gone off somewhere to have a sulk. John mentally assigned him the cot that looked the dirtiest.

John had just dug his toothbrush and a flannel and soap out of the rucksack when he heard shouting down the hallway. Anthea, who had just walked into the sleeping quarters, looked up with a start and caught John’s eye before hustling back out into the hallway, heading towards the source of the voices.

They headed for the entranceway, where they could hear G calling them. They—Mycroft, John,
Anthea and Sherlock—came from several directions and skidded to a halt.

G stood next to the open steel doors, a triumphant smile on his face. Behind him, just at the entry, stood a man, a complete stranger. And, as John noted with dismay, he was a complete stranger with a gun in his hand.

“So,” G chortled. “Bit of a poser, innit? Thought you had everything going your own way, and were going to stall until whatever plan you’ve put together threw a spanner into this whole mission.” He gestured behind him. “This here is Yvgeny. He’s an old friend—used to work for Moriarty with me in London till he moved back to the Old Country.” He looked at the group, and pulled a cheap phone from his pocket. “Didn’t know I’d found this at the hotel, did you? Didn’t last long—couldn’t find a charger, and it only had a bit of juice left. But it was enough—I gave Yvgeny a call earlier, when I figured out you lot were going to turf the whole thing, and likely me along with it. He lives in Sofia—I figured it was unlikely he’d have evacuated, and I was right. Holed up in the fanciest bar in town, helping himself to the best stuff. Probably not exactly sober, but who the fuck cares?” Behind him, Yvgeny nodded genially, the gun staying rock-solid. Not an amateur, clearly.

“What, exactly, is your intent?” Mycroft asked, in arctic tones. “One would be curious as to how you plan to explain this…insurrection to Mr. Moran.”

“Well, that’s the thing,” G said. “I don’t. Plan to explain, that is. See, I know that you’re going rogue. Don’t know how, don’t care. Bottom line, there’s no way this site will pay off for Mr. M., and he’s made it crystal clear that any screw-ups are down to me. And, that being the case, I have no intention of waiting around for him to find out and deal with you, and then turn around and deal with me. Because he will, you know. So I’m going to turn in my resignation, incognito, as it were. I’ve got friends, I’ve got money, and I speak pretty good Russian, so I think Yvgeny and I are just going to go on walkabout and visit his cousins in Moscow for, oh, five years or so.”

“And you’re planning to assassinate us, to ensure we don’t tell Moran?” Sherlock asked, in a disinterested voice.

“Christ, no,” G said. “I can’t kill you lot—Moran would hunt me down like a dog. I can only make this work if he’s got nothing to gain by coming after me.” Behind him, Yvgeny nodded fervently.

“Then what’s to prevent our telling Moran everything?” Anthea asked. “Because we will. Sooner rather than later.”

“Well, no,” G said. “Not without the phone. So, Iceman, toss it over here.” Mycroft looked stonily back; G jerked his head, and Yvgeny moved forward and pointed the gun at Anthea’s forehead. She glared back at him. Mycroft, though, sighed, reached into his pocket, pulled out the phone, and tossed it so that it landed with a clatter at G’s feet. The criminal stepped forward and brought his heel down sharply in the middle of it. Plastic and glass shattered with a snap.

“There, see? Problem solved,” G smirked. “Now, in a few, Yvgeny and I are going to be on our way. We’re taking the truck; you can fucking walk out of here. Good luck with that, by the way—you’re on a mountain, 15 kilometers from civilization, and it’s sodding cold out. I figure you’re not likely to start in darkness, so that gives us an 8- or 10-hour lead. By then I’ll be halfway to Russia. But before we leave, I have one thing I want to do.” He pointed at Sherlock with his chin. “C’mon over here, Junior. I have something for you.”

Sherlock stared back, a mulish look on his face. G gave a small smile and shook his head. “See, that’s exactly what I’m talking about.” He strode quickly forward and, before anyone could react, shot out a hand and cuffed Sherlock across the face, hard. Blood spurted from Sherlock’s split lip, as the detective slid into a defensive stance, looking suddenly both calm and dangerous.
The big man laughed, moving swiftly back out of immediate reach. He gave a quick nod to Yvgeny, who moved into a position where he had a clear shot at Mycroft, Anthea and John. G, though, looked solely at Sherlock. “Oh, this is just what I wanted,” he said. “I’m going to beat the crap out of you, Posh Boy. Can’t kill you, but I can fuck you up as much as I want. And believe me, you twat, I want.” His arm shot out again, but this time Sherlock, expecting the move, slid smoothly to the side and managed to land a solid kick to G’s left leg before dodging back out of reach. Sherlock, John noticed, now wore a manic grin as he bounced on his toes, waiting for G’s next move.

The next five minutes were a lethal, flowing dance of martial arts and pain. Sherlock was very good —his time Away had honed skills learned in his teens, and John had seen Sherlock’s various certificates of merit on the wall of his bedroom. But Sherlock was also at a low ebb physically, and the longer this bout lasted, the more that would come into play. G, on the other hand, clearly spent considerable time on his training and his body on a regular basis, and his size meant that he had both a greater reach and greater strength than the detective.

It was agonizing to watch—John flinched every time Sherlock failed to move out of reach in time and took another solid blow to his arms, legs or head. He’d managed to keep his torso clear so far—between his healing incision site and the great blue-black bruise on his back, a blow there would end the fight, almost certainly, and Sherlock knew it. G took hard hits as well, but seemed to shake them off without any trouble, wading instantly back into the fray.

Finally, the inevitable happened. Sherlock glided in, intent on clipping G’s ribs with a well-aimed elbow. At the last second, though, the big man shifted, dropped, and whipped Sherlock’s legs out from under him. The detective landed hard, and, before Sherlock could scuttle out of reach, G had laced one hand through Sherlock’s hair and the other hand around his throat, pulling Sherlock up to kneel in front of him. The hand around the younger man’s throat clenched harder; Sherlock gave an agonized gasp and collapsed at G’s feet, with G’s fingers still caught painfully in his hair.

G looked up at his audience, a pleased grin on his flushed face. “Oh, that is brilliant!” he exclaimed. “I’ve been wanting to do this for a week.” He looked gloatingly at Mycroft, who watched, dismayed, as his brother panted at G’s feet. “You lot are all the same. Talk a big line, so long as you’re holding all the cards. But then you fold right up in a pinch.” Without looking down, he gave Sherlock’s head a shake. “Didn’t even need to pay full attention to deal with this one.”

Suddenly Sherlock’s voice rang out from floor level, hoarse but certain. “Perhaps you should have done, though. Then you might have noticed the little surprise I had hidden in my right boot.” And G, looking down, saw the large knife that Sherlock now held, shoved firmly against the inner right side of G’s crotch.

It was a brief moment of triumph. G froze, while Sherlock spoke in an icy voice. “Let go of my hair, and place your hands on top of your head.” The criminal complied, while Yvgeny, silent until now, said “G?” in a slurred tone.

“Put the gun down on the ground and kick it across the room,” Sherlock demanded, without looking away from G. The second criminal didn’t move, his gun hand rising uncertainly towards Sherlock. Sherlock, seeing movement out of the corner of his eye, shoved the knife upward, hard, and G let out a pained shriek and threw a hand out, apparently intending to warn his friend not to shoot. Yvgeny, though, at least half-drunk and unsure what was going on, panicked and staggered back. The gun went off—and hit G in the back of the head.

The criminal dropped without a sound, landing half on top of Sherlock. Yvgeny emitted a pained howl, looked around the room, lost, then raced towards the doorway. But in one final, deadly act, he stopped just outside the entrance, lifted the gun again, and shot point-blank into the keypad next to
the steel doors. There was a hoot of an alarm, a groan—and the doors slammed shut, leaving John, Sherlock, Anthea and Mycroft—and G’s corpse—inside.

John stood, stunned, as the alarm continued to wail, then broke free and hurried over to haul Sherlock out from under the cooling body of the criminal. The detective’s face was bloody—most of the blood his own, from his split lip and bloody nose, but a quick assessment revealed no serious injuries that were immediately apparent. John rocked back on his heels, relieved.

That relief lasted until he looked over at Mycroft, and saw controlled panic on a white face as the older man stared at his brother. He looked back at Sherlock, and saw a similar expression mirrored there. He suddenly remembered his earlier conversation with his friend, while Sherlock fiddled on the laptop.

“Sherlock,” he said slowly. “Should I assume we have just been ‘spectacularly unlucky’?”

Sherlock blinked, blinked, blinked. John looked to his brother. “What did you two do? Why is being locked in here worse than just, well, being locked in here?”

Mycroft swallowed and looked at Anthea before finally, finally answering. “We set in place a last-chance option, to ensure that the facility would never fall into Moran’s hands if something happened to us. The option would never be acted upon, so long as we sent a code phrase to the relevant parties every four hours. Once the Bulgarians arrived, the need for the contingency would cease. But Sherlock hadn’t yet finished setting up the message to the Bulgarians, so…” Mycroft looked back at Sherlock, still huddled next to G’s body, still silent. “Our first check-in will fall due in roughly 2 1/2 hours.”

“And we no longer have a phone on which to send the phrase, so the contingency will initiate,” Anthea said, in a tone of dawning horror.

“So what, exactly, will happen at that point?” John asked.

Mycroft’s face suddenly underwent that shift that John often saw in Sherlock—becoming the mask, the lid the brothers shoved down over uncomfortable, messy emotions. When he spoke, his voice was toneless, austere, almost calm.

“Within 10 minutes of the time the phrase is not received, a NATO plane in southern Germany will take off on a ‘routine training mission’, heading towards its ultimate destination out over the Atlantic. And, when it reaches this location in its flight path, an unfortunate accident will occur—a mechanical flaw. Doors in the underside will inexplicably open, and a large, very large, bomb will be unleashed—and it will destroy this location, and everything in it.”

Chapter End Notes

So I guess we can officially say that the "interlude" is over, huh?
The gang must deal with the consequences of Yvgeny's actions. It involves curses, bruises, and a cataclysm.

John wanted to break the appalled stasis they had fallen into after Mycroft’s pronouncement. “Right, then,” he said firmly. “What do we have, and what do we need?”

Sherlock, coming abruptly out of his momentary coma, looked over sharply. “What?”

“We need an assessment,” John continued. “We have a problem; we have no immediately obvious solution. We need to look at what we have on hand that can lead us to find one.” Simple military approach—it worked, yeah, but it also gave the more flustered members of the party (amazingly enough, the Holmes boys, in this case) the opportunity to refocus and calm down.

“Fair enough,” Mycroft said, walking over to pull Sherlock off the floor where he sat next to G’s cooling corpse. The younger man winced and tottered momentarily, but stayed up. “What we need: a phone which we can use to send the recall code. It must be sent within the next 2 hours and 17 minutes. Once the plane takes off, there can be no recall. Following that, we must find the other door and contrive to open it.” He paused, then continued. “On reflection, we should divide our energies. If we can manage to contact the system and call off the launch, we will still need to get the doors open. But if we don’t, it’s even more urgent, as we must be far enough away from here in time to avoid the blast. I would estimate that that means we must find the doors and open them in no more than 2 hours at the outside, to ensure we are out of range if we fail to send the recall.”

Sherlock looked around, thinking it through. “I suppose we should search the front areas, the ones used more recently. It’s possible there’s a working land line, though I don’t believe we’ll be able to configure the signal appropriately. But it’s— “

“We have a phone,” John interrupted. The Holmes brothers swiveled their heads to face him simultaneously, like dogs on point. A crease suddenly appeared between Sherlock’s eyes, and Mycroft’s chin rose along with his eyebrows.

“No, hang on, it’s not what you think,” John said, digging into the back pocket of his parka and pulling out the phone. “It’s...I got it from Siobhan, and it’s a limited-use phone—only had £100 worth of data use on it when I got it, and I may have used most of that.” He looked at Sherlock, for
whom the light had now dawned, and nodded. “Yeah, this was part of the secret—well, the thing I was working on. I got my answer earlier, and we will need to talk about that at some point. But in the meantime,” he reached out and handed the handset to Mycroft, “knock yourself out. Hopefully there’s enough left on it.”

Mycroft sniffed. “Extending the usage is simple enough,” he said. “I’m quite certain we can hack into the company servers and unlock it.” He was already typing rapidly on the tiny keyboard, while Sherlock hovered over his shoulder. “Yes,” he said absently, while continuing to type. “I should have that taken care of momentarily.” One last series of keystrokes, and the older man gave a pleased huff. “There.”

“So, you can send the signal now, yes?” Anthea asked. She’d been quiet since their first realization of the danger facing them; John was startled to hear her speak now.

Mycroft started to nod, before he saw his brother’s face. Sherlock had gone quiet in his turn, his arms wrapped tightly around his torso. “Is that not the case, Sherlock?” Mycroft asked, in a surprisingly gentle tone.

“I…there was…it made sense to insert an additional level of security,” Sherlock said, rather too quickly. “So, I put in an additional requirement, to prevent any outside entity or persons from acquiring the recall code and sending it remotely.” This clearly made sense to Mycroft, whose face was suddenly blank again. John, though, was still at sea.

“But what did you do?” he asked finally.

Mycroft answered for his brother. “The code can only be sent from the same phone from which it originated,” he said. “Otherwise the system will disregard it, and potentially retaliate against the sender in some fashion.” The last was almost a question, directed at Sherlock, who nodded.

“But surely, we can find a way around that,” Anthea said—also a question, though not phrased that way.

Sherlock thought about that. “Maybe?” he said. He looked at his brother. “Can we spoof the ID? Fool the system into thinking it’s still the same phone? I’m assuming you noted the specifics for Moran’s phone at some point.”

Mycroft nodded. “I did. And we can try. I will take that—I’m quicker at coding than you are. The rest of you need to find the door, and discover what needs to be done to open it. We no longer have any access codes, and, given that the other exit wasn’t on the schematics on Moran’s phone, we would never have had anything for those doors in the first place.”

“On it,” John said, and nodded to Sherlock, who turned to go and staggered sideways before John caught his arm. “Whoa, there,” John said, guiding the younger man to sit on a low counter ranged along the back wall of the entrance area. “Look at me, please,” he said, pushing Sherlock’s chin up so that he could check his pupils.

Sherlock jerked his chin free. “I’m all right,” he snapped. “G got in one solid hit on my left ear—I believe my eardrum may have gone, as my balance is off. I’m not dizzy or nauseous, and we don’t have time for this.” He tried to force himself to a standing position again, while John kept a grip on his shoulder.

“No, we don’t,” John replied. “But we can take five minutes to clean you up, and let me check you over. Sooner you relax and let me do that, the sooner we can get to what else needs to happen.” Sherlock scowled and tried again to stand and stalk away, and John once again pushed down on his
shoulder, hard.

Anthea, thankfully, stepped in to break the impasse. “Why don’t you go get John’s kit and do that, and I’ll head out now to look for the doors?” she said. “That part can’t be very difficult, after all—they have to be accessible to the missiles, so that limits the search field dramatically. I’ll call you on the transceiver when I find them.” She trotted off, heading back to the missile room, while John turned back to Sherlock.

“Let’s go, then,” he said. “My kit is in the sleeping room. Only take a minute.” Sherlock stared at the floor for a solid thirty seconds, visibly reining himself in, before lurching to his feet and staggering off in the indicated direction without a word.

While Sherlock stood stonily beside him, John dug through the rucksack on his cot and pulled out his medical kit, then prodded the detective to sit. “Can’t reach you otherwise,” John said mildly, hoping to coax the younger man into a slightly more receptive mood.

Sherlock sat with a huff. “We are wasting time.”

“Anthea’s searching; you and I both know she’s more than capable. Your brother is cracking away at the phone; we can help either one of the two if they ask, but in the meantime, I want to take advantage of the opportunity to make sure you don’t have any serious issues before we have to make a run down a mountainside.” He took out a penlight and flashed Sherlock’s pupils before continuing. “I could carry you down if I had to, but neither one of us would enjoy it.”

He gently pushed Sherlock’s chin to turn his head, and directed his penlight into the left ear. A small trail of dried blood spread down Sherlock’s throat below the ear, and the detective winced as John gingerly manipulated the opening to get a better view. “Yeah, it’s partially ruptured. Can you hear out this side?” he asked.


John pulled out some packaged antiseptic wipes and thoroughly cleaned around the ear before moving on to Sherlock’s face. He cleaned the blood from Sherlock’s chin and neck, and took a closer look at the split lip, now swollen and painful-looking. “Under normal circumstances, I’d put a stitch in that. But in the interests of time, I’ll just use some of this glue. Hold still,” he added, as Sherlock gave an involuntary flinch. “Almost done.”

John picked up the used materials and tossed them in the bin. “I’m not going to do a full exam, but I need for you to tell me the truth now,” he began. “We can’t afford for you to hide something that’s going to put you—Christ, I almost said ‘out of the running’. A little too apt, isn’t it?” he added, with a rueful smile that Sherlock echoed. “But it’s still true. Bottom line—on a scale of 1 to 10, where do you fall?”

Sherlock hesitated; John could almost see him working through the possibilities of lying versus truth. Finally—“Perhaps a 5,” he said. “Yes, I have some pain—I’m quite sure I’ll have a new crop of bruises by morning, assuming we live to see it. I wouldn’t turn down some form of pain relief, though nothing that will cause impairment—we can’t afford it. But there’s nothing that would
prevent me from moving, and nothing that’s going to slow me down if I need to go quickly.” He
ducked his chin again, looking down at his fingers, twitching nervously in his lap, before continuing.
“You know I’m fatigued. That seems to be the ongoing theme of this expedition. But I have been
much worse, and have been able to continue. I can do the same tonight.” He looked back up, with
surprising earnestness. “Does that give you what you need?”

John sighed. “It’ll have to, won’t it?”

Ten minutes later, Sherlock had downed a dose of co-codamol, John had packed up the rucksack to
bring along (including only essentials—Sherlock would be livid when he realized he was once again
without spare pants), and they headed off after Anthea, who had spent part of the intervening time
detailing her route over the transceiver in John’s parka hood. They had just reached the doors to the
missile room (having passed a silent Mycroft in the dining hall, whose focus remained solely on the
phone) when John heard a soft “Hah!” of triumph over the transceiver.

John hit the tiny toggle that enabled him to speak as well. “So, where are you in relation to the
missiles?”

“And what do the doors look like?” Sherlock chimed in, having flipped up his own hood so as not to
be left out. “Steel? Blast-proof? Is there a touchpad? Does it have power to it? And visible wiring?”
He probably would have continued but for running out of breath.

Anthea managed to leap into the breach in time to stop the flow. “Sherlock—breathe. One thing at a
time, please. I think you need to see this for yourself. Go to the far right-hand side of the chamber—it
will take you a while to get there, it’s a lot bigger than we realized. Lots of debris on the floor too, so
be careful. Once you get to the wall, turn left and go all the way to the end, then left again. You’ll
find me about half-way along.”

The directions were easy enough to follow, though not especially easy in half-dark. Both John and
Sherlock had numerous trips and outright falls over hidden debris on the floor, so that their trail was a
litany of smothered (and not-so-smothered) curses. Eventually, though, John was able to reach out
and touch smooth metal, and knew that they’d reached the far wall of this vast chamber.

Sherlock, reading his mind as usual, chimed in at that point. “It’s almost certainly a natural formation
—a very large cave indeed, that the original architects subdivided with metal walls and sheathing. It
would be fascinating to see in full light, to fully appreciate the size of the void.” He ran his hands
along the metal wall, then knelt briefly to touch the floor. “Polished stone on the floors—they must
have simply ground it down to level and then smoothed it.”

They worked their way quickly along the perimeter, and, once they made the final turn, heard
Anthea from relatively nearby.

“Hurry up,” she called. “The good news is, I found the doors. The bad news is, I have no idea how
we’ll get them open. And the clock is ticking.”

“Why?” Sherlock asked sharply, as they trotted to her location. “Is there not a keypad?”
Anthea snorted. “Not only is there not a keypad, there’s not really a door, in the conventional sense.” She touched Sherlock’s shoulder and turned him to one side. “See over there? That’s the end portion of a gear drive track. It runs right down what initially appears to be a blank wall, which makes no sense.” She poked his shoulder, prodding him to turn the other direction. “But look over there—there’s a seam that runs from ground level up as far as you can see.”

She walked away from them, roughly forty feet, and pointed. “And here’s an identical seam. Again, goes up a long way. And, you’ll note, the track for the drive is roughly halfway between the two. So…”

John recognized the setup before Sherlock did—the younger man had never seen military motor pool sheds, but John had. “Good God. It’s the biggest garage door opener in the world.”

“Yep,” Anthea said. “And the problem is, I don’t think there’s power to it anymore. At least not that I can find. They may have intentionally disabled it at some point. With this poor lighting, it’s impossible to look at closely, and the mechanism itself could easily be 50 feet up—I can’t see the ‘ceiling’ from here to be sure, and I can’t find any kind of catwalk or access stairs.”

“It gets worse,” she continued, pointing off to the left. “About 10 feet that way, there used to be a regular door, a metal one. Probably for normal access, when they didn’t want to open the big door. I got excited for a moment when I saw it, before I got closer and discovered it’s welded shut, quite professionally. And given that the door itself is plate steel, it’s not opening any time soon.”

Sherlock walked over to look closely at the steel door before nodding in agreement. “Given enough time, we could probably shift it, if we had the right cutting tools. But not in the time we have. So, the big door it is.” He walked over and began examining the drive track; John followed, trying fruitlessly to see the upper end of the apparatus.

While Sherlock continued to poke and prod the mechanism, John finally asked the question that had been bothering him for some time. “So, the bomb. I get that the point is to keep the missiles out of Moran’s hands. But if this place is destroyed, won’t that, well, set the warheads off? Which, to my way of thinking, isn’t exactly optimal?”

Sherlock, predictably enough, ignored him. Anthea, though, was kind enough to respond.

“No—at least, it’s extremely unlikely. It all goes back to how nuclear weapons are designed. The fissile material—that’s the nuclear matter—is encased in a heavy metal shell, and that shell is surrounded by a quantity of conventional explosives, and then the whole thing is encased in another thick metal shell. The chain reaction in a nuclear bomb is carefully choreographed, with the explosives used to detonate the weapon set off with a finely-tuned electrical charge. That has the effect of compressing the uranium simultaneously from all sides and preventing any uranium from escaping its container too quickly. All of the conventional explosives surrounding the fissile material must go off within microseconds of each other in order to contain the uranium. In the very worst-case scenario, the destruction of this chamber and the subsequent fall of millions of pounds of rock onto the warheads would almost certainly mess with the synchronization of the charges and the compression would be compromised. The nuclear chain reaction would either not occur at all, or it would be cut short. The ‘not occur at all’ option is by far the more likely.”

John gave a shiver, not entirely from the chill in the room. “Let’s not have the bomb fall at all, then—best possible option.” He looked over at Sherlock, still lost in his examination of the drive track, before turning back to the younger woman. “How are we doing on time?”

“One hour, 37 minutes,” Sherlock said, without turning around. Trust the detective to have a running countdown in his head.
“Is that the time for the plane takeoff, or the time we have to be out of here if we can’t stop it?” John asked.

“The latter. We have one hour and 29 minutes before takeoff,” Sherlock said, turning around. “However, we will be much better served if my brother does his little bit for the cause and gets the whole thing called off, as I can see no easy way to get this door opened quickly.” He stepped away from the wall and headed back the way they’d come. “Let’s go encourage him, shall we?”

It wasn’t going well. That was apparent from across the room, when they entered the dining hall where Mycroft had set himself up. The Great Man had apparently been keeping track of unsuccessful options, judging by the scribbled notes arrayed on the table in front of him (written on the back of an old Russian magazine, using the stub of an ancient pencil). His shoulders were tense and high, and his keystrokes were now frustrated jabs, followed by an exasperated sigh.

As they approached, Mycroft stood abruptly, stretched, turned, and held out the phone to his brother. “Here,” he said, in tones of disgust. “I have tried every logical variant I can conceive of, to no avail. Perhaps a less straightforward approach will succeed.” He pointed to the messy notes on the table. “The necessary spoof ID is there, on the left.”

Sherlock immediately set to work, his spidery fingers flying over the keys. “You take a stab at the door mechanism, then,” he said, without looking up. “John and Anthea can fill you in.”

Mycroft raised his eyebrows inquiringly, and they set off, back the way they had come.

In other circumstances, John would have found it fascinating to compare the wildly divergent approaches that the Holmes brothers took to problem-solving. Sherlock’s way included a thorough initial study, followed by a lengthy mental examination of the possibilities, followed by an announcement of the results. Mycroft, on the other hand, took a more direct approach. He asked John and Anthea what, if anything, Sherlock had physically tested, and what steps had already been taken. Then (very much unlike his brother) he proceeded on the assumption that the earlier review had been completely accurate, and moved on.

“It’s clear that there is no power feed to the lift, so we can disregard the possibility of using it to open the door. We need to search this chamber,” he announced. “We need two things: items, large and heavy, that can be used as prybars; or, any small service vehicles that are self-propelled. The area is large enough to conceal multiples of both. Let’s go.”

They split up the great chamber into quadrants, noting that the portions along two walls, and in the center, by the missiles, could be avoided because of their earlier forays. They each turned up their hoods to communicate through their transceivers as they walked methodically through their assigned areas.

John was all too aware of the passage of time. He found himself checking the phosphorescent dial of his watch compulsively, counting the minutes as they passed without a relieved shout of triumph from Sherlock, or a slightly-smug announcement that Mycroft had found whatever specific pry tool they were working for (or, better yet, the breaker to turn power back on to the defunct door opener).

They were down to 47 minutes when John (literally) stumbled across their first break—a long, heavy
set of levers, of the type used in working on train tracks. God only knew what their purpose had been here, but they were heavy, long enough to be effective, and had a narrow, tapered end that could easily wedge under or into the seams around the door. John gave a happy report to his teammates and began to drag his finds back to the door.

Shortly thereafter, Anthea shouted in glee and asked for Mycroft’s help in moving her own find—a small mobile tractor, of the type commonly called a “mule”, used to tow or push objects around. The two made their own way back to the door, while John concentrated on dragging his own offerings. By the time they arrived, John had already managed to wedge the tapered edge of one of the levers into the right-hand seam of the door, and was throwing all of his weight against it to try and force the metal door out of its track. They only needed enough space to squeeze through, after all.

“Any luck?” Anthea asked, puffing a bit, as she and Mycroft pushed the sturdy little vehicle along until it rested in front of the great door.

“Not as such,” John grunted, as he threw himself once more against the unyielding door. “Maybe if all three of us tried together. I don’t have enough weight on my own.”

They spent the next ten minutes, fruitlessly trying different positions and locations, prying, pushing, wedging. All for naught. In the end, John let the lever fall with a metallic clang, then looked (fearfully) at his watch. 31 minutes.

They next made a try at ramming the door with the mule, backing up to get a lengthy approach, running full-force while pushing, then releasing at the last moment before impact. The little tractor hit with a horrific, jangling clang, but had no obvious effect on the door beyond a miniscule dent.

Before they lined up for their next try, Sherlock appeared suddenly out of the near-darkness. He said nothing, still typing fruitlessly, but his presence leant additional urgency to their attempts—it was apparent that he had come in order to be near the door as the time ticked down and he was unable to make the recall happen. 28 minutes.

The next set of attempts were made with increasing weight on board—they grabbed every piece of heavy debris they could find and layered it on the flat platform on the front of the tractor before backing up, running and pushing again. The dents on the door grew deeper, but the basic structure was very much intact. 23 minutes.

For the next attempt, they once again heaped their metal pile on the platform, but this time, John climbed on top and clung to the handle with all his might. On impact, he was thrown violently against the door, rolling free with a pained groan. The great door had made a deep metallic clang on impact, and seemed to be somewhat canted in place; the change, though, was minute. 21 minutes.

John went and picked up his lever again, wedging the end firmly against the tiny bent area created by their earlier charge. The three of them shoved against the metal bar, over and over, in a rhythmic pattern; by the time they stopped, hands on knees, panting for breath, the opening had increased to no more than an inch. 16 minutes.

Before they could regroup and try another round, Sherlock suddenly spun, shouted in frustration, and threw the phone violently against the door before shoving his hands through his hair, then swiping them down his face. “It didn’t work,” he finally said, quietly. “The last attempt…the system sent a kill signal to the phone.” 15 minutes.

The next few minutes were desperation, pure and simple. They worked in teams of two, each taking one of John’s levers and working at opposite ends of the door; they searched for more, heavier materials and piled them on the mule before running, backing up further and further, then hurtling at
the doors, nursing new bruises at each attempt. Sherlock briefly attempted to climb up the lift track before Mycroft grabbed him bodily around the waist and hauled him back down, kicking and fighting. \textit{8 minutes.}

“The plane just took off,” Anthea said quietly.

When he had time to reflect on it (later—much, much later) John simply couldn’t believe how stupid of him it had been. He had known they were there; he had put them there \textit{himself}. But it simply didn’t register, until those last, desperate minutes, when he looked over and saw the rucksack, standing abandoned against the wall to the right of the door.

\textit{“Jesus Fucking Christ!”} he howled, and dove towards the bag, almost ripping the zipper in his desperation. \textit{“Sherlock! Come take one!”}

And there, at the bottom of the rucksack, were the two, small limpet mines he had picked up at the cache, and managed to forget he had. He shoved one into Sherlock’s outstretched hands, grabbed the other, and together they dashed towards the door.

He looked at Sherlock, the graduate of a demolitions course, for guidance, and they slapped the mines on the lower edge of the door, roughly three feet off the ground and three feet apart. Then they hit the charging buttons, grabbed Anthea, Mycroft, and the rucksack, and ran into the darkness away from the door. On the count of ten, there was a moderate-sized explosion, and a great booming \textit{“clang”} from the door. They raced forward, and saw that a rough hole, 5 feet in diameter, had been torn in the bottom of the metal. They each crouched to avoid ragged bits of steel and hurtled through, startled to find themselves in a rocky corridor, still lit, thank God, by emergency lighting strung along the sides. Two minutes’ run brought them abruptly out onto a flat, rocky expanse blasted into the mountainside, with a track leading away. Without a pause, they took off down the mountain.

They couldn’t maintain this pace; John, a veteran of many a military hike, knew that. After their initial terror-driven spurt, he reached out and grabbed Sherlock’s arm, slowing him down to a steady trot that they both could maintain indefinitely. Anthea and Mycroft followed suit as they continued along the rocky track. There was moonlight, enough to follow the trail, though they couldn’t see any detail of their surroundings beyond a vague impression of “rocks and trees”.

John couldn’t make a sound estimate of time elapsed; he knew, from painful experience, that fear messed with your perceptions of time. But he was fairly positive they had been running for at least 15 minutes when he heard it. At first, he wasn’t certain—it was hard to hear clearly over his own thundering heartbeat and gasping breaths. But in the next moment, he was sure—he heard a plane.

He looked over at Mycroft, and, from his expression, knew that Mycroft had heard as well.

They were running again, full-break—tearing down the mountainside as if demons were pursuing. But they were too close, \textit{too close}. And then, as they rounded a turn, skittering over gravel, John saw it—a great, rocky overhang to their left, perhaps a cave opening, perhaps just stone that had been undercut by ancient streams. Either way, it was \textit{protection}. He touched Mycroft’s arm, pointed, and sped towards it, towing Sherlock along by the sleeve of his parka as he went.

They skidded inside, moving quickly to the farthest reach—no true cave, but an undercut of perhaps 50 feet in depth. As they reached the back, John pushed Sherlock down and fell to his knees himself. He reached out and pulled Mycroft and Anthea close, and barked \textit{“Cover your ears! Open your mouth!”} as he forced them all flat.

And then there came the loudest sound John had ever heard, a great, bass roar that filled his head and rattled his bones. And, shortly thereafter, the world split wide open.
See? Betcha thought I forgot about John's limpet mines, didn’t you?
Crisis: Part Three

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the bomb, the gang makes their way back to safer territory. Or is it?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first thing John noted, after the world stopped rocking and rumbling, was something tickling his cheek. He was cold, confused, and disoriented, and aware of odd noises and sensations. The tickling, though, was what led him to finally open his eyes.

His first confusing view of “something dark” waving in front of his eyes resolved quickly into Sherlock’s curls—the detective was lying partially underneath John, and John’s nose was buried in the back of Sherlock’s neck. John pushed himself up, ignoring the moaned “Ow” from beneath him, and sat up to take stock of things.

All in all, it could have been much worse. The overhang hadn’t collapsed, and the opening hadn’t been covered by rockfalls, though a large mass of stone and debris had piled up across it (and continued to fall—John was startled to see a fist-sized stone drop out of the sky and land with a sharp crack). Dust was heavy and drifting in the air like fog—John could taste it in his mouth.

John coughed, coughed again, and was finally able to speak. “Anyone hurt? I need a quick answer, please.”

On the other side of Sherlock, Mycroft sat up with a groan, pulling Anthea up beside him. “Dusty, but well,” the bureaucrat said. “Me, too,” Anthea added, beating what looked like several pounds of blown dirt from her lap.

“As well as can be expected, with you lying on top of me,” Sherlock said, sourly, from ground level. He sat up with a groan, lacing his right arm around his torso. “Ow. Again.”

John dropped the heavy rucksack off his back, batted Sherlock’s arms out of the way and did a quick exploration of his friend’s ribs, while the detective twitched and huffed and make a general nuisance of himself. Nothing notable showed up, thankfully. “It was just landing on a rock,” Sherlock said irritably. “And then you, climbing on top. Stop fretting.”

“It’s in my job description,” John said. “Fretting, and following irritating consulting detectives around.” He grinned, and caught Sherlock’s smirk before said detective turned, got to his hands and knees, and then pushed himself to standing with another heartfelt groan.

Mycroft flinched as another tumble of rock and debris rolled down the mountain and crashed to the front of their shelter. “I believe we need to consider our options from here,” the older man said. “I wouldn’t like to rely on the stability of this shelter, given the continued rock falls. We’ve been fortunate, but we can’t be sure that the blast didn’t undermine the stability of the rock face.”

“Well, there’s a cheery thought,” Sherlock said. “Escape the massive bomb, and die from an excess of confidence in our continued safety.”
Anthea looked up at the top of the overhang nervously, then pointed outward with her chin. “Then we’d best get moving,” she said. She started to stride off, before Mycroft reached out and (gently) grabbed her arm.

“Calmly, my dear,” he said. “We had best decide where we’re going first.”

The agent shuddered, batted more dirt off the front of her shirt, and nodded. “Then let’s walk while we decide, yes? I’m not particularly enthusiastic about getting trapped in here, or flattened if the roof breaks loose. And, for right now, there’s only one way to go anyway.” She looked around, then spotted the beginnings of the track down the mountain, just visible around the piles of debris.

“Fair enough,” John said. He looked at the others, got grudging nods from the Holmes brothers, and they set off once again, though their pace this time was much less frantic. Anthea had wordlessly picked up the rucksack and slid in onto her back; John considered arguing, but his left shoulder was fervently thankful for the break.

They set off walking at a brisk pace; not running or trotting (none of them retained the energy for that, even if had been advisable on a path littered with small rockfalls and slides of dirt and stone scree), but quickly enough that the encroaching cold was manageable, at least in the short run.

They rounded the first turn, finally losing sight of their refuge, and found themselves looking out at a vista of the city below them. The view, though, was not quite what it had been previously.

“The electric grid has started to fail,” Sherlock said. “Look—there goes another sector,” he added, pointed to an area where all lighting flickered, flickered, and then went altogether dark.

“It may well be from the explosion,” Mycroft said. “It’s not unlikely that major electric mains ran through the missile site—something had to be providing the power here, after all, and service for something that large would require extensive capacity. Once those cables were destroyed, the failures would flow back through the system.”

He pointed towards a still-bright area, off to the northwest. “That’s the area of the hotel. All things considered, we might be best-served to head back there. We know it still has power, and we know that considerable food is still safely stored in the kitchens. It’s as good as destination as any, and we need a refuge from which to plan our next steps.”

He looked over at John. “It’s roughly 12 kilometers, much of it downhill. How long do you think it will take us to walk it? I would hope we find a vehicle en route, but we might as well plan for the worst-case scenario.”

“Between 3 and 4 hours,” John said. “That’s based on a slightly-fast walking speed. More likely towards 4 hours—until we get back to paved roads, we have to be more careful how we go. And fatigue is going to start to be an issue.” He carefully didn’t look at Sherlock, who was staring abstractedly out at the flickering lights of the city below. It was telling that the detective didn’t react to John’s statement; under normal circumstances, he would have bristled and insisted he was “fine!”.

The trek started off well; they all settled into a quick stride that ate up distance quickly. As they got further from the top of the mountain, the piles of rock and dirt grew sparser, giving them a smoother path.

John quickly came to regret not stuffing bottled water into the rucksack; the cold, dry air just emphasized how long it had been since any of them had had any liquid, and the tendency to mouth-breathe in exertion just exacerbated the problem. But the trail itself was relatively easy—broad enough for the 4 of them to walk abreast, sloping easily downhill. All in all, John had seen much
worse treks, usually carrying a 90-pound pack on his back.

The first two hours were smooth—they walked, they took turns carrying the rucksack, they talked (well, the rest of them talked, while Sherlock remained largely silent, interjecting a snarky comment periodically), they even sang, briefly—John started humming without realizing it, only to have Anthea pick up the tune and start caroling out the words. While the Holmes brothers looked on with identical bemused disdain, John and Anthea worked through a long repertoire of songs, ending with a medley of bits from Monty Python (“I’m a lumberjack, and I’m OK” had Sherlock gaping at the two of them as if they’d slipped a cog. It was great).

After two hours, though, they each seemed to “hit the wall”—exhaustion and cold seeped in, and they grew quiet. It was now heading along towards dawn, though the brightening of the sky was still a few hours away. But, as John had often noted in field surgery, the hours between 3 and 5 a.m. were the hardest to push through.

There was a brief flurry of energy and mild excitement at the beginning of the third hour, when they encountered a series of abandoned cars and trucks along the road. Each proved to be empty of petrol, though, which (by the third useless vehicle) left them uninterested in investigating the next car found.

They fell gradually into a staggered spread on the path: John in front by a few paces, then Anthea, then Mycroft and Sherlock, roughly side-by-side.

Mycroft’s soft exclamation of “Bugger” brought the train to a sudden halt.

Turning quickly, John saw that Sherlock had subsided silently onto his knees. Mycroft stood with a hand on his brother’s shoulder, looking uncharacteristically helpless, and Anthea looked to John in similar fashion.

John moved quickly back to his friend and crouched in front of him, pushing Sherlock’s chin up to peer into his eyes. “Hey. Look at me, yeah? What’s wrong?”

Sherlock gave a slow, hazy blink. “Tired,” he finally muttered. “Just…tired. And dizzy.” And, of course, John had managed to forget about Sherlock’s ruptured eardrum—the vertigo must be maddening.

John reached out and prodded gently along Sherlock’s rib cage again, generating a slight flinch near the incision site (not unexpected, especially after Sherlock’s earlier complaints about landing on a rock), but nothing alarming. A quick palm to his forehead confirmed that fever wasn’t an issue. In all likelihood, this was indeed just fatigue.

Unfortunately, they had no good options here. There were no houses that they’d encountered on this route, and they had yet to reach an area that still had electricity. The abandoned cars would be uncomfortable and cold—too cold to spend any length of time in. So, somehow, they needed to keep going. The hotel couldn’t be more than another 3 kilometers now, if that. And if things got desperate—if they simply couldn’t keep Sherlock moving any longer—there were at least other buildings on the road, shortly before they would reach the hotel.

John pushed Sherlock’s chin up again, and bumped it gently. “Look at me again, please.” Sherlock’s eyes tilted up towards him, exhausted and dazed. “If Mycroft helps you, can you keep going? It’s not far now—maybe half an hour. And then you can get warm, and eat, and go to bed for as long as you need, I promise.”

Sherlock’s eyes slid closed again, then opened slowly. He gave a tiny nod. “Yes. Bed,” he said hoarsely, before reaching one wiry arm out in Mycroft’s general direction. The older man pulled
Sherlock up and laced his brother’s arm over his shoulder, before wrapping his own around Sherlock’s waist.

“All right?” Mycroft asked, very softly. Sherlock nodded, and stood a little straighter. John picked up the rucksack he’d dropped at Sherlock’s feet, nodded to Anthea, and they set off again, though slower than before.

It took a bit more than 30 minutes, in the end, because they had to take turns helping to haul Sherlock along the path—Mycroft paused for a breather after 15 minutes, noting ruefully that his brother was heavier than he looked. Since John had the rucksack, Anthea walked over, held out her arm, and took Mycroft’s place. She stayed with the detective for another 10 minutes, then (with a pat to Sherlock’s shoulder, which produced no more than an exhausted grunt from its recipient) handed him off to John, while John handed the rucksack to Mycroft.

When the group saw a glow of light on the horizon, they stepped up their pace marginally—they knew they were close, and it gave them a last gasp of energy. What they saw, though, as they reached the first of the buildings on the street leading to the hotel, made them stop in their tracks—all windows and doors of each building were broken, debris trailing out of the gaping doorways. In one, a destroyed car was lodged halfway through a shattered plate-glass display window.

It was clear that things had changed during their absence. “Looters,” Mycroft said. “They likely started in the city centre, and worked their way outward. It’s clear this happened no later than yesterday evening, but we should be wary for signs of their continued presence. We can’t afford to run into any kind of armed force at present.”

John almost laughed at that—they couldn’t fight off a hostile force of 12-year-olds, in their current state. God help them if they met any looters.

He looked further down the road, where the top of the hotel was just visible. “The rest of you stay here,” he said. “Get inside one of the buildings. I’m going to take a run to the hotel and make sure we’re not walking into something. I’ll be back in no more than 30 minutes, one way or the other.”

He didn’t wait for comments—while Mycroft and Anthea were probably capable in general terms, neither of them had true combat training, he was fairly sure. And somebody had to protect Sherlock in John’s absence.

He reached the hotel in 5 minutes, with most of that time spent flitting from one shadowed area to the next, staying low and quiet. He then found a safe spot with a clear view of the entrance, and waited silently, counting off 10 minutes on his watch. When all remained quiet, no movement visible in any part of the front of the hotel, he cautiously darted across the parking lot to the open glass doors, one of which had a great crack running almost all the way across it.

He completed a quick survey of the interior in another 5 minutes, then worked his way back to the rest of the group, not bothering to dodge from shadow to shadow this time. On seeing him approach, Mycroft came to the doorway of the looted building they had chosen as their temporary resting spot. “I presume it’s safe to proceed,” the older man said. “Is there much damage?”

John shook his head. “Not a lot. They tore apart the lobby—looking for money from the cash drawer, strewing stuff around from the shops, that kind of thing, and they took most things out of the walk-in fridge. But the freezers are still fine—apparently decided they weren’t worth the trouble. And the rooms look OK—all the doors are open, but they just tossed things about a bit and then lost interest. Power’s still on, and water. I say we go for it.”

He saw movement from the interior of the shop, and was pleased to see Sherlock walk, very slowly but under his own power, to the doorway—apparently the brief rest had done the detective some
good. “Are we going, then?” he asked hoarsely. “I believe someone promised me a bed.”

“Yes, your majesty,” John said, with a florid bow. “Now come drape thyself gracefully over my shoulder, and we shall go hither.” He was delighted to hear a raspy chuckle from his friend, who (slowly) walked over to do as he was told.

When they reached the hotel lobby, John pointed everyone down the same hallway they’d used earlier. “The doors were open, but they don’t seem to have done any real damage. The rooms are pretty much as we left them—we might as well just use the same ones as last time.” Unspoken in that was the assumption that Sherlock would once again share with John—he needed to be there in case things took a turn for the worse.

They paused just outside their group of rooms, while Mycroft looked at his watch. “It’s now a little past 4 am. I would suggest meeting back in the dining room no later than noon. I can see no point in attempting to plan anything now—I, for one, freely admit that I lack the capacity. But we must come up with a plan of action at that point, and there are several possibilities I would like to discuss in depth.” He looked pointedly at John. “And I believe you have some specific information that should be shared.”

John was much too tired to be embarrassed. “Yeah, probably so,” he said. “In the meantime, everyone make sure to drink a full glass of water before you climb into bed. We’re all dehydrated, and you’ll feel worse once you wake up, if you don’t.” He looked over at Sherlock, propped against the wall next to the door to their room. “That includes you.”

“If it gets me a bed quicker, I’ll drink two,” Sherlock croaked. He leaned his head back, eyes closed. And, with a chuckle of amusement from Anthea, they each went gratefully to their rooms.

Once they were settled in their room, Sherlock fell instantly into oblivion. John intended to make a quick pass through the shower first, but made the mistake of sitting down on the bed while he changed. His next awareness was of sunlight streaming through the windows, and Sherlock groaning from the other side of the bed.

Chapter End Notes

See there? NOT a cliffhanger, again!
Crisis: Part Four

Chapter Summary

It's time to plan. But first, Sherlock has a bath that doesn't end quite as you'd expect, and John gets a chance to be the Smart One for a change.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John rolled to sit on the side of the bed and looked reflexively at his watch, as Sherlock made his groaning way into the loo. Just past 11 a.m., then—7 hours, not too bad. Ideally, he would have preferred that Sherlock, at least, have at least 8, but he’d take what he could get. He stood, stretched, and followed Sherlock’s path towards the en suite.

“Want me to set up another bath for you?” he asked through the closed door. He was pretty sure that the detective would be just as stiff today, after the assault by G, as he was from the bruise on his back two days ago. A hot bath would be not quite as effective as pain medication, but was a better choice if Sherlock could tolerate it.

“Please,” came the rasping reply. “I can’t bend over far enough to do it myself.”

Very stiff, then. John waited briefly for a telltale flush from inside, and then followed his friend into the bathroom. Sherlock was sitting on the closed toilet lid, looking exhausted still, despite the reasonable amount of sleep they’d had. He had removed his jumper and trousers before leaving the bedroom; his exposed arms and legs were covered with a new crop of blue-black bruises.

“Why don’t you go back and lie on the bed while the tub fills?” John asked, turning on the taps and then holding his fingers under the flow to wait for the proper temperature.

“Don’t want to get up again,” Sherlock said. Well, that was truthful, if a little concerning. It was unlikely that today would be in any way restful, and this wasn’t a great baseline to start from.

In short order, John finished filling the tub and closed the drain. Sherlock tottered to his feet with a huff and began slowly stripping off his remaining clothing, declining John’s offer of help. John let his friend know he would come collect him when breakfast was ready, and left him crawling carefully into the tub. He heard Sherlock’s appreciative moan as he headed for the hallway, and the dining room.

He smelled breakfast cooking before he reached the dining room—a delectable odor of sausages floated down the hallway. When he entered, he found Mycroft standing at one of the large cooktops, managing two large skillets, one of sausage, one of eggs. Without turning, the older man read his mind, as usual.

“Put some toast on, can you?” he asked. “There are several loaves of frozen bread in the freezer—it’s where I found a vat of egg yolks and packets of sausage as well. The bread has an unfortunate texture that way, but at least it’s not stale or moldy.”

John obediently opened the walk-in freezer, and found the bread on a shelf along the side wall. He
pulled out one loaf, closed the door, and walked over to the toaster oven on the far end of the counter. “Where’s Anthea?” he asked, while dropping slices of bread onto the metal grille surface.

“Searching,” Mycroft said, while continuing to stir the eggs. “She wanted to see what had been overlooked in the shops—among other things, she expressed a desire for clean pants.”

John chuckled. “Hope she looks for some for Sherlock as well, then. I don’t think it’s dawned on him yet that his supply got left behind.”

Mycroft grinned—not an expression John had seen him wear very often. “You can go and break that happy news to him—I’d prefer to stay out of it.” He gave the eggs one last stir and turned off the burners. “You can also see if you can round up the others for breakfast, if you would. Everything is ready, and it won’t keep well.”

John went looking for Anthea first—the longer Sherlock had in the bath, the better. He trotted off to the row of shops in the huge lobby, then called her name. Before he called a second time, the woman appeared from the far shop of the row, carrying several large bags and beaming.

“Well, it looks like you were successful,” John said with a smile. “Pants dilemma solved, then?”

“For all of us, actually,” she said. “Apparently looters are not much interested in silk unmentionables. Got some socks and jumpers, and jeans as well—none of those to really fit Mycroft or Sherlock, with their stork-like legs, but you and I are set.” She handed off one of the bags to him, then held out another smaller one with a triumphant grin. “Aaaaand, the piece de resistance—I found one last phone, still in the packaging. It had been kicked under a display case so the looters missed it.”

“Oh, excellent!” John said, holding up his hand for a high-five. “Go tell Fearless Leader, while I roust Sherlock out of the tub. Breakfast is ready.” Anthea waved airily over her shoulder as she strolled off.

When John reached the room, he was surprised by the silence—no splashes, no noises of skin slipping on porcelain. He laid the bag of clothing on the bed and walked into the en suite, stopping in the doorway. He found himself wishing for a mobile, or at least a camera—Sherlock was sprawled out, arms wide on the marble sides of the tub, a damp flannel spread over his eyes. His head was thrown back, resting on a folded towel. His mouth was slightly open, and breathy snores were audible, slow and regular.

John felt a wave of fondness—this was a Sherlock no one else saw: Sherlock without the Mask, without the haughtiness. He reached out and gently nudged his friend’s damp shoulder to wake him. And then, of course, just then, things went all to hell.

Sherlock’s right hand shot out and clamped onto John’s wrist like a steel band. That was immediately followed, too fast to really track, by Sherlock erupting from the water and launching himself into an attack position, his right hand still wrenching John’s wrist to the side while his left pulled back, flattened like a blade, as he prepared to strike. John found himself in a fight on two fronts: first, to keep Sherlock from attacking fully; and second, to suppress his own instincts to respond in kind. The second was more problematic than the first—Sherlock seemed frozen in place, still taut as a bowstring but not striking, but John found himself vibrating with the need to move, when his wiser, medical instincts told him that he really, really needed to be still.

After a long minute, medicine won. John held his position, and very quietly spoke, still without moving.

“Sherlock,” he said. “Where are we? What are we doing?”
Nothing happened, initially; Sherlock continued to stand, naked, glaring and dangerous, still gripping John’s wrist. Gradually, though, something else bled into Sherlock’s eyes. He shook his head, eyes darting around the room before finally coming to rest on John, and his grip on John’s wrist. Then he abruptly thrust John’s arm away as if burned, a horrified look stealing across his face. He launched himself backwards, then suddenly staggered, his eyelids fluttering, colour a pasty grey.

Before he could fall, John broke from his paralysis and grabbed the detective by his biceps, muscling him over to sit with a thump on the closed toilet lid. “Sodding adrenaline rush,” he said crossly. “It’ll pass; just sit there and breathe, OK?”

Sherlock’s head was down, chin almost to his chest. He spoke without looking up. “I must apologize,” he began.

John interrupted. “Nope, not your fault,” he said sternly. “I know better than to startle anyone from sleep who’s been through combat. It was stupid, and I’m sorry for it.”

Sherlock’s head came up at that, with a brittle smirk. “I’ve never been in combat. You’ll need to look for a better excuse than that.” His fingers were laced together in his lap, clenched in a way that had to be painful.

John snorted. “Just because your opponents didn’t wear uniforms doesn’t mean you weren’t in combat. You’ve told me enough, and I’ve observed enough since you returned, to know that you were.” He hesitated before continuing. “And I’ve heard your nightmares. Remind me of my own, you know?” Saying that was a calculated risk; John knew that Sherlock tried very, very hard to hide his nightmares. John hadn’t mentioned the ones he’d observed during Sherlock’s long convalescence.

Sherlock froze, a tinge of pink appearing high on his cheekbones. The silence went on too long for John’s comfort.

“Sherlock,” he said. “You have nightmares. You’re entitled. And, Jesus, you saw me fucking wet myself during one of mine, and never turned a hair.” True, sadly—one of those times that John shouted the house down, and startled awake to find Sherlock standing fretfully at the foot of the bed, blinking, his brow deeply furrowed. “You didn’t make me feel ashamed—well, not any more than I did on my own, anyway. Why do you think I’d do that to you?”

Sherlock thought about that, his face still wearing that frozen mask. Then he relaxed, just slightly, and jerkily bobbed his head before slowly unclenching his hands. “Thank you, John,” he said hoarsely.

John grinned and turned to leave the bathroom. “So, go get dressed before your brother sends Anthea to get us. Breakfast is ready, and you will eat. Oh, and Anthea left you a present—it’s on the bed.”

That caught Sherlock’s attention—he loved presents, though he of course claimed to disdain them. As John reached the doorway and started down the hall towards the dining room, he heard Sherlock’s pleased little “oh” behind him, as he (presumably) found his clean pants.

Breakfast was surprisingly light-hearted, considering the circumstances. Escaping imminent
detonation improved the mood, evidently. They all ate heartily, even Sherlock. It was rather a more-
Spartan meal than their last one here, given their reliance on frozen materials only, but nonetheless
filling and very welcome after the exertions of the previous day.

When John pushed his plate away, not surprised to find himself the last one to finish, he stood and
took the plates to stack in the sink—if they were to stay here any length of time, it only made sense to
clean up after themselves. The others stayed seated—it was time for their planning session, then.

“All right,” Mycroft began as John came back and sat down. “It’s past time we established a plan of
action. I think we are agreed that our new target has to be Moran, yes?” He looked at each of them in
turn, noting their nods (or, in Sherlock’s case, a sneer. Mycroft chose to interpret that liberally).

“We have some inkling of Moran’s location, actually,” he continued. “I spent considerable time
before the rest of you woke hacking into the various security networks, and searching carefully
through MI5 and MI6 background information and field reports.” He waved vaguely towards the
rear of the kitchen. “The looters were apparently uninterested in desktop units, and left the head
chef’s office computer untouched. The wi-fi connection is still working normally—we have been
extraordinarily fortunate in our choice of accommodations.” He modestly failed to mention that these
accommodations had been his choice. He knew they knew, and that was enough.

Sherlock was remarkably short of patience this morning. “Don’t care. Tell us what you found,
beyond the forty new recipes you’re anxious to try out.”

Anthea frowned repressively. Sherlock pretended not to see her.

Mycroft sighed and repressed. Sherlock pretended not to see her.

Mycroft sighed and repressed. “Correlating reports submitted over the past 6 months makes it clear
that Moran has, or at least had, a major base of operations in Kosovo. That’s hardly surprising—
Sherlock can attest to Moriarty’s past dealings in Hungary and Serbia, and it would have been
tempting for Moran to try and resurrect those connections, especially given his plans to acquire his
new playthings in eastern Europe. Despite its helpful proximity to the Exclusion Zones, it is not
within the evacuation area itself, so he wouldn’t need to concern himself with limited resources.”

“Like we do,” Sherlock said.

Mycroft nodded. “But that may be a short-term issue. Remember that we are now free to access
anything we wish from the other caches. We have nothing left to hide.”

“And nothing left to lose,” Anthea added. “Moran will know by now that we’ve ‘gone rogue’, as G
put it.”

“No; he won’t,” Sherlock said. “You’re all missing the salient point here.” He wore the dreaded “We
All Know What’s Going On Here” expression; the others didn’t like it any better than John did. He
looked from one to the other, clearly exasperated at their lack of understanding.

“For God’s sake,” he snarled, “think! We sent a message to Moran, hours before the bombing, telling
him that we needed additional time to process the coding so that the warheads wouldn’t go critical.
Hours later, a massive explosion occurs, in an area already evacuated and so not immediately subject
to news reporting or investigators. We know it was the bomb, because we arranged it. But what is
Moran going to think, based solely on the fact that an explosion was noted?”

The light dawned. “He’ll think we failed, and set off one or more of the warheads,” Mycroft said,
looking annoyed that he hadn’t thought of it first.

Sherlock nodded. “And the beauty of it is, even if he hears reports about the ‘bomber accident’, he
won’t believe it—we all know that kind of report could easily be a cover-up for a nuclear incident that governments don’t want publicized. He’ll also assume—“

John couldn’t hold it back. “He thinks we’re dead!”

Sherlock frowned momentarily at the interruption before continuing. “Yes, he does. Which means?”

“Which means that we have a window in which activity on our part will be completely unmonitored, since no one will be looking. I would estimate that window to last a minimum of 48 hours, of which roughly 12 have already passed, and a maximum of 72. Past that point, NATO or local military forces will almost certainly have boots on the ground, despite the presence of the Exclusion Zone. They will know, unlike Moran, that the story of the ‘accidental’ bomb drop is true, and will send experts in to access the damage. At least some of those troops will be in Moran’s pay, or at least subject to his influence—he will ensure that he has ‘eyes’ in place once the force is requested,” Mycroft said.

“But wouldn’t he still assume we’re dead, regardless of the source of the explosion?” John asked.

“I don’t think we can rely on that,” Mycroft said. “I suspect he will find it rather too convenient to be believed, even though, ironically, it was very nearly true. Especially so, once word of Sherlock’s manipulations to create the failsafe reach his ears, as it inevitably will. I think we must proceed on the assumption that we have a finite window for action, and plan accordingly.”

“We also haven’t considered the larger picture,” Anthea interjected. “The virus sites, and the likelihood that Moran will make good on his threat to release all of them, once he suspects our survival.” She looked tellingly at John, who sighed, but nodded.

“Yeah, I know. Time for my ‘secret’ you’ve all been wondering about,” John said. “But you’ll understand why I wanted to be sure before I told you.” He paused. “God, I wish we still had the phone. I didn’t want to do this without the written material to back me up. I know how much Sherlock likes data, and I actually had some—not a lot, and very preliminary, but I did have it.”

Sherlock made little “get on with it” waves with his spidery fingers.

“Right, then,” John continued. “A lot of this goes back to the nature of genetic manipulation. I’m no expert, so I’m not going to go too deep here—you can do your own research if you want more detail.” He looked at Sherlock, who nodded. No doubt there.

“Anyway. We know that the virus is an intentionally-modified version of the original. Specifically, modified to make it transferable either through airborne contamination or injection—the vector type doesn’t really matter for this conversation, though I’d sure like to know what the researchers have found out since I last looked. But, bottom line, the issue is that the virus was changed—manipulated, modified, however you want to describe it. In one sense, you could say that the new version is a hybrid, since it’s likely that the effect was produced by splicing genetic material from some other source into the original.” He leaned forward in his seat, splaying his hands across the tabletop. “I’m sure you’ve all heard of ‘hybrid vigor’—the fact that, in some cases, a cross-bred entity is actually healthier, or more successful, than either of the sources. But the opposite can just as easily occur—the cross-breeding can expose new weaknesses. Or, more importantly for our purposes, the new form ends up being unstable—that is, it doesn’t stay in the same form as the first generation, but continues to change on its own.”

Mycroft raised his eyebrows. “Change, how?” he asked, intrigued.

“No way to tell,” John said. “But the most important point is, the vast majority of mutations, which
are essentially what we’re talking about here, are lethal to the entity. The changes make the being—virus, bacteria, cow, sheep, human—unable to reproduce (or replicate, in this case), or unable to feed, or…you get the idea. Successful spontaneous mutations happen, certainly. But genetic manipulation isn’t spontaneous, and usually includes forced changes that would never occur in nature, at least not in a short period of time. Producing the version of the virus used in the attacks probably took years of work, with hundreds, thousands of failed attempts. They would have had to do many, many trials to be sure that their final form did what they wanted it to.”

He thought about that as he said it, and shuddered—God alone knew where, or how, that testing occurred. “I suspect that the final product was rushed into production as soon as possible—Moriarty’s organization wasn’t known for being patient, and the workforce would be all too aware of the consequences of not meeting deadlines. That makes it all the more likely that errors could start to creep in, the longer the virus was left to replicate on its own. And that brings us to the data.”

John got up and walked over the rear wall, where a whiteboard was anchored above the prep stations. He picked up a marker and began drawing circles, several of them, grouped in twos.

He walked over and pointed to the first two circles. “OK, in each case, the first circle represents morbidity, the second mortality: that is, what percentage of those exposed become infected, and what percentage of those infected subsequently die.” He took a red marker, and filled in all of the first two circles. “This is a representation of the results of the first ‘demonstration’ of the virus. To the best of our knowledge, 100% infection rate, 100% mortality.”

He moved to the next set of two, took his marker, and filled in 95% of the first circle, and 90% of the second. “These are the results from the second round, occurring over the next few hours. A difference, certainly, but it could conceivably have resulted from a slight difference in delivery mechanisms, or quicker response from medical teams—we know it was at least a couple of hours after the ‘demonstration’ people fell ill before anyone realized something serious was going on.”

He stepped to the third set. “OK, two sets for this one—these relate to the incident in Vienna.” He marked up the first group of two. “Morbidity initially reported at 85%; mortality at 84%.”

He now had everyone’s rapt attention, and he nodded in recognition. “And yes, those numbers are significant. That event was only a couple of days after the initial releases, but the infection rate, and the severity of those infections, though still terribly high, are nonetheless notably less than the first events.”

He moved to the final set of circles, filled them in, and stepped back to make sure the results were clearly visible in tandem with the first set from Vienna. “These are the revised results from Vienna—posted roughly 36 hours after the first set.” The morbidity rate now stood at 71%; the mortality at 64%. “In the later news reports, the officials had included new exposed individuals that weren’t recognized in the initial panic—people who had immediately left the room as soon as dinner was served, not staying for the evening entertainment. They developed the illness away from the conference hall, if at all, and, for those who were not infected despite their exposure, were unaware of the nature of the event until the next morning.”

He placed the markers back in their holder and stepped back from the board. “So, I know what I took from this as a physician. But I’m not an epidemiologist, nor an expert in treating virulent infectious diseases. That’s why I wanted to get Bertie’s take on this—not only is it his field, he was also working on the virus from the beginning.”

Anthea was the first one to speak. “But what was your ‘take’? How significant are the changes?”

“My semi-educated thought was ‘very’—the infection rate has dropped by nearly 30% in less than a
week; the fatalities have decreased by almost 40%,” John said. “The question was, why? Was it a
difference in transmission, degradation in the virus packets—that is, was whatever storage
mechanism Moran used just not up to the job, so the viral load in the dose was significantly less? Or
something to do with the virus itself?”

“And what was Bertie’s response?” Sherlock said, his eyes rapidly darting back and forth among the
circles on the hand-drawn chart.

John took a deep breath. “He believes—and understand, it is only a belief at this juncture, or at least
as of our last messages to each other—that the virus is degrading. If the second round of events had
been the ones to show the much-lower percentages, he would have thought it was a storage problem
—that is, much of the virus dying before release. But, given what certainly appears to be a
progression, he thinks it’s some kind of replication error that’s cropped up, and is escalating with
each progressive generation. He thinks—hopes—that this represents the beginning of a trend.”

Mycroft stepped up to the whiteboard and quickly drew two lines at a ninety-degree angle to each
other, and put divisions along each. One radius he labeled “time”; the other “rate”. Then he quickly
dropped in points, and finally connected each point to create a curve, with the high edge to the left
and a rapid slant downward to the right. Finally, he stepped back and turned to John.

“So, this would be a reasonable representation of the results, based on our current data. A marked
downward curve. The question is, is it predictive? That is, does our friend believe that this trend will
continue, in which case we can reasonably expect that the infection rate will fall to near-zero within a
short period of days?”

“I asked him essentially the same question,” John began.

“Using fewer words, most likely,” Sherlock muttered, not quite under his breath. John frowned but
continued.

“He’s hesitant to weigh in on that. He’s awaiting the results of several hundred test scenarios that will
tell us a great deal more. It’s possible. That’s the best we can expect,” he concluded.

“So, what does that mean for our plans?” Anthea asked. “We’re not trying to find the virus locations,
surely.”

Mycroft shook his head. “Of course not. But when you tie our window of opportunity, while Moran
thinks we’re dead, to this potentially game-changing information about his one remaining lethal asset,
it makes our next logical step quite clear.”

John sighed. “To you and Sherlock, maybe. Share with the class, please.”

Sherlock jumped in at that point. “Well, we’re going to Kosovo, of course. We’d already basically
decided that. But what I think my brother is referring to is our mode of transportation.” He looked
over at Mycroft, who nodded in confirmation.

“We’re going to go steal a plane,” he concluded, with a manic grin.

Chapter End Notes

The information about mutations and gene manipulation is essentially correct. There's
more to it, obviously, but the framework is there. And yes, most mutations are lethal (despite what the X-Men movies would have you believe!)
Crisis: Part Five

Chapter Summary

The gang sets off on their mission to steal air transport. But it's not easy, they're running out of resources, and the mission is not exactly what John expected it to be.

“We’re going to go steal a plane.”

John blinked, looking at Anthea to see if she was any the wiser for Sherlock’s statement. Her shrug answered the question—she was just as much in the dark as he was.

Sherlock picked up on that, of course. “Oh, please,” he said. “It’s obvious. We have a short time-frame in which to act, and we are in an area in which vehicles—well, vehicles which actually still contain petrol, that is—are in short supply, as is the ability to refill them within the Zone. We need to be able to cover potentially large distances quickly, if we’re to have any chance of catching up with Moran before he’s aware we’re still active in the game. Ergo, a plane—it enables us to bypass the Zone completely if we wish, with no need to go through border crossings or present papers that we don’t have. And where do we know of a plane which is almost certainly still sitting in its last known location, awaiting our return?”


“Yes, of course,” Mycroft said impatiently. “It’s unlikely that it’s been moved; Moran would want it to be available in the event that we, or G, had survived. He may also wish it to remain reasonably accessible for his own use—though he could bring it to Kosovo, I suppose. We’re uncertain that he is actually there at present—he could be anywhere. Kosovo needs to be our destination, though, if only to access information on his current whereabouts.”

John had to ask. “Who’s going to fly it, then? I can’t imagine you trusting that Moran’s pilot won’t cotton onto the truth once we board without G, and I, for one, wouldn’t trust him regardless.”

Anthea took that one. “All three of us are qualified pilots, at least on paper,” she said, with a significant look at Sherlock. “Mycroft and I both have considerable flight hours in recent years. Sherlock’s experience is more…theoretical, given his aversion to air travel.”

“It’s not an aversion,” Sherlock said, more than a little defensively.

“So, your time has been in simulators?” John said, ignoring his friend’s comment.

Sherlock frowned, unsure whether he was being teased. “Yes,” he finally said grudgingly.

“Well, that’s better than I have, any road,” John responded, trying to take any lingering sting out of the situation. “You’ll have to show me sometime.” The detective hesitated before nodding jerkily.

It seemed like a good time to change the subject. “So,” John said, “how are we going to get back to the airfield? We can’t possibly walk that whole way—it would take days, even if we were all up to that kind of trek.” He didn’t turn to look at Sherlock, but he could feel the affronted glare on the back
of his neck.

“I believe some hiking will be inevitable, at least until we reach the edge of the Sofia Zone,” Mycroft said, also avoiding a look at his brother. “But I think that, rather than heading immediately towards Belgrade, we should go to the nearest cache. That way, we can pick up a vehicle, as well as additional supplies.” He paused. “It’s just over the border into Macedonia, near Shtip. Too far to contemplate walking, but we can presumably steal an interim vehicle once we leave the Zone. We will have to go off-road briefly to avoid the border guards, but that should be relatively simple.”

Sherlock had reached his tolerance level for being ignored. He shot to his feet and stalked around to stand in front of John and Mycroft. “Then we should get underway, shouldn’t we? We’re wasting daylight already, and time is certainly of the essence.”

“Before that,” John said, stepping up to look Sherlock squarely in the eyes, “give me a number for today. One to ten.”

Sherlock opened his mouth, prepared to lie—John could see it, quite clearly.

“And honest one, please. You promised,” John said.

Sherlock’s eyebrows pulled down, and that tell-tale crease formed between his eyes. “Four,” he said sourly.

John sighed. Not surprising, but still not good. He made a quick decision.

“Good enough, though not what I’d hoped,” he said mildly. “Why don’t you and Anthea go gather up the rest of the new clothes and put them in the rucksack? I want to check and see if any of the food is worth carrying along. Mycroft, a little help?” Mycroft raised an imperious eyebrow, but stayed silent. Anthea, recognizing her cue, hooked an arm through Sherlock’s and chivvied him out of the dining room.

As soon as the door closed behind the other two, Mycroft turned expectantly to John. “Well? I presume you have something you wish to impart in my brother’s absence.” He paused briefly. “He will know.”

“Yeah, I got that. But it needs to be said, and he doesn’t need to hear it,” John said. “I’m going to be needing one of the canes shortly. I’m having trouble with my bad leg.”

Mycroft’s eyebrows rose. “Your…the leg ‘injury’ which is psychosomatic? The one which hasn’t troubled you since my brother returned?”

“Yup,” said John. “Sudden relapse. Stress. You understand.” He gave the older man a studiously bland look. “It’s unfortunate, but I’ll have to make occasional unscheduled rest stops.”

Mycroft gave a miniscule grin. “Mmm. And, coincidentally, the rest of us, including Sherlock, will perforce have to rest as well, since we can hardly leave you behind. How unfortunate.”

“Isn’t it?” John said. “Nothing for it, though.”

Mycroft nodded, then continued, in a more-sober mien. “How much further do you think he can push himself, before he is forced to stop because he simply can’t continue?” he asked, as if discussing the weather. John, wise to the ways of Holmeses, wasn’t deceived.

“Not long. If we have another day like yesterday, no time at all,” John said simply. “If we find a vehicle relatively quickly, and then the plane theft goes smoothly, he might have enough time to
recuperate a bit. But I’m very concerned about the continued demands on the few reserves he has left. So, rest stops. Food. Sleep, when we can.”

Mycroft was still troubled. “I appreciate your consideration,” he said. “But we must nonetheless continue, sooner rather than later. Our window will close quickly, and we must take advantage of it while we can. Ours is not the only fate with which to concern ourselves; Sherlock would be the first one to agree.”

“Yeah. So would I, in the end. Doesn’t mean I have to like it,” John replied.

By one that afternoon, they were on their way. The unused new clothes had been packed into the rucksack (the dirty ones left behind, thankfully—John suspected his white jumper could stand in the corner by itself at this juncture, given how dirty and caked with dried sweat it was), and a small selection of portable foods had been added as well—one of the frozen loaves of bread, a large hunk of hard cheese, and some slightly-overripe peaches from the pantry. John had made sure that the canes were still securely latched to the straps before swinging the pack to his shoulder.

Sherlock had given John and Mycroft a highly-suspicious look when he returned, but, so far, had been unable to hit on the real subject of their earlier conversation. John hoped to keep it that way, at least until they managed to find a vehicle to use. He could easily see Sherlock refusing to stop and rest out of sheer pique, if he knew he was being “coddled”.

They had decided to head for the northwestern edge of the Sofia Exclusion Zone, just past Bankya. It was a little further to walk—roughly 17 kilometers—but it would place them in a good position to quickly reach the cache outside of Shtip, given its location on the main loop road, and allow them to avoid going back up into mountainous areas. John estimated it would take them between 5 and 6 hours, at the slow pace he intended on imposing.

They started out well enough. They were all tired, still, though luckily their boots had been broken in well enough by now that no one had serious blisters to worry about. The airy good humour of last night was gone, though—no singing this time. This trek was something to be endured, nothing else.

The sky was somewhat overcast, though it didn’t look like snow was threatening, it was still cold. Their pace was just enough to keep them from suffering. John did hope to reach their destination before full dark, but it seemed unlikely given the time of year. They might have to force themselves to walk a little faster once the sun started to drop below the horizon.

Mycroft, Anthea and John took turns engaging in desultory conversation; Sherlock was largely silent, his head down as he trudged along. After roughly ninety minutes, John shot Mycroft a significant look and nodded at the detective.

They walked on for five more minutes, before Mycroft suddenly said, in a concerned tone, “John, are you limping?”

Sherlock’s head shot up at that, looking John over with brows drawn down. John had just enough time to stick a slight wobble into his step.

“John?” Sherlock said, in a hoarse rasp. “What’s wrong?” He stopped, almost vibrating with tension.

“I’m all right,” John said, almost regretting this necessary tactic. “It’s just…my damned leg is acting up. It’s ridiculous, but I can’t make it stop,” he added, trying for a combination of embarrassment and
“Would a brief rest help?” Mycroft asked innocently. He was a much better actor than John was.

“We don’t have time,” John protested weakly. “Let’s keep going. Just ignore me.”

Sherlock’s brows went even lower. “No,” he said. “We should stop. You’re in pain,” he added, as if that were the only thing that was important at the moment. John felt a reluctant glimmer of satisfaction.

“Well…I suppose fifteen minutes wouldn’t hurt,” John said. He pointed towards a small park just up the street. “Over there, maybe?” A selection of benches were visible, shaded by large trees at the edge of the sidewalk.

Ten minutes later, they were all draped across their respective benches. Mycroft sat rather primly, one long leg crossed over the other, hands clasped loosely in his lap as if waiting for tea. Anthea stretched out across hers on her stomach, chin on folded hands, eyes closed though she was clearly not asleep. John sat closest to Sherlock, his “bad” leg draped lengthwise along his bench. And Sherlock—Sherlock had originally sat down gingerly on the edge of his bench, as if reluctantly riding the Tube. Now, though, he had gradually slid down, until he was almost lying flat on his back, just his shoulders still propped against the metal frame to keep any pressure off his bruised back. His face was expressionless, but nonetheless managed to look weary, somehow.

John noticed the detective frowning, his hands coming up to rub his temples. “Headache?” John asked quietly.

Sherlock nodded. “Started this morning,” he said. “Unsure whether it’s the beginnings of migraine, or just the garden-variety sort.”

Sherlock had come back from his time Away with a tendency to migraines, bad ones. John had investigated a host of medications for him—none had proven effective, given Sherlock’s often-paradoxical responses. In the end, Sherlock usually just lay in a darkened room in silent misery, either at Baker Street or John and Mary’s flat, until the pain lifted.

John stood and went to Anthea’s bench, where the rucksack laid next to her. She opened her eyes inquiringly while John dug in the bag for his medical kit. He pulled out several packets of pills, grabbing two and shoving the remainder into the pocket of his parka. He took one of the bottles of water as well, then walked back to Sherlock, holding out the tablets and water.

“Here. Take these,” John said. “ Might work, if it’s not migraine. Even if it is, they’ll do no harm.”

Sherlock looked at the offerings suspiciously. “What are they?”

John held them out again. “Co-codamol. I know you don’t need anything that might sedate you. These will work better than paracetamol.” He paused, then continued. “And they’ll help with the bruises as well. I’m sure those don’t feel especially good either.” That was a calculated risk—though it was true, it was, at best, a fifty-fifty shot whether the detective would admit it.

Sherlock thought about it briefly before reaching out and taking them with a sigh. “Did the rest help your leg?” he asked once he’d swallowed them. “Can we go now?”

John considered that. He would prefer to wait long enough for the tablets to kick in. But he also didn’t want Sherlock to cotton onto the fact that these rest stops were for his benefit, not John’s.

“Yeah, I think so,” he finally said. “I’m going to use one of the canes for a while—the extra support
will help a bit as well.” He turned his back on Sherlock’s frown and walked over to unhook the cane from the strap on the rucksack. Sherlock often said that “only lies have details,” but in this case, John needed something to bolster his story, since he wasn’t sure he could fake a limp effectively for the next 4 hours or more without the cane to remind him.

Mycroft and Anthea stood and gathered themselves to leave; Mycroft picked up the rucksack and slid it onto his back. John leaned his weight on the cane, then reached out his left hand and pulled Sherlock off the bench, and they set off again.

By 4:30, they were all tiring, and the light was starting to go. They have made three additional stops; in the last, Sherlock collapsed bonelessly on the weedy grass at the side of the road, and was almost asleep by the time John went to offer him water and a peach. Rousing him, fifteen minutes later, felt abusive, but there was nothing for it. The detective forced himself up, then started walking, not looking to see if the others were following.

They had now reached the outskirts of the city, and were in one of the areas where power was failing. Many streets were completely dark; in others, a few streetlights remained, presumably powered by solar batteries. It was like something out of an apocalyptic film: houses with doors standing wide open, belongings strewn across walkways, abandoned cars resting in the middle of the street. They had seen no people on this entire trip.

They turned a corner, following Mycroft’s mental map (garnered from Anthea’s new phone), and came across an odd tableau: a group of 10 cars abandoned in the middle of the street, in front of the rubble of a collapsed building that blocked the entire road. It was unclear what had brought the building down; the surrounding area included relatively recent construction, so age or neglect seemed unlikely.

Reading John’s mind, Sherlock murmured, “Gas leak. The force was focused below ground level, and pushed the debris out from that point before the building toppled.” John was prepared to take his word for it.

They wandered up to the cars—they would either have to work their way around the blockage, or backtrack and go another way.

“Should we check to see if any of them have petrol?” Anthea asked. “Even a little bit would be enough to get us to Bankya, and save us another hour or two of walking.”

That seemed reasonable; the group moved up to the assemblage and selected vehicles to check. The first few were empty, but Sherlock’s second choice proved to have both keys in the ignition, and at least enough petrol to move the indicator needle above the “empty” mark a bit. That was the good news; the bad news was, the car was blocked in between four others, which would have to be muscled out of the way to get it clear.

As the light continued to fail, they set to work moving the blockage out of the way—shifting the cars into neutral, then pushing them up the street far enough to free the next vehicle in line. It was that focus that brought them to disaster.

John, pushing firmly on the back of an elderly Vauxhall, heard it first—a slight clatter of rubble
shifting. It could have been accidental—a bit of unstable brick moving, or a small animal darting through to avoid the commotion. When it was repeated, though, John knew. He reached over to Mycroft, his “partner” on this particular vehicle, grabbed his wrist and jerked his head towards the shadows now reaching along each side of the road.

Mycroft raised his head, listened briefly, then pursed his lips and blew a brief, shrill note. On the street behind them, Sherlock and Anthea, working on the new car in line, spun and looked rapidly around, moving quickly over to stand near John and Mycroft in a defensive line, staring into the near-darkness.

From each side of the street, stepping around debris and confidently forward, came men—six, no seven in all. They carried an odd collection of weapons—heavy lengths of steel pipe, wooden cudgels, a pickaxe. While John and the others watched, the group moved into the street to face them, arranging themselves in a loose line.

Mycroft edged forward, standing tall and imperious, and spoke in what was presumably Bulgarian. Anthea moved closer to John and translated quietly.

“We mean no harm,” she near-whispered. “Let us go, and we will tell no one you were here.”

The man in the lead, a tall, middle-aged blonde with the muscles of a body-builder, laughed before responding.

“Who would you tell?” Anthea translated. “And why would we care?”

Sherlock moved forward; Anthea tried, and failed, to grab his arm, then shook her head as he spoke.

“I would think you would ‘care’ that we reported the presence of deserters from the NATO forces sent to guard the borders of the Zone—your Bulgarian is good, but your Polish accent is quite distinct, and two of your friends are wearing NATO-issue boots,” Anthea said, after a pause during which the face of the leader of the looters congealed into a scowl. “And that said deserters were attempting to block access to the contents of the vault of the prominent goldsmiths, located one street over, until they could arrange to transport it out.”

John heard Mycroft sigh beside him. So much for any hope of claiming to be harmless refugees.

The leader stepped closer, tapping his heavy length of pipe in his hands as he spoke.

“Well,” Anthea translated, “that’s unfortunate. I had planned to just tie you up and leave you long enough for us to get our business finished, and then release you. But now...well, I guess we’ll just have to kill you. Sorry.” And, as she completed her translation, the leader nodded to his compatriots, and they moved forward, weapons at the ready.
Chapter Summary

Sherlock and Mycroft demonstrate a startling talent, one that is extremely effective—until it isn't. John deals with the aftermath, and then gives Mycroft some blunt facts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Anthea finished her translation of the looter’s threat, Mycroft reached over and picked up the cane John had left propped against the rucksack, currently sitting on the boot of the nearest car. He quickly tossed it, without really looking, to Sherlock, then deftly unhooked the second cane from the straps and settled it into his own pale hand.

In the meantime, while John stood, sizing up their attackers and judging which one to start with, Anthea suddenly strolled forward until she stood facing the erstwhile leader. She smiled broadly, and the large man, after a momentary perplexed stare, let a slow grin spread across his own features. He said something which no one bothered to translate, but led Sherlock to make a low, angry sound of disgust.

Anthea tossed her head in apparent amusement, said something incomprehensible (to John, anyway) in reply—and suddenly stepped up and kicked her opponent solidly in the bollocks with her military boot, then, as the man jackknifed and howled, clapped her cupped hands violently over his ears and drove his head sharply down onto her rising right knee. The looter dropped like a sack of meal; Anthea leaned over him to pick up the sturdy length of pipe that had fallen from his relaxing grip, then took a hearty swing with said pipe to the back of the man’s head. As she rose, she smacked the pipe into her opposite palm, looked at the stunned audience, and caroled, “Next?”

Things got hectic, then. John, having picked out his first choice of opponents earlier, took a running leap onto the bonnet of the Vauxhall, spun, and drove his left boot into the jaw and neck of his victim (a move he had seen in an action film Sherlock sneered at, and practiced in secret. Take that, Sherlock). That man, too, went down without a sound. They were down to five, now. John hopped down and squared off with the nearest combatant, who was much warier than his compatriots had been. From the corner of his eye, John noticed Anthea sparring with her chosen looter, making darting strikes with her pipe before dodging nimbly back out of reach.

Out of the corner of his eye, John saw first Mycroft, and then Sherlock, make a peculiar snapping motion with their wrists. The outer sheathing of the canes slid smoothly off, to expose three feet of polished steel that the brothers brought expertly into position. If it had been safe to do so, John would have rolled his eyes: he knew all along the canes had more to them than met the eye.

John caught glimpses of the two, then, just glimpses, as he spun and attacked and wore his own opponent down. Those glimpses showed him something completely unexpected: a synchronized, dance-like display that represented hours, years of practice and study.

Mycroft, as soon as both blades were exposed, stepped towards the center of the group of three remaining looters, glancing at his brother to check his position, before barking, “Pret. Allez!” Then the two raised their blades, spun, moved effortlessly forward and engaged, the swords darting out to
inflict small wounds before withdrawing and attacking from a different aspect.

“Tierce!” Mycroft cried, and the two glided closer, spinning on their toes to come almost back-to-back, Sherlock’s opponent being nearly hamstrung as the detective’s blade inscribed a low arc, in tandem with his brother’s higher swing.

John heard a low cry to his right, and looked to see Anthea’s opponent crumpling to the ground, a bloody wound gaping at his temple. She raised her eyebrows quickly at John—do you need help? John shook his head and hooked his boot around his target’s left knee, not quite bringing him down, but getting there.

Behind him, the Holmeses continued their stylized dance—they were now down to two fighters, the third taking limpingly to his heels with one arm dangling uselessly. John saw Sherlock’s glint of triumph before turning back to his own battle.

Mycroft shouted “Quinte!” and the brothers spun with choreographed precision, shifting between opponents to keep both off-balance. John ducked under a swing of his looter’s cudgel, feeling the weapon barely touch his hair as he dropped low. He heard Sherlock give an exhilarated laugh as Mycroft’s opponent took the blade to his forearm before jerking haltingly back out of range, and saw a flash of a smile on the older man’s face in response.

John had just seen, and taken, his own opening in his target’s defense—reaching in to grab an overextended arm, twist the wrist, then wrench the arm forcefully back and up to dislocate it, while simultaneously kicking the man’s legs out from under him—when Sherlock stumbled slightly. And that was enough—his opponent snaked an arm out, grabbed Sherlock’s wrist to isolate the sword, and then lifted a leg to kick Sherlock’s unprotected torso full-force, once, twice. Sherlock gave a choked cry of agony and dropped to his knees; his opponent moved forward to take the sword from the detective’s nerveless hand, throwing it high in preparation for a blow that John, darting forward in terror, knew he couldn’t prevent.

He was pushed roughly aside by Mycroft, spinning rapidly across the intervening space and raising his own blade up and forward—before bringing it down and back, with terrifying speed, thrusting the point forward violently. John regained his balance just in time to see five inches of the blade appear from the looter’s shuddering back, before being withdrawn with a harsh jerk. The looter fell, landing behind Sherlock with a harsh gurgling sound that abruptly cut off.

As John and Mycroft both moved towards him, Sherlock’s eyes rolled up and he fell bonelessly to the ground, making no attempt to stop the collision of his face with the pavement. John swore and slid to his knees, while Anthea darted in behind him to drop the rucksack, complete with his med kit, next to him.

Sherlock’s faint didn’t last—by the time John had reached his side and opened the med kit, the detective’s eyes had popped open on a gasp. His face contorted, and his right hand shot out to grasp John’s wrist in a bone-shattering grip. “Pain,” Sherlock wheezed, his breath spiraling up into panic range. His left hand opened and shut manically in the air, reaching for nothing. “It...pain,” he panted, his eyes wild. His legs moved erratically, as if trying to decide whether to run or coil up against Sherlock’s torso.

“Shit,” John said. “Mycroft,” he barked. “Come take his hands. I need mine.” The older man slid smoothly into place on Sherlock’s far side, capturing his brother’s fluttering left hand before reaching out to detach the right from John’s wrist. John absently noted the dark-red marks left behind.

John rifled quickly through his supplies, pulling out the small bottle of morphine—only two doses remaining, so he had wanted to keep it for emergencies. With Sherlock’s pain level, though, this was...
the only viable option; oral meds would take as much as half an hour to be effective, if he could even get them (well, keep them) down. John quickly prepped the syringe, opened up Sherlock’s trousers enough to pull them clear of his hip, and injected the dose—a heavy one, given Sherlock’s regrettable tolerance levels. Then they waited, listening to Sherlock’s pained gasps while Mycroft clutched both of his hands tightly.

Finally, after an agonizing five minutes, Sherlock let out a long, shaky breath. His legs relaxed first, ceasing their restless motion; shortly thereafter, Mycroft was able to gently disengage his brother’s left hand and lay it at his side—he kept the right. The eyelids were last, fluttering, then sliding closed for good.

John’s eyes met Mycroft’s—they both shared a relieved look before standing and stretching, trying to loosen muscles that had been tightened far too much over the past few minutes. Anthea took their place, sliding a folded jumper from the rucksack under Sherlock’s head before looking back over her shoulder. “Now what?” she asked.

“Now, I’ll do a quick exam,” John said. “I need to see if any additional damage has been done—broken ribs, for example. I wish to God I could do blood work, or have access to a scanner, but…,” he trailed off, as he moved back over to kneel at his friend’s side again.

“And afterward?” Anthea asked, moving aside to let John work.

“One crisis at a time,” John said, setting out the tools of his trade.

Ten minutes later, Sherlock was still blissfully unconscious, and John was packing away his kit while Anthea straightened Sherlock’s clothes, disarranged in John’s examination. John stood, stretched again and dropped the kit back into the rucksack before turning to the silent observer, standing resolutely five feet away.

“So?” Mycroft asked now, in a bland tone that did very little to mask his obvious concern. Well, obvious to John, anyway—he’d now officially reached the status of Holmes Interpreter, evidently.

“Well, part of it is almost certainly a return of the costochondritis,” John began. Sherlock had suffered through a lengthy bout of that in the first two months after the shooting; it was common after chest trauma or surgery, the cartilage lining and connecting the ribs and sternum becoming inflamed and painful. That was particularly the case for Sherlock, since two ribs had needed to be surgically wired back together, and his second surgery had been even more invasive than the first. In that original bout, the only “cure” was anti-inflammatory and time, since the condition was generally self-limiting, and the pain had been wearing, but not agonizing. Now, though…

“My main concern with this is whether it’s still the benign form, brought on by his recent exertions and physical stress on the torso,” he continued. “It comes in two versions—benign, where’s it’s simply inflammation that ends on its own, given appropriate care; and bacterial, where there’s actually infection present. The second version requires IV antibiotics, if not surgery. The level of pain isn’t necessarily indicative—it can range from ‘mild’ to ‘severe’, regardless of the type—but this is an order of magnitude worse than what he experienced before.”
“And, given his ongoing issues with infection…” Mycroft said slowly, asking a question without actually presenting it as such.

John nodded. “It’s a real possibility. Can’t be sure without imaging. The ‘acid test’ can be swelling in the connections between the cartilage and the ribs, but because of his recent injuries it’s just as likely he’d have swelling regardless. And the pain, well…” he trailed off. Pain, after the river, and G, and the looters—it would be shocking if Sherlock didn’t have ongoing pain from those, even without his healing incision site. If this was bacterial costochondritis, though, Sherlock had been ignoring, or masking, pain for some time—this couldn’t have happened overnight. Days, maybe, but no less than that.

Mycroft pondered that momentarily before returning to the main point. “And you said, ‘part of it’, the implication being that there’s more?”

John nodded. “Potentially, at least. We can’t ignore the elephant in the room any longer. There’s a reasonable chance that he has infection still floating in his system—infection that could form another abscess, if it hasn’t already. And I have absolutely no way of telling if that’s happening, nor any way to treat it outside of a true medical unit. We need to assume that we’re on the clock, here—he needs to be back under care, sooner rather than later, and have a great many tests done in a qualified facility.”

“Or?” Mycroft said, not in a challenging way, but rather resigned.

“Or he’s liable, one day soon, to get very ill, very quickly,” John replied. “And then we’ll have no choice—hospital, immediately, no matter where we are or how dire the risk.”

And Mycroft could do nothing but nod.

They took the old car they had been working to free, a Skoda that was probably 20 years old. The looters had fled, limping and bleeding—well, those that were able, anyway. The corpse lay where it had fallen; the big man Anthea had clocked with the pipe was still sprawled out on the pavement, but John had done a cursory check and presumed that the man would survive, unless other predators (human or otherwise) found him first. They left him without a second thought, though they did empty his wallet, as well as the dead man’s. They ended up, surprisingly, with more than €2,000 in cash.

The car was clean, for the most part; the plastic seats were creased but not torn, and all of the important bits were still attached. Anthea volunteered to drive, using her cherished new phone to navigate. John and Mycroft, between them, loaded Sherlock gently across the rear seat, and John slid in, to sit with his friend’s head in his lap while Mycroft climbed into the front next to Anthea.

They had only a small amount of petrol, but they hoped it would be enough to get them to the edge of the Zone (and that the car was stout enough to drive off-road where necessary, to avoid checkpoints). Those checkpoints, helpfully, were identified on a map Anthea pulled up by what she described as “creative infiltration”—probably not legal, but also unlikely to get them caught.

It was a little before 6 PM—full dark, now, and cold. The heater in the car was fitful at best—
hopefully they would be able to secure better transport to get them to the cache at Shtip. After 15 minutes, they reached the farthest outskirts of Sofia, and headed off across frozen fields to avoid the nearest checkpoint to the border.

“I’m working on keeping a straight line as much as I can—shortest distance,” Anthea said. “It really focuses your attention when you know the damn car could die at any moment.”

John expected, when they reached Bankya, to engage in another round of theft and evasive maneuvers. He was mildly stunned, then, when Anthea simply pulled up to a busy petrol station, with Mycroft in tow, and came back five minutes later holding a set of keys triumphantly in her fist. She walked around to John’s door and opened it.

“Come on,” she said. “€1,000 and this car did the trick. We have new transport and a full petrol tank. But we have to relocate quickly, since they want to hide this car until they can cut it up for parts.” John blinked, then decided this was one of those “act now, ask later” situations. John roused Sherlock just enough to get minimal cooperation with getting out (the detective’s eyes were open, but no one was home, clearly). Between them, John and Mycroft settled Sherlock comfortably in a nest of their parkas in the back compartment of a large SUV parked around the side of the station. It was mildly dirty and smelled of old motor oil and onions, but it was roomy and, as Anthea had said, had a full tank.

The car, sadly, would only go up to 90 kph—above that, it rattled and shook hard enough that John feared it would quit entirely. The trip from Bankya to Shtip, then, took almost five hours. They stopped in a nameless town and bought food—sandwiches, juice and lethally strong coffee—that they consumed in the car. They took turns driving—Anthea confessed that she was finding it difficult to stay alert, so they set up a rotation, each of them taking an hour’s worth at a time. In the depth of the night, while Sherlock snored in the rear and Anthea did the same in the back seat, John found himself having one of those odd, revelatory conversations with Mycroft that happened once every two years or so, it seemed.

“So, fencing?” he said.

Mycroft gave a brief half-smile. “I knew you’d ask eventually,” he said drily.

“Hey, it’s been a busy night,” John replied with a grimace. “Had one or two things to work out first. So, again—fencing?”

Mycroft nodded. “Yes, of course. I took it in school—one of the few sports I had any aptitude for.” He looked over at John, with a sardonic eyebrow pulled high. “I was not what you would call an athletic child.”

“So I’ve heard,” John chuckled.

“I found that I liked both the physical and strategic aspects,” the older man resumed. “I competed, both in school and at uni, and often practiced when I was home on breaks and weekends. Sherlock, as you can imagine, was fascinated. Of course, he would have preferred we use sabers—more in keeping with pirates—but he was willing to compromise on epees.” He dealt with a sharp turn before continuing.
“Sherlock eventually surpassed me—he put in endless hours of practice, and became one of the Cambridge champions in his teens. I believe he still has one of his certificates on the wall in his bedroom.”

John nodded—he’d seen that, actually. “But the two of you together—how did that happen?” he asked.

“Serendipity, largely,” the bureaucrat replied. “Of course, when I left for uni Sherlock was still at primary school. The only practical way for him to take instruction was through a private teacher, so, after much pleading from him, my parents decided to allow him to study with my own instructor. We took lessons together for several years, though of course at different levels. Then, when Sherlock was about 16, he had the idea of patterning attacks—choreographing movements like dance, with set routines based on individual situations. At first it was simply something we could do together—given our age difference, there were very few common areas of interest until Sherlock was nearly grown. But, when Sherlock finished his first undergraduate degree at 18, he opted to take a ‘gap year’ of a sort—working with, for, me.” He gave John a significant look. “I’m sure you can divine the nature of that work. And the fencing became part of our armament.”

John pondered that—clearly there was more here that he would be interested in knowing, but he was sure that Sherlock would be reluctant to have that conversation going on without his knowledge. In the end, John asked only the least-intrusive question of the many he had in mind.

“Do you still practice together?” he said. “I can’t imagine you being able to do that without it.”

Mycroft nodded. “Not as much as we used to, of course. But we still generally make time at least once or twice a month, when he’s healthy.” It went without saying that “healthy” (or it’s inverse, “not healthy”) didn’t refer solely to the physical realm.

Shortly thereafter, they changed drivers again, with Mycroft taking over the rear seat, so the conversation went no further. John made a mental note (at this point, he had a mental filing cabinet full of them) to ask Sherlock more about this, once he was feeling better.

When it was John’s turn to take the rear seat, he had just started to settle comfortably when he heard rustling from behind him, and saw Sherlock’s head pop over the back of the seat. His hair was flattened and greasy-looking, and his eyes were still glazed, pupils large and black.

“You gave me morphine,” the detective said, a distinct slur in his voice. “I feel too well for it to be anything else.” He paused. “Mmm. Not well, exactly. Just not hurting. It’s nice,” he added reflectively.

John thought carefully before responding. Stoned Sherlock was often Truthful Sherlock, if you approached things correctly.

“Yes, I did,” he said simply. “How long had you been hurting?”

Sherlock blinked, yawned, and blinked again before responding. “Since yesterday—well, it got worse yesterday. But it only really got bad this morning. Not as bad as after the kicking thing. But still bad.” His brow furrowed. “I told you I just had a headache. I didn’t think you’d notice.” He frowned. “The co-codamol didn’t help. I like morphine so much better.” He added a cheery smile to
“You’re welcome,” John said wryly. “But I have to ask you a question now. Can you think well enough to tell me the truth, or do I need to wait a while for you to come down more?”

Sherlock thought about that. “Now. At least I think so.”

“You know we’re on our way to hunt Moran, starting with stealing his plane. Are you going to be able to function once the morphine wears off?” John asked bluntly. When Sherlock was like this, bluntness was essential—he lost all ability to interpret nuances of speech, or to understand any kind of sugar-coating of reality.

Sherlock’s brow furrowed again. “I’m not sure,” he said. “Not if anyone kicks me again. Not without more morphine.” He gave John a slightly hopeful look.

“No,” John said. “You like it too much, and I don’t want to have to wean you off it again. Neither one of us enjoyed it the last time.”

Sherlock sighed resignedly. “Then, maybe not. The co-codamol didn’t do much, and I was starting to have trouble taking deeper breaths. That’s why I stumbled when we were, when the fighting—I got light-headed because I was running out of air.” He looked earnestly at John. “But I’m fine now.”

“Yeah, sure you are,” John sighed. “Why don’t you go back to sleep for now, and I’ll think about it, OK?” Sherlock blinked, nodded, and dropped back down out of sight.

By the time they reached Shtip, an hour later, Anthea was back in the driver’s seat. She roused everyone when they got close, and they all watched as she pulled into a utilitarian block of low buildings in an industrial area. At the rear, there was a large, probably electrified fence connected to a set of heavy metal gates; Anthea pulled up, entered a code into the keypad next to the gate, and pulled through carefully once the gates ground open.

Mycroft sat forward from the back seat and directed her towards the far-left corner. “It’s a caretaker’s flat,” he said. “Currently empty; even though this is outside the Zones, many of the people in the area left as a precaution. We can stay there tonight.” He looked at his watch, shook his head, then continued. “Well, what’s left of ‘tonight’, anyway. We can load up our supplies once we wake.”

Sherlock, from his nest in the back, answered with a groan. “Here’s hoping those supplies include some really good drugs. Or at least something to make me not care that it hurts. I’ll take either option.”

“Well, I have an idea for what we can do tomorrow, if the supplies include the things I’ll need,” John said. “For tonight, I’ll give you a hefty dose of oxycodone—that’ll take care of that ‘not caring’ bit, since it should put you right back to sleep. Deal?”

“Deal,” Sherlock sighed, and they trudged off to find sleeping quarters for the remainder of the shortened night.

Chapter End Notes

The fencing scene was one of the precursors of this whole fic, and was actually conceived almost a year before Season Four premiered (and I’ve been dying to finally
get it written!). So, once again, I've prophetic (at least about Mycroft)--who knew? The terms used are actual fencing ones, referring to various positions and motions, but the Holmeses have co-opted them to another purpose.

And yes, costochondritis is a real thing, and I'm once again borrowing from something I've experienced. I had my spleen out, years ago, in an open surgery where the incision skirted along the bottom edge of my ribcage. I was relatively lucky--my pain level from it wasn't horrible, but it was terribly nagging and lasted more than three weeks. The worst cases, though, can be agonizing.
Chapter Summary

At the cache site, the group finds some of what they need, and John puts together a treatment for Sherlock's pain. But sometimes, the cure is just as bad as the disease.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John was surprised, the next morning, to find himself awakened by Sherlock. Normally the man could creep silently around, even coming into John’s room whenever he wished, without making a sound. Now, though, John woke to Sherlock’s breathy, pained panting from the other side of the bed they had ended up sharing, as the flat only had two beds, one in each tiny bedroom. Mycroft ended up on the battered sofa in the living room.

The detective was aware enough to know that John was awake. “Hurts,” he half-whispered. “I can’t…it h-hurts,” he shuddered, and pulled his arms tighter against his sides.

John scrambled out from under the covers and grabbed his kit, holding it in his hands indecisively. He took the bag and walked over to stand at Sherlock’s side of the bed, then reached out and laid his palm along his friend’s cheek. “I need a straight answer. I have one dose of morphine left—just one, and we can’t guarantee we can easily get more, if there’s none in the cache. So, do I use it now, or can you wait long enough for some oxycodone to kick in?”

Sherlock closed his eyes, trying to breathe through the pain. “The tablets,” he finally said softly. “Just…don’t skimp. You know my tolerance levels—a standard dose does little more than paracetamol.”

“Yeah, I know,” John sighed, and dug out three tablets, then pulled out their last bottle of juice as well. He helped Sherlock lift up just enough to take the pills and juice, forcing himself to ignore the hitching gasps of pain at the movement. He carefully laid the detective back flat on the bed, then stood.

“I’m going to go look and see if I can find something edible in the flat,” John said. “You’re going to have trouble with the meds if you don’t eat something. I know you don’t want to,” he continued, as Sherlock’s face contorted in disgust, “but you can’t take the chance on setting your stomach off. Lie there and let the pills work.” Sherlock said nothing, his hands drifting back up to press against his sternum with a grimace.

John walked out to the small kitchen and met Anthea and Mycroft, already putting together an…unusual meal.

“Crepes,” Mycroft said over his shoulder. “We had no fresh milk, and no bread. But there was
powdered milk and flour in the cabinet, and a few eggs in the fridge. We also have jam and honey to
put in them—I made a filling of sorts with those, with butter, chopped almonds, cinnamon-- and
there’s bacon, though it’s a little past its prime.”

Mycroft handed off the spatula to Anthea, who frowned but took it. Then he turned to John.

“How is my brother?” he asked simply. “And what does he need?” John noticed Anthea darting
looks over her shoulder—she clearly wanted to ask the same things.

“As to how he is—in a great deal of pain,” John said. “Not unexpected—the oxycodone I gave him
last night would have worn off several hours ago. I’ve given him a hefty dose of the same, which
hopefully will kick in shortly. In the meantime, though, I need something he can eat to keep it from
coming right back up.”

Mycroft turned back to the stove, reached for a plate from the counter, and served up one of the
crepes-and-filling. He reached for bacon as well, but John shook his head.

“I think the bacon might be a little too much at present,” he said. “Let’s see how he feels in twenty
minutes or so.” Anthea silently handed over a cup of tea, and John headed back to the bedroom.

Sherlock was still in the same position, exuding that very still, if-I-move-it-will-hurt vibe that John
was all too familiar with from his own experience post-gunshot wound. His eyes cut over at John’s
entrance, but his head didn’t move.

“I don’t want…” he began, before John cut him off.

“Not an option,” John said. “Remember—the meds only work if you keep them down. And just
think what vomiting would do to your pain level right now.” Sherlock cringed, then nodded very
gingerly.

John set his offerings on the bedside table and raised Sherlock’s shoulders very, very carefully before
sliding the extra pillow underneath. The younger man’s breathing went ragged and shallow, but he
made no sound. John sat carefully on the edge of the bed and picked up the fork.

In five minutes, the food was gone and Sherlock was as white as the pillowcase under his head, eyes
closed tightly and bottom lip caught between his teeth.

John picked up the plate and pointed at the cup of tea, still sitting on the nightstand. “Do you want—


John nodded and headed to the door, hesitating a moment before shaking his head and going back to
the kitchen.

Anthea met him at the doorway with a filled plate and a raised eyebrow. “Well?” she said, with no
small amount of impatience.

“He ate it. Didn’t enjoy it, and it’s a crapshoot as to whether it stays down,” John said succinctly.

“Oh dear,” she sighed.

“So, what can we do?” Mycroft asked from his position at the miniscule table. He had Anthea’s
phone in his hand, but had put it aside at John’s entrance.
“Not a damn thing,” John said, with no small amount of bitterness. “We need to wait a bit, to see if he …well, to see. If it stays down, he should get a bit dozy once the meds kick in. We can go check out the cache while he rests. Depending on what medical supplies we find, I may have a better option for him at that point.”

Fifteen minutes later, when they were ready to head over to the storage units, John walked softly back into the bedroom to see Sherlock, still on his back, breathing evenly and relaxed in sleep. He left a note on the pillow beside his friend, and left as quietly as he had entered.

This cache was very different from the last. Their first unpleasant shock was the absence of a vehicle—the storage container was still securely locked, and yielded smoothly to the codes Mycroft entered from memory. But, as the door slid up, it revealed only empty space. They all stared in disbelief, looking around as if the car was hiding somewhere in the corners.

“But that’s…where can it be?” Anthea asked helplessly.

“Presumably with the caretaker, who has apparently taken this opportunity to permanently depart,” Mycroft replied, in an arid tone. “Which begs the question of what we will find when we examine the rest of the cache.”

That question was answered very quickly indeed. As they found the correct corridor in the storage area and rounded the last corner, they saw one of the metal accordion doors already rolled up to the ceiling, with lights shining inside.

“Fuck me,” John sighed. “That’s ours, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is,” Mycroft snapped. Not quite as impervious as he wished to appear, then.

The cache wasn’t ransacked, exactly. Nothing was strewn randomly around, nothing was pulled roughly open to lie strewn across the concrete floor. Instead, everything had been systematically searched, to the point where piles of rejected items were stacked neatly against the back wall, presumably so that the searcher knew not to look through these particular boxes again. Looting, certainly, but organized looting.

The rejected boxes, on quick examination, held mostly clothing. That would be helpful—all of their parkas were filthy, and they could easily transfer the transceivers into new garments. Some food was still present—MREs, protein bars, fruit leather. That, too, was worth taking, at least in small quantities.

All of the large armaments were gone—no rifles, no scopes, no limpet mines or grenades. In the bottom of one of the opened boxes in the center of the room, John found two pistols—small, lightweight, but better than nothing—and two boxes of ammunition. Those were put into the small “take” pile by the open door.

John could have wept when he saw the field medical kit standing wide open in the corner. He knew, knew, that most of what he wanted was gone. No morphine; no demerol; no injectable systemic pain relief of any kind. Not surprising—all of those items could be readily sold on the black market. He
didn’t need much in the way of bandages or suture materials, but he did take a few of each just in case. He did find a couple of prizes, though, in a side pocket—a small bottle of Phenergan, and four pre-filled syringes of lidocaine. He picked up his selections and walked over to where his companions were standing unhappily in the doorway. An open duffle bag sat at their feet, and he dropped his items silently inside.

Mycroft raised his eyebrows. “Anything helpful? The rest of this is largely useless to us at this juncture.”

“A bit,” John replied. “I think I can give Sherlock some relief, at least. Nothing for the bigger issue—all the antibiotics are gone, though it’s unlikely the kit would have contained what we needed in that area anyway. I’m done, if you are.”

The Great Man nodded, and leaned over to pick up the bag. “Nothing of note, other than the clothing and food. I see no point in scavenging further at this point; once we have the plane and are back outside of the Zones, we can purchase or ‘liberate’ whatever’s needed.” He patted his left pocket. “I do have false passports for each of us; those will prove useful, since we will likely be landing at conventional airports.”

John leaned over and picked up the bag. “Let’s get back, then. The treatment will take a while, and he may well need some recovery time afterward.”

Mycroft’s eyebrows flew up. “Is this…treatment that dire, then? Should we perhaps consider waiting?”

“It’s not ‘dire’, exactly. But it’s going to hurt a great deal, though hopefully that won’t last once the medication kicks in,” John said. “And I don’t think waiting is an option now. You didn’t see him this morning. He can’t go on as he is, and the only other option is morphine, which we could probably get if we had to, but which would present its own laundry list of problems for him.”

“Truer words were never spoken,” Anthea sighed from behind them. “Been there, done that.”

This time it was John’s eyebrows that rose, but the agent offered nothing further. Yet another indicator of Anthea’s unspecified past with Sherlock.

When they reached the flat, John put the duffle bag down and fished out his medical items before walking back to the bedroom. Sherlock was awake, barely, though he looked drowsy and cross.

“How is it?” John asked, setting his supplies on the foot of the bed.

“Better…” Sherlock said, after the briefest of pauses.

“As long you don’t move?” John said.

“As long as I don’t move,” Sherlock sighed. He looked at the materials spread across the bed. “Can I assume you are here to do something about that?”

“Got it in one,” John said, sorting out the items before pointing at them, one at a time. “Phenergan; Lidocaine. We’ll need both, for different reasons. The Phenergan is a stopgap—it wouldn’t be my first choice, since I was hoping for some Demerol or even a little additional morphine. It’s usually used as an anti-nausea drug, which, now that I think of it, is probably an added bonus. But it can also be used as a backhanded way to help with pain relief: it intensifies the effect of other pain meds already in your system. I’m going to give that to you first, before I start. It’ll probably make you a little drowsy afterward, but that’s not a bad thing.”
He picked up the syringes. “The lidocaine is the real treatment. Local anesthesia—usually used before stitches, for example. I’ve used it on you any number of times, so I know you tolerate it well. In this case, I’m going to inject it in the intersections between the ribs and the cartilage—that’s where your pain is coming from. It should work pretty dramatically—you should notice an almost immediate difference.”

Sherlock was already nodding. “Then let’s get on with it.”

John shook his head. “A bit more information first. Full disclosure,” he began. “While I believe this will help, at least in the short run, the injections themselves will really fucking hurt. I want to make sure you understand that—I’m going to give you the Phenergan first or you won’t be able to stand it, but it’s still going to be very unpleasant. So, I need an affirmative agreement from you before I start this. And understand as well, if I think it’s too much for you, or there’s even the slightest adverse effect, I’m stopping, and we’ll try you on high doses of anti-inflammatories instead.”

Sherlock gave a whispery sigh—his difficulty with taking deep breaths was still an issue, making his voice much quieter than usual. “You know I can’t take them. I couldn’t take them in hospital without developing stomach issues that could never be adequately addressed, and I’m sure you can imagine how well that would work now.” He closed his eyes briefly, before opening them to look stoically over John’s left shoulder. “I can eat, if I force myself to ignore the borderline nausea and utter lack of interest in food. I would strongly prefer not to begin vomiting again.”

And there it was. John knew Sherlock had been struggling these past few days, but it was disheartening to hear his friend confirm how bad things had gotten. Disheartening and, to be truthful, a little frightening, given their current circumstances.

Sherlock was already moving on. “You said, ‘in the short run’. What does that mean? How long will this give me?”

John shook his head. “No way of predicting. For some people, it lasts only until the initial dose wears off—a few hours at best. For others, a few days to a few weeks. I could probably extend the curve if I had some cortisone to add to the mixture, but I don’t. And even if I did, I don’t think I’d try that without access to real-time imaging. It’s too risky.” He held up a syringe and looked solemnly at Sherlock. “Even this is risky, you understand. I could go too deep, puncture the pleura, go through a major vessel—it’s not something I’d normally choose to do, given any other options.”

“There are no other options,” Sherlock said. “You already said that. Morphine, even if we had it, would take away the pain, but also render me largely useless for this venture, if not an actual hindrance. I get very reckless when using it.” And God, wasn’t that a terrifying idea, John thought—Sherlock Holmes, even more reckless than usual.

“And, as you say,” he continued, “I’d prefer not to have to go through yet another detox. Once every five years or so seems quite sufficient, wouldn’t you say?” He gave a rueful grin.

Five minutes later, they were ready. John had injected the Phenergan, then carefully removed Sherlock’s jumper and vest. He wiped the skin on Sherlock’s chest very thoroughly with packaged alcohol wipes while his friend shivered and twitched. Mycroft hovered in the doorway, uncharacteristically uncertain about entering.

John put the wipes aside and pulled on a pair of latex gloves from his kit. “OK, first step. You won’t enjoy this either, by the by. We have a total of 8 doses, two from each syringe. I’m going to have to establish the worst spots, and the only way to do that is by essentially poking them. We’re lucky in this case—you have so little flesh over your ribcage that I can see structures easily, so it’s not as random as it may seem.”
“Thank you, I suppose,” Sherlock muttered.

John took his time, probing along and between ribs while Sherlock sweated and jerked and, a time or two, shouted. He marked his chosen spots with tiny pieces of torn paper (“it’s this or permanent marker,” he said when Sherlock complained). Then he laid the syringes next to Sherlock’s hip and spoke over his shoulder to Mycroft.

“I think it would be a good idea if you were in here,” John said. He carefully didn’t specify why, but the older man came and sat on the bed on Sherlock’s far side nonetheless.

It was every bit as bad as John had feared. With the first injection, Sherlock’s face went grey, and every muscle in his body tensed as he struggled not to move. By the second, Mycroft had reached silently over and taken his brother’s right hand. Sherlock began to make sounds that John preferred not to remember, later. Midway through, Anthea came in and stood in the far corner, arms wrapped tightly around herself. By the end, Sherlock had tears of pain silently leaching from the corners of his eyes, and all three of them were shaking.

John picked up the depleted syringes and pulled off his gloves while Anthea went into the en suite and returned with a damp flannel, quietly wiping Sherlock’s face, chest and hands.

After several minutes, Sherlock rasped, “Thank you,” but his eyes remained tightly shut.

“Oh, Christ, Sherlock, please don’t thank me for that,” John said.

They stayed another two hours. By the end of the first, Sherlock was up and around, gingerly testing the movement in his torso and staying resolutely silent about his earlier treatment. John coaxed him to eat a protein bar and drink as much water as he could tolerate, a regimen to which Sherlock reluctantly adhered.

By the second hour, the pain from the injections themselves had dwindled, and Sherlock was beginning to feel real relief, for the first time in days. He stood in the kitchen and gave John one of his rare, crooked smiles. “I can move,” he said, throwing out those long arms and twisting to and fro.

“Hold on there,” John said, throwing out a cautioning hand. “Just because there’s less pain, doesn’t mean the issue has gone away. Don’t push yourself. Don’t exert a lot of effort that involves your torso or extended arms. And, for God’s sake, don’t get hit in the chest again.”

“Yes, Mummy,” Sherlock simpered, before grinning again. John, of course, found himself grinning back.
They loaded up the SUV with their rucksack and duffle bag at just before noon. Their plan was to stay outside of the Zones as much as possible; it would make the trip take a bit longer, but would also allow them to use their remaining Euros to purchase food and petrol as needed. Anthea estimated that their total travel time would be a little more than 6 hours.

Sherlock, for this trip, disdained his previous “nest” in the back, climbing into the front passenger seat next to Anthea with the enthusiasm of a toddler on his way to the zoo. John hadn’t realized, until he saw this contrast, how subdued Sherlock had been over the past days.

That enthusiasm, sadly, gave way to boredom roughly an hour into the trip. By 2PM, when they made their first al fresco toilet stop, everyone in the car (well, everyone but Sherlock) was looking back fondly to their last trip, when the detective was sedated and snoring in the rear.

“I don’t see why this is so difficult to comprehend,” Sherlock said for the fourth (fifth?) time. “If we simply cut through the edges of the Zone, we could shave nearly an hour off the trip.”

They had reached the point of taking turns responding. This one fell to Mycroft.

“It is immaterial until we reach northern Serbia, three hours from now, since we need only worry about the Belgrade Zone. And you are presuming that we can maneuver around all of the checkpoints, going cross-country. As Anthea has explained,” (“several times,” Anthea muttered, not quite under her breath), “that is not practical in this case because the terrain is too difficult. While it could conceivably save us time, it could just as easily result in our losing this…adequate vehicle. None of us want to start walking again, now do we?”

Sherlock, by this time seated in the rear seat beside a long-suffering John, hunched back into his corner resentfully, but subsided.

They stopped for an early dinner/late lunch in Nish, which proved to be an interesting smaller city, with a combination of starkly modern, Soviet-style buildings interspersed with an ancient stone wall and a very pretty river. They ate at a local restaurant along the waterway that was more than happy to take their Euros. Sherlock amused himself by browsing through tourist information on Anthea’s phone.

“Oh,” he said at one point, sounding genuinely intrigued. “There’s a tower made from skulls of decapitated prisoners of the Ottomans. I’d actually like to see that.”

“Next time we’re in town,” Mycroft said snarkily.

By half-four, they were back on the road, all of them somewhat relaxed from the meal and the relative peace of the setting. John drove the last leg, skirting around the edges of the Belgrade Zone (by mutual consent, no one opted for Sherlock to take a driving shift. Not after the thing with the ambassador’s Bentley).

“So, what’s the plan?” John asked, throwing the conversation open to the group. “I mean, I know our end game is ‘steal the plane’. But a little more detail on that would be helpful, you know?”

Mycroft started to reply, but Sherlock beat him to it. “We basically have two options: force—i.e., we go to the plane, overpower any guards, and take off; or stealth—we go to the plane under an
acceptable pretext, convince the pilot and attendant of our bona fides, and maintain the pretense as long as possible. My personal preference would be for option B, given that it might enable us to stay under Moran’s radar a bit longer. But the direct approach would relieve us of the requirement to ‘play-act’ for what could be an extended period of time.”

Anthea chimed in at that point. “I think you may be overstating things, actually. It’s highly unlikely the pilot would stay with the plane; the attendant and a guard or two, maybe, but more likely just the guards. Think about it—they’re at an isolated private airstrip with relatively few amenities, and they will be there for days on end. Would you stay with the plane, or would you give your superiors your contact information and find a comfortable billet somewhere nearby?”

Sherlock made a thoughtful noise. “That does put a different slant on it, I suppose. It might be possible to convince the guards that we are there for a legitimate purpose, and that we don’t require the services of the pilot.”

John had been listening to all of this, but running things through his head at the same time. At the first pause in the conversation, then, he jumped in. “Um. I think I have an idea that might work, actually.” He looked around at his audience. “But you’re not going to like it.”

Chapter End Notes

I found the medical side of this difficult to write, though it was necessary. This reached a little too far into my own medical history, I think. I've had this kind of pain twice in my life, and it's hard to think about how all-consuming it is, and re-live it in a small way. I tried not to make it too graphic, while still making it realistic. Sorry if it skeeves anybody out.

The information about Phenergan is accurate; I had a physician assistant give it to me one time when she couldn't get in touch with my doc to give me additional pain meds when I was really hurting.

And the tower of skulls? Pure serendipity, because it's TRUE. I had looked at the map and settled on Nish as their stopping place, looked up things they might be likely to see, and whelp, there it was.
Crisis: Part Eight

Chapter Summary

Anthea gets her Bad Girl on. And Sherlock discovers that there is, indeed, such a thing as too much caffeine.

*I think I have an idea that might work, actually. But you’re not going to like it.*

Despite the circumstances. John felt an impulse to laugh as he saw both Holmeses’ heads swivel around as one. Mycroft beat his brother to the punch, this time.

“Pardon?” he asked, in a mildly confused tone; not really his most impressive hour, John thought.

Sherlock snickered; he apparently agreed. He looked indulgently over at John. “I’m sure John is anxious to tell us all about it.”

“You’ll be patting me on the head next,” John muttered. Anthea snorted behind him. He decided to ignore both the surprise and the condescension. Hardly unusual, either one of them.

“So, OK, it’s not exactly Byzantine in its complexity. But, in my own military experience, a complex plan makes it all the more likely that something, or someone, will fuck it up,” John began. He could see Sherlock frowning out of the corner of his eye; Sherlock liked complexity.

“It comes down to expectations, really.” He pointed at Mycroft. “Moran and his people know what you look like.” He pointed next at the detective, who was still frowning. “They certainly know what you look like.” He turned that pointing finger at himself. “And they presumably know what I look like.” Then he turned to Anthea. “But I’ll lay you money they have no idea what she looks like; in fact, except for Moran and maybe his right-hand flunky, I’d be willing to bet they don’t even know she exists.”

Anthea caught on immediately, and beamed, while the brothers looked on with furrowed brows. “Oh,” she sighed, “John has the best ideas. Now all we need are some handcuffs.”

They made a brief stop at an army surplus shop on the outskirts on Nish, and headed out. They arrived at the private airfield north of Belgrade just after 6PM local time. It was quite cold, with light snow just beginning to drift over the runways and roads surrounding the field. They were able, thanks to Mycroft Holmes’ eidetic memory, to reproduce the required access codes for entry to the airfield and the hangar for the plane, and Anthea slowly pulled the battered SUV to a stop next to the partially-open side door before climbing briskly out and shouting a curt request in Serbian for help.
from whoever was inside.

When there was no immediate response, she huffed and kicked the door the rest of the way open. “Hello?” she barked, in English this time. “I’m here on Mr. Moran’s business, so I suggest you get your lazy, muscle-bound arses in gear.”

The rest of the group had climbed out of the car, and stood silently behind her. Sherlock had his parka draped over his handcuffed wrists, as if trying to hide the restraints. It wasn’t terribly successful. But then, it wasn’t supposed to be.

There were indeterminate noises heard from inside the hangar—something metallic being moved, followed by footsteps. Then two men appeared in the doorway—one a tall, bald man in his 40s, currently looking annoyed but not alarmed, the other much younger, perhaps 25, with a shock of white-blond hair and several lamentable tattoos on his skinny arms and neck. The younger man held a large pistol down by his side, but didn’t seem inclined to point it at them.

“Who the fuck are you?” the older man snapped, in a deep smoker’s rasp. His English carried the accent of working-class London. The younger man was silent, sidling up to stand close behind his partner.

“Anna Moran,” Anthea said, emphasizing the last name with a smirk. “And yes, the name means exactly what you think it means. Uncle Sebastian asked me to help out on relocating this lot; G went and got himself killed, didn’t you hear?”

“Jesus. No, we hadn’t heard,” the younger man blurted. “What the hell happened?”

“Shot by a looter. Not really anyone’s fault. And before you ask, yes, the looter is dead,” Anthea said. It was, ironically, at least partially true.

“So, who are they, anyway?” the older man chimed in. “And why are they here?”

Anthea turned back to her little entourage. “You’ll have heard of them. The pretty one is Sherlock Holmes; the prissy one is Mycroft Holmes; and the short one is John Watson. Let’s just say they’re working as…sub-contractors on a special project for Uncle Sebastian.” She ignored both Sherlock’s death glare and John’s “Oi” of mild offense. Mycroft just sighed.

The older man looked them over, and snickered. “Why’s Pretty One handcuffed, then?” Sherlock expanded his glare to include him.

“Tried to do a runner,” Anthea replied airily. “Twice. I’ve learned to keep him this way whenever we’re outside of a controlled setting.” She patted the right pocket of her parka. “Just because I have a gun, doesn’t mean I want to have to wave it around constantly. The handcuffs are a lot easier.”

Stepping a little closer to the door now, she looked expectantly at the two guards. “So, is it fired up and ready to go?”

“What?” the younger man said, while the bald man blinked beside him.

“The plane,” Anthea drawled, with theatrical patience. “Is the plane ready to go? We’re supposed to be in Kosovo in three hours.”

“Well, it’s…I suppose so but…we can…” the older man stammered, before trailing off. “Um…the pilot went off two days ago. Be back sometime tomorrow, he said. And we don’t have an attendant—we hire them per flight when they’re needed, and we didn’t…” He had the air of a man who was only now realizing he may have made a career-limiting mistake.
Anthea’s brow pleated in a frown. “Well, that’s inconvenient.” She glared at the two guards for a moment before sighing. “Oh, well. I suppose I can fly it myself. I always end up doing things myself.” She gave a quick, sly side-eye at Mycroft as she said it; John had to turn away momentarily to hide his grin.

The younger man, apparently, wasn’t quite as stupid as he looked. “Should we, maybe, I dunno, call Mr. Moran and see…” he said, looking anxiously at his fellow guard.

Anthea sniffed. “Well, you could, I suppose. But I don’t think I would, right now. Did you see the news reports about the big explosions outside Sofia? That was our last project—didn’t end well. And Uncle Seb…well, you know how he is when he’s disappointed.”

The young man blanched. Evidently, he did know.

After a moment’s silent contemplation of an enraged Sebastian Moran, the two guards (who John had begun to mentally refer to as “Baldie” and “Inked”) looked at each other, shrugged, and moved away to let Anthea and her “prisoners” into the hangar.

The plane stood in the center of the chilly space, door standing open and steps lowered. Anthea looked back at John and Mycroft. “You can bring the bags,” she told them, before prodding Sherlock towards the steps. The detective gave her a baleful look before stalking up and into the plane.

As John and Mycroft came in with their respective bags, Anthea turned back to Baldie and Inked. “Is it fueled up? And the flight plan filed? Or do I need to do that as well?” Her tone was both impatient and imperious.

“No, no,” Baldie said hurriedly. “All topped up, and ready to go. But the flight plan…no one told us anyone was coming. But this field doesn’t really get arsed about it—we can just send it in now, no problem. Flying to Prishtina, yeah?”

“Unfortunately,” Anthea sighed. She looked earnestly at Baldie, with Inked hovering nervously behind him. “I’m going to need to do my walk-around and pre-checks before we leave. Can one of you act as a guard while I finish that up, while the other one files the flight plan? These two probably won’t be a problem, but you need to make sure Sherlock doesn’t touch anything in the cockpit. He’s mental enough to try sabotage, you know?”

She turned next to Mycroft, standing patiently beside her. “You can do the checks with me. Go get me a headset and then sit in the pilot’s seat so we can run down the list together.” Mycroft gave an austere nod and headed into the plane, while John picked up his rucksack and followed Baldie inside. Inked trotted off across the hangar, presumably to file the flight plan.

Twenty minutes later they were taxiing down the runway, Anthea in the pilot’s seat and Mycroft next to her. In the main cabin, Sherlock had already been dosed with antihistamine, and was now drowsy and irritable. He held out his handcuffed wrists imperiously to John, who pulled out the key to unlock the restraints.

“You wear the cuffs next time,” Sherlock said with a huff, then dropped back into his seat, put on his seat belt, and pulled a blanket over his shoulders as his eyelids drooped.
“Fair enough,” John said, tucking both cuffs and key back in his parka’s large pocket. As soon as takeoff was complete, he glanced over to make sure his friend was truly settled, then ambled up to the front of the plane.

Anthea looked very professional—headphones and microphone in place, hands moving over the various controls like a piano keyboard. She glanced over at John with a smile as he entered, but remained focused on the plane. Mycroft, on the other hand, was rather more at ease, watching Anthea, but not in the sense of “keeping an eye on her”—this was more of an appreciative audience.

“She’s very good,” the Great Man said, without turning.

Anthea smiled again. “Give me 10 minutes to get to altitude and into calm airspace and we can relax,” she said. “I want to get us out of range of the Belgrade traffic first.”

John and Mycroft made desultory conversation while Anthea dealt with Air Traffic Control and completed their climb to altitude. Then she switched on the auto-pilot and pulled off her headphones, raising her eyebrows expectantly.

“Damn, that was easier than I thought it would be,” John began. “I was really expecting a little more resistance, you know?”

“I wasn’t,” Mycroft said. “The downfall of despotic organizations: everyone is afraid of the people above them, to the point where any small failing is magnified in the eyes of the subordinate, and failure is viewed as potentially life-threatening.”

“Definitely true in the case of either Moran or Moriarty, I would think,” John replied, nodding. “So, how long do you think we can get away with keeping the plane? And, more to the point, how long do you think we’ll need it?”

They had discussed their basic strategy on the long car ride, while Sherlock was still awake and able to participate. They hadn’t really talked, though, about the mechanics that much: how to get from “here” to “there”, and, for that matter, where “there” was likely to be.

“Unclear at this juncture,” Mycroft said. “It is dependent on what we find in the Kosovo headquarters. As we discussed earlier, I am unsure whether Moran will actually be in residence there; though it’s possible, I suspect he spends more of his time in the active locations. He is very much a “hands on” leader—sitting in planning meetings or reading reports is hardly his style.”

Anthea looked back at the controls. “Our trip is only going to take about an hour, including takeoff and landing. So we should be out of the airport and on our way to secure transportation by, say, 9PM. We should probably stop for something to eat at that point.” She looked at Mycroft. “I presume the idea is still to make a midnight visit?”

Mycroft hummed. “Even if a skeleton staff is left in place, I anticipate no difficulty in finding our own way in. Though the electronic manipulations in our offices were impressive, I presume those were only possible through the local efforts of their mole rather than a remote assault by a truly talented expert able to get through our security protocols. A simple local parasite drive attached to the peripherals in the secure rooms, presuming it was masked well enough, would have done the job. It is unlikely that the security systems on their end are especially impressive—they don’t expect any kind of interference, since they are unaware that anyone knows of the existence of this headquarters.”

“And Sherlock is very good with security systems,” Anthea chimed in. “And with picking locks.”
John rolled his eyes. “Yeah, so I’ve heard.” They all knew John hadn’t just “heard” of Sherlock’s talent.

When Anthea turned back to her console and put her headphones and microphone back on, John presumed that was his cue to return to his seat for landing. Before he did, though, he went to the miniscule galley and prepared a cup of espresso (while wondering idly how many other planes had espresso makers in the galley), with large quantities of sugar, and poured it into a lidded cup that he wedged in his cup holder before snapping on his seatbelt.

As they came in for a smooth landing and began taxiing, John unhooked his belt and reached over to shake Sherlock gently. The detective’s eyes opened, reluctantly and slowly, before he looked around the cabin in a confused and mildly alarmed fashion. He relaxed, marginally, when that wandering gaze encountered John’s face.

“What time is it?” he asked blurrily.

“Just gone 9,” John said. He reached over for the cup of espresso and handed it to his friend. “Here, drink this. Should help you shake off the antihistamines.” Sherlock dutifully took the cup and gave a cautious sip before making an appreciative noise.

“I need to buy one of these machines,” he announced. “Or give one to Mrs. Hudson.” Which, since they both knew Mrs. Hudson produced 75% of the coffee Sherlock drank, made a weird sort of sense.

By the time they had come to a stop next to a smallish private hangar, though, Sherlock was fully alert and approaching mania. After holding out his hands and watching them tremble, he sighed. “Perhaps the espresso maker isn’t such a good idea after all.”

“Yeah,” John said, “but at least we’re sure you’re awake now.”

“And will be for the next 72 straight hours, very likely,” Sherlock replied.

Unlike the field outside of Belgrade, this hangar was empty—no staff, no lights. Apparently, it was only occupied when the plane was actually stored here. That assuredly made things easier, though it was a bit awkward when they realized that they would have to go inside and open the doors manually before they could stow the plane. Anthea let the engine idle while John opened the door and dropped the stairs, and then he and Sherlock headed for the glass side door.

It did have a lock, of sorts—Sherlock made quick work of it, using a tiny olive fork he’d pirated from the plane galley and a piece of wire they’d found in a drawer. Once inside, it was the work of moments to find the controls for the accordion doors, which clanked slowly up and left the entire
front side of the tall building open to the elements. A blast of cold air howled through the building as Anthea slowly edged the plane inside, before shutting it down.

It was a short walk, but a cold one, to the main terminal. The airport was small; clean, mostly, and recently remodeled, but painfully utilitarian in a post-Soviet kind of way. As they walked, Mycroft laid out their approach, and handed out passports.

“We are German,” he began. “The main language here is Albanian, and none of us are competent enough in it to pretend to be natives. English is out for obvious reasons, and too few locals speak French, but German has a reasonably high chance of finding someone with at least basic capabilities in the airport because of the area’s longstanding ties to Germany and Switzerland.”

Mycroft turned to John. “Do you speak German?” he asked. He looked at John with polite inquiry, though John was sure it was no more than politeness—he would be stunned if Mycroft didn’t know every subject he’d ever studied, and his grades in each, going back to primary school.

John shook his head. “Not enough to count,” he said. “And I’ve been told by someone,” he cut his eyes meaningfully at Sherlock, “that my accent is ‘reminiscent of a toddler with a speech impediment’.” Sherlock looked momentarily abashed; it was a sham, of course, but John appreciated the effort.

“Very well, then,” Mycroft continued, “I think you will have to be our bodyguard. A man of few words, and they can be in whatever language you choose, though you will have a German passport.” He pointed with his chin at the rucksack on John’s shoulder. “You may wish to pull out one of the pistols and place it in your pocket. We don’t want it to be obvious to the general populace, but it should be apparent to any trained observer.”

By the time they strode up to the car rental counter, in a far corner of the terminal, they were all “in character”. Mycroft walked like an emperor, with Anthea tucked close against his side, his arm around her shoulders in a territorial display. Sherlock, hair tousled and parka artfully disordered, trailed sullenly behind, exuding an air of effete disdain. John had dropped into a military stride, hand hovering near but not on his pocket, eyes scanning everywhere at once. When Mycroft stepped up to ask about the cars available, John smartly turned his back to his “patrons”, resuming his scan of the room and people behind them.

A stiff conversation in German ensued, in the course of which Mycroft pulled out the roll of remaining Euros and counted off bills, and was in return rewarded with a set of keys and what were presumably directions to secure their vehicle.

The vehicle in question proved to be a large Mercedes sedan—elderly, but clean and spacious. John tossed the bags in the boot and climbed in the back with Sherlock; Mycroft drove, with Anthea using the phone to navigate. “It’s a 30-minute trip to the restaurant,” she said. “And about 10 minutes from there to Moran’s site. There’s a park nearby that we can camp out in, to wait for midnight.”

The trip wasn’t especially interesting—it was very dark, very cold, with snow blowing across the road and drifting across the terrain. John had an impression of dim lights and concrete buildings, but very little else. “Much has been rebuilt in the past fifteen years,” Mycroft said, reading John’s mind as usual. “Though there are exceptions, in general, beauty wasn’t necessarily considered in the process.”

The roads themselves were terrible—eroded and rough throughout, with the occasional large pothole that Mycroft had to negotiate around. John had read somewhere that Kosovo was in the running for the poorest country in Europe—this was certainly lending credence to that view.
Sherlock didn’t handle confinement in the car well; John made a mental note to never offer the man espresso again. Every nervous tic was on display—toes tapping, knees bobbing up and down, fingers twitching and rubbing against each other. He periodically burst out with monologues about random facts—a brief history of the Serbian war period, the Albanian diaspora, and the most-common public meeting places (coffee shops, ironically enough). But his attention wouldn’t hold for long enough to finish any of these dissertations, and he moved on to the next in rapid-fire speech.

Finally, they reached their first destination, a small restaurant on the edge of a residential district. They had an unassuming meal—tasty, certainly, but nothing special. The other three had a reasonably convivial conversation which John couldn’t join, since it was in German. John was pleased to see that Sherlock ordered, and ate, a bowl of what looked to be tomato soup, along with two pieces of warm bread and a glass of cider. For his own part, John ate whatever Mycroft ordered for him; the only thing he could say with certainty was that it contained chicken. But it was filling and warm, and he was no longer hungry when they finished.

By the time they finished eating, it was approaching 11PM, and they were among the last patrons remaining. Mycroft paid the check—cash again, of course—and they wandered back out to the Mercedes, where Anthea climbed into the driver’s seat this time. She had been correct, earlier—the park was only a few minutes away, and they sat in reasonable peace for 45 minutes before heading to the nondescript building in an industrial area that Mycroft had identified as Moran’s headquarters.

As soon as they arrived, they drove completely around the building, looking for cameras or obvious surveillance of any kind. None appeared; while there were indeed indications of a security system around the windows and a keypad by the door, that was the extent of the protection—no guards, and no CCTV.

They parked the car behind the building, and Sherlock barreled out of the car in a blast of released anxiety and the remnants of his caffeine high. He walked carefully around the perimeter an additional time, looking at each window closely and both front and rear doors, while the rest of them waiting patiently by the car.

He abruptly turned on his heels and trotted back to the car, still vibrating with energy. “We can’t get in this way,” he said.

John’s heart sank, and he heard Anthea make a sound of dismay before he took a closer look at his friend.

“But?” Mycroft said behind him, with an air of exaggerated patience.

Sherlock’s face split quickly into a slightly mad grin. “There’s a ladder,” he said happily.
Crisis: Part Nine

Chapter Summary

The gang hits Moran's headquarters, and finds some very interesting information, and a spanking new ride. But their expedition ends with a very unpleasant surprise.

Chapter Notes

A couple of days late, I'm afraid--I'm in the process of getting my house ready to sell, and there just aren't enough hours in the day (nor is there enough of me to go around). I'm hoping things will get a little easier soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“People never think about roofs,” Sherlock said cheerfully, as he and John scaled the ladder. Anthea and Mycroft waited outside, not because they didn't wish to climb (at least so Anthea said huffily, when Sherlock sneered), but because someone needed to keep a watch. “For some reason, it never occurs to them that the presence of a ladder basically announces that there is a way into the building from there. I can’t tell you the number of ‘high-security’ buildings I’ve entered with ease because the doors on the roof aren’t protected. They sometimes have a fire alarm linkage, but that’s the work of moments to bypass.”

“And how many of those were your brother's locations?” John asked.

Sherlock chortled. “How well you know me, John.” He looked back over his shoulder. “But it’s sometimes purely legitimate. He has employed me on multiple occasions to prove to a new set of idiots that no system is fool-proof. Particularly when it’s designed and implemented by fools.”

As predicted, the entry into the door on the roof was the work of four minutes—it would have been less if Sherlock still had his usual set of lock-picks. An olive fork and a length of wire just wasn’t quite the same.

The interior of the building proved to be just as unimpressive as the outside: dingy grey walls, ugly brown carpet, uncomfortable metal furniture. They spent little time exploring initially, since their first priority was disarming the building security systems to let Mycroft and Anthea in.

Once their group was back together, Mycroft took the lead, given that his was the information that had led them here. “It’s clear this is an operational center, though I have no knowledge of how much time he physically spends here. Somewhere in this building, though, are the core servers for his computer systems, and, potentially, a trail to his current location.”

“You don’t think he’s in Kosovo now, then?” John asked.

“No,” Mycroft said absently, while they waited for the lift. “I was never certain, given Pristina’s down-scale atmosphere. And having seen this building, I think his presence is even less likely. Moran is a man who believes he is entitled to the finer things in life.” He raised an ironic eyebrow at
the ugly carpet and bland walls. “I hardly think this qualifies—do you?”

“That’s rather ironic, given that he volunteered for service in both Afghanistan and Iraq,” Sherlock said. “Hardly ‘the finer things’, was it?”

John snorted. “Nope. Not the phrase I’d use.” He thought about that for a second. “You know, that is odd, when you think about it. Why would someone with that kind of mindset train as a sniper? I mean, yeah, not everyone who enters the service does it for ‘Queen and Country’; a lot of young kids put in one tour and they’re out, with some training and job experience. But sniper? That’s pretty damn intentional—after basic training, most of those who train as a sniper plan on putting in their twenty before getting out. They do it because they really want to be a soldier, and they’re good at it. And most soldiers don’t die rich.”

“For Moran, I would suspect it was more a case of someone who liked killing coming up with a completely legal route to continue to do so,” Sherlock said. “I have little information about Moran’s history prior to his entrance into the military at 18, but I would strongly suspect he exhibited the classic pattern of a psychopath in the making.” He thought for a moment before continuing. “But the impetus towards ‘high living’ almost certainly came from his meeting with Moriarty in 2007. That meeting took place in November, though we have no detail on what transpired. By January of 2008, Moran had had his career-ending injury, and was discharged shortly thereafter, at which point he presumably entered Moriarty’s employ. We know that the two were then inseparable within 3 months, and that most of those 3 months were spent in a debauched tour of European and Asian venues, all of the highest caliber.”

“Moriarty showed him those ‘finer things’, and he liked what he saw,” Anthea said. “And was not terribly concerned about what he needed to do to keep them. It was a good investment on Moriarty’s part as well. Moran was ranked as one of the top snipers in the world—that’s a skill set Jim found very useful.”

“I would call it a match made in Heaven, but for the obvious irony,” Mycroft said, with a wry smile. Anthea groaned, and Sherlock rolled his eyes. It was easy to forget that Mycroft and Sherlock did have similar senses of humour—the elder brother just rarely gave his free rein.

They found the servers, and a host of terminals linked to them, on the third floor, in a free-standing glass enclosure in the middle of an otherwise open floor—one or two small offices along the outer wall, but otherwise a large expanse of grey concrete, steel beams and bare light fixtures. It was glacially cold, both in the open space and in the enclosure itself—air conditioned, ironically, despite the arctic feel of the surrounding area.

“I think I’ll take first shot,” Sherlock announced, dropping into one of the hideous “ergonomic” chairs with a thump. “You know I’m better at passwords than you are.” He gave Mycroft a deceptively sunny smile.

“Just so,” Mycroft drawled. “But would it, perhaps, be a bit more efficient if we simply used the one Anthea captured in her earlier divinations?” He gave Sherlock the most innocently-inquiring look conceivable.

Sherlock gave a scowl ugly enough to frighten seasoned criminals, before smoothing his features into
patrician indifference. “You always have to spoil things,” he sniffed. He stood and gestured Anthea theatrically into his place, then stood moodily to one side while she sat and tapped away.

Sherlock picked up on it before Anthea said anything. “What? Your magic password not quite up to snuff?”

“Hush,” Anthea said. “I’m in. But I’m not in, exactly.”

“Well, that’s specific,” the detective sneered.


Sherlock—Sherlock—abruptly looked what, in anyone else, John would have termed “sheepish”.

“Sorry,” he muttered, while John looked on in amazement. Anthea glared momentarily, then huffed and turned back to her keyboard.

After five minutes of charged silence, she huffed again, this time in resignation. “I suppose you’re back on, now,” she said, standing and waving Sherlock to the chair. “There are two levels of security. My password got me through the first—it’s into files and applications used by lower-echelon staff and outside entities—but I can’t get into anything secure, and certainly not into any of the really good stuff.”

Sherlock had by now recovered from his momentary funk. He dropped back into the chair with a superior smirk, before diving into a furious spate of typing and making annoyed noises. After a silent few minutes, he resurfaced long enough to look briefly at his audience. “Go away, all of you” he said. “This will take a while, and you’re distracting.” Then he turned back to his keyboard.

John turned to Mycroft. “Well. That’s us told, then.”

They set off to explore the rest of the building. The best discovery was a fleet of at least 20 cars and SUVs in the basement—all black, of course (“what every criminal has to drive. It’s in the handbook and everything,” John smirked), with keys lodged in a metal lockbox in a small office set in the corner of the garage. In short order, Mycroft picked the lockbox, Anthea found the controls to open the garage doors to the street, and John trotted out to bring the elderly Mercedes inside. He drove it around to the farthest corner and parked it behind a host of other vehicles, where it would not be immediately obvious. Then he grabbed the keys to the SUVs and experimented until he found the one matching the vehicle furthest from the doorways, drove it out to park in front of the doors, and returned the rest of the keys.

“Chances are, they may not even notice it’s gone for several days,” he said. “If we put the Mercedes keys in there, they’ll have the same number as they expect to see.” He looked seriously at Mycroft. “You’re going to lose your deposit, though.”

Mycroft cracked an unexpected laugh. “I suspect I can bear up under the strain,” he said.

They continued their search through the building, encountering six floors of nothing: utilitarian office spaces, conference rooms, cafeteria; a suite of offices on the top floor that apparently housed high-ranking staff when they were in residence (not recently—a layer of dust covered everything in the rooms), an entire floor devoted to storage. Boxes, large and small, were stacked in random rows
“Some of this may ultimately prove of use, if it includes records of Moriarty’s, or Moran’s, worldwide operations,” Mycroft said thoughtfully. “I think I will send a team back here once we have wrapped up our own expedition.”

By the time they wandered back to the computer floor, Sherlock had been working for over an hour. John was pleased to see, when they entered the glass enclosure, that Sherlock had surfaced from his work and was sitting, relaxed, in his chair as they approached.

“I’ve been waiting ages for you,” he complained. Of course, “ages” could mean anywhere from half an hour to five minutes—for Sherlock, it was a very flexible term.

“No, you haven’t,” Anthea said. “If it was more than ten minutes, you would have come looking for us, to whinge in person.” She looked over his shoulder at the terminal, which now displayed multiple open windows, some of which appeared to be CCTV views. “What are those feeds from?”

Sherlock turned back to the computer terminal. “That one displays a view inside your conference room, Brother Dear,” he said, pointed at one of the windows. “And another is linked into the London system, and displays the street in front of your house.”

“Hardly surprising,” Mycroft sniffed. “We already knew Moran had access to those areas. The question is more how he secured it.”

“An inside job, obviously,” Sherlock said. “Someone with credentials which allow them access to secure areas without question. Could be a computer expert, but unlikely—while that kind of person could certainly accomplish the CCTV links, they wouldn’t be able to directly access the conference room—unless you’ve started having those tiresome ‘bonding’ sessions with the lower echelons.”

“Not at present,” Mycroft said, with a not-smile. “But enough of this—certainly pursuing this spy will be high on the agenda when we return, but this tells us nothing we didn’t already know. What else have you found?”

Sherlock accepted the change of subject philosophically enough. “I found evidence of the original setup of the viral research. It would take weeks to wade through all of it, so I just skimmed the high points. Most of the work was done in northern Africa—Morocco, to be precise. I suspect we will also find shipment records of virus stock from there to Europe—I have loaded portions of the data to a memory stick for later review. But, given that Moran told us that he has no sure knowledge of where the caches were ultimately established, and it seems reasonable to assume he was telling the truth in that instance, I didn’t want to spend a great deal of time searching for locations at this juncture.”

He reached out and closed several of the windows, including all of those with camera views, leaving only two open. “I did find two critical pieces of information, however. The only question we will have is deciding which to act on first, and how.”

He reached over and clicked the mouse, and a database listing of many, many files popped up. “This is reference material relating to the initial research, and the testing process. It is, I believe I should say, horrifying reading.” Sherlock’s expression didn’t change, exactly, but John noticed a momentary flicker in his friend’s eyes—Sherlock meant it, and had been truly disturbed by what he read.

Sherlock had paused momentarily, but now continued. “In addition to the research data, locations of the actual laboratories are included, as is the name of the primary scientist in charge. We know where this man was, as of three days ago—it is reasonable to assume that he, and his primary laboratory, are
still there.” He looked around at his audience. “I would presume it is safe to assume that he is now one of our primary targets.” Nods all around—no arguments there.

He reached for the mouse again, and this time the screen reflected a view of a posh, a very posh, flat, with what appeared to be a view of a very wide river running through far below, with buildings and parks lining each bank. “This, I believe, is Moran’s current location. The flat is one of three maintained through one of Moriarty’s old shell companies—the business name hasn’t changed despite the change in ‘management’, shall we say.” He clicked again, and the screen zoomed in closer on the view out the windows of the flat. The river was now much closer, and the buildings were no longer just impressions in the far distance. “He’s in Vienna.” He flipped back to the screen containing the information about the chief scientist. “And, conveniently, so is our scientist.”

“Well,” Mycroft said. “That makes things easier, certainly. I suppose at this point our best option is to head back to the airport, then. The plane still has ample fuel, thankfully—I’d rather leave before daylight if we can, and attract as little notice as possible. We’re going to have to insert a false transponder identity into its systems before we take off, though—Vienna is almost certainly more stringent on checking such things than Prishtina, and we don’t want to find ourselves in a holding cell, accused of stealing a plane.”

“Even though we did,” John added.

“I can handle that bit,” Anthea said. “I can use the ID from one of our diplomatic planes—I had to include it in a report last week, after the pilot was involved in a minor incident in Paris.” She saw Sherlock’s raised eyebrows and responded before he could ask. “Typical diplomatic snit. Based on the commands of his passenger, an envoy from Vietnam, he refused to yield his takeoff slot to the Chinese ambassador’s plane when requested to do so. They essentially had a standoff in the middle of the runway that lasted almost two hours, before an Australian plane taxied around both of them and took off.”

“And I thought football players were childish,” John said.

“You have no idea,” Mycroft replied. “Why do you think the Diogenes has the rule against speaking? I need one place in which I do not have to listen to posturing and drama.” He gave his brother a significant look; said brother silently lifted his left hand, two fingers eloquently lifted.

In short order, they shifted their supplies from the elderly Mercedes into the sleek black SUV and headed back to the airport. Their expedition had taken time; it was now almost 3 am. Their earlier energy from the adrenaline of breaking-and-entering had long since burned away, and they now sat largely in silence, staring out at spotty snow and bland concrete buildings illuminated by harsh orangey lights. Mycroft drove; Sherlock sat in front this time, and the two carried on an impenetrable conversation about a composer John had never heard of. He raised his eyebrows at Anthea; she shook her head. “Not a clue,” she mouthed silently.

Mycroft would also act as pilot this time, since Anthea had admitted fatigue. John, for one, was looking forward to being back on the comfortable plane; a catnap sounded very enticing. He sat, drowsy and reasonably content, for the rest of the short drive once Sherlock and his brother had lapsed into silence.
They passed through the airport entrance with no trouble, turning off the normal passenger routes to head towards the private terminals on the back side of the airport. John had just turned in his seat to reach over the back for his rucksack, when the car gave an abrupt, harsh turn and sped back rapidly the way they had come, while Anthea and John clung to the grab bars above the windows.

“What the hell…” John began, before yet another turn gave him a clear view back to the hangar they had headed towards, and the comfortable plane John had been waiting for. A plane that was now spotlit by harsh white lights, and surrounded by a fleet of large black SUVs just like the one they were currently driving.

Chapter End Notes

That bit about the standoff on the runway? A variation of a true event that happened several months ago, at (I think) Dulles or Washington National in DC. Ambassadors are diplomats, but not, evidently, all the time...

And yes, you will eventually find out what Anthea means by "Brussels". But not today.
Crisis: Part Ten

Chapter Summary

Once again, the gang has to change their plans on the fly. They make a dangerous escape, find yet another new ride, and visit an old hangout. And John discovers that things are not going quite as well as he hoped, from a medical standpoint.

Chapter Notes

So sorry for the delay, folks--it's been a very tough ten days. I was no sooner finished with readying my house for sale when I had to bundle up my younger son and drive 1500 miles (round-trip) to take him to start university in Texas. His final "gift" to me was a thumping cold, so I'm feeling pretty whiny about the whole thing, but I did manage to finish the chapter (yay, me!)

The big vehicle barreled along the access roads along the back side of the airport, not even slowing for the nonplussed guard standing at the main gate. Mycroft, clearly well-trained in high-speed driving, tooled the SUV around curves with hardly a drop in speed.

"Aside from the obvious, what's wrong?" John asked, while clinging firmly to the grab bar above his window.

"We were seen," Sherlock answered tersely. "Seen by someone who recognized Mycroft, and who will, in all likelihood, organize a full pursuit in very short order." He looked over his shoulder at John. "You recognize that the plane is now lost to us. That means we must rethink our strategy completely, and quickly."

"Who was it?" John asked. In the end, it didn’t really matter—anyone who knew Mycroft Holmes was alive was a critical problem. But he wanted to know.

"Danilo Friedrichs," Mycroft said, while continuing to increase the car's speed as they reached a brief straightaway. "Half Russian, half East German. Former clandestine member of the Stasi, by all accounts, but also employed for some years in the Russian diplomatic corps as an interpreter and bodyguard. I have encountered him on several occasions, and I know he saw, and recognized, me."

"And now, presumably, he has a new employer," Anthea added.

"Or maybe he had dual loyalties all along," Sherlock replied. "It’s quite likely, given Moriarty’s concentration of efforts in eastern Europe." None of them mentioned that Sherlock had had unfortunate experience with that “concentration” on a first-hand basis.

They reached more heavily-populated areas, and Mycroft was forced to slow dramatically to avoid the local traffic even at this very early hour—a few older cars and the occasional farm vehicle, trudging along at 20 kph. He launched into an expert series of passing maneuvers, including one or two that had Sherlock hissing in agitation beside him and grabbing his own over-window bar.
They had made regular progress, for all that they really didn’t have a firm destination in mind. That
decision was the next order of business, and John had just opened his mouth to start that conversation
when Mycroft looked in the rearview mirror and hissed in his turn.

“We’ve acquired a tail,” the older man snapped, before making a violent right turn at high speed,
hurting down the semi-residential street before launching into another dizzying series of snap turns.

“They very likely have trackers on all of their vehicles; it evidently occurred to someone to activate
them, and to engage assets outside of the airport in the pursuit,” Sherlock said, turning to look behind
them for their tail. He turned back to his brother, currently swearing under his breath while avoiding
yet another slow, elderly car in front of them. “We have to switch cars, quickly.”

Mycroft threw a not-smile at his brother. “So I would presume. We must manage this very carefully,
though—we will have only one opportunity to do this unobserved, as I expect we have now
acquired an additional pursuer.” He tossed his head back, indicating the small dot in the rear distance
that was gradually gaining on them.

Anthea looked up from the phone clutched in her hand. “There is a parking garage on the main road
in the city—perhaps 4 kilometers away, now. It’s 8 levels. Do you want me to navigate to it?”
Mycroft gave a terse nod.

Five hair-raising minutes later, punctuated by multiple hairpin turns and near fatal collisions, they
zoomed quickly into the concrete parking structure, barreling rapidly up the ramp after pausing
momentarily to take a ticket.

“I estimate we have, at most, six minutes before our pursuer reaches the garage and locates this
vehicle,” Mycroft said. “In that time, we need to park, grab what supplies we can easily carry,
transfer to another vehicle and be outside of this structure.” He continued to travel up the ramp, as
John and Anthea reached into the bags and rucksack stored behind them and began pulling out items
to shove into their parka pockets.

Soon enough, Mycroft slammed the car to a halt on the uppermost level, popped open his door, and
shouted, “Come on!” as he ran towards the stairway in the far corner. The others followed, running
full-out and hurtling down the stairs. They tore down two flights before blasting back out onto the
parking floor. “Sherlock—find a candidate,” Mycroft snapped.

The detective looked rapidly over the offerings before pointing towards an elderly Volkswagen van
tucked away in the corner. “That one,” he said. “Slow, but reliable, and easy to hot-wire.”

They all broke into a run, but Anthea, momentarily in the lead, suddenly tripped over an extended
concrete pad and fell, hard. Mycroft, with barely a pause, bent, jerked up her arm, tossed her over his
shoulder, and continued his run towards the van, while John blinked in surprise. He looked quickly
over at Sherlock, only to see his friend give a slightly-hysterical grin. “Stronger than he looks, John!”
he panted as he ran.

When they reached the van, Sherlock, without pausing, snaked out a long arm and yanked off one of
the windscreen wiper arms, then used the raw metal end to force one of the small side half-windows
open. He shoved his arm through the opening, with a grimace of pain, until he managed to unlock
the door with a tiny “Aha!” of triumph. Two minutes later, he had stripped the ignition wires with his
olive-fork-and-wire tools, and the engine coughed into life. The rest of them had climbed (or, in
Anthea’s case, been shoved) inside once the other doors were unlocked, and they were on their way.

“Where are we going?” John asked over his shoulder, as he climbed over to Anthea and started palpating her painful knee. The agent grimaced, but stayed silent.

“Vienna still, I would think,” Sherlock said, having somehow gained possession of Anthea’s phone in the interim. “The only question is which target we go after first, and how.” He flicked furiously through screens as he spoke.

“The doctor,” Mycroft said. “He wouldn’t have any reason to take action against us on his own, but he’s a valuable tool against Moran. He knows things about Moran’s operations, and we can more easily extract information from him than from Moran.”

“Agreed,” Sherlock said, still flipping through screens. He stopped, finally, and looked around at his audience. “There’s no indication of any further release of the virus as of yet. Perhaps they’re not quite as sure of identifying you as you originally thought.”

“Or Friedrichs is playing his own game, and not informing Moran of our presence,” Mycroft said. “Though I’m unsure what advantage he could gain by not doing so.”

John looked up from his assessment of Anthea’s swelling right knee. “In the end, it doesn’t really matter right now, does it? I mean, either way, we drive to Vienna, don’t we?”

“Yes,” said Mycroft, as he turned onto the main motorway heading north. He looked briefly back over his shoulder. “How is she?”

“She’ is fine, and perfectly capable of speech,” Anthea said, with more than a touch of exasperation. “It’s twisted; not dislocated, no permanent damage. I fell down. End of.” She looked commandingly at John, who, after a moment, picked up his cue.

“She’s okay. Just wrenched it—some minor swelling, but I think she’ll be fine in a day or two. Ice would help, if we could get it,” he said.

“Noted,” Mycroft replied, though it was unclear if the response was to Anthea or to John.

Sherlock looked up from his continued forays through the phone, frowning and rubbing fretfully at his temple with his free hand. “It’s now just past 5 am. It’s nearly 12 hours to Vienna. The question is, should we try to drive straight through, or should we stop?”

“Stop,” John said, with no hesitation. “We all need rest; we all need food, and I may need to check both you and Anthea.” He ignored Sherlock’s affronted sniff.

Stopping seemed to be the general consensus, excluding Sherlock. They headed north, then diverted in Nish long enough to purchase basic food supplies and ice for Anthea’s knee (that John packed in plastic bags and wrapped in serviettes before applying). The question then was, where to stop?

“Should we head back to the farmhouse outside of Belgrade—the one we stayed in that first night? It’s roughly half-way. It’s not far off our route, we know it’s safe and reasonably comfortable, and it won’t alert anyone to our movements,” Anthea asked.
“I think that’s an excellent choice, my dear,” Mycroft said. “Given that we already have some food, all we really need is shelter and water, and we know that location has both.” He looked over at Sherlock, who had already started flipping through the phone.

“Just under five hours from here,” the detective said. “Stay on the main motorway until we approach the southern edge of the Exclusion Zone—I’ll direct from there.”

John looked up at that, having watched Sherlock closely for the past few minutes. “Then you need to take a shift back here in the interim and rest,” John said, brooking no opposition. “I know your pain level is better. But you’re still not at your best, and you’ve been rubbing your temples off and on. Come have a lie-down, and I’ll take your seat and get you up when we get close enough.”

John had realized, over the past hour, that he had been lulled into a false sense of security by Sherlock’s renewed perkiness—because his friend was no longer in such pain, it was easier to ignore his other pressing issues. Seeing Sherlock begin to gradually fade in the front seat, much though he was trying to hide it, brought all of those earlier concerns back into view.

Sherlock looked, momentarily, as if he would object. He turned to John, chin raised in mild offense, before apparently thinking better of it. His chin lowered, his shoulders heaved in a sigh, and he grudgingly moved to slither over the seat back, while John edged up to take his place. Sherlock settled silently onto the pile of discarded parkas next to Anthea. When John looked back ten minutes later, he was sound asleep.

It was a quiet trip. Now that the adrenaline of their escape had worn off, fatigue had soon followed. Midway through the trip, John took over the driving, and Mycroft moved back to join his sleeping brother, while Anthea moved up to “shotgun” in the front seat. They talked, just a bit, of nothing in particular, before lapsing back into silence as the sun fully rose.

As promised, John had Anthea wake Sherlock and change places once they neared the Zone. The detective roused quickly, but John saw a grimace or two as Sherlock shimmied over the seatback. No longer completely pain-free, then.

Sherlock, of course, noticed John noticing. “Stop. Pulling on the bruises, nothing more. I am—”


“As they navigated cross-country, the ancient bus noisy but willing, Sherlock and John maintained a comfortable silence, but for the times when Sherlock offered directions. It was now just past 10 in the morning, a bright, cold sunshine pouring through the windscreen. John looked on the daylight with disdain; he wanted to climb in a dark hole somewhere and sleep for a week, if not two.

The farmhouse, once they reached it, was just as they had left it: still secure, still clean and unlooted. Mycroft went to check on the generator while John helped Anthea out of the van, and she limped and swore her way inside.

As with their first visit, the initial order of business was to light all of the fires—there was still ample wood available, and John had left the necessary tools—flint, tinder, scrap paper—in place when they left. Within ten minutes the fires were blazing away, and the old house began to warm again. John, when he headed to the loo, was pleased to note that the water pipes hadn’t frozen—they might actually be able to manage hot baths eventually.

By silent agreement, they each headed directly to a bedroom—no one was inclined to linger, chat, or make tea after the exertions of the past 24 hours. John took the room nearest Sherlock, laid down and pulled the chilly duvet and sheets over his still-clad form, and knew nothing for the next several
John woke for good, late that afternoon, when it was nearly dark, and very cold. He wandered out into the living room and was startled to find Anthea already there, wrapped in a blanket and staring into the fire.

She looked up at his entrance and smiled. “We’re going to have to cook dinner using whatever we can cobble together, unless you want to dine on protein bars and water,” she said. “But there’s no great hurry—I just couldn’t sleep. The knee is uncomfortable enough that it wakes me every time I move.” She noticed John’s look and held out her hand. “No, I don’t want to take anything—it’s fine now I’m awake. More irritating than truly painful.”

She had made coffee earlier, in the small electric pot, and now offered him a cup. They sat comfortably together for a bit, before John suddenly remembered something he’d meant to ask earlier.

“So,” he said, raising his eyebrows, “‘Brussels’? What was that about? I can’t remember the last time I saw him pull in his horns that thoroughly.”

Anthea laughed. “Ancient history—when we were kids just out of uni. I’d just started working for Mycroft as an intern. We had an assignment together, and Sherlock decided that his brother had brought me in to ‘babysit’ him, no matter what I tried to tell him. He was an absolute horror—went out of his way to cause trouble throughout. ‘Baby’ agents don’t do the exciting stuff, you know, and that just made it all the worse. We were put on the surveillance of a renegade diplomat at a conference in Brussels, and Sherlock would not shut up. There we were, sitting in what was essentially a broom closet, and he’s holding forth on one of his monologues about something-or-other, while I’m hissing and poking him. And just as he leans over and sneers at me, saying—loudly—that the security staff are too dense to anticipate our actions, the door gets yanked open and Sherlock falls out backwards onto his arse. Long story short, we were both locked up in an excruciatingly uncomfortable cell until Mycroft could send someone to get us released, and the entire mission had to be scrubbed. Big Brother was Not Happy, and Sherlock ate crow, figuratively speaking, for the next three weeks. Mycroft set him to transcribing mission reports. With pen and paper. Mycroft would read them, comment, and pitch them in the trash in front of him, with a big smile on his face.”

“Damn,” John breathed admiringly. “That’s true evil, that is. As well as sort of inspired. No wonder Sherlock gets his knickers in a twist whenever Mycroft gets involved in his business.”

“Well, to be fair, that’s not the only incident Sherlock obsesses about. There’s ample ammunition on both sides, honestly,” Anthea said. “And you know, I’m sure, that neither one of them has the
The Holmes brothers wandered in roughly ten minutes later, still looking a bit the worse for wear. John chuckled at the view: Mycroft now had the beginnings of a red-gold beard, and his normally well-controlled hair had reverted to natural curls almost as spring-like as Sherlock’s. He had slept in his clothes, and they looked it. Sherlock looked uncharacteristically rumpled as well, his hair in nest-like disarray and the jumper Anthea found in the hotel sliding partly down one thin shoulder, the neckline completely stretched out.

The two wore nearly-identical expressions of displeasure.

“There’s no hot water,” Sherlock said, in a tone just short of a whine.

“And no soap,” his brother added mournfully.

“I’m going to go turn the water heater back on shortly,” John said soothingly. “So we can hopefully all have baths before we leave. And I think there’s soap under the sink in the kitchen.” The brothers frowned, but subsided.

They dined on French toast again. The roaming flock of chickens had left a good supply of fresh eggs in the hay stacked around the barn, and there was one remaining loaf of very stale bread in the pantry, as well as the tiny cured ham, bought in Nish, that John sliced and fried. There was no syrup, but a bottle of honey served instead. By 6 pm, they were fed, the hot water heater had done its job, and they were able to each have a quick bath before packing everything up to leave.

It had been decided to head first to the main laboratory—the scientist still made a logical first target. If they drove straight through, they could be in Vienna by midnight, and decide their next moves based on what they observed on arrival.

Mycroft elected to drive again, with Sherlock in the front next to him. John and Anthea settled in the back, Anthea chatting quietly while John searched through the phone for any updated news reports on the virus. He paid little attention to the conversation between the brothers for the most part—it had far fewer words than conversations normally required, and tended to include cryptic phrases that made no sense without the unspoken context. That made it all the more startling, then, when he suddenly heard Mycroft’s voice, speaking clearly and concisely.

“So,” the older man asked Sherlock quietly, “when did the fever start?”
Crisis: Part Eleven

Chapter Summary

As it happens, fever isn't the only thing Sherlock hasn't been forthcoming about. And their first step on their new order of business comes to an unexpected ending.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So,” the older man asked Sherlock quietly, “when did the fever start?”

Both brothers certainly heard John’s quick intake of breath from behind them; Mycroft, at least, had known all along that John was listening. This had been a means of informing John, while robbing Sherlock of the ability to object.

He did try to object, of course. “John, it’s not—”

“Save it,” John snapped. “It doesn’t matter if it’s high, if it’s not, if it’s just a minor annoyance that comes and goes. Bottom line, you have fever, and that is officially a Bad Thing that you chose not to share with anyone until your brother noticed. Do you have any response to that?”

There was no answer from Sherlock, who continued to look straight ahead out the front windscreen, though John noticed the tips of his ears grew a bit rosy.

“Thought not,” John said. He tapped Mycroft on the shoulder. “Could you stop for a moment, please? Your brother needs to swap with Anthea and come back here, so he and I can have a chat.”

The bureaucrat wordlessly glided the car over to the verge, and Anthea climbed out with a grimace, while Sherlock sighed and trudged around to the back door as if walking to his execution.

As soon as the two were settled in their new places, Mycroft swept the car back onto the road. Sherlock sat still, briefly, before turning to John. “I was going to tell you if it became a problem. It’s not, it’s never, severe—only the same as just before we left. Mild, and mostly in the evenings. It goes away with paracetamol.” He looked earnestly at John—one of those expressions that he was very good at shamming, so John could never really be sure of his sincerity.

“And how long has this been going on?” John asked softly, in a tone he knew was intimidating. “And where did you get the paracetamol, since I didn’t give it to you?”

Sherlock ducked his head, avoiding eye contact. “I…it comes from your kit,” he muttered. “Before we had to leave it.”

“Which means this started, what, two, three, days ago?” John asked. It wasn’t really a question. “The same day the pain got bad?”

“The day of the injections,” Sherlock said. “Well, that evening, I think. It may have been earlier and I didn’t notice because…”
“Because of the pain,” John said with a sigh. Sherlock’s silence was his answer.

They were both startled by the voice from the front seat.

“Much though I sympathize with your frustration over my brother’s…lack of transparency, John, in our current circumstances there is very little we can do about this issue,” Mycroft said. “We have a minute window in which to track Moran, and the virus, before our options are taken from us. If we delay, Moran will find us. And the likelihood that every major medical facility within 500 miles isn’t tagged to recognize a patient matching Sherlock’s description is vanishingly small—Moran knows just how ill Sherlock has been, after all. It’s certainly what I would do, in a similar situation. I believe that seeking advanced medical help at this juncture, without truly dire necessity, would be very unwise.”

“And unnecessary,” Sherlock added. “I am not truly ill. I am fatigued, always; I am in some minor pain, but only from the bruising and overexertion. But I am not ill.” He gave John a searching look, those pale eyes intense as ever. “I would tell you, John. I would. I know very well that attempting to conceal serious illness could compromise the safety of us all.”

And with that, John had to be content. “I…I suppose I believe you,” he said reluctantly. “But Jesus, Sherlock. Don’t let me find this kind of thing out by accident. Not now. Not when our options are so narrow. I need to know if you’re suddenly likely to drop at my feet, and have a plan of action, if that’s the case. It isn’t something I can solve on the fly, like stitching up a cut. Do you see?”

Sherlock nodded dutifully, like a chastened child. Another look he was good at, but John did give him credit for being mostly sincere, in this instance.

John held out his hand. “Give me the paracetamol, please. I need to know what you’ve had and when, just in case things take a turn for the worse.” Sherlock dug in the right-hand pocket of his parka and held out two sheets of blister-packaged tablets. Spurred by some instinct, though, John went further.

“Give me anything else you took as well,” he added, in a studiously neutral tone of voice. Sherlock suddenly flushed, aware of the instant weighted silence in the car, and the focused attention of all the occupants.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” the detective snarled, digging out a single sheet of blister packs. “It’s oxycodone. You will note that none of the pockets are opened, and I only took the one sheet. It was for emergencies only, and I’ve taken none of them.”

“Then why did you have them?” John asked. “Knowing that all you had to do was ask, and I’d give you whatever you needed?” He knew the answer—at least he was fairly sure he did. But Sherlock needed to say it, for his own sake.

“I was…I needed to know it was there,” Sherlock said, in a very small voice. His gaze was now locked on his hands, twisted together in his lap. “I know it seems suspect. It…I assure you, I never intended to use them recreationally. But I needed to have them.” The last came in an uncomfortable rasp. This was, apparently, the truth, albeit a truth that Sherlock would have preferred not to share.

There was a long, long pause, in which John tried to think of a way to respond that didn’t sound like an accusation. Sherlock, clearly anticipating something along those lines, reached up and pressed the heels of his hands over his eyes. “Please don’t,” he said. “Don’t…assume.”

“I’m not. I don’t,” John managed to say. “I just needed to hear you say it. Brother of an alcoholic, remember?” He gently reached over and pulled Sherlock’s shaking hands off his eyes. “Can I hold
them for you, right here in my pocket, if I promise to let you see them if you need to? Will that work?"

Sherlock, lips tightly together, gave a jerky nod. John was peripherally aware of Mycroft, in the front seat, giving a tiny, relieved sigh.

“One more thing, and we’re done,” John said, reluctantly. “Is it safe to assume that persistent pain is a trigger for you? Even low-level pain?”

“…sometimes,” Sherlock said, still speaking to his hands, once again clenched, knuckles white, in his lap. “If there’s nothing else to focus on for extended periods.”

Fair enough, John thought. They had spent entirely too much time rattling around in cars for hours at a time, something Sherlock found stressful even when he was healthy. There wasn’t much to be done about that, given that they were in the middle of yet another long, dull road trip.

“Let’s do this, then,” John said. “If you feel, well, on the edge, tell me, or your brother, or Anthea. Don’t just keep soldiering on in silence. We’ll find something to distract you, yeah? You can try to teach me Serbian or something. If nothing else, it’ll serve as comic relief.” He grinned, and was relieved to see his friend give a small smirk in return.

“‘Soldiering on’”? Sherlock said with an eyebrow lift. “Was that intentional, or just inadvertently apt?”

“All right, I was trying to be supportive, you twat,” John said with a chuckle. And, with that, the oppressive air in the van lifted. Not fully, not permanently—but for now, if was enough.

John surprised himself by nodding off, not long after that difficult conversation. When he roused, some indeterminate time later, he saw that Sherlock had followed suit, and was now wedged in the corner, his feet pulled up on the seat and his head lolling against the seatback. Anthea had replaced Mycroft as driver—the elder Holmes was drowsing in his own corner, though he looked uncomfortable even in his sleep.

John leaned forward and tapped the agent gently on the shoulder. “So, where are we?” he asked, very quietly.

“About half an hour out,” she said, just as softly. “I was just about to wake Mycroft—I need someone to navigate from this point, and we need to decide if we’re going straight to the laboratory site, or if we’re going to try to round up Dr. Hebert first.” Hearing her say the name (“Eh-bear”) made John realize he had misread the information Sherlock had pulled up, thinking the scientist’s name was “Herbert”—French or Belgian, then, not English.

Right on cue, Mycroft huffed and sat up with a small groan, just as Sherlock shifted in the back seat beside John. Ears like bats, those two. “I believe we should go after the doctor first,” Mycroft said. “It would be wise to collect initial information before we try to gain entrance to the laboratory.

“Agreed,” Sherlock said, snaking a long, wiry arm over the seatback to snag the phone from the
center console. He flipped rapidly through multiple pages before stopping with a pleased hum.
“There are 42 ‘Phillipe Hebert’s listed in the Vienna professional medical register. But only one
maintains his residence in the same building as Moran’s flat. I think we have a destination.”

That rang an alarm bell or two for John. “Hang on,” he said. “Don’t you think it might be
problematic to go after Hebert so close to Moran? I would think we’d not want to alert him to our
presence until we’re ready to do so.”

“Fair point,” Anthea said. They all looked at each other in silence for a moment, considering.

“We should go and examine the lab now, and grab Hebert when he arrives in the morning,”
Sherlock said finally. “That serves two purposes—first, we avoid any possible premature
entanglement with Moran; and second, we get immediate data on what is, and isn’t, being handled
from this facility. Entry shouldn’t be exceptionally difficult; we probably can’t access the actual
production lab, but realistically, we neither need nor want to. We don’t need to examine stocks of
virus to get what we need.”

“Not a bad option,” Mycroft said, “but I would propose a compromise approach. We don’t
necessarily want to delay matters an additional 8 hours if we don’t have to.” Unspoken in that
response was the knowledge that, in Sherlock’s health issues, they had their very own countdown
underway.

“I suspect that we could successfully lure the good doctor out of his den early, given the right
incentive,” the Great Man continued. “A break-in, or a fire at the laboratory, perhaps. It’s very likely
that Hebert would come if prodded appropriately—if nothing else, because he would be concerned
about the authorities entering the labs.”

Sherlock gave a disgruntled huff, but nodded.

“So, how does this ‘luring’ happen, then? I’m presuming one of us is going to impersonate
emergency services, yes?” John asked. “Who has the best German?”

“Mycroft,” Anthea replied, before Sherlock had a chance to say anything. “He sounds like a native.”
The detective sniffed, while Mycroft gave a smug little smile.

Twenty minutes later, they sat in a parking structure on the outskirts of Vienna, three minutes from
the laboratory location, listening to Mycroft have a fraught conversation on Anthea’s mobile with
Phillipe Hebert, who apparently had all the intestinal fortitude of a white rabbit.

Sherlock “translated” Hebert’s portion of the conversation for John, tapping Morse code onto the
back of his hand. John already knew Mycroft’s portion—well, the basics, anyway, since they had
worked together on the “script”.

[But surely there must be someone else on your list], Sherlock tapped, as the doctor’s high, nervous
voice quavered. [I am simply a researcher. I do not own the facility. Why don’t you call the owner
of the building?

Mycroft looked offended, and responded in pristine German that managed to sound simultaneously condescending and exasperated. John didn’t really need a translation, though Sherlock diligently gave him one, since they were now beyond the scope of their script. [You are listed as the responding authority, sir. And we are given to understand by the building owners that your facility has security measures in place to which they do not have access. The alarm originates from within your portion of the building, and I am afraid I must insist on your presence.] The bureaucrat paused for effect. [If need be, I am authorized to use whatever measures are required to secure your compliance.]

[I suppose I have no choice, then.] the voice whined. [Can you send a car?]

“Nein,” Mycroft said firmly.

Now, they waited. They knew, based on the comparative locations of the laboratory and the luxury flat, that it would likely take Hebert at least 45 minutes to arrive, assuming a typical delay in securing a cab at almost 2 in the morning.

The first period, ten minutes or so, was spent carefully checking the surroundings of the laboratory, identifying the locations of cameras and security systems. As they had told Hebert, the main building itself was no fortress, and entry was straightforward—a simple lock on the loading dock door was easily bypassed, and they were inside. The lab itself, though, took up 5 of the 9 stories of the building, and was essentially a separate enclave that even had its own climate control systems. Nothing went through common ducting or conduits to the rest of the building; even the electrical panels were independent. The lab used space, nothing more.

After doing what investigation they could with their limited access, they ultimately situated themselves in the opulent lobby of the building to await Hebert’s arrival. There were comfortable wing chairs, butter-soft leather sofas, and a scattering of glossy magazines. Surprisingly, there was no resident security guard after hours; a concierge during the day, going by the walnut-and-steel kiosk in the center of the lobby, but no 24-hour presence.

John and Anthea explored further, while Mycroft and his brother established themselves in the lobby proper. John was delighted when they found the small coffee room tucked away in one corner of the ground floor, and had no qualms at all about helping himself to whatever looked attractive. Anthea grabbed canvas shopping bags from a display, and they filled them with juice, water, and a variety of snack foods and sandwiches, before carting their haul gleefully back to the others.

John pulled over a large coffee table in front of one of the sofas and spread out their feast, handing out juice and water to each. Mycroft, John and Anthea each pulled out sandwiches; Sherlock, John noticed, eyed the offerings with mild dismay. That, combined with his friend’s subsequent reluctance to pick up the packets of dark chocolate biscuits that John knew were normally a favorite, led John to walk over and press the back of his hand to Sherlock’s forehead before he could jerk away.

“Thought so,” John said, while Sherlock pulled himself back. “That’s a pretty noticeable fever—how long has it been an issue?”
“Don’t know,” Sherlock muttered. “I was asleep. I woke up, and…” he waved one elegant hand up and down his frame.

John dug in his pocket and pulled out one of the blister packs, popping out two paracetamol and handing Sherlock’s bottle of juice to him. “Take them, drink all of the juice, and try to eat at least one of the packets of biscuits. Or maybe some of the crisps—whichever you’d rather. Just something to help you metabolize the tablets quicker.”

While Mycroft and Anthea pretended to be unaware of the interplay happening five feet away, Sherlock slowly opened the juice and took the pills before setting the bottle on the table in front of him. John opened his own sandwich and was halfway done before Sherlock managed to select one of the packages of plain crisps, open it, and eat the contents—one piece at a time, as if taking medication, each one washed down by a tiny swig of juice. Then he carefully sat back in his chair and closed his eyes, while his brother and friends eyed him with silent concern.

Fifteen minutes later, Mycroft suggested they all move towards the front entrance, to await Hebert’s arrival. The security on the doors was easily overridden from the concierge desk, and Anthea poked at the keyboard until the internal lighting increased to a more-normal daytime setting, shining from the expensive brass light fixtures arrayed around the sitting area. They didn’t want to give Hebert any hint that Emergency Services personnel weren’t actually in the building until they hustled him inside, and a dimly-lit lobby would be suspicious to even the dimmest of individuals, called to a security alert in the middle of the night.

One of their best finds, in their earlier search, had been a closet containing jackets and badges belonging to the normal building security staff. They now all wore tasteful navy-blue zipups and hats, and John had been surprised to find a taser tucked in the pocket of his. After a moment’s thought, he handed it to Mycroft—given that the bureaucrat was going to be doing most of the talking, he needed something on hand in the event things suddenly went bad. John still had his pistol tucked in the back of his parka, anyway, and he was sure Anthea had hers as well.

They gave Mycroft the jacket that fit best, since he would be front-and-center with Hebert. Anthea’s gear was too long; John’s was too big, and Sherlock’s—Sherlock’s fit his small waist, but the sleeves were nearly four inches too short, and the shoulders were painfully tight. After his first experimental arm raises, the ominous tearing sounds led him to hurriedly unzip and leave the jacket casually open. They ultimately decided to have Sherlock remain in the lobby doorway, largely out of sight.

At just short of 3 am, they saw car lights approaching out front, and a taxi slid to a stop. They all moved to the doorway and stepped out, just as the passenger alit on the pavement. They stood in a loose semi-circle as he paid the driver and stepped cautiously forward.

John’s first impression (first horrified impression, actually) was that Hebert looked just like Jim Moriarty: small, almost delicate, with big brown eyes and black hair slicked back from a slightly-receding hairline. John heard Sherlock give a tiny gasp behind him, but forced himself not to turn around.

The second impression was less alarming. Strong resemblance, yes, but the big difference lay in the eyes. Jim Moriarty’s eyes always reflected one of two things: twinkling, exuberant glee, or lethal, fathomless insanity. This man’s eyes held no more than irritation and an undercurrent of fear—a difference stark enough to throw off that first queasy shock of “recognition”.

As John felt his pulse slide back into a more-normal range, Mycroft stepped forward smartly and introduced himself as “Herr Schaefer”, followed by a nonsensical agency designation. He stepped close to Hebert, close enough that the size differential between the two men was painfully obvious—and intimidating. John reflected, not for the first time, that Mycroft was a master at this kind of thing,
even better than his brother.

John didn’t attempt to follow the rapid-fire German conversation, relying on Mycroft’s body language to tell him when to move. He was just preparing to do so when something—motion, a glimmer of light, both focused on the rooftop of the building opposite—set his inner alarms screaming. Without conscious awareness of doing so, he surged forward, grabbed Mycroft’s arm and the back of Anthea’s jacket, and pulled with all his might, dragging them both towards the building. And, at the same moment, he heard a sickeningly familiar booming echo—and looked back to see the upper half of Hebert’s face dissolve into a crimson mist before the man fell bonelessly forward onto the pavement.

Chapter End Notes

The more I thought about it, the more likely I found it that Sherlock could have struggled with his drug issues after his release from hospital (and HLV tends to reinforce that thought). An enforced, lengthy use of morphine would have been a strong trigger that would have left him vulnerable for some time. So for me, this sequence just seemed to fit.
Crisis: Part Twelve

Chapter Summary

Sherlock gets a bit up-close-and-personal with a corpse, but there's a good reason. And the mystery of Mycroft's mole is solved.

Chapter Notes

NOTE TO SUBSCRIBERS: Now that I'm putting up the next chapter, I think it's safe to remove the duplicate from last week. So this "Part Twelve" is indeed a new chapter for everyone.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the brief, shocked pause after the scientist collapsed, no one moved. Immediately thereafter, though, John heard/felt shifting behind him; Sherlock, as usual, wanted to be first in line to see.

“Sherlock, if you move, I may shoot you myself,” John snarled.

That surprised a crack of (slightly hysterical) laughter from Anthea. “God, John. You have a way with words, you know?”

They stayed, huddled in the doorway, for perhaps five minutes, peering desperately at the rooftop and the surrounding streets, listening for any movement. None of them were inclined (well, excepting Sherlock) to move out of their shelter without some assurance that Moran wasn’t still waiting for his next shot.

John was just about to suggest that they edge their way carefully back into the building when they were startled by a loud pop song suddenly blaring from in front of them—from the corpse, in fact. “It’s his mobile,” John said blankly, and was immediately rewarded by an indignant sniff from behind him.

“Really? Never would have guessed,” Sherlock said. “And whom do we suppose would be calling just now, hmm?”

“Rude,” John muttered.

They all stared at the corpse. The phone, having gone silent after four repetitions of the annoying song, began again. Just as John was preparing himself for a dash-and-grab, Anthea shoved him aside and stalked over to bend over the body, wrinkling her nose at the expanding pool of blood. “Moran’s the type that wouldn’t knowingly shoot a woman,” she sniffed, as she rose with the mobile in her hand. “It’s convenient and insulting at the same time.”

Despite Sherlock’s grabby hands, she gave the phone to Mycroft, just as the next round of rings began. The bureaucrat waited two cycles before brushing the screen to reply.
“Yes?” he said, as if sitting at his desk in the bowels of Whitehall. His long, pale fingers flicked over the screen, moving the mobile into speaker mode.

“Hey, how’s it feel to be back from the dead, Iceman? I mean, for your brother, it’s his second or third time around, too. Must be a family thing,” Moran said.

Mycroft made an unimpressed noise. “The reality was much closer than you realize,” he said. “But I won’t deny that we took advantage of the situation. It led us here, after all, and clearly you would have preferred that not to be the case.” He looked over at the body splayed on the pavement. “Do your employees typically bear the brunt of your displeasure, though? That seems a trifle unfair.”

Moran gave a dismissive huff. “He had largely outlived his usefulness anyway, given your arrival at the lab. I mean, he was never much more than a figurehead, but I wasn’t going to give you access to whatever limited intel he had. I was looking forward to your encountering him, though—looked familiar, didn’t he?” The criminal gave a nasty snigger.

“Obviously,” Sherlock interjected, over his brother’s shoulder. “I presume he, then, is the ‘star’ of your recent video announcement?”

‘Yup,” Moran said. “Happened to see him one day while I was touring one of our research labs, a year or so ago, and damn near swallowed my tongue. Of course, the resemblance was only skin-deep—Hebert wasn’t quite an idiot, but it was a near thing—but skin was really all we needed, after all. Just dubbed Jim’s voice, and voila! Moriarty reborn! I did give him a ‘promotion’ in exchange, but all he really did was make the rounds of our facilities and look like Jim. Be silent and look scary. Easy peasy.”

“And one would presume you no longer need his presence, given your willingness to sacrifice him?” Mycroft said.

“Well, no,” Moran replied, in an exasperated tone. “Thought that was pretty obvious. It’s like you said a while back—I consider your departure a declaration of war. I won’t call him the first casualty —evidently G has that honour—but the second, certainly.” He gave a weighted pause before continuing, his voice now radiating menace rather than the false conviviality of earlier. “He won’t be the last.”

There was a sudden sound as the line disconnected. Almost immediately, the gun boomed again from the rooftop, while John tried valiantly to push his charges further back into the shadow of the entranceway. Over their heads, one by one, all of the exterior lights shattered, raining bits of glass and metal over them while they flinched and covered their heads. As the last light fixture exploded, the street lights then began to go, with absolute precision—one shot, one light, until the street, and the building, stood in near-total darkness, the only illumination coming from the entranceway of the building across the street.

“Well,” Anthea said in the sudden quiet. “Clearly keeps in practice, doesn’t he?”

Sherlock broke their tableau by sidling deftly around John and darting over to the dimly-lit corpse, while John grabbed fruitlessly at him as he passed.

“What the hell are you doing?” John snapped. “Get your arse back over here. Moran could still be waiting.”

Sherlock sniffed in disdain. “No, he’s not. He knocked out the lights so that we couldn’t see which direction he went. He knows we’ll be coming after him.” He looked down at the corpse, while fastidiously avoiding the pooled blood under the head. “And this body has things that we can use.”
He proceeded to rummage through pockets and, after flipping the body over with a grunt, patted down the jacket as well.

He pulled out three objects with a crow of triumph—a wallet, a ring of keys, and an electronic key card. He shoved them into his parka pockets before beckoning urgently to the others. “Come help me undress him,” he said, while John gaped.

After a moment’s inaction, Sherlock huffed in annoyance. “Really, do you never think? The authorities will be here momentarily—if nothing else, the sound of the shots will lead some good Samaritan to call it in. We want to delay his identification as long as possible—we need time to use his card and ID to look through the lab and databases, and if they find out who he is, this building is the first place they’ll search. Eventually they’ll find the cabbie, of course, but in the meantime, a naked corpse won’t give them much information, especially with the damage to his face and teeth. Hiding him isn’t feasible—we don’t have any means of cleaning up the blood effectively.”

And he was right, of course, though John still found stripping a still-warm body of clothing on the street appalling.

In minutes, it was done. Sherlock tossed the keys, keycard and wallet to his brother, while John bundled up the clothing and shoes; he would dispose of them in a garbage bin inside the building. Once inside, Anthea turned the main interior lighting back to its “after hours” settings and re-armed the door security before they headed for the lifts.

Thankfully, the security at the entrance to the lab floors didn’t require anything exotic—no retinal scans or fingerprints (though John was pretty sure Sherlock would have procured a finger if necessary). The key card opened the main entry doors easily, and, once inside, the ring of keys handled all the other entry points.

They didn’t attempt to enter any of the true laboratory spaces; none of them felt inclined to suit up in contamination gear unless it was necessary. Lacking access to any outside testing, there was nothing they could do that couldn’t be done better by the task force Mycroft would almost certainly unleash on this building as soon as it was feasible.

They started from the top floor and worked their way down, largely just observing, seeing if anything truly alarming came into view. It didn’t, for the most part—the facility looked just like you would expect a pharmaceutical research building to look. The top floor was storage—boxes, filing cabinets, and storerooms full of laboratory equipment and disposable supplies. None of it was of interest now—right now they needed information on Moran, more than on the virus itself.

The next floor was labs, four in total. All had biological warning signs affixed to their doors. John gave them a cursory view through the observation windows but identified no equipment that he wouldn’t have expected to be there, so they moved on.

They hit gold on the next floor down. The lift doors opened onto opulent office space—the administrative suite, apparently. None of the interior doors locked, which made access to computer terminals convenient. Anthea took the first station at the front desk, while Mycroft strode through into the lavish office behind and sat in the highbacked leather chair. Sherlock had one of those wordless conversations with his brother, who was kind enough to answer verbally for the sake of the rest of them.

“I’m going to access a highly-restricted messaging application which I arranged with Lady Smallwood before our departure. I hope to receive good news about the identification of our leak; it will have significant bearing on our approach to the current situation,” Mycroft said, while typing rapidly. “In the meantime, the rest of you can glean whatever is possible from the internal servers.”
John was very well aware that his inclusion in that grouping was a courtesy only; his participation would likely consist of leaning over Sherlock’s shoulder and writing things down if necessary. And maybe getting tea.

Using the login information Sherlock had developed in their earlier intrusion, Sherlock and Anthea engaged in a rapid search through the local databases. They didn’t need any additional information from the “corporate” areas, given Sherlock’s earlier efforts; their focus now was on in-house file directories that weren’t linked to the main servers.

They had been surfing through databases for perhaps ten minutes when Mycroft came wandering over, an unsettled look on his face. Anthea noticed first, and raised her eyebrows.

“Something unexpected?” she asked. “You thought the mole would have been identified by now. Did that not happen?”

Mycroft shook his head. “No, our traitor has indeed been captured. But it’s not, that is to say…,” he trailed off in a very uncharacteristic manner.

Sherlock stared at his brother, brows knit together. “What? Why this dramatic pause? Who is it?”

“Vivian Norbury,” Mycroft said. “The longtime Senior Administrative Liaison for MI6. In retrospect, it’s obvious—she had access to all records, all rooms—she sat in on and recorded every senior council meeting, and monitored all external missions under Lady Smallwood’s purview.”

Sherlock blinked. “That tweedy little woman with the child’s haircut and the sensible shoes? The one with the strong resemblance to a spaniel?”

“The very same,” Mycroft said. “And I will admit that I am…stunned, I suppose. Mrs. Norbury was originally hired by Uncle Rudy—I can’t remember a time when she wasn’t there. She used to give me sweeties when I came to visit, when I was small.” He looked bewildered. It wasn’t a look John had seen on him very often.

Anthea suddenly spoke up from behind them. “She didn’t like me,” she said. “I never knew why. But when I first started working with you, she had a habit of ‘losing’ my reports, or claiming that I never submitted them. Sherlock finally had to show me how to put a tracker on them, to prove that she’d received them.”

“Based on what Lady Smallwood says, it’s likely she resented all female agents,” Mycroft replied. “She apparently feels that she should have been given the opportunity to work in the field.” He looked thoughtful for a moment before continuing. “Ironically, she is probably correct. The complexity of her deception illustrates her considerable talents. It’s unfortunate that she was born a generation too soon.”

“And lacking a conscience,” Sherlock added sardonically. “Apparently offering you sweeties as a child didn’t prevent her from cheerfully engineering your doom, when it proved convenient.”

“Or, more accurately, when I proved inconvenient,” Mycroft said with a sigh.
Sherlock had had enough sentiment now, evidently. “Moving on, then. I presume that she has now been appropriately bound and secreted away, unless the Powers That Be have decided on a fatal ‘accident’. What does her capture mean for our current situation, since I assume that you will now be able to take steps we could not previously contemplate?”

Mycroft shook his head minutely, as if clearing it of debris. “Yes, well. We no longer need concern ourselves with secrecy, per se, at least not in reference to these laboratories. I have arranged for raids on this facility, and on the one in Prishtina, within the next three hours. That will serve two purposes — first, we will secure up-to-date information on the creation and dispersal of the virus; and second, we will begin to dismantle Moran’s operation from the inside, thereby leaving him lacking places in which to go to ground easily. I want him on the run, with limited resources.” He gave a not-smile. “I particularly want him aware that I am the one closing his loopholes. I want him angry and off-balance.”

John felt compelled to comment on that one. “Just a word of caution, if I may,” he began, aware of Mycroft’s offended stare. “He’s a sniper. And, while he may indeed get angry, I wouldn’t count on it throwing him ‘off-balance’. It’s not in their makeup, at least not while they’re tracking. ‘Patience’ is their mantra. I’ve known snipers who wait for three days, in pouring rain, with ants climbing up their trousers, for that one good shot. They can’t afford to let circumstances affect their focus, and I doubt Moran has lost that. I don’t think we can afford to underestimate him, or hope that losing things important to him is going to throw him. If anything, that will make him more dangerous, rather than less.”

Mycroft, to his credit, looked thoughtful rather than offended. “Thank you, John. I will take that into consideration. Do you see any reason, though, that we should not now proceed with our own hunt, based on whatever information we can glean on Moran’s likely location?”

John felt his face slide into a wolfish grin. “Not a thing,” he said cheerfully.

Chapter End Notes

When I ran through the description in my head of the “qualifications” that the mole in Mycroft’s operation had to meet, it slowly dawned on me that Vivian Norbury fit the bill perfectly. So apparently she is a villain in EVERY universe.
Crisis: Part Thirteen

Chapter Summary

The gang searches Moran's flat for clues to his whereabouts. But a new complication makes them realize they are running out of options and time.

Chapter Notes

Sorry I'm running a few days longer than usual between chapters--RL is being an absolute beeyotch right now. I can't see the light at the end of the tunnel yet, but I think maybe, possibly, I know where the light switch is.

“If we don’t find something useful soon, I’m going to start throwing things. Fair warning,” Anthea said, with an impressive glower.

“We have already found ‘something’,” Mycroft said. “We have managed to secure tentative locations for more than half of the virus caches. And two additional laboratories.”

“And it hasn’t gotten us an inch closer to Moran,” Sherlock sniffed. “I don’t know about you, but that’s the standard I’m judging this effort against as well.” Anthea nodded militantly behind him.

The Great Man sighed. “I can’t disagree that Moran’s location is of paramount importance. But I have come to believe we won’t find that information here—this is clearly limited to the virus project, rather than Moran’s overall operations. The site in Prishtina likely had more value from that perspective, but I doubt we have the time to search through all of that data.”

“I don’t think we need to,” Sherlock said. “MI6 has minions who can handle that aspect, certainly. But I believe our best opportunity may lie in Moran’s flat. We can, of course, hope that he is still there, but it’s exceedingly unlikely. But it may give us clues to his next move, and, potentially, his next destination.”

“Agreed,” John said. “Moran isn’t a planner, at least not to any level of detail—he outsources that, clearly, based on the whole ‘I don’t know where the virus was placed’ debacle. Maybe his flat will reflect that—I mean, maybe he’s a bit careless about what he leaves lying about?”

Mycroft nodded. “A reasonable hope. If nothing else, we can use the flat to get a few hours of sleep before proceeding.” He looked around at the three of them, one eyebrow lifted quizzically. “I think we could all use it.”
They arrived at Moran’s building at a little past 5 am. The city was yet to begin stirring, so they drove their stolen vehicle down empty streets before pulling into the parking garage underneath, using the code found on a card in Hebert’s wallet. They didn’t have to be concerned about interior access, either: one of the keys on Hebert’s key ring opened the garage-level door into the main building. Once inside, they took the lift to the top floor, and Sherlock quickly picked the lock on Moran’s unit, one of two on the penthouse level.

The flat was staggeringly over-the-top, almost laughably so. The living room gleamed with gold and crystal accents on every possible surface. The couch was upholstered in what appeared to be real pony skin; two lamps, on abstract etched-glass tables at either end, looked to be real Tiffany, or very good copies. The walls were crowded with huge modern canvases reflecting smears of colour and grotesquely distorted figures. John was sure that they were expensive—it didn’t mean they were in any way attractive.

The piece de resistance was spread across the expanse between the pinto-skin couch and the huge Louis XIV-style fireplace: a tiger skin rug, complete with head. John found the green glass eyes particularly repellent.

They all stared momentarily, less impressed than appalled. “Well,” Mycroft said. “Clearly interior design is not his forte.”

Sherlock was surprised into a snort of laughter, before schooling his face into disdain.

By unspoken agreement, they all opted for sleep before strategy—it had been a very long two days, and John, for one, lusted for a shower and a bed, with the shower optional if need be. They wandered past an overstuffed drawing room and a frankly dazzling kitchen before finding the hallway that lead to four opulent bedrooms. John opened the first door on the left and found himself in the master bedroom, complete with a four-poster bed roughly the size of his old bedsit, with several dozen pillows. He threw himself face-down on the decadent mattress with a near-orgasmic sigh, and barely heard the others selecting their own rooms before tumbling into blackness.

He awakened sometime later to a hint of daylight around the edges of the thick curtains, and movement nearby. His heart rate shot up and he rolled quickly to his back and off the back side of the bed before rational thought returned—Vienna. Moran. Safe—well, sort of.

A soft sound from the foot of the bed focused his attention back into the here-and-now. Sherlock stood, hands fluttering against each other nervously, swaying slightly from one foot to the other.

“What’s wrong?” John said, very softly. The detective, since his return, sometimes woke from violent nightmares distressed, panicked and careening towards hyperventilation. Quiet and calm prevented him from escalating, at least part of the time.

“I…you said. In your pocket,” Sherlock stammered, looking at his feet now rather than at John, fingers pleating the hem of his untucked shirt.

John, still half-asleep, stared momentarily before his foggy brain caught up. Suddenly, the light dawned.

“Oh. Oh,” he said, climbing back over the bed and reaching into the pocket of his coat, which he
only now realized he had never removed before falling instantly into sleep. He pulled out the flat strip of oxycodone tablets and held it out, while Sherlock watched anxiously. “Here they are. All present and accounted for.”

Sherlock blinked, nodded, then blinked again before turning to walk slowly towards the door. John’s medical mind finally kicked in before his friend reached the doorway, and he quickly strode over to lay a restraining hand on Sherlock’s shoulder, feeling light tremors under his touch. So, persistent pain was indeed a trigger, but in this case, the pain itself was a more important issue than cravings.

“Here. Come sit for a moment, yeah?” John said, nudging Sherlock back toward the corner of the bed. Sherlock sighed but went, sitting with a slight wince that immediately caught John’s eye. John reached forward and gently ran his fingers along Sherlock’s rib cage and incision site, exerting slight pressure as he went. Sherlock didn’t wince, this time, but John felt involuntary tensing of the muscles that couldn’t be suppressed. He also noted the return of the fever—in the increasing glow of light from the windows, a light flush spread across Sherlock’s cheeks, his eyes slightly glassy and lids red along his lashes. They looked at each other in silence before John let out a puff of breath.

“Well,” he said. “That’s not ideal.”

Sherlock gave a bitter chuckle. “You have a positive talent for understatement,” he said, closing his eyes briefly. He raised his head to look John in the eye. “It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t change what we have to do, and I’ll be fine in the short run if you can help me manage the pain so that I can still function.”

“No, Sherlock, you won’t be ‘fine’. This is farther from ‘fine’ than I care to be, outside of a hospital,” John said, pulling the bits and bobs of his medical kit that he had rescued out of the various pockets of his coat and laying them out on the bed. While Sherlock scowled, John stalked into the massive en suite and returned with a cool, damp flannel, which he held out while pushing Sherlock back onto the pillows. “Put this over your forehead for a bit, while I go find something you can take medication with. Don’t get up,” he added firmly as he headed for the kitchen.

Half an hour later, Sherlock had been dosed with paracetamol, two of the oxycodones, a large glass of juice and two shortbread biscuits, and had fallen back into a light sleep, the flannel over his eyes. After waiting a further fifteen minutes to make sure the man was truly under, John padded silently to the door and down the hallway. He found Mycroft in the second bedroom he checked.

The bureaucrat was awake, sitting with his back to the headboard and frowning at Hebert’s phone when John opened the door. He looked up, face shaped into polite inquiry, but quickly morphing into surprisingly obvious concern.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, putting down the phone and rising quickly. “What do you need?”

“We’re out of time,” John said without preamble. “The pain is returning, the fever is now constant, and he’s on a downhill slide. He needs a hospital and a scanning suite, soon--we’re running the risk of sepsis, and I can’t take a chance of treating him with a non-specific antibiotic after his poor reaction the last time. So, whatever we’re going to do, we need to do it quickly.”

Mycroft went still, his face blanking and eyes going distant. It was in these moments that the family
resemblance between the two brothers was at its strongest. But, in this case, it was also one of those times when John was reminded that Sherlock had once termed his brother “the most dangerous man you’ll ever meet”—the Mycroft who blinked briefly, then refocused ice-blue eyes on John with a scalpel-like gaze was that Mycroft, not the man who had been their traveling companion these past days.

“Very well, then,” this new Mycroft said. “I would suggest we reconvene and plan our attack. At this juncture, I consider our main task that of removal, rather than capture. The latter will be too time-consuming, and involves more uncertainty in methodology and opportunity. Do you agree?” It was, surprisingly, more than a pro forma question—this was a strategist seeking a military assessment, not empty courtesy.

“Agreed,” said John. “Capture is always more difficult, and we’d have to find a way to completely disable Moran, without killing him—I don’t place a high likelihood on that, and I really doubt we could force him to give us any kind of usable information if we did. He’s not the type to quietly surrender. Going out in a blaze of glory is a whole lot more likely.”

“I believe that can be arranged,” Mycroft said, with a steely smile.

They met in the kitchen, after Mycroft roused Anthea. Sherlock they left for the time being—an additional hour or so of sleep was of high value right now. Over a breakfast of quiche and juice (the quiche found in the walk-in freezer, and quickly reheated in the restaurant-style oven), they started their planning.

“The first order of business has to be searching this place,” Anthea said, while sipping her juice. “Now that we’ve seen it, I doubt we’ll find much—this isn’t his main residence, clearly. Not a single personal item that I’ve seen, nor any electronics other than what’s in the living room or kitchen. I think it’s more likely a ‘vacation’ spot—something he comes to when he wants to get away.”

Mycroft nodded. “That is my impression as well. This place shows no signs of ongoing occupancy. I think we should give it a cursory search, and then turn to Dr. Hebert’s flat. We know the good doctor actually lived here, and I would be surprised if we didn’t find much more useful material there.”

After finishing their breakfast, each of them set off through the flat, looking for computers, tablets, safes, any kind of secured equipment or room. They were perhaps half an hour into the process when Sherlock wandered out of John’s bedroom, frowning and yawning.

“You were supposed to wake me,” he said. “I wanted to do my own search.”

John was gratified to see the flush of fever had faded from Sherlock cheekbones, and his eyes looked clearer. His right arm, though, had drifted back to its protective position around the detective’s rib cage—not a good sign. Sherlock noticed John’s inspection, raised his eyebrow and consciously dropped his arm back to his side. “I’m all right,” he said firmly. “Much better, in fact.” He looked imperiously around. “Where have you already searched? I want to look in the less-obvious locations. Moran’s not stupid—anything he wants to keep secure will not be easily located.”

“Mycroft and Anthea have the loos, the bedrooms other than the master, and the kitchen. I have the living room and the master bedroom. I’m already finished in the living room, so I was about to head
for the master. You want to come with?” John asked, already knowing the answer.

“No,” Sherlock said. “I’m going to do a more-complete survey of the living room first. You tend to stop once you finish the top five items on your mental list—I’m going the rest of the way through. Then I’ll join you.” It was relatively polite, considering—though John knew very well that the subtext for “I’ll join you” was “I’ll recheck everything you touched.”

The next twenty minutes was much like the previous hour or so—no sudden finds, no expressions of wonder or disgust. At the end, Sherlock and Mycroft had one of their mysterious eyebrow-lift-and-lip-quirk conversations before turning to John and Anthea with resigned expressions.

“We’re wasting our time,” Sherlock said. “This place has been rather meticulously stripped—professionally, in fact. Moran must have called in help when he realized we were in Vienna. We need to head down to check Hebert’s flat before they get to it. They can’t yet be aware that we have his keys.” He gave John a tiny little smug smile at that—just to make sure that John recognized the wisdom of stripping Hebert’s corpse.

They gathered up their few possessions—coats, the two guns and the taser, John’s minimal med kit—and rode the lift down to the third floor, where Sherlock rummaged through Hebert’s key ring before pulling out the correct one on the first try (of course).

This flat was considerably smaller than Moran’s, and much less grotesquely ornate. Not tasteful, exactly, just inoffensive—brown corduroy couch, leather chairs, dark Old Master copies on the walls. They all froze momentarily when they heard voices coming from somewhere in the flat, before realizing that Hebert had left his telly on when he left.

They divided up their labour much as they had done in Moran’s flat—Anthea and Mycroft took the bedrooms and loos, John the kitchen and the living room, with Sherlock provided his own “last look” over everyone else’s work. The work was quicker this time—this flat was smaller, of course, but there were also fewer items in place to check, unlike the overstuffed layout in Moran’s rooms. The only find of any importance was a hidden safe that Sherlock found in the living room, unimaginatively placed behind a false wall panel. It proved to contain a large amount of cash, in a number of different currencies—Euros, British pounds, dollars, a few John didn’t recognize—as well as jewelry and a small stash of computer printouts. “Looks like he was planning to run,” Sherlock commented, before putting everything but the printouts back, closing the safe and replacing the fake panel.

John was just finishing up in the kitchen (while Sherlock hovered in the pantry, moving boxes and poking at walls) when Mycroft called suddenly from the master bedroom down the hall.

The telly they had heard upon entering the flat was mounted to the wall opposite the large bed. A news feed was running, with a studio announcer speaking excitedly in German while a series of film clips showed in the background. Flashes of close-ups showed people running, screaming, falling over one another. Mycroft picked up the remote control and hit buttons, and English subtitles began crawling across the bottom of the screen.
Terror in the City! Multiple gunshots fired. Three known dead, all members of the police. Public urged to avoid open spaces until more information is forthcoming.

Mycroft, Anthea and Sherlock were of course following the reporter’s speech in German, so they were considerably ahead of John. Abruptly, though, John’s background came to the forefront when yet another clip was played, this one captured inadvertently on a tourist’s mobile. As the tourist filmed a street performer in a city park, there was a sudden, echoing boom and a smiling policeman standing behind the performer jerked roughly and fell, while the phone was dropped amidst screams and blurry images of running people.

He looked in horror at his traveling companions. “That’s a sniper rifle,” he said. “That’s Moran.”

Chapter End Notes

The tiger-skin rug is a tiny nod to canon ACD for Moran. And pony-(or horse-) skinned couches? Real, unfortunately. I’ve seen them, and they’re every bit as heinous as you’d expect.
Crisis: Part Fourteen

Chapter Summary

The Hunt begins—but, as it turns out, both sides are playing. And one side doesn’t plan on playing fair.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

No one questioned John’s assessment—of course it was Moran. It was exactly the kind of thing Moran would do—incite chaos and disregard (or enjoy) the human cost. The question was, was there a purpose here, or was this just violence for its own sake?

Mycroft quickly turned to the desktop computer sitting on a handsome desk in the corner, booting it up with a dismissive sniff. “Not even password protected,” he said. “I agree with Moran—Hebert was not far from an idiot.” He quickly navigated to a variety of news feeds before accessing what was apparently an MI6 server, which contained raw situation reports and graphic photos of the dead.

Sherlock walked over to read over his shoulder. “All head shots, high-velocity shells, typical wounds. Only commonality is the victims’ employment in the city police force. My assumption would be that Moran views that as an additional layer of affront to us.”

“And he would be correct,” John said. “At least, for me.”

“An innocent is an innocent, John,” Sherlock said with a frown. “I have never understood differentiating between ‘worthy’ victims and ‘unworthy’ ones. Except perhaps when children are involved.”

“Yeah, I know,” John said with a sigh. It was evidence both of Sherlock’s well-hidden concern for true victims, and his failure to comprehend the weight society placed on what he would term ‘artificial segregations amongst the population as a whole’.

Sherlock didn’t react to John’s statement, instead choosing to drop into one of the kitchen chairs and start reading obsessively through all the shooting reports again. Within minutes he was so deep into his own head that he didn’t respond to external stimuli. John knew the signs—the detective would surface only after having exhausted every possible bit of data.

He turned to Mycroft and Anthea. “Should we do a deeper dive through this flat, while Sherlock works through whatever’s caught his attention? We never really finished before Moran called.”

They had nearly completed their second run through the flat, and Sherlock had just resurfaced from his mental deep dive, when Hebert’s phone suddenly shrilled out a pop song from Mycroft’s pocket. The noise startled the bureaucrat badly enough that he flinched violently, leading to a snicker from Sherlock and an ensuing repressive frown from Anthea.

Mycroft pulled out the phone and swiped the screen to answer. “Yes?” he asked, as if madmen phoned him out of the blue on a regular basis. Though, now John thought of it, they might do so, actually.
“I’m assuming you received my invitation by now,” Moran drawled. John repressed the urge to respond; he needed to leave this one to cooler heads than his currently was.

“Invitation?” Mycroft said, in tones of polite indifference. “Are you planning some sort of social function?”

“Not exactly,” Moran said. Indistinct traffic noises filtered through the connection, along with the occasional flutters of wind gusts buffeting the phone mouthpiece. “I’m planning a hunt. Shouldn’t surprise you lot—it’s my specialty, after all. And I did tell you that your noncompliance would be considered an act of war between us.” John heard the sniper moving—settling in a new position, presumably. Hopefully not a position with a sightline to their current location in Hebert’s flat.

“Fair enough,” Mycroft said amiably. “But, of course, that also assumes that we will be initiating our own hunt.”

Moran chuckled. “I’d be disappointed if you didn’t.” More movement in the background; the street noises grew slightly louder. “But I figured I might as well cut to the chase; I’m assuming you’re now looking for every bit of information you can glean from my flat. Good luck with that, by the way—my cleanup crew are very expensive, and very thorough. But, to get things started, I’ve left you some clues as to the starting point.” More movement, this time including metallic clicks. “As a matter of fact, I need to leave the last one now. Hang on.” A rough, scrabbling sound, a tiny sound of an inhale from Moran—and then a sharp, violent bang that was followed immediately by an echoing boom in the background. As John gaped at the phone, aware that the others were just as stunned as he, Moran suddenly came back.

“There, then,” he said cheerily. “That’s the final bit. I’ll wait for you for the next two hours. If you’re as good as you seem to think you are, you shouldn’t have any trouble figuring out where. If not—well, I may just have to lay some more clues. Cheers!” he finished, and the connection was abruptly severed.

“He just shot someone,” Anthea said weakly, as if wanting someone to contradict her.

“Yes, he did,” Sherlock confirmed. “And something about that shooting is our clue to his location. We have two hours to figure out its relevance. I suggest we get started.”

John had never seen Mycroft and Sherlock actually work together quite like this, linking those alien intellects towards a common goal. It was oddly fascinating to watch—or would have been, have the circumstances been less dire. John and Anthea did what they could, finishing their last searches through Hebert’s rooms, pulling up pages on the scientist’s laptop based on lightning-fast suggestions from the brothers, putting both Hebert’s and Anthea’s phones into service when the laptop wasn’t enough on its own.

The Holmeses exhausted multiple lines of inquiry before coming to a frustrated halt. Anthea, surprisingly, was the one who made the most valuable connection. “Maybe…we’re overthinking this?” she said hesitantly. John was interested to note that neither Holmes seemed offended by the question.
Encouraged by their response, she continued. “I mean, we’ve torn this place apart—there’s nothing here we didn’t already have from the place in Prishtina, aside from a truly appalling selection of porn that I could have done without seeing, thank you. Maybe we should be looking at the victims instead?”

Sherlock scowled. “We have already exhausted that line. The only common point is their status as police.”

Anthea shook her head. “No, that’s not what I meant. Maybe…oh, I don’t know. Maybe location is important, as well as the victims. Locations of the shootings within the city, I mean.”

Mycroft looked thoughtful. “I see no reason not to explore that,” he said. He pulled the laptop over and navigated to a Vienna tourism site, and handed Hebert’s phone to Sherlock so that he could do the same. Anthea watched over Mycroft’s shoulder as he looked at information on the first shooting site, while Sherlock wordlessly took the second.

““The first shooting was in Ottakring,” the bureaucrat said. “West of the central district. Formed on the site of a 1000-year-old village. Main historical building of note is the Wilhelminenberg Castle. No political history of note, but the castle does have an unsavoury past on two fronts—it had a strong Nazi presence before and during World War II, and, more recently, it was the site of a major scandal during its use as a girls’ orphanage, including rapes, beatings, and allegations of sexual trafficking.” He paused, his eyebrows rising. “One of the primary donors for the orphanage was a mock charity operated by James Moriarty.”

John moved to look at Sherlock’s screen—the detective was reading at a rapid pace, flipping through pages almost too rapidly to see. Sherlock finally stopped his scanning and spoke.

“The second was in Landstrasse, in a park adjacent to the Belvedere Palace,” he said. “The palace has been noted for its extensive collection of Klimt masterpieces, at least one of which proved to be derived from Nazi seizures of Jewish-owned art.”

Anthea raised her own eyebrows. “I’m sensing a theme here,” she said. She looked back at Mycroft’s screen, now showing the third site.

“The third site was at Schoenbrunn Palace,” he said. “During the 1930s, a small portion of the palace was used as a holding facility for the mentally disabled. Several hundred, mostly children and young adults, were labeled ‘lebensunwert’ by the Nazis—unworthy of life, essentially—and executed.”

John turned to the telly against the far wall, turning it back on to the news broadcast channel that had been blaring when they entered the flat. The reports had already begun to trickle in on Moran’s shooting. Sherlock rapidly translated the reports for John, while Mycroft tried to access MI6’s feed once again.

Ten minutes later, the frustration level in the room was high, and increasing rapidly.

“There are no historic buildings in this location. There are no Nazi connections. There is no connection to any of Moriarty’s operations. This appears to be simply a random street corner where a uniformed police officer was working on a traffic infraction by a taxi,” Sherlock said. He flipped through maps, far too quickly for John to read accurately.

John abruptly remembered something he’d seen, sitting next to the couch in the living room. He walked out of the room and came back with his prize, flipping to the back cover where a large fold-out map was tucked away. Anthea looked over inquiringly.
“It’s a tourist guide,” John said. “The map is for walking tours, for people who don’t want to rely on phone screens.” He folded it out on the desk (while Sherlock sniffed and pulled the phone out of the way, ostentatiously turning his back) and grabbed a black marker out of the central drawer. Anthea read off the addresses for him, and he put large black circles on each location. Then he stepped back and looked critically at his work.

His brief flare of satisfaction at finding something he could do faded quickly. Looking at the sites on the large map helped give him a better picture of the events, but nothing more—no great revelations, after all.

Behind him, Sherlock suddenly made a small sound—not quite an “oh” of enlightenment, but a wordless tone of recognition nonetheless. He reached over John’s shoulder and pulled the marker from his friend’s hand, then leaned over the map to draw a series of lines. When he was done, he gestured at the results. “It is, in an exact sense, a sign. Surprisingly literal—it would appear the selection of sites, and their corresponding Nazi links, were simply gamesmanship on Moran’s part. A red herring, no more. This is what he wanted to convey.”

And this, as it happened, was an arrow, pointing towards the banks of the Danube.

After the initial excitement of Sherlock’s discovery, things quieted quickly. They had a general direction now for Moran’s location, but no more—“towards the Danube” was useful in no more than a general sense. There was something here that they were missing, or rather, that Moran had neglected to share.

John watched Sherlock get increasingly agitated, beginning the manic pacing that was always a sign of internal unrest. After watching this frenetic activity for five minutes, John gritted his teeth and stepped into Sherlock’s path on the next circuit. The detective didn’t quite bounce off of him, but it was a near thing.

“What?” Sherlock snapped, eyebrows drawn down tight and angry.

John reached out and touched his palm to his friend’s forehead, then nodded. “Thought so,” he said. “How’s your pain level? One to ten?”

Sherlock pulled his head back roughly, looking away before turning back to give John a challenging look. “We’ve already established that I have fever. This is nothing new, and not currently relevant.”

“Yes, and I gave you medication which should, theoretically, have lowered said fever five hours ago. Now it’s back. So, new regimen—we give you paracetamol every four hours, like clockwork. I’m setting a timer on Anthea’s phone,” John said firmly. “And answer the question—pain level?”

Sherlock glared for a moment before recognizing John’s indifference to it. “Six,” he said crossly. “Seven if I move quickly.”

John flinched internally, but said nothing. A six or seven, given Sherlock’s high pain tolerance, was a nine for anyone else. “OK, then,” he said, ignoring the alarm bells clanging in his head. “We add pain meds to that prescription, on the same schedule.”

“No,” Sherlock said, in an uncompromising tone. “I have to be able to think.”
“Yes,” John replied. “You also have to be able to move. You asked me to help you manage the pain, so you could function. This is me, managing the pain.”

Sherlock scowled again, before sighing and holding out his hand. “All right,” he said. “But one, not two. I can’t afford to be sleepy.”

“Deal,” said John, and pulled both medications out of his jacket pocket to hand to his friend.

The clock continued its countdown to Moran’s two-hour deadline, while they searched obsessively through Vienna travel sites and maps. At the twenty-minute mark, Mycroft suddenly sat up straight in his chair, pivoting the laptop so that all of them could see. “Here,” he said. “The Judenplatz. The site of a large synagogue in the Middle Ages, and now the location of a Holocaust memorial. It’s the only thing in the indicated area with even an indirect connection to the Nazis, which seems to be Moran’s other ‘clue’.”

Sherlock looked at the page, scanned the information, and nodded. “Agreed,” he said. “The location is correct, based on the arms of the ‘arrow’; there’s nothing else I could find either.” He stood and reached for his parka, currently draped across the back of his chair. “Let’s go. We’ll have to hurry to get there by the deadline.” He paused, as a thought struck. "Though, to be fair, we don't actually expect to meet Moran, do we? Except perhaps seeing him moving away at high speed. We will need to develop a more comprehensive plan of action once we see what this site offers."

They rode the lift back down to the parking garage and climbed into the van, exiting back through the security gate and heading towards the center of Vienna. The trip would be roughly 15 minutes—they should arrive just on the edge of Moran’s timeline. It was almost half-four—approaching twilight, in this wintry season. Traffic was exceptionally light—John was surprised to realize it was Sunday. He’d lost track.

As they approached their destination, the streets grew narrower, the space between the historic buildings smaller. With the last turns, they entered into an area much unchanged from its medieval beginnings in layout.

Each of them scanned frantically for any sight of Moran, any indication of his presence. Anthea drove, navigating the narrow, winding streets quickly but carefully. Mycroft, seated next to her, was comparing the buildings around them to satellite views on Anthea’s phone, eyes darting back and forth like searchlights. Sherlock was doing much the same from his position next to John in the back.

John, though—John was trying to suppress a growing feeling of uneasiness. He chalked it up, at first, to paranoia, based on his knowledge of insurgent tactics. The walls were too close, and there were far too many places for hostiles to hide.

Just as Anthea announced they had reached their destination, pulling into a rectangular opening in the otherwise closely-packed streets, John’s senses all flared at once, taking in the clear space, the tallish buildings, the narrow, winding roads leading in. He reached urgently up and grasped Mycroft’s shoulder.

“It’s a trap!” he gasped. “Go back—it’s a trap! It’s a kill zone,” he shouted, as Anthea wrenched the wheel violently around. And they might have reached the street, might have pulled clear in time, but
for the wheezing of the ancient motor and the sudden lurch as Anthea tried to force the gears to shift more quickly than they were capable of. Just as they shot towards the dark opening on the far side of the square, Mycroft’s window exploded into a thousand shards—and the Great Man gave a gasp and fell headlong to the floorboards.

Chapter End Notes

The sites mentioned are as described, as is their history, though I did have to do a little hand-waving on the exact locations--it's not EXACTLY an arrow, but it's pretty close.

I spent WAY too much time nailing all of that down, actually!
Crisis: Part Fifteen

Chapter Summary

The hunt heats up, on both sides of the equation. And the attempts are hitting increasingly close to home.

Ignoring Sherlock’s horrified bark of “Myc!” from behind him, John launched himself over the seat back as Anthea swerved the van down side streets and alleyways, before coming to a stop under a heavy stone archway on the edge of a small, dark plaza. He quickly popped open the passenger door to give more room and light to examine his patient, currently curled across the floorboards.

Blood, covering the left side of his neck, jacket and shirt. A fair amount, but nothing suggesting arterial flow or even a large vein. As John reached out a hand to check the bureaucrat’s pulse, Mycroft’s eyes popped open—reassuring, again, though he winced at the gasp of pain Mycroft couldn’t suppress, his patrician features contorting into an agonized grimace.

Mycroft shakily put out one hand to try and lever himself off the floor, before John pushed gently against his chest to stop him. “Not just yet,” he said. “Let me see what we have first.”

Mycroft sighed and laid back, edging himself around until his feet slid out the open door and he could lie more-or-less flat, looking expectantly up at John. The “Well?” was silent, but understood.

John dug into his rear parka pocket and pulled out the pair of surgical scissors he’d salvaged in his mad grab for essential medical materials during their earlier race to safety in the parking garage. He carefully cut away Mycroft’s jacket and shirt, exposing pale skin and the beginnings of deep bruising, in addition to the ugly slash, roughly six inches long, burned across the top of his left arm and shoulder.

“Thank God,” John said, as he dug further into his pockets for gauze pads, a small bottle of antiseptic and tape. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sherlock’s face, staring intently over the back of the seat. Mycroft tried unsuccessfully to turn his head and look as well, but stopped with a flinch when the movement pulled on damaged muscle and tissue.

“It’s a clean graze—deep, in a couple of places, but I think butterfly bandages will work better than stitches because of the location,” John began, as he carefully cleaned and blotted up blood which continued to seep from the wound. “I’m sure it hurts, though,” he added, as Mycroft flinched yet again.

“A fair assessment,” the bureaucrat said in a strained tone. His hands were clenched at his sides, knuckles white.

“You were lucky,” Sherlock said from the back, in an odd voice that had Anthea looking over her shoulder at him in concern. “Had Anthea not already been moving away, in all likelihood the bullet would have traversed your neck rather than passing along the top of your shoulder.” His speech sped up, until the last few words blurred together. “The result would have entailed devastating damage to the spinal column and the esophagus, severed both internal and external carotids, and---”

“Sherlock,” Mycroft said, soft but firm. The verbal vomit from the back seat stopped abruptly. “I am
well,” he continued calmly. “John can confirm that this is uncomfortable, but not in any way dangerous.” He looked commandingly at John, who, after a moment’s pause, realized this was his cue.

“Yeah,” John said, focusing on finishing his cleaning in a consciously nonchalant fashion. “It looked bad, I’ll grant you, but I suspect your brother caught a bit of shock from the impact. Lots of bruising, and the shoulder will be quite stiff for a day or so, but should be fine.” He intentionally avoided looking at his friend—with Sherlock, too much reassurance could sometimes backfire.

There was a long pause from the rear. Finally, the detective gave a shaky sigh, audible throughout the car, before responding. “I…yes, I see,” he said, tone now formal and deceptively calm. “Would it be best to return to the flat? We will need to reconsider our approach, and it would be easier to complete your handiwork somewhere other than the floorboards of this less-than-pristine vehicle.”

John nodded, and reached out a hand to help his patient up, while edging himself out the open door. Mycroft levered himself back onto the seat with a grimace and a groan.

“I think we ought to, at least for a while,” John said, once he was sure Mycroft was sitting competently on his own. “And one of us is going to need to make a run to a chemist—we need more bandages and other basics.”

“Me, I think,” Anthea said. “I can use my German I.D. and credit card. It’s unlikely that any kind of facial recognition for me is out there, unlike the rest of you.”

“Is that still an issue?” John asked, perplexed. “I thought your mole had already been identified and dealt with—that spaniel woman,” he continued, with a glance at Sherlock.

Sherlock had recovered from his earlier shock. “We can’t guarantee that Norbury was the only agent involved,” he said. “Until Lady Smallwood has had a chance to complete the interrogation, we must assume that using official resources, or operating in the open, is a risk we can’t afford to take.”

“Yes,” Mycroft said. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t enlist certain trusted assets to make Moran’s life more difficult. Once we reach the flat, I will put some of that into motion. We can utilize some of the information obtained in Prishtina to limit his access to outside help and resources.”

“After I get painkillers in you, and some fluids and calories,” John said firmly. “Both of you, in fact,” he continued, looking at Sherlock. “You’re due for your next doses anyway.” Sherlock glared but stayed silent.

By unspoken agreement, they headed for Hebert’s flat, rather than Moran’s, preferring a dead man’s lodgings over the ornate awfulness of Moran’s penthouse. As soon as they entered, John headed to the kitchen to put together tea and a light snack—he’d seen eggs in the fridge, and there was a loaf of bread on the counter. While Mycroft tottered to the sofa and sat with a groan (with Sherlock hovering behind him, trying very hard to appear unconcerned), John and Anthea found a large skillet, plates and cups, and got things in train.
Leaving Anthea to finish up cooking duty (since she grudgingly admitted that scrambled eggs did fit into her limited skill set), John dug out his packages of medication and distributed them to the brothers, along with cups of tea. Mycroft took his with a sigh of relief; Sherlock frowned and turned the tablets over in his hands several times before reluctantly putting them into his mouth. It did not escape John’s notice that he didn’t argue about the pain pill, this time.

As soon as the quick meal was done, Anthea headed out to the chemist, armed with a list from John. Nothing requiring a prescription; none of them felt inclined to risk falsifying the scrip, but using John’s own license information was still too risky, even if the Austrian pharmacy would accept it. For now, John hoped he could keep Sherlock on a relatively even keel by following a steady dosing regimen with over-the-counter medication, supplemented by the oxycodone tablets.

By the time Anthea returned and John had changed his bandages and supplied him with a jumper from Hebert’s closet (laughably small, but warm), Mycroft was feeling much improved and ready to start the attack on Moran’s resources. He booted up Hebert’s laptop and accessed the secure MI6 server, then sent a series of commands before settling back in his chair, a smug smile in place.

“I have released the dogs, figuratively speaking,” he said. “Moran will now find that he is not the only sniper in town, nor the only hunter. And four properties in Vienna that were identified from the data at the Pristina location, presumably used as either bolt holes or storage, have now been either emptied or wired with small-yield explosives. A breach probably won’t kill him, but will certainly guarantee a very unpleasant experience.”

“‘Probably’ won’t kill him?” John asked.

The bureaucrat started to nod, then stopped with a wince as his damaged shoulder muscles protested. “Death is not necessarily the intent, at least not yet. We want him on the run, and perhaps damaged. There’s a reason he came to Vienna, and we still don’t know what it was—we had thought, initially, that he wanted to confer with Hebert about the dispersal of the viral caches. Knowing what we now know about Hebert’s actual function, however, that seems extremely unlikely. Yes, part of his motive now is to stalk us—but he was already here before he knew we had arrived, though he certainly knew, or suspected, that we had survived. So why did he come? To collect something, or to do something? On reflection, I think it rather important that we know the answer to that question before we use deadly force.”

“And the balance of probability would argue that it has something to do with the virus,” Sherlock said. “But what? It’s unlikely that he still has access to a mechanism to release the remaining caches directly; he would almost certainly require access to his servers for that, and we’ve long since blocked those from any external contact and taken them offline.” He looked thoughtful for a moment before continuing. “It’s possible that he could access them through a smart phone, but again, the release messages would be stored, and queued up, on the server. A phone, no matter how elaborate and expensive, simply doesn’t have the ability to store a program robust enough to control multiple remote locations on its own. He could, perhaps, control one site at a time by using his phone to interface with whatever control mechanism is attached to the cache itself, but that would require that he retain the identifying information—electronic, not physical—for the cache. Very unlikely indeed, since we know he outsourced the placement in the first place.”

“So, back to research, I assume?” Anthea said with a sigh. She settled at the table beside Mycroft, while John took her phone (since Sherlock had taken temporary control of Hebert’s, and was flipping through pages while muttering to himself). He wanted to check his email—he hoped to have additional information from Bertie by now.

After half an hour, during which time neither Holmes had surfaced enough to ask a single question,
John wandered back into the bedroom and switched the telly back on, hoping to find something in English to while away the time. He left the news channel they had watched earlier on, the sound muted, while he searched through the onscreen menu. Abruptly, though, the news report switched to a live broadcast, with a view of a row of modern indoor storage units, once of which now had a blackened hole where the door used to be. He turned on the sound, and shouted for Anthea.

The agent came trotting into the room just as the view onscreen switched to CCTV video, presumably from the security system in the hallway of the storage facility. The black-and-white picture focused on the row of doorways, and showed a tall man striding down the hall, duffel bag in his hand. The man dropped the bag, reached into his pocket for a key, and inserted it into the lock. There was a brilliant flare of light on the screen; when it cleared, the hallway was obscured by heavy smoke, which slowly cleared over the next minute. As the view re-emerged, the doorway was now open and rimmed by torn metal and smoke—and the man, limping heavily, was disappearing around the corner.

Anthea hustled back to the kitchen, John in tow. As she explained, Mycroft logged back in to the MI6 database, while Sherlock came to stand behind him. With a last click of keys, the laptop screen suddenly filled with the same CCTV footage, this time showing just a bit more of the man—someone at MI6 had done some impressive filtering work, artificially “clearing” the smoke to allow a clearer view of the explosion and its aftermath.

It was Moran, of course. Mycroft’s measures had borne fruit, quicker than they could have hoped. Moran was injured, clearly—no way of knowing how badly. And he now knew that the hunt had begun on their side, as well.

Mycroft sat back with an air of repressed pleasure. “Well, that was impressive,” he said. “I must remember to commend the local field agents—the level of damage was calculated very nicely indeed.”

“And I think it’s likely that Moran will need to lick his wounds for a bit,” John said. “So, should we take advantage of that? Get a bit of rest while we can? Mycroft, I know you, at least, need some downtime—another dose of painkillers and a few hours of sleep will set you up for a much better day tomorrow than you’d otherwise have, trust me.” He studiously avoided looking at Sherlock—trying to urge the detective to rest now would almost certainly backfire. But Sherlock might—might—relax if everyone else did so.

Mycroft looked at John, shot a quick look at his brother, and agreed. “Perhaps four hours? It’s just gone three now—if we’re up at 7, I can make a few queries as people return to their offices.”

“And I have first dibs on the shower,” Anthea announced. “I need that a whole lot more than sleep right now.”

Mycroft and Anthea took the two bedrooms. John changed the older man’s bandages again before heading back to settle across one end of the huge sectional sofa with an afghan and Anthea’s phone—he was too edgy to sleep. Sherlock flitted aimlessly between the laptop and Hebert’s bookshelves, looking tired and anxious. John resisted the urge to say anything, hoping that exhaustion would win
before he had to press the issue.

Finally, after fifteen minutes of pacing, Sherlock pulled a medical textbook off the shelf and settled on the far end of the sectional with a wince and a sigh. John didn’t comment, but put the phone aside and switched off the lamp next to him. When he carefully looked over at his friend ten minutes later, Sherlock had subsided onto his left side, eyes closed and the book sliding unnoticed to the floor. John carefully rose and went to the entry, returning with an armful of parkas, two of which he draped over Sherlock before settling back into his corner with the other two.

He had just started to drift off, listening to Sherlock’s breathy, light snores, when the wall of glass behind them exploded into millions of brilliant shards.
Chapter Summary

The gang works out a plan to outfox Moran. But, more than ever, they're running out of time.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the longer-than-usual lag between chapters--I had a knotty Fiddly Bit to work through in my head, and RL is still just being a stone-cold beeyotch.

John found himself huddled on the floor in front of the sofa before the last fragments of glass had tinkled to the ground, aware of Sherlock similarly arrayed perhaps five feet away.

He heard movement from across the room, coming from the hallway to the bedrooms. “Stop!” he shouted, while scuttling forward and gesturing to Sherlock to follow. “Stay there—we’re coming.”

“Two shots,” Sherlock panted behind him. “Has to be two shooters—too close together for one. Near-synchronous.” Arctic wind howled through the shattered panels, while bits of glass continued to crack off and fall to the floor.

“Are you hurt?” Mycroft asked urgently from the hall. “Are either of you injured?” The bureaucrat’s usual calm demeanor had abandoned him—he sounded near-panicked.

“Just some minor cuts,” Sherlock said, in a somewhat strained voice. “I put my hand down on some of the glass. John is uninjured as well,” he continued.

“Well, yeah, but you could have asked,” John huffed, while continuing to edge his way to the hall.

They both jerked violently as two more shots slammed into the wood paneling opposite the sofa. John had just reached the safety of the hallway and scuttled inside; Sherlock dropped reflexively back onto his belly, before determinedly starting to crawl again. “I am tired of this,” he snarled. “And it fucking hurts.” John’s head snapped over his shoulder to look closely at his friend—evidently Sherlock was due for a top-up on the pain meds, then. Profanity from the detective was never a positive sign.

The second set of shots seemed to be the last—after reaching the safety of the hallway, then the kitchen, they all waited for another barrage that never came. What did come, though, was the carol of pop music from Hebert’s phone, currently sitting in Mycroft’s bedroom.

Anthea was closest—she darted back for the phone and handed it to her employer, while John picked bits of glass from Sherlock’s blood-smeared palms. Mycroft swiped his finger across the screen to answer, and flicked the phone to speaker mode before laying it on the kitchen counter.
“Well,” Moran’s voice rasped out. “I hope I have your full attention.” There were indistinct noises in the background—wind, traffic noises, a rustle of movement.

“You do,” Mycroft said.

“But it smacks of over-compensation,” Sherlock added. “Over the top, really.” Anthea rolled her eyes.

Moran gave an ugly laugh. “Well, you’re the ones who tried to blow me up. Not what I’d call sporting, you know? So, the way I see it, this is tit-for-tat. Anyone bleeding, by the way? That would really add to my enjoyment.”

“Probably not as much as you were,” John muttered, still fussing with Sherlock’s hands.

Moran gave a crack of laughter. “Damn, Watson. Whatever happened to ‘first, do no harm’, mate?” he said. “I’m a little dinged up, granted. But hardly out of action, obviously. Nothing a good-sized plaster or two couldn’t handle. But you people—you’re just about to serve as target practice, unless you’re out of that building in the next five minutes. See, solid ammo isn’t the only thing I have. I figured a couple of explosive rounds would ruin your whole damn evening, you know? Now, I don’t especially want to use them—I mean, why damage one of my own flats? But I will, unless I see you depart post-haste in that piece of shite you call a vehicle. And yes, my compadre and I will be taking a shot or two as you go. But, hey, moving target—odds are probably in your favour there. Either way, the countdown starts now. Ta-ta!”

The phone clicked, then started emitting a steady dial tone.

Sherlock pulled his hands away from John and stood with a grunt of pain. “I am sure Moran is a man of his word. We should be putting together what we need, and moving to the lift,” he said, as he moved to grab Hebert’s laptop from the counter. John braved the howling wind from the shattered windows to get the parkas, and Anthea rifled through the bedrooms, grabbing their few possessions (plus a few of the unlamented Hebert’s jumpers) and stuffing them in pillowslips.

Mycroft, despite all the flurry around him, stood firm and flicked at Anthea’s phone, dialing a number and then typing in a sequence of complicated responses, while Sherlock looked on in mystification. When his brother began speaking rapidly in German, though, Sherlock’s face broke into a pleased grin.

“Brother Dear,” he breathed. “What an excellent idea!” John looked at his friend, eyebrows raised, but received no response beyond a smirk and a “you’ll see” from Sherlock.

They hustled quickly to the lift, but, once they reached the underground garage, Mycroft stopped them before they entered the elderly van.

“Wait a bit,” he said, walking over to the ramp leading to the main street and looking carefully out, without exposing himself to the view of anyone above. Sherlock came to stand next to him, both of them in attitudes of expectation. Anthea, who hadn’t heard Mycroft’s conversation, raised her eyebrows at John, who returned a mystified shake of the head.

John heard it first—an odd, quiet buzzing sound, electronic, clearly, but no indication of the source. Sherlock saw his face and reached out a hand to point John’s chin up (while John slapped at said hand, before realizing Sherlock’s intent).

It was still invisible, but there was something, some flutter in the reflections from lights on the surrounding buildings, that spoke of movement, high above. And suddenly there was sound—sound
that had John flinching back from the doorway before stopping himself. An impossibly fast burst of shots echoed down from above—automatic fire, then. Mycroft gave a pleased smile, and Sherlock smirked, before turning back to walk towards the van at a leisurely pace. Once they reached it, though, John grabbed a wiry arm.

“Alright, give—what the Hell was that? And why are we no longer in a hurry?” he said, aware that he was once again running behind the rest of the group, mentally speaking. Not a new sensation.

“Mycroft made a phone call to some friends,” Sherlock said. “Very special friends, who just happen to have access to a host of black-ops equipment, like, oh, drones with rapid-fire capabilities. If Moran isn’t dead, he’s certainly on the run himself, or at least rousted out of his nest across the way. Doesn’t mean he won’t be back, but it does mean that we needn’t concern ourselves with sniper fire while we leave.”

Anthea gave the detective a stern look, having conferred briefly with her employer. “It has nothing to do with ‘friendship’, and you know it.” She turned to John before continuing. “The phone call was to the Vienna head of the Interpol counter-terrorism unit. Mycroft reported a live shooter on the roof—completely accurate, though calling Moran a ‘terrorist’ may be stretching a political point.”

“We nonetheless need to be seen departing,” Mycroft said. “We know that Moran retains at least some of his local connections, even if, hopefully, his fellow sniper is now a non-issue. What we do past the point of departure, though, is something we can discuss en route.”

“En route to where?” Anthea asked. “If I’m driving, I’d prefer to know where to, just in case I have to do a little precision driving again.”

“Nowhere in particular,” Sherlock said, before his brother could answer. “I have an idea.” He trotted off into the shadowy distance of the parking garage, before returning four minutes later with a smug smile. “Got it,” he said. “We can go now.”

He did have an idea—and a good one, John thought. One of those things that were so obvious, once explained, that you felt like an idiot for not having realized it yourself.

Once they’d bundled themselves into the elderly van, Anthea tooled it deftly out of the parking garage and headed down the still-dark streets, leading gradually towards the center of the city. It was now just past 6 in the morning, and the early risers were starting to trickle onto the roads.

After perhaps ten minutes’ driving, the agent pulled to a stop on the edge of the financial district. “All right, then. What do you have in mind?” she demanded. “And no more theatrics, Sherlock. I’m tired, it’s cold, and we all could stand a hot meal. So where are we going?”

Sherlock gave her a disapproving frown. “I would have thought you already knew. Proximity to my brother hasn’t helped your mental acuity as much as one would think, evidently.”

Anthea gave him a look that would strip paint. “And proximity to John hasn’t improved your manners, either. So we’re even.” She looked to Mycroft. “One of you needs to explain. I don’t care which.”
Sherlock finally sighed and relented. “All right. It’s painfully obvious, though.” He looked suddenly at John. “John, what did Moran want us to do?”

“Leave the building?” John said, knowing that there was more to it.

Sherlock nodded. “Yes. And we have done so—the van is, if nothing else, easily identified. Moran’s presumption would be that this would put us at a disadvantage—we would need to find a new base of operations, but the use of the van would broadcast our location to his watchers. So, how do we combat that issue?”

“...not...um, not use the van?” John said.

“Yes. And...” Sherlock said slowly, waiting for John to proceed.

“Look for a bolthole?” Anthea interjected, when John came up empty.

Sherlock huffed. “You’re both missing the point. We need a base that Moran doesn’t know about. We can’t use the van to go to that base, or Moran will know, nor can we proceed on foot without being picked up on camera. So, yes,” he continued, as John prepared to leap back in, “we won’t use the van—we’ll leave it here and take alternate transportation. But where should we go? What would be the absolute, least-likely place for Moran to look, assuming he couldn’t track us by using the van and was forced to rely on other methods—tracking reservations at hotels, hacking CCTV cameras, etc.?”

The light suddenly dawned, for John at least. “Back to the building?” John asked. “But Hebert’s flat is open to the elements, even if the authorities aren’t already there. And surely Moran’s people have eyes on his penthouse.”

Sherlock nodded, pleased, now that John had gotten the point. “Yes, that’s true. But the building contains many other flats. So, I did a little research, before we left the garage. There are two cars in the garage that have not been moved in at least 10 days. Which means...?”

“That the owners are very likely out of town, or that this is simply a secondary residence,” Anthea said. “Which means that we can ‘borrow’ their flat for the time being, with Moran being none the wiser.”

“Yep,” Sherlock popped. “And we can also ‘borrow’ their vehicles, if the need arises.”

“Though hopefully our remaining time in hiding will be short,” Mycroft said. “I want to deal with Moran and return home to deal with the aftermath of all of this. It will be neither a short nor a pleasant process—not least because we must undertake a stringent search for the remaining caches of virus, even if their remaining toxicity is now limited by time.”


The plan, as it developed, worked perfectly. Once they had abandoned the van, they walked two
streets over to the rapid transit train station at Wien Mitte, in the heart of the city. Being seen on camera here was less of an issue that otherwise—if Moran thought they were abandoning the hunt and returning to London, it was all to the good. They boarded the train without difficulty, and would be at the airport in less than half an hour—this early in the morning there were few travelers, and no competition for seats. John dropped into his with a sigh—his body was reminding him that they had now been awake (with the exception of their brief nap before Moran’s ‘target practice’) for far too many hours.

He cast a surreptitious glance at Sherlock, and noted that the detective’s right arm was once more clamped to his side, his posture stiff and forehead furrowed. First order of business, then, before transportation, needed to be food, drink and medication.

As soon as the train pulled to the platform at the airport, John gave Anthea a significant look before speaking. “I think we should go ahead and have some breakfast before we look for a car,” he said, looking at Mycroft rather than his brother. “You could use it, I’m sure, and I’d be willing to bet those ibuprofen have worn off by now as well.”

Mycroft, by no means slow on the uptake, agreed immediately. “A fine idea, John,” he said. “I will confess I could also stand something with caffeine—I am finding it difficult to concentrate at the moment. A combination of fatigue and discomfort, I suppose.” Again, he didn’t look at Sherlock.

Their attempts at subtlety were in vain, of course. A disgruntled huff sounded from the man in question. “Please. Enough panto dramatics, don’t you think?” he said sourly. “I will agree that food and medication are in order. Can we just get on with it, or does Anthea have lines she needs to speak first?”

Anthea sighed, long and loud. “I don’t, but I can come up with some if necessary. Anything that gets me to a meal and a bed sooner. At this point, I’d be willing to sing them if required.”

That drew a reluctant smile from Sherlock. “I’ll hold you to that,” he said. “Perhaps later.”

Finding a place for breakfast was easy, and the results satisfying. They ended up at a comfortable little restaurant on the exterior rim of the airport—away from the main bustle of the concourses, but open, clean and well-staffed. Mycroft and Anthea did most of the talking—John just nodded and smiled, and ate whatever was placed in front of him, which proved to be both tasty and filling. Sherlock ended up picking at porridge with fruit, while the others opted for fry-ups. As soon as most of the food was gone, and cups of tea refilled, John dug into his pocket for his supplies and doled out medication to both Mycroft and Sherlock. This time, Sherlock took a full dose of pain medication without protest, looking at John as if challenging him to say something. John didn’t.

By 8 am, they had finished their meal and dealt with the rental of a late-model Mercedes at the airport counter, using Anthea’s German passport and credit card. (John found himself wondering just how high the credit limit on those cards must be—these ‘secret identities’ were apparently designed for those agents used to the finer things in life). The car had darkly-tinted windows, which made for a more-anonymous entry back into Moran’s building 45 minutes later.
Using Hebert’s entry card, they took the lift to the 20th floor, where Sherlock’s chosen absentee ‘landlord’ lived. John, without asking, took Sherlock’s improvised lock picks from his pocket and dealt with the door himself—Sherlock had, once upon a time, spent several hours teaching John a host of techniques, and insisted he practice on a semi-regular basis. It gave him a ready excuse to prevent Sherlock from having to crouch in front of the door, and his friend accepted the offering without comment.

This flat was attractive, if a trifle musty from disuse. It was clean—maid service, most likely—but had the slightly-neglected look of a property rarely inhabited. No personal items, no magazines or books lying about, and, in the kitchen, no food beyond a few bottles of wine and some packaged frozen dinners in the fridge. The beds in the three bedrooms, though, were made up with clean linens, and there were fluffy towels on racks in the en suites.

Anthea checked each room, before pointing to the last with a pleased smile. “This will do nicely,” she said. “I want to rifle through the closets and chests for clothing, but it can wait until I’ve had at least four hours’ sleep. You lot work out who gets the other rooms—I’m done for the time being.” And with that, she gave Sherlock a gentle shove to move him aside, and closed the door in their faces.

The rest of them sorted things out quickly. Sherlock and Mycroft opted for the largest bedroom—they would share, as neither of them planned to sleep immediately but rather planned a short research session, which would work best if they were together to explore possible options. John left them to it, went into the last bedroom, climbed into the soft, cool sheets and closed his eyes.

He woke, startled, to the sound of his name, and looked frantically around until he spied Anthea at the side of the bed, reaching for his hand to pull him up.

“What?” he gasped, as they hurried along the hall to the open door of the large bedroom, the one the Holmes brothers had chosen. It was now mid-afternoon, and light filtered through the large windows, revealing an empty bed, sheets and duvet thrown onto the floor. The room was frigid, an icy breeze rolling in from glass doors opening in the far wall. John started to walk forward, to close those doors, when Anthea grabbed his wrist.

“Wait,” she said. “Quietly and carefully.” Her eyes were wide and anxious, pupils blown with something like terror.

John edged his way to one side of the doors, looking carefully at the scene before walking out—Anthea was afraid, very afraid, of something.

The first thing he saw was Mycroft Holmes, kneeling at the base of a parapet wall around an expansive stone balcony offering an exquisite view of the city and the Danube, far below. The older man was shirtless and shivering, his bandaged shoulder spotted with fresh blood, his right arm extended up to the right, towards something John couldn’t see without stepping around the doors.
And then John stepped very quietly, very slowly, out onto the balcony towards Mycroft, and saw Sherlock standing on the ledge.

Chapter End Notes

I did tell you that there were a few more shocks to come...
Their options have all fallen away. There's no time left. This needs to end.

John was distantly aware of the breath whistling out of his chest, and fought off a determined attempt by his knees to buckle. The slight noise of his exhale caught Mycroft’s attention, and the bureaucrat carefully turned his head to reveal a bone-white face and a split lower lip, a trickle of blood visible down the corner of his mouth. His right hand was wrapped tightly around his brother’s right ankle—not that it would be sufficient.

Sherlock, however, didn’t notice, so lost in his own head that he continued to stare off to the horizon, carrying on an almost-inaudible conversation with no one. He was weeping, shoulders shaking and breath hitching in between his stuttering litany. The only recognizable words were “no” and “please”.

Anthea silently reached over and gripped John’s arm to get his attention, gesturing with her free hand towards Mycroft before edging over to Sherlock’s left, moving as close as she dared. Then she looked to her employer, waiting for his nod, before she held up her hand with three fingers extended. She then folded down each finger in turn: three. Two. One.

Just as the last finger fell, John barked “Sherlock!” The detective startled, badly, half-turning to look at that unexpected voice, while also wobbling on the ledge, his balance utterly off. But, as Sherlock wavered, the other half of Anthea’s plan kicked in—Mycroft surged up to grab his brother’s waist instead of his ankle, and Anthea lunged and caught both Sherlock’s left arm and his hair. While Sherlock wailed in distress, the three of them teetered backwards and landed in a heap at John’s feet.

Two things were immediately apparent: first, Sherlock wasn’t going to make this easy, fighting to free himself, though unable to muster much strength to do so, thank God. And second, he was completely off his head, raving about Moriarty and snipers and burning and… Burning. That was a third thing, actually. As the detective gave a final feeble thrust with his arms before going limp, his eyes rolling up and sliding closed, John’s forearm brushed across Sherlock’s cheek. He cringed at the heat radiating from that blotchy skin.

The other two had pulled away from Sherlock as soon as the struggles to escape faded, and now knelt on either side of the recumbent form, looking at John with wide eyes (and, in Mycroft’s case, an additional flow of blood from the split lip).

“Let’s get him to the bed,” John said, just to focus everyone on the task at hand. One step at a time.

As John and Mycroft slid Sherlock’s arms over their shoulders, Anthea rushed over to sort the strewn sheets and duvet back onto the bed. As soon as their patient was settled on his back, his breathing even but too quick, eyes still shut, John turned to his audience.

“Anthea, could you go grab my coat from my room, and whatever bits of my kit ended up in those pillowslips?” he asked, while moving quickly to the en suite to wash his hands. While he was scrubbing, he ran a quick eye over Mycroft.
“What happened?” he asked, while moving back to start stripping off Sherlock’s clothing. “How did he end up out there?” He tried, quite hard, not to make it sound like an accusation.

Mycroft responded without taking his eyes from his brother. He would need some care himself, John thought—fresh blood spotted his bandages, and he winced when he moved too quickly.

“I…we were asleep, finally,” the older man began. “We had spent time on the balcony earlier, to clear our heads. I know he intended to take another dose of his medications before we slept, but I believe he forgot—fell asleep. I woke to him speaking, moving frantically around the room, making no sense. When he moved towards the French doors, I…I may have panicked,” he added, his face working momentarily in a way John had never seen before.

Mycroft reached out, carefully, to start unbuttoning his brother’s shirt before continuing. “I grabbed him—tried to convince him to return to bed, so that I could get you. But that…he didn’t know me. He became more and more agitated, and finally fought me. I believe he thought me to be James Moriarty. He hit my shoulder, and the pain stopped me long enough for him to break away and get to the balcony. By the time I reached him he was on the ledge.”

Anthea came back at that point, hands full of medical materials, and took up the narrative. “I heard the noise—Sherlock shouted, once, and then I heard Mycroft fall and I opened the door, and saw Sherlock climb up. So I came for you, and here we are.” She held out John’s pitifully inadequate “kit”, then sat at the foot of the bed, watching the feverish man breathe.

Mycroft continued unbuttoning his brother’s shirt, while John took on the trousers. John was looking down, pulling the legs over Sherlock’s bony feet, when Mycroft suddenly froze, and Anthea made a tiny, appalled noise. When John raised his eyes, he saw the source of those reactions.

Sherlock’s chest had already been a roadmap of his injuries—the deep, round divot marking the original path of the bullet; the two four-inch surgical scars, crisscrossing it, that were the relics of his surgeries. Before now, the scars, while not completely healed, had been flat, with a medium-pink colour that would fade to silvery grey with time. Now, though…

The scars were no longer completely flat, but looked taut and shiny, as if being pulled tight over a drumhead. They were also an angry near-red, and, when John reached out carefully to touch, were searingly hot.

“Well, shit,” John breathed. “That’s that, then.”

“What?” Anthea asked. “What can we do?”

“No, a damn thing,” John said, with a challenging look at Mycroft. “We take him to hospital, right now.”

“We can’t,” Mycroft said, in a harsh rasp. “Not until Moran is found.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck about Moran at this point,” John snarled. “Sherlock needs a hospital. He needs surgery. He needs antibiotics. Because if he doesn’t get those things, very, very soon, he’s liable to fucking die!”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Mycroft near-shouted, before wrestling himself back under control. “And don’t you think I also know that, given Moran’s current location in Vienna, any hospital here, even an MI6 one, is potentially a death sentence?”

“We can guard him,” John insisted. “Stay in his room, stay in the operating theatre, 24/7—we have guns, we know what we’re doing.”
“And so do these people,” Mycroft replied. “Can we defend against poison in his drip? Can we test every bit of water, every mouthful of food, everything he comes in contact with, for the duration of his stay?”

The worst part was, he was right. John hated it, hated the helplessness of it. But he was right.

John swallowed this particularly bitter pill reluctantly. “All right, then. What do you propose?”

“Twelve hours,” Mycroft said. “Twelve hours, in which we focus on locating Moran. If need be, I will delegate the actual approach and removal—I believe I can find reliable resources for that.”

John thought about it. “It’s possible,” he said slowly, “if you can secure what I need, within the next hour. We can’t wait any longer than that, Mycroft—we really can’t. And, now that I think of it, I have a backup plan, if what I can do here isn’t enough: Ramstein—well, Landstuhl, really.”

The bureaucrat raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

“I’m sure you’ve been to Ramstein at some point—they hold a fair number of diplomatic meetings and ceremonies there. Among other things, it’s the main transfer base for American soldiers, and sometimes allied soldiers or non-combatants, being med-evac’ed from Afghanistan and Iraq. Those casualties are taken to the military hospital at Landstuhl—biggest US hospital outside of the country itself. World-class facilities, cutting-edge medicine,” John said, putting as much conviction as he could into the statement. “And, as it happens, I know the chief thoracic surgeon—he’s a mate of mine. Met him on my second tour, and worked with him quite a bit. He’s safe, Mycroft—I’d swear to it.”

Mycroft looked thoughtful. Anthea, though, chimed in on her own to sway the conversation.

“It’s a good option,” she said. “Moriarty, and, thereafter, Moran—they focused on Europe and the Middle East, with some dabbling in Africa. But not a lot in America, and I don’t believe I’ve ever seen intelligence that indicated Moriarty had plants in the American army or air force. CIA, yes, certainly. But not the conventional forces.”

“In a car, we could be there in seven hours,” John added. “If you could round up a helicopter we could trust, maybe half that.”

The Great Man nodded. “Yes, I can see the value in that. We will keep that in reserve. In the meantime, however, please give me a list of your requirements—whatever is needed, within reason. I think I have a method that will allow us to secure what we need without tipping off any watchers.”

John jotted down a list and handed it over, and Mycroft went back to the living room to make his mysterious arrangements. In the meantime, John enlisted Anthea to help in the more-immediate aid.

“I saw several bags of frozen vegetables in the freezer. Go grab them and bring them in,” he said. While the agent was doing that, John finished stripping Sherlock down to his pants, and folded the sheets and duvet at the foot of the bed, out of the way. Then he went into the en suite and returned with several small hand towels.

When Anthea returned, he wrapped the first bag in a towel and pushed it into Sherlock’s left armpit, folding his friend’s limp arm back down to hold it in place. Following his example, Anthea proceeded to create similar packs from each bag and hand them to John, who placed them under the unconscious detective’s other arm, in his groin, and across his forehead.

“It’s not ideal,” he said, when Anthea looked around hopefully for something else to do. “And it’s not enough. But we need to get his core temperature down, and this may be safer than putting him in
While they waited, John turned his attention to the elder Holmes when he returned, stripping off the sodden bandages for a better view of the wound Sherlock had battered. As Mycroft flinched, John pulled off the butterfly strips he had used originally and, with a shake of his head, cleaned the wound and reapplied new strips. “This is going to need stitching, now,” he sighed. “This will hold for the time being, but you need to limit movement. And we need to start you on antibiotics as well, when we can.” Mycroft sighed and nodded.

Twenty-nine minutes later, while Sherlock remained in a fevered sleep, a discreet knock sounded on the exterior door of the flat. Anthea moved to answer it, and a smartly uniformed man stepped in, laden with two large, insulated bags that he laid on the dining table. A second worker, behind him, brought in a third bag. Mycroft moved forward, took the small tablet held out by the first man, signed, and returned it, before ushering the deliverymen out the door while John looked on in bemusement.

As the older man began opening the bags, delicious smells wafted out.

“You ordered…dinner?” John asked, confused.

Mycroft nodded. “Yes—something that would go unremarked by any watchers, though I think it unlikely that any remain. We do need to eat, as well. But I think you’ll find that third bag is more to your liking.”

He did, indeed. In the third insulated carrier, John found bags of saline, thermometers, cannula equipment, syringes, alcohol wipes, vials of liquid paracetamol, and, best of all, two small bags of the high-strength, very specialized antibiotic Sherlock needed. Mycroft saw John’s smile at that, and gave a tiny smile himself.

“We were fortunate,” he said. “While a large supply was not readily available, these two doses were. I would hope they would be enough to carry us through our twelve-hour timeline.”

John nodded, already unwrapping his materials. “Yeah—each of these is good for at least six hours, if not eight, depending on what infusion rate I set.” He stopped in his preparations to look at Mycroft. “Thank you. This is…it’s still not great, but I think I can make things better for a time, or at least keep them from getting worse. Just as long as we all understand how very, very limited that time is.”

It took relatively little time to get Sherlock seen to—IV set up, thermometer readings done (39.0—even after the addition of the makeshift ice packs), antibiotic and paracetamol added to the saline drip line. The detective half-woke in the middle of John’s ministrations, but was still making no sense, muttering and tossing his head fretfully but not trying to rise, thank God.

After thirty minutes of checking Sherlock’s vitals and temperature (stable, and falling, respectively), John was comfortable with leaving him for a time, leaving the bedroom door open while he walked back into the kitchen, where Mycroft and Anthea were huddled around Hebert’s laptop while tackling large plates of wonderful-smelling food.

“So, where are we?” John said, pulling up a chair and reaching for his own plate. “And what can I do?”
Mycroft didn’t look up; Anthea pushed her phone across the table. “Here,” she said. “Can you check and see if you’ve received any updates from Bertie? It might inform how we approach this; if the virus is still a threat, finding the remaining caches takes a higher priority than they otherwise would. We know Moran can’t access them, so it’s not a case of him releasing them, but rather someone accidentally stumbling across one.”

“On it,” John replied, flipping through screens to access the email program. “What are you two researching?”

Mycroft abruptly surfaced—he was doing Sherlock’s trick of staying deep in his mind until certain triggers pulled him out. John’s question, evidently, qualified as a trigger. Flattering, that.

“We are re-evaluating all of the information gathered from the ‘clues’ Moran provided earlier. It’s not ideal—we can’t guarantee that his intent was to do anything more than set up his sniper location—but that and any new intelligence gathered by on-site MI6 resources represent all we have,” Mycroft said. His expression indicated how unsatisfactory that was.

John’s email popped up—he was gratified to see two brief updates from Bertie. The first was simply an updated analysis of the virus itself, mapping the genetic changes from the original Ebola source, and verifying that the transmission was waterborne—ingested, or absorbed through mucous membranes or open wounds. The second—

“The degradation of the virus has escalated,” he read aloud, aware of the intent focus of the other two. “The genetic flaw is now present in up to 90% of the samples, and is expected to continue to impact future generations, to the point where non-lethal replication—that is, non-lethal to the organism itself, so that the new versions survive—will cease entirely in a relatively short period of time.”

John’s smile, he saw when he looked up, was echoed from across the table.

“It’s pleasant to have one positive note,” Mycroft said. “But it’s not—”

He was interrupted by a tinny echo of pop music coming from the bedroom where Sherlock lay. All three of them leapt to their feet and sped down the hallway. John reached the phone first, looking over to see if the noise had disturbed his patient—not visibly, at least.

He flipped the phone open, started to speak and was cut off by Moran’s coldly furious tones. “Get Holmes on the phone,” he snapped.

“Which one?” John replied sarcastically. “We have a couple, actually.”

“The one who got my friend killed,” Moran snarled. “Do it now, before I do something very unfortunate.”

“I’ll save you some time, then,” John said, and flicked the phone over to ‘speaker’ mode. “Go ahead.” He looked to Mycroft, whose stance was now stiff and patrician, the consummate government functionary.

“What would you like, Mr. Moran?” Mycroft said. “I am heartened to learn that our little surprise was at least partially effective. Do you wish to discuss terms of surrender?”

“I want to discuss how truly stupid it is to push me into a corner, you pompous piece of shit,” Moran said. “We both know surrender was never going to come into question for me.” A series of odd sounds were audible in the background: metal shifting, water dripping, an unusual echo. “But it just might, for you. Because if I don’t see you, at a place I designate, at exactly 10 PM, I’m going to
implement my very own Doomsday protocol. I’ll even be generous—I don’t care about Watson, or the woman—just the two Holmes boys will do. And I’ll even make you a little promise—I won’t shoot at you, and I won’t have anyone else do so either.”

“And what would lead me to believe that you have such an option still available?” Mycroft asked, in tones of polite inquiry. “Your lack of access to your computer system would seem to limit your abilities rather severely.”

That odd echo came again, before Moran replied. “Not everything requires a computer. There are very, very many situations that require only one man in the right place, at the right time, with the right weapon. Watson knows—it’s how the Army works, part of the time. And I’m a sniper—I’m used to being that man, so I feel right at home. You’ll have to take my word for it that I have such a weapon—but I assure you I do, and I have damn-all to lose at this point. Now, I’m sending the location to your phone as soon as I hang up, and I expect you both there, at 10 PM. Bells are optional, but keep a leash on Baby Brother’s mouth or I may just cut my losses and kill both of you anyway. Ciao!” The line disconnected with a click.

“Is it necessary to say, ‘it’s a trap’?” John asked. “And that you shouldn’t, under any circumstances, appear as requested, even if Sherlock were physically capable of it?”

“Of course, it’s a trap,” Mycroft said. “The only question is, why does he want us there? This particular location?”

“It doesn’t matter,” a hoarse voice said from the bed behind them. “None of it matters, and we don’t really need to know what he plans. Because I know where he is.”
Chapter Summary

Sherlock lays out his conclusions, and the gang considers their options. But, as is often the case, they find that life is what happens while you were making other plans.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It doesn’t matter. None of it matters, and we don’t need to know what he plans. Because I know where he is.”

The three other occupants of the room turned as one towards the bed, where Sherlock, eyes red-rimmed and glassy, was looking back at them expectantly.

“Well?” he huffed hoarsely, after a moment’s stunned silence stretched just a bit too long. “Does no one want to know where Moran is, or are we planning to simply ignore him, in the hopes that he will get bored and go away?”

That bit of minor snark broke the spell; John headed determinedly over to the bed, picking up his stethoscope and thermometer as he went.

He dropped onto the bed by Sherlock and gently pushed the detective’s head to one side, popping the thermometer into his ear. While waiting for the results, he looked sternly at his friend.

“How do you feel? Honest answer, please,” John said, glancing at the thermometer’s final number with a frown.

“How do you feel? Honest answer, please,” John said, glancing at the thermometer’s final number with a frown.

About as you’d expect,” Sherlock said, in a near-whisper. “Head hurts; chest hurts; it’s much too warm in here. Other than that, I’m in tip-top shape.” Mycroft, standing now at the head of the bed, rolled his eyes.

“Can you eat something?” Anthea asked. “We got you some lovely potato soup.”

Sherlock’s throat worked suddenly. He closed his eyes for several seconds, then opened them carefully. “Evidently not,” he finally managed.

John sighed. “That’s a bit of a problem, then. I don’t have any injectible pain meds—well, other than that one half-dose I’ve been carrying for emergencies.” He peered closely at Sherlock. “Is this an emergency, or can you wait a few and see if your stomach settles once your temp has dropped?”

“Wait,” Sherlock said. “I need my brain, and my common sense—well, at least as much of that as I normally have. As my brother will tell you, morphine makes the latter completely disappear.” He paused, then gave a wry grin. “Though I do rather enjoy that feeling.”

“So you’ve said before,” John said. “Which is why I never kept it in the flat.”
“And a wise move that was,” Mycroft said, with the air of someone summarily cutting off a topic of conversation. “Now. Shall we discuss Sherlock’s conclusions, while he is still coherent enough to express them?”

And there it was—that momentary flash of the inherent ruthlessness that Mycroft could wield, even when John knew he was concerned about his brother. Sherlock, oddly, seemed pleased. John sighed and held his peace.

Sherlock looked to Anthea. “Did you record Moran’s last call?” he asked.

The agent nodded. “I’ve recorded all of them,” she said. “Do you need a replay of something?”

“I don’t, but you will, shortly,” the detective said, his voice still thready—deep breathing was right out, apparently. “You’ll want to listen to the background, not to Moran. But we’ll get to that.” He looked over at John. “Did you receive any final reports indicating the infection route of the virus? How it’s transmitted?”

“Yeah,” said John. “Water-borne: either ingested or inhaled, or through mucous membranes or an open wound. It’s a little confusing for the investigators, though. In the initial attacks, it seemed very unlikely that everyone in the room would have drunk water, or even tea or coffee made with contaminated water. There would always be someone in a room of 50 or 100 people who would abstain, yet everyone was infected.”

“Mycroft—pull up the photos from the early scenes on the laptop,” Sherlock commanded.

“Why?” his brother asked, while nonetheless doing as requested.

“I recalled something, when I heard Moran speaking on the phone. The noise—water dripping, running,” Sherlock began. “Look at the rooms in the photos, not the victims. In the background, there is at least one important feature in each room that was overlooked in the investigations.”

John looked over Mycroft’s shoulder, as did Anthea. Mycroft rapidly flicked through photo after photo, before stopping abruptly. “Oh,” he said softly. “I see. How unfortunate.”

John made a frustrated noise, and noted Anthea’s annoyed face over Mycroft’s back. “I’m glad you see—now can you enlighten the rest of us?” he snapped, aware that his temper was fraying but unable to stop himself.

Mycroft gave a long-suffering sigh, but responded calmly enough. “In each of the original locations, there is an installed piece of equipment along one wall—something very useful, in a cold climate in the middle of winter. An automatic humidifier, to add moisture to the air. They are often used to make rooms more comfortable, and have been shown to reduce the incidence of some respiratory ailments.”

“So, anyone entering the room would basically breathe in the virus,” John said. “That’s—that’s horrible, actually. Efficient, but horrible.”

“Yes,” Sherlock said. “That also explains why the infection rate was lower in the subsequent attack—again, not everyone would have ingested liquids, and the ballroom at the hotel in Vienna did not contain a humidifier. That does, however, argue that the lower rate of infection in Vienna may have resulted at least partially from a lack of exposure, rather than a steep decline in the viability of the virus itself.”

“It was both, then,” John said. “The decline is definite, and accelerating, thank God.”
Sherlock tried to shift himself in the bed, winced in pain and subsided. Anthea reached over wordlessly, lifted his shoulders and tucked pillows carefully behind him, and received a grateful glance in exchange.

“The tie-in with water was the clue,” he continued, as if Anthea’s move had never happened. “Well, that and something that turned up in our research for Moran’s initial location.” He pointed to his brother. “Pull up the information on the Danube Canal area.”

Mycroft complied, flipping through screens almost too fast to register. His eyebrows raised suddenly. “The lock?” he asked, looking to Sherlock.

Sherlock nodded, briskly, then froze, the movement evidently wreaking havoc on his pounding head. John quickly reached over and handed him water from the side table. Sherlock sipped, very slowly, his eyes closed. A minute passed, two, then he sighed and handed the glass back to John and opened his eyes.

“If you read the description of the lock and weir, it tells of the structures around the canal, all of it in the center of the area Moran originally led us towards,” he said, his voice still soft, near-whispered. “The Nussdorf complex spans the Danube canal; it was built in the 1890s, and the original buildings for the works still stand. But it’s what’s underneath that’s of interest to us, and, I strongly suspect, to Moran.”

Mycroft picked it up from that point. He gestured to the laptop screen, now displaying several photos of the canal, buildings, and what looked like a sluice, brimming with green-brown water. “There’s an underwater, and subterranean, hydroelectric plant that uses the river’s flow through the canal. Tiny, by the standards of large dams—12 underwater turbines—but functional, producing enough energy for 10,000 Viennese households.” He flipped back to an informational screen. “The controls and access to the turbines are underneath the buildings, and the canal itself,” he added.

Sherlock looked now at Anthea. “Play the phone call,” he rasped. “Adjust the sound loud enough so that the background noises are clearer.”

Anthea tapped on the screen, and Moran’s voice boomed from the phone again. This time, though, they concentrated not on Moran’s pontificating, but rather on the odd sounds—water dripping, as well as a sound that might be water flowing through a constricted area; rhythmic metallic sounds, most likely equipment of some kind; an after-echo from Moran’s voice, indicating the presence of a large space with hard surfaces around him.

“I believe you may be correct,” Mycroft said slowly. “And, if you are, that opens a wealth of possibilities for what his final weapon may be.”

John could follow this one, unlike some of Sherlock and Mycroft’s other half-explanations. “He plans to use the canal, and thereafter the river, to distribute the virus?”

“Yes, almost certainly,” Sherlock said, then coughed, cringed in pain, and dug his fingers into the bedding before calming. John handed the water back and waited while his friend sipped yet again. Mycroft forestalled Sherlock’s exhausted efforts to continue.

“It would be catastrophic,” the bureaucrat began. “The presence of the sluice alone, and the underwater turbines, would mean that a quantity of the virus would be rapidly transported downstream to the main body of the Danube, which runs across most of the continent, passing many large population centers on the way. The turbines would ensure that, rather than passing along in a relatively-contained bolus, the virus would be forcibly mixed and separated, contaminating a wider sample of the flow.”
Sherlock, recovering himself, leapt back in at that juncture. “The unique design and placement of the power plant, however, could be the most devastating aspect. Remember the initial attacks—what likely killed those victims was the humidifier, encapsulating virus in tiny water globules. And, when the turbines churn, though most of the water movement remains below the surface, there is nonetheless substantial disruption at surface level when the engines are fully engaged. The water will splash, will create…”

“Mist,” Anthea said. “Overspray. Whatever you call it, that picturesque sluice dumps large quantities of moisture directly into the air, right in the heart of Vienna, where thousands of residents and tourists pass every day.”

There was an appalled silence, as they looked at each other in recognition of just how terrible this could be. Even with the virus rapidly degrading, the likelihood that none of the people exposed would contract the illness—and, very likely, die—was vanishingly small. Anyone with a compromised immune system would be at particular risk, as would children and the elderly.

“So, what’s the plan?” John asked. “Because we can’t show up at his 10 PM location, but we also presumably can’t just waltz into the hydroelectric-whatever and expect to take him down.”

“Quite,” Mycroft said dryly. “He almost certainly has cameras set up. And if, as we suspect, he has located his cache of virus down in the access area to the turbines, he’ll have confederates to ensure privacy. It’s not open to the public, but it does require constant maintenance, so the presence of Moran’s equipment would be glaringly obvious.”

From there, they launched into a rousing discussion of possible approaches, all of which were rejected for one reason or another. They had been talking—arguing—for more than ten minutes when Anthea caught John’s eye and pointed over to the bed.

Sherlock now laid limp on the pillows, eyes closed and breathing slow and even. Exhaustion and illness had finally caught up the Most Stubborn Man on Earth, and he was now down for the count. Mycroft’s voice trailed off as he, too, observed, and the three of them quietly edged out of the room, pulling the door shut before continuing the discussion in the kitchen.

Half an hour later, they had come to an uneasy consensus. While not ideal, their best option was to create a distraction. Moran would know, or at least suspect—he wasn’t stupid. But, if the distraction was good enough, the sniper would be forced to deal with it, which meant leaving his underground lair and, hopefully, leaving the mechanism, and the virus, open for them to deal with.

Roughly two minutes after they reach their conclusions, John noticed the time—Sherlock was due for a change of IV bag. He pointed wordlessly towards the bedroom and left the other two in the kitchen, while using Anthea’s phone to recheck the optimal drip rate for the antibiotics. That meant that he didn’t notice the change in the bedroom until he actually reached the bed.

The empty bed. The bed lacking a Sherlock.

“Fuck me,” John barked, hustling into the en suite, hoping against hope that his errant friend was there. No. And, on closer examination, John realized that Sherlock’s parka, previously dropped in the corner of the room, was missing as well.

As Anthea and Mycroft hurried in, drawn by the tone of John’s voice, John realized another thing that was missing. His own parka, previously dropped in a chair set by the side of the bed, was now draped across the foot. And, as he rummaged through the side pockets, he found exactly what he feared: though the last blister packs of oxycodone were intact, his last syringe, his ‘emergency’ half-dose of morphine, was gone. A quick rustle of the rumpled bedding revealed the discarded syringe,
now empty.

“He’s done a runner,” Anthea said, in an astounded tone. “That complete berk. And he’s made sure he’s drugged to the gills, to boot. How on Earth is that supposed to help?”

Mycroft, who looked as pale as the bedsheets, answered slowly. “It is, I suspect, the only way he could get himself out of the bed and functioning, at least marginally.” He looked to John. “Am I correct in assuming that such ability will be extremely short-lived?”

“To say the least,” John said. “The fluids and the IV paracetamol have dropped the fever temporarily, but the antibiotic hasn’t had time to do anything yet. I give him an hour at the outside—I’d normally say far less, but I know how determined he is.”

Mycroft sighed. “The only positive, and it is a very small positive indeed, is that we know where he’s going. The only question is whether he is physically capable of getting there.”

Behind him, Anthea made a small sound. “There may be a little more to this than we thought,” she said, reaching out to pull a piece of paper, perhaps three inches square, from the blankets.

The paper was inscribed with Sherlock’s spidery script, and contained only three words: FORLORN HOPE. INHIBITIONS.

And it was just at that point that John, still holding his parka clutched in his right hand, realized the other thing that was missing—his gun was no longer in the rear pocket.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sure you're not shocked to hear that the lock, and the hydroelectric plant, are real, and operate just as described. And I strongly suspect that, if some madman DID release something just to the rear of the turbines, it would react just like this. (Gawd—I'd make a hell of a terrorist, wouldn't I?)
Sherlock felt *fantastic*. There was still some pain (which a small, distant voice kept trying to call to his conscious attention—that was a Bad Thing, apparently). But the beauty of morphine was that he didn’t *care*—that lovely, warm blanket removed all concerns to a comfortable distance. And the anxiety, which had been rasping his nerve endings these past days like steel wool, was gone. He felt strong, and calm, and very nearly invincible. His plan would enable them to deal quickly with Moran, and then they could all finally go home.

He had already made several strong mental reminders to have a serious discussion with John about a workable plan for long-term consumption of morphine. A low dose—nothing *troublesome*, and Sherlock was perfectly willing to have it monitored by a physician (though John, of course, would be the optimal choice for that, Sherlock was willing to stretch his tolerance for the end result. As long as whoever John chose would simply issue the morphine without any kind of tedious attempts at “caretaking”). Sherlock was confident he could convince John of the wisdom of such an approach, especially if he revealed the true extent of his recent issues with anxiety. Potentially mortifying, yes, but Sherlock believed that the ends justified the means in this instance.

Sherlock had found the first few minutes of his current endeavor rather difficult—his balance was off, and rapid movement made his head swim. That had quickly faded, though, as the lovely morphine reached its full effect. By the time he reached the street and flagged down a taxi, he was flying, in a way he hadn’t been since recovering from his gunshot wound. He had to repress a sudden urge to giggle. That pulled him up short momentarily—perhaps a *slightly* smaller dose would be wiser, going forward. Another mental note, then: John would know best on dosage, presumably.

As his taxi pulled up to the western side of the Danube canal, Sherlock spent several seconds pondering how long it would take Mycroft and the others to find his note and be on their way. He was particularly pleased that his feigned sleep had fooled his brother; a giggle very nearly bubbled to the surface again.

*Definitely* a reduction in dosage.

Sherlock was certain that, once the rest of the group realized he was gone and reviewed his note, Mycroft would immediately recognize his meaning for the first portion of his message and have everyone moving post-haste. The only question (and Sherlock felt a momentary flash of what might be guilt at doubting his friend) was whether John would remember the context of Sherlock’s clue for him and act accordingly. He hadn’t had the time to write out anything further—John would have set a reminder to change out Sherlock’s drip bag promptly, and Sherlock had needed to be well out of
Sherlock walked across the bridge near the weir with a small gaggle of American tourists, tittering and flashing their mobiles at every passing sight. It was late, and quite cold—he wondered idly how cold the water would be, if he “accidentally” stumbled and one of the annoying tourists happened to fall over the rail. He could hear John tutting in his head, though, and managed to resist the impulse.

The area was quite well-lit, the decorative lights reflecting brightly off the relatively still water to the north of the weir. The beautiful fin-de-siecle buildings were closed for the day, but the grounds and walkways along the canal were still accessible. The far walkway, the one along the eastern side of the canal, would be his entry point—according to the information he’d studied on the website, there were a series of tunnels which ran under the buildings, and gave entry to the service areas for the turbines. While these tunnels were easily entered from inside the (closed) works buildings, these exterior doors existed for access by service people. Restricted access, of course, but Sherlock had his olive-fork-and-wire lock pick set with him, which had proven surprisingly versatile. Unless the locks were electronic (which seemed unlikely, given the age of the facilities) he didn’t anticipate any problems.

That proved an accurate assessment; the lock was stout, but unsophisticated. The entry was quick, but working with the picks, crouched under a bridge abutment, was uncomfortably painful, dulling his sparkling mood. His spirits recovered somewhat, though, once he stepped over the threshold into the dark tunnel—as soon as he confronted Moran, the pieces would all be in play, ready for the final wrap-up. And then they could go home. He wouldn’t even object to more time spent in hospital, if it meant that he could once again take a deep breath.

Because that was becoming an issue. While Sherlock had been fine, more than fine, on the trip here, and in the walk across the canal, the effort of unlocking the doors had now truly awakened the deeper pain in his chest—a pain the mild dose of morphine was not equipped to handle. He was once again aware of breathing shallowly, which was adequate for walking, but not running—and certainly not for any form of combat. That realization was beginning to bleed off his lovely morphine bliss. At the same time, he felt an alarming wave of heat run through him—the kind of heat that had coursed through his veins earlier in the day, before he had lost himself.

He gave himself a stern talking to, and refocused on the task to hand. True combat was never in the cards. All he had to do was grab, and hold, Moran’s attention until the plan was set in motion.

It took longer than he would have hoped to find Moran’s lair. While the tunnels were large, dry, and reasonably well-lit, there were nonetheless rather a lot of them, going in several different directions. Sherlock’s first guess had led him initially towards the canal and, presumably, the turbines, but had then curved back to access the mechanisms that controlled the sluice gates. He was forced to backtrack a considerable distance, now troubled by his flagging energy level.

It ultimately took three tries to locate the correct tunnel, a side-run coming off a dark corner he had ignored on his first pass. He was forced to negotiate another lock, groaning as he first tried to crouch, then was forced to kneel instead. By the time he was done, the unpleasant swimmy feeling in his head was back, and he was becoming alarmed—he had to finish this soon, or he might be unable to
do so. He also was having flashes, just brief flickers, of people in the corner of his vision—not fever dreams, exactly, but unsettling, since he was fairly sure that no one was actually there. But only fairly sure—and perhaps that was a problem as well?

When he slowly, painfully, rose from unlocking the heavy metal door, he opened it a tiny crack, and was relieved to hear voices echoing from the corridor beyond. Given the late hour and the location, this was extremely unlikely to be anyone other than Moran and his people. The “people” aspect, though, was an immediate issue—he needed his meeting with the sniper to be a solo effort.

He crept down the corridor, as silently as possible, listening intently to get an accurate read of Moran’s location, and the number of individuals present. He was relieved, desperately so, when he realized that the conversation he was hearing was one-sided: Moran was on the phone, rather than speaking with someone in the room with him.

He hovered outside the large room, waiting for Moran to end his conversation. Then he squared his shoulders, took as deep a breath as was possible, and strode forward to greet the man who planned to kill thousands of people.

Showtime.

John

John looked at Mycroft, and didn’t see the level of confusion registered on Anthea’s face.

“You know what it means,” he said, pointing with his chin towards the note. “You know what he’s saying.”

Mycroft nodded. “For the first portion, at least. The second is less obvious—we’ll get to that in a moment.” He picked up the small slip of paper. “‘Forlorn hope’ is a reference to an outmoded tenet of the British army—used from the Middle Ages right up through the Napoleonic Wars, perhaps even later. Had you heard of it in your military training?” He looked enquiringly at John.

“Just the name,” John said. “Don’t think they ever gave any real explanation—I think I remember an instructor saying something about it in reference to courts martial.”

“That is not inappropriate,” the bureaucrat said. “A portion of the men involved in Forlorn Hope actions were those either under suspicion for some reason, or formally charged with serious crimes that would otherwise lead to court martial and dishonourable discharge, if not summary execution.”

Anthea raised her brows at the two of them, in a “get to it” kind of way. Mycroft huffed gently but continued.

“The basic concept was of soldiers making a death-defying first charge in a major action—often in the context of an assault on a fortified position or building. The relation to soldiers under suspicion, including suspicion of past cowardice, goes as far back as the ancient ‘trial by ordeal’—the thought
that God would prove their innocence or guilt, depending on the outcome of the battle,” Mycroft said. “But in the purest military sense, it was soldiers, sometimes junior officers wishing for promotion, who volunteered to lead what could be a deadly attack. To concentrate the defenders’ forces on what could sometimes be no more than a diversion, while the mass of the attackers proceeded from a different front. It could even refer to a ‘Trojan horse’-like sortie, where the members would present themselves as non-combatants or deserters, to gain entry by pretense. It is this meaning, I believe, that is Sherlock’s intent—by going to Moran on his own, he removes the necessity of our finding a means to draw Moran out. Moran will come to us.”

“If he doesn’t just kill Sherlock and throw the body at our feet,” John snapped. “In what world is this a good idea?”

Mycroft hesitated, before speaking slowly. “I believe he viewed it as the only way to advance matters quickly, which he knew was a necessity,” he said. “It would never have been my choice. But I can’t deny the logic.”

John shoved down a surge of savage anger at that—he knew, despite Mycroft’s stoic demeanor, that the bureaucrat was deeply worried for his brother. In this, Mycroft was just like Sherlock: he would always see painful truths, and feel obligated to voice them.

“So, how do we take advantage of this, much though I hate the very idea of it?” Anthea asked bitterly. “Since Sherlock has chosen once again to be a sacrificial lamb.”

“I believe we must wait on Moran,” Mycroft said. “The whole point of Sherlock’s actions was to gain direct access, without having to try to breach Moran’s defenses. While I believe we would be wise to head towards the—”

The phone, Moran’s phone, suddenly chirped rather than rang—a new text message. Mycroft stepped to the nightstand and picked it up, flicking open the messaging page. “I HAVE SOMETHING OF YOURS,” he read aloud. “There is also an attached video file, labelled ‘security footage’.” He clicked on the link and placed the phone flat on the bed, so that all of them could see.

_Sherlock_

Sherlock hadn’t remained unnoticed after all. As Moran ended his phone call, the sniper suddenly raised his voice.

“C’mon in. I’d say the water’s fine, but in this case that’s really not quite true,” he said, with a nasty chuckle.

Sherlock stepped imperiously through the doorway. He didn’t speak, simply raised his eyebrows and waited. Moran stepped in to fill the void—people were so predictable.

“So, you decided to jump the gun on our meeting,” Moran said. He casually held up a large pistol, pointing it at Sherlock’s head. “But I don’t recall giving you this location. Bit rude, that.” He looked theatrically around and behind Sherlock. “And you seem to have lost your entourage.”

Sherlock snorted derisively. “If you know anything about me, you will be aware that manners are not my strong suit. And you no longer warrant my brother’s full attention—now that your intent is understood, it can be easily dealt with from a distance. I just came out of idle curiosity—wanted to see your intended Weapon of Doom.” He made sure Moran could hear the sarcasm in his words.
Moran flushed, but didn’t respond as his face clearly indicated he wished to. The pistol didn’t waver. Better control than Sherlock expected, that.

“Curiosity has always been your downfall, hasn’t it, Junior?” Moran asked, with a vicious little smile. “Jim lead you by the nose, right to a really big ‘downfall’, after all. And here you are again—all by your lonesome, with me.” He shook his head in mock sorrow. “For someone so brilliant, you’re really quite stupid in your way.”

“Well, we make good company, then,” Sherlock said, with his best Normal People grin. “Because this whole plan reeks of something concocted by a third-former with access to too many comic books.”

“I know very few third-formers who can kill a thousand people or so with the flip of a switch,” Moran snarled.

Sherlock felt a distant pleasure at getting under Moran’s skin—though that distance was a problem, actually, as he was suddenly starting to lose the plot. He had to remind himself of his intent—he kept getting distracted by the shadows, unsure whether something, or someone, was moving over there. That feeling of unseen observers was back. He stared, hard, into the corners of the room, blinking and rubbing at his eyes.

He was jerked back to reality by Moran’s voice.

“What the hell are you looking for?” Moran snapped. “I know it’s not the rest of your party. You’re on your own—perimeter alert only picked up one individual.”

Sherlock leapt to cover his lapse. “Still looking for the Weapon of Doom.” This time he added air quotes.

Moran was unimpressed. “That’s not a bad title for it, actually. And it’s not precisely a weapon—it just holds something that is. But here’s the thing—I have no intention of satisfying your curiosity until Big Brother gets here. And he will—I’m quite sure you slipped your leash, without him realizing. If you figured it out, so will he—unless he knows already. Either way, we can just wait. I’ve got time to burn and nowhere to be.”

An unpleasant wave of heat shot through Sherlock’s body, and his head swam alarmingly. He had to get this done—his part, at least. The rest would be on John.

He strode right up to Moran, using his slight height difference to his advantage. The pistol in Moran’s hand rose to fend him off, the barrel nearly touching Sherlock’s forehead. “I think you overestimate your importance in the grand scheme of things,” Sherlock said with a sneer. “My brother expects me to freelance—he will be unsurprised, and unimpressed, by my absence. I just came to confirm something I’ve long suspected.”

The sniper raised his eyebrows expectantly.

Sherlock looked Moran slowly up and down—slowly, because to move too quickly led to a rapid increase in the cascade of adverse sensations that were starting to overwhelm him. “Jim liked to collect things, including people,” he began. “Of course, he wanted to collect me, in the end. But he also liked, sometimes, to surround himself with inferior things, defective things—well, people. It was, I presume, a means of demonstrating his innate superiority, so that even the truly stupid would appreciate the contrast. I mean, General Shan? Ms. Wenceslas? Their sole function was to demonstrate the difference between the ordinary and the exceptional—with the ‘exceptional’ running the show from behind the scenes.”
He moved back, to lean casually against the metal counter holding controls and dials that sat in the middle of the room. Moran was not to know that it was either sit down, or fall down. Sherlock resisted the urge to push his right arm against the rising pain in his chest.

“When I first encountered you, before the explosion at the row of shops, from a distance it almost appeared as if you were one of the ‘exceptional’ ones—someone that Jim had collected like he did other shiny, interesting things. Like me, in fact. I was almost disappointed that our paths never truly crossed—I wanted to see what Jim saw. I freely admit, my curiosity knows no bounds.”

He forced himself to stand again, ruthlessly suppressing a wince as the movement flexed his chest muscles and rib cage. “But now that I’ve…engaged with you, now that I’ve seen you at work, followed your actions, I’ve regretfully concluded that you fall into the second category,” he continued. “Oh, you have a talent—you’re a truly outstanding sniper, no question. But other than that? You’re a pale imitation of your master—an ersatz ‘Jim’ who has tried, in a spectacularly inept fashion, to capitalize on the efforts of his mentor. Since we both know this wasn’t your plan—the research started at least four years ago, which implies that the remainder of this scenario also originated at that time.”

Sherlock walked close to Moran again, reaching out to brush imaginary dirt from the older man’s shoulder. “In the end, I suppose, I have wasted my time. It’s quite disappointing, and my brother will be unbearably smug about it. Because, when you come right down to it, you’re just…boring.”

As he started to turn his back, started to walk away, he saw Moran move rapidly out of the corner of his eye. He saw, barely, the arm come up, and Moran step into a fighting stance. And, as that flying arm connected violently with Sherlock’s shoulder, and the follow-up blow by the hand still holding the pistol sent him tumbling forward to carom off the wall, his last thought, before oblivion, was “finally!”

**John**

Into the stunned silence, as they watched Sherlock slam into the wall and slide down it, to lie inert at Moran’s feet, Anthea voiced what they were all thinking.

“He wanted Moran to hit him,” she said, in a voice that combined fury, concern and confusion.

“Yes, he did,” Mycroft confirmed. “Which begs the question of ‘why’? Clearly, his intent was to make Moran angry, leading to an attack. But to insist that Moran render him unconscious…that does not immediately seem logical.”

John had been turning that over in his head as well. “Judging by the way he moved in those last few moments, I don’t think he was entirely in control,” he said slowly. “The bit with looking around the room? I think the delirium was returning, and Sherlock knew it, but didn’t want Moran to realize. So he tried to give Moran a reason for a collapse, without giving away the degree of his illness.”

“But…he had the gun. He could have stood Moran off, could have held him until we could get there,” Anthea said.

“We didn’t see the gun,” Mycroft said. “It’s possible his illness led him to lose it, or forget about it. Or perhaps he was weak enough that he wasn’t capable of holding it throughout a confrontation.”
was clear that none of these possibilities was palatable to the bureaucrat.

But, quite suddenly, John made the connection—the one he believed Sherlock had hoped for, the one memory that had resonance here, and that made Sherlock’s actions both insane and, possibly, inspired. John looked at Mycroft, a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

“I think…,” he began. “I’m not positive, but I think I know what the second part of that note means.”

Chapter End Notes

"Forlorn Hope" actions were a real thing in the British Army for a very long time indeed, and worked exactly as described.

And, a Public Service Announcement—in case it didn't come across clearly enough, Sherlock is high, and not a little confused. In his right mind, he would never ask John to set him up on the Morphine Frequent Flyer Plan. (Even if he WOULD enjoy it, if John offered...)
Chapter Summary

It all comes down to this: for Sherlock. For Moran. And, potentially, for Vienna.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took them roughly 20 minutes to reach the canal area. Part of that time, of course, had been spent in arguing—whether they all should go, whether they should take weapons, whether they should attempt to simply walk in and shoot Moran without any further interaction. In the end, though, they opted for a cautious approach, in large measure because they were unsure of Moran’s intentions, and what he might have put in place as a failsafe.

Moran had sent additional texts after the security footage, showing a view of a dimly-lit metal doorway, somewhere below ground level judging by the angle of the light sources, as well as directions from that point. Mycroft had no trouble identifying it, and its location. “Maintenance access,” he said. “Accessible even when the main buildings are locked, as they are now. I would presume this was also Sherlock’s point of entry, which means Moran knew that Sherlock was approaching before they met.”

“But that’s not news, surely?” Anthea asked. “I don’t think any of us thought otherwise. Moran’s many things, but ‘stupid’ isn’t generally one of them.”

“No, not precisely,” Mycroft said. “Just a reminder that none of this requires subterfuge, at least not in our initial approach. I am not sure, however, if Sherlock was coherent enough to realize that.”

“Given that the basis of his plan was essentially to get his arse handed to him, I doubt it mattered, really,” John said bitterly.

“No,” Mycroft sighed. “Likely not.”

They reached the walkway along the canal at just past 10. It was very cold, and the crowds had thinned considerably since earlier in the evening. Their only accompaniment was the cheery music still wafting from speakers hidden along the canal. The dark water was glassy and almost still—the weir and, presumably, the underwater turbines currently inactive.

John spotted the doorway first, as he turned to look back under the bridge. “There,” he said, pointing to a darker spot under the supports, marking the indentation for the entrance. He looked a bit closer. “I think it’s already open, at least partially. There’s a tiny bit of light, at least.”

And so it proved to be, once they’d clambered down the metal staircase that gave access to the understructure of the bridge and the walkway. They stepped into a brick-lined tunnel lit with pale
yellow security lamps. It was dry and cold, and John was surprised to see a pile of cloth that revealed itself as Sherlock’s parka, not far from the first branching of the tunnels. He held it up for Mycroft and Anthea.

“A combination of fever and confusion, I presume,” Mycroft said dispassionately. “He was hot, and forgot why he needed it.” That explained why Sherlock had appeared on the security footage clad only in his jumper and trousers.

The missing gun was not in the pockets. John sighed and tucked the coat under his arm.

They followed the directions attached to Moran’s text, so it took them rather less time than Sherlock had expended to find the control room. They heard Sherlock, though, before they reached it.

The detective was once again lost in his mind, wandering through a mishmash of languages, his tone varying from pleading, to anger, to sorrow, and back to pleading, all in the space of a minute. Mycroft, John could see, understood what was being said, and looked pinched and unhappy; John was more concerned by the delirium itself, and what it meant for the progression of Sherlock’s illness.

As they reached the opening into the control area, Moran stepped forward into the light to meet them.

“About damn time,” the sniper boomed. “I was getting really sick of listening to little Shirley whine. I didn’t kick him—yet—but I have to confess, it’s been a struggle.” The man was entirely too chipper for the situation, a big smile creasing his face.

His damaged face, John now saw. A great blue-black bruise covered the left side of his face, the eye partially obscured by swelling. A bundle of white bandage was visible just at the hairline. Scanning quickly, John saw evidence of other injuries—a series of large plasters down the left arm, a larger bandage secured above the wrist, a bulge under the heavy khaki of his left trouser leg. Either the explosion at the storage building, or the drone, had done more damage than Moran had admitted in their earlier conversations.

The damage, though, didn’t prevent the criminal from holding a very large pistol at shoulder level, pointing directly at them. Seeing John’s gaze, Moran twitched the barrel slightly. “You all know the drill. Hands up, please, and my friend is going to do a little friendly groping.” A small, dark-skinned man stepped into the light from behind the machinery in the shadows. “Didn’t really have to search Junior, there,” Moran said absently, as the man pawed roughly over John’s parka and pulled out their remaining pistol, dropping it on the control panel. “Skinny as he is, I could tell if he was carrying an extra pencil, let alone a gun.”

The henchman turned to Mycroft next, pulling out the taser from his back pocket. “Ooh. Nasty things, tasers. Think I’ll let Nando have that, eh, Nando?” The small man nodded appreciatively.

Nando then stepped towards Anthea, who gave a militant look before pulling off her parka and dropping it in front of him. “That’s all you get,” she said, and dared him to attempt more. Given that she had several inches on him, and looked both fit and slightly dangerous, the criminal looked over his shoulder at Moran, awaiting instruction.

“Aw, let it go,” Moran shrugged. “It’s not like she’s got anything crammed in her undies, after all.”
He smirked and blew Anthea a mocking kiss, undeterred by her stony response.

Moran then turned to his associate. “Nando’s going to leave us now,” he said, giving a little wave to point the man in the right direction. “People to do, things to steal.” Nando gave them a derisive grin and left, still silent.

Throughout this little vignette, Sherlock had continued to moan from his place against the far wall. The sound rose and fell, but never stopped completely. Moran now looked over at his recumbent prisoner with a frown. “I am really tired of that,” he said fretfully. “I may just have to shoot him and be done with it.”

John flinched. “Let me take a look,” he said. “I’m a doctor. I have a few things in my coat; maybe I can quiet him down.”

Moran thought about it, before shaking his head. “Naw, don’t think so. I don’t quite trust you, Watson—you’re not just a doctor, after all.” He looked over at Anthea. “Tell you what. Pull your ‘things’ out of your pockets, and give them to Ms. Holder, there. Tell her what to check. In the meantime, the rest of us can have a little chat. Although, really, whatever she does isn’t going to make any difference.”

Anthea scowled at this tacit dismissal, but took the thermometer and stethoscope John handed her, nodding as he detailed basic checks she could undertake. She stomped over to Sherlock’s side, dropped to her knees, and spoke softly to her friend as she carefully lifted his jumper and loosened the waistband of his trousers.

Moran now turned his attention back to Mycroft. “So, Iceman, here we are. Did you figure it out? What the Big Plan is? I mean, I could start running off at the mouth, like a good Bond villain. But I think it’s more fun if you do it. I’m presuming you’ve worked all the angles by now, even if Little Brother hadn’t.”

“Your intent is to use these facilities to disperse a large quantity of virus into the Danube,” Mycroft said calmly. “The most significant impact will come from the overspray emitted immediately above us, but a portion may well survive to wreak havoc downstream of Vienna itself, depending on the ability of the strain to survive the impact of the colder temperatures of the river itself.” Mycroft looked casually around the control room, towards the open cradles for the huge, silent turbines resting just the other side of the wall.

Moran noticed the look and chuckled. “Yeah, it’s there,” he said, gesturing with his chin. “Big, strong capsule, just tucked into the corner over there. Really heavy plastic—it was a bitch to get in place, lemme tell you. The mechanism’s pretty sweet, too—the turbines themselves pull the access plate open, soon as they start to rotate. No action needed on my part—in fact, at this point I couldn’t stop it if I wanted to. And I don’t, you see.” The sniper waited, a broad smile on his face—waited for his audience to appreciate his full intent.

“You want to die,” John said, holding himself in place with an iron will. “And you intend to take us with you. Because once the container opens, it will contaminate this chamber as well—no way to avoid it.”

Moran held out the hand still holding the gun, shaking it in an up-and-down motion. “Eh. I don’t want to die, especially—but I’ve resigned myself to it. Decided that it was worth it, to take you bastards with me. And the very best part is, it’ll all be recorded, and broadcast worldwide: Jim Moriarty’s revenge on the Holmes boys. A little posthumous, granted, but still pretty sweet.” He looked at the clock set in the wall above the control panel, then waved expansively at the camera in the far corner of the ceiling. “We’ve got a little more than five minutes, now. Smile for the camera,
And it was at just that moment, just as Moran looked up at the camera with a mocking smile, that
Anthea abruptly twisted Sherlock onto his side, thrust her hand far down the back of his trousers, and
pulled out the missing gun—which she promptly used to shoot Sebastian Moran, very precisely, in
the middle of his forehead.

“You really should have searched him, after all,” she said, as the sniper’s knees went, and he crashed
to the floor on his face.

John’s knees very nearly went, as well—he had to place his palms firmly against them, lean forward
and breath heavily for several seconds before he could straighten back up and head over to
Sherlock’s side. Because it hadn’t been certain, until Anthea actually pulled out the gun.

John had explained to the other two what he thought Sherlock’s note referred to—a case, shortly
before Sherlock jumped, in which the detective had gone missing one afternoon while John was tied
up at the surgery. In the mad rush to try and retrace Sherlock’s steps, John had gone back to Baker
Street to see if he had left a note or any indication of where he was heading. He hadn’t, but John
found his gun missing from his room. John was just about to head back to NSY when Greg Lestrade
showed up out front—Sherlock had been found, safe and reasonably sound, after pulling a gun on
his captors once he broke out of his bonds. John’s gun, of course.

When John and Greg met up with Sherlock at A&E (nothing serious—a mild drug hangover, and a
dislocated thumb from jerking out of his restraints), Sherlock explained about the gun. He had taken
the gun with him as a precaution, not really expecting to be attacked and then injected with a strong
sedative. He had managed, though, when he realized capture was inevitable, to shove the weapon
down his pants, right down between his legs. “No one ever thinks to pat you there,” he said with a
sneer. “Inhibitions.”

John shook his head free of both relief and memory, and threw himself down next to Sherlock,
opposite Anthea. He was vaguely aware of Mycroft, behind them, darting over to (presumably) look
for the tank of virus. John couldn’t afford to think about that just now.

“I don’t like this,” Anthea said, holding out the stethoscope. “He seems to be working much too hard
to breathe.”

John grabbed the tool, popped in the earpieces, and made a rapid assessment. “Nor do I,” he said,
while shifting to check pulse and temperature as quickly as possible. “It sounds like that fucking
pneumonia is trying for a comeback. One more thing to add to the list,” he added bitterly. Then he
shoved the instruments aside and called Mycroft.

“I know we’re running out of time,” John told the older man. “We need to get Sherlock out of here,
and then decide what to do about the rest. He can’t be in this room if the virus is released. Nor can
you, come to that—open wound on your shoulder.”

Mycroft, to his credit, didn’t try to immediately launch into a description of the cache, but rather
focused himself on the immediate task—moving his brother to a safe spot before dealing with the
next crisis. Between the three of them, they managed to lift the detective and carry him safely out to
the far side of the connecting tunnel, while he continued to moan and babble. Then John looked
inquisitively at Mycroft, who quickly picked up his cue.

“The container is as Moran described,” said the bureaucrat. “Heavy, opaque plastic—somewhat
flexible, so it won’t shatter. It is, however, tucked completely underneath other bulky metal
equipment. It is not accessible from a distance, full stop. Whatever action we take must be performed
at point-blank range.” He looked down at the phone in his left hand. “And that action must take
place within the next three minutes, to fall within Moran’s timeline.”

John thought about that. “Do you understand what he meant about the turbines? How the motion
would open the container?”

Mycroft nodded. “I believe so. The turbines rotate, obviously, and the leading edge of the moving
blade is accessible from inside the chamber, if one is willing to get very wet. I presume that a line has
been secured to one of the blades—when it activates, the line will pull a slide-action bolt or other
locking mechanism on the underside of the container. I can’t be certain of the exact design, as the
opening is not visible from this side.”

“But we can be sure that the turbines will activate, and release the virus?” Anthea asked, as if she
already knew the answer. Mycroft simply nodded.

“The only real solution is to ensure that the container is already empty by the time the mechanism
engages,” he said, looking at John. “While a small amount may still be released when the hatch
opens, it shouldn’t be enough to cause large loss of life, and certainly not enough to inflict casualties
further downstream.”

John thought about that, quickly, then looked at Mycroft. “The guns?” he asked, and received an
affirming nod. He had started back to the control room when Anthea reached out and grabbed his
arm.

“Why you?” she said, moving to block his path. “I can do this. And Sherlock needs you.”

John shook his head. “No—Sherlock needs the med evac that his brother is going to call in, right
fucking now. And I need to do this, because I know—without someone having to take time to
explain it to me—how I can minimize my exposure and still get the job done. We just don’t have
time, Anthea—we really don’t.” Anthea frowned, shook her head, bit her lip—and moved out of the
way.

John stopped, though, as something occurred to him. He peeled off his parka and handed it to
Mycroft. “Wrap him up in that,” he said. “His is still in the control room, and it’ll give me better
coverage because of the excess length. Do either of you still have your gloves?”

Anthea nodded. “In my coat pocket—check the back one,” she said. John flashed her a smile, and
ran.

Once inside, John stepped quickly over to Moran’s body and pulled the large pistol out of the
sniper’s cooling hand, and grabbed his own gun from the control panel. He hurried to don Sherlock’s
parka, ridiculously oversized for John but covering considerable additional body space that his own
would have left exposed. He pulled the hood up and yanked the tie running around the face tight,
until only a small circle of skin, a few inches wide, was still uncovered. He dug out Anthea’s gloves, forcing the slightly-too-small leather gauntlets over both hands.

Protected, insofar as was possible, John hurried over towards the corner where the ominous container rested, forcing his way back through the jumble of pipes and hoses towards the dull white plastic barrel. Mycroft was right—there was no way to move this, and no way to damage it from a distance, given that the visible area was only three to four inches wide, and partially blocked by additional wiring and hoses.

John scrambled in, climbing over and under obstacles, until he was next to the bulkhead of the turbine area, the virus container visible underneath, at a few inches above knee height. A countdown was still running in John’s head—he was sure it wasn’t as accurate as a Holmes would produce, but it was close enough to know that he had to act, now.

Finally, finally, he wedged himself into place, his back against the bulkhead, leaning back with the virus container just behind his knees. Then he reached back, gun in each hand, and placed the barrels against the top edge of the opaque plastic side—the angle was important, as the openings needed to stay on this side of the barrier, which meant a top-to-bottom shot was essential. Then he said a quick prayer to whatever deity might be listening, squeezed his mouth and eyes tightly shut, and pulled both triggers.

Chapter End Notes

One quick explanation: John's concern, in covering exposed areas, is to make sure any tiny wounds or abrasions he may have don't come in direct contact with the virus. Lord knows, with their activities over the past week, he almost certainly has a number of them, big or small.
Intervention: Part One

Chapter Summary

Finally, finally, they are on their way home. But it won't be easy, and it won't be pleasant for everyone involved.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. RL, ya know. Kinda sucks.

While the stone-walled room still echoed from the simultaneous pistol shots, John was already moving, hurling himself away from the liquid gushing from the hidden tank as quickly as possible. He began feverishly throwing off his clothing, now spattered with contaminated water, just as rapidly, starting with Sherlock’s parka.

Once he had removed the parka, gloves, boots and trousers, he darted over to Moran’s prone body and yanked at the dead man’s shoes, then pulled the trousers down as well, before wriggling into both trousers and shoes himself. Too big, but it didn’t matter. He considered grabbing Moran’s coat, but it was sprayed with a mix of various bodily tissues—on consideration, he’d rather be cold.

When he finished his reassembly, he looked up to realize that the pool of contaminated water was creeping rapidly across the floor, nearing his position. He hastily hopped over Moran’s body, leaving the pistols lying in the water, and raced out to the corridor, shoving the heavy door shut behind him.

Anthea sat against the far wall, Sherlock’s head in her lap. The detective seemed lost in his mind again, mumbling to himself and moaning.

Mycroft had the phone to his ear while he paced jerkily back and forth. On spying John, he pulled the phone away.

“What’s the name of your surgeon friend? At Landstuhl?” the bureaucrat said.


Mycroft shook his head, before beginning to speak softly into the phone again as he resumed his pacing. John shook his head and went to kneel beside Anthea and Sherlock.

“How’s he doing?” John asked softly, parting the too-small parka to gently press Sherlock’s torso, frowning at the involuntary grunts of pain from his semi-conscious patient.

“No worse, no better,” Anthea said. “Breathing’s still rough, and he’s very, very warm.” She ran her hand soothingly across Sherlock’s forehead. “The sooner we’re out of here, the better.”

“When should that happen?” John asked, taking Sherlock’s wrist to check his pulse. “And where are we going?”
Mycroft was suddenly behind them. “Prague,” he said, as if he’d been part of the conversation all along. “There is a superior MI6 medical unit there, and they already have some of Sherlock’s past medical history, given his brief stay there prior to his return.”

John nodded—much closer than Landstuhl, which was all to the good. “So, how do we get there?”

“Our transport should be here momentarily,” Mycroft said. “Is there anything we need to do first, to prepare? Anything Sherlock needs that we can supply?” Only those fluent in Holmesian body language would pick up on the anxiety underlying that question.

John shook his head. “Not really. And I wouldn’t want to give him much now anyway, given that he’s almost certainly heading directly into surgery on arrival.” He looked back down at his friend before continuing. “What’s the timeline?”

“Five minutes,” Mycroft replied, while checking his phone reflexively. “I have given our location in detail; they should come equipped for moving Sherlock.” He looked back at John, in an uncharacteristically uncertain manner. “Is there…do you believe…how extensive is the surgery likely to be?” he finally managed. Anthea looked at Mycroft, her brow furrowed in concern.

John debated with himself momentarily before choosing truth over comfort—he knew Sherlock, at least, never wanted anything sugar-coated, no matter how unpalatable the truth might be.

“I can’t really say, without any kind of imaging,” John said. “But I think we should be prepared for a long stay in hospital. Hopefully not as long as last time, but certainly several weeks. He’s got a lot of ground to make up.”

Mycroft nodded, looking solemnly at his brother. “Thank you,” he said. John was unsure what he was being thanked for; he suspected it was simply an automatic response on Mycroft’s part.

Just then, there was a burst of sound from somewhere further down the tunnels, followed by the appearance of a tall man in black body armour, carrying a very large gun. Two more men quickly came into view, holding a metal cage stretcher between them, the kind used to lift patients out of danger.

The first man came to a stop in front of Mycroft—he didn’t actually 

It was quick, efficient and blatantly illegal. In five minutes, the nameless agents had loaded Sherlock into the basket stretcher, and carried him out of the tunnels, then up the steps to the stone paths. John, Mycroft and Anthea trotted along behind.

John flinched at the sudden blast of cold as they came out of the tunnels—he was re-thinking his abandonment of Moran’s parka now. He lost that train of thought quite quickly, though, as he looked over to the bridge, and saw the bullet shape of a helicopter sitting on the pedestrian walkway, in defiance of any number of laws and regulations. It was flat black—no reflection at all shone from the metal curving sides. The appearance screamed “Black Ops”—John had never seen this kind of copter before, not even in military publications. The blades moved slowly, making absolutely no sound, and John realized that he hadn’t heard any kind of engine noise prior to the arrival of the
agents either.

As the group approached the copter, a side panel slid silently open, leaving a 10-foot gap in the side of the vehicle. A fourth black-clad agent stood in the opening and beckoned them inside. John and Anthea hopped up first, then stood back as Sherlock’s stretcher slid onto the floorboards, followed by the agents and Mycroft.

As soon as the stretcher was locked securely into place, the side door slid silently closed, and the copter lifted gently off the ground. John was shocked by the quiet—he had ridden in many a helicopter in his day, but had never been in one in which it was possible to hold a normal conversation without headphones. Mycroft and Anthea, by contrast, seemed completely unsurprised.

John waited until they had reached altitude before gesturing to get the attention of the one armoured agent who had remained in the main cabin area. “Are any of you medic-qualified?” he asked.

The agent shook his head. “No, sorry,” he said. “We have equipment, but we didn’t bring medical staff along, in the interests of time and weight allowances.”

That settled that, then—John was now officially Dr. Watson. “Then break out your full kit, please,” he said briskly. The sooner I get some basic care started, the happier we’ll all be.”

Within the next five minutes, John had set up the materials to put in drips for both hydration and medication, intending to add anti-fever and a low dose of morphine to the normal saline line. Sherlock had begun moaning again, raving pitifully in French. Once again, John was the only one not to know what his friend was saying, but, judging by the faces of Anthea and Mycroft, that was just as well.

He looked up, after pulling out the last vials of the medications, to see Mycroft watching him intently, his mouth tight and unhappy. John thought about it, briefly, then—“I could use some help,” he said, gesturing towards the equipment. “Extra pair of hands.”

Mycroft gave a little bob of his head, so much like a nervous Sherlock that John would have smiled, under other circumstances. “I…yes, of course. What do you need?” Mycroft said, sounding uncharacteristically unsure.

John nodded to Sherlock’s far side. “Get over there, and hand me things when I ask for them. I don’t want him to start flailing if I hurt him, so you can be on ‘arm duty’ as well, if it comes to that.”

Mycroft, by now in position, nodded firmly, his mask of smug competence back in place. Distraction, John thought, worked just as well with him as with his brother.

Once John had completed all the medical tasks he could for Sherlock, he slid back into his seat on one of the padded benches that lined the compartment with a sigh. His patient had calmed with the addition of the morphine, and now slept fitfully—the raving had waned, then ceased.

“So,” John asked, looking at Mycroft, “how long will this trip take? I’m assuming this thing will do rather better than the garden-variety choppers I’ve seen. Lord knows, I’ve never even seen one of
these.”

Anthea gave a snort of laughter beside him. “If you’ve seen one of these, someone’s in big trouble. They don’t officially exist.”

Mycroft gave her a repressive look before replying. “While their speed and range are, of course, classified, I can safely divulge that our flight time will be just over 2 hours. Not as quick as an aeroplane, but lacking the requirement of a landing strip, so we can go directly to our destination. The facility has a pad on the roof.”

“Is that what we’re calling it, then?” John said snarkily. “The Facility That Shall Be Nameless?”

Mycroft shot him a quick, true grin. “MI6 is not known for their originality in such things,” he said. “Sherlock’s agency code, when he was very young and very green, was ‘Ugly Duckling’. It has never been updated.” He paused, then looked sternly at John. “You must never tell him. He wouldn’t take it well.”

John made a zipping motion across his lips while suppressing a laugh. Anthea let hers loose.

Roughly 50 minutes in, Sherlock roused, slowly. His eyes opened, and he looked dazedly around, his pupils wide and dark. Anthea was the first to notice.

“Hey, there,” she said gently. “How are you feeling?” John and Mycroft, both previously dozing, sat up and looked at the detective.

“I’m not…where are we?” Sherlock said, in a hoarse whisper. His eyes clenched back closed briefly before opening again. “My head hurts. Thirsty.”

John debated with himself before reaching into the refrigerated cabinet they had located earlier, nestled under the rear bench. He grabbed a bottle of water, then knelt beside his friend and held it to Sherlock’s lips. Sherlock sucked at it greedily, before John pulled it carefully away.

“You need to go slow,” he said, when Sherlock frowned and reached woozily for the bottle. “You’re almost certainly going straight into surgery when we arrive, and I don’t want much in your stomach —too great a risk of aspiration, particularly with your tetchy digestive tract. Sip, for now.” Sherlock complied, grudgingly.

After finishing his drink, Sherlock grew increasingly alert, though his cheeks were still flushed a deep pink with fever—39.9, as per John’s most-recent check, despite the addition of medication to his drip. The hydration, though, was clearly helping—he was coherent, for the most part, though still a bit confused, asking where they were three times.

He had a coughing fit, then, and cringed with pain despite the low dose of morphine John had given him. The coughing seemed to go on forever, and Sherlock grew increasingly panicked as he struggled to catch a breath in between. Mycroft clambered over and carefully raised his brother’s shoulders, while Anthea, at John’s direction, grabbed a bundle of blankets and pillows to make a nest of sorts in the corner of the two benches along the edges of the compartment. Between them, John
and Mycroft managed to maneuver Sherlock out of the cage stretcher and into the bedding, leaving his torso elevated and supported by the pillows.

Sherlock settled into the nest with a contented sigh, and rested briefly before his eyes opened again. He looked around, listening, and then looked to his brother in amazement. “We’re in a helicopter,” he said, with a loopy smile.

Mycroft nodded. “Yes, we are,” he said gently. “A very fast one.” Sherlock beamed, his earlier discomfort temporarily forgotten. He settled back into his nest and drifted off, while the rest of the group tried to do the same.

John wasn’t fully asleep when they entered their final approach for landing, but he was close enough to it that the sudden change in the motion, and the subtle shift in the minimal engine sound, roused him abruptly. Across from him, Mycroft and Anthea both sat up, adjusting hair and clothing. Sherlock slept on, though his brow furrowed when the copter landed with a brief jolt.

The lead agent came back into the rear compartment and pushed the button that opened the large side door. The door slid silently aside, to reveal a rooftop landing pad, with a medical team hurrying towards them, gurney in tow. Sherlock was now awake, watching the proceedings, blinking and yawning. “Are we there?” he croaked. “Can someone help me up?” he added, looking fretfully around.

Two medical staff climbed up and hauled Sherlock’s discarded cage stretcher out of the way for easier access. As they moved forward, though, Sherlock cringed and tried to move away. “No, I… help me up.” He looked at John. “Please help me up.” He became increasingly distressed as the attendants stripped away his bedding. The men moved forward as if to carry him out, regardless of his protests.

John stepped forward, in between them and their quarry. “Just a minute,” he said. “We can help him out.” He looked over at Mycroft, who nodded and moved towards his brother.

The lead medical tech bridled at that. “Protocol is that we do all transport,” he said firmly, moving to edge John aside.

“We will be disregarding protocol, in this instance,” Mycroft said icily, and turned his back on the man.

In short order, Mycroft and John had laced Sherlock’s arms over their shoulders, and (mostly) carried him to the gurney. He gave little gasps of pain throughout, but insisted on walking, with a great deal of assistance, the last few feet before sitting on the edge of the gurney and closing his eyes. John took that as his cue to help Sherlock settle, swinging his legs up while Mycroft helped his brother lie back.
against the raised cushion.

Anthea moved over and took Sherlock’s hand, as they started to move towards the lift doors on the other side of the roof. Mycroft and John had just reached the doors when one of the armoured agents stepped over in front of John.

“I’m sorry, Captain Watson,” he said, as the doors opened behind them, and the attendants pushed Sherlock’s gurney inside. “You’re going to have to come with us. You’ve been exposed to a lethal pathogen. We can’t admit you to the facility until you’ve undergone a full decon procedure.” And, as John looked helplessly over the agent’s shoulder, the lift doors closed, with Sherlock and Anthea inside.
Chapter Summary

The gang are reunited after John's decontamination. An old friend shows up unexpectedly, and Sherlock's surgery begins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John’s first impulse, on seeing Sherlock’s gurney enter the lift without him, was to push his way past the techs blocking him, to force his way through. Mycroft once again read his mind.

“John,” he said softly. “What would you do, if you were in their shoes? If you had someone exposed to a lethal organism trying to enter a facility full of vulnerable patients?”

And he was right. Of course, he was right. Even though John knew his exposure was minimal at worst, they couldn’t take the chance. “All right,” he sighed, looking to the lead medical tech. “Let’s just make it quick, yeah? I need to make sure his surgeon has the full history before they take him in for surgery.”

As the tech smiled and gestured towards a second lift, on the far side of the landing platform, John noticed Mycroft standing beside him, looking longingly towards Sherlock’s departing group, then shuttering his face and moving back towards John.

John stopped momentarily, putting his hand on Mycroft’s arm. “Go,” he said. “I don’t need any help, and the only thing I’m in danger of is embarrassment. I suspect Anthea could use the extra support, if your brother starts getting stroppy.”

Mycroft, no fool, recognized the concern behind the words. He nodded graciously, thankfully, and went.

The next 15 minutes were a combination of harrowing and hilarious. It was not fun getting power-washed, locked in a glass cubicle and glaringly naked, in front of a host of gawking techs. It was, however, pretty damn funny to realize that the progression of pastel-coloured decontamination foams used after the power-wash were entirely too reminiscent of an automated car cleaner. When one of the techs started humming the “Car Wash” tune, raising his eyebrows at John, John’s unavoidable giggles led the rest of the room to explode into laughter despite the grim aspects of the situation.

Getting re-dressed was annoying—none of his clothing was salvageable, of course, but the only things available were surgical scrubs and a set of soft slippers. His hosts also insisted he don a surgical mask before leaving the decontamination room.

When John was finally, finally, released from the quarantine area, he had to ask three people before
he was directed to the pre-surgical rooms. He trotted down corridors, ignoring the questioning looks of medical staff and (presumably) agents as he went. At length, he reached double doors marked “Theatres and Holding” and pushed his way through, relieved to spy Mycroft sitting on the edge of a cot through an open doorway down the hall. The bureaucrat was shirtless, with fresh new bandages on his shoulder and a tightly-wrapped sling immobilizing his left arm.

Mycroft looked up as John hurried in, and pointed at Sherlock with his chin; the younger Holmes was huddled, propped on several pillows, in the second cot in the room. Sherlock didn’t seem to immediately recognize John, in his scrubs and mask; he looked to his older brother in alarm, eyes wide, and flinched away when John reached out to touch his shoulder.

John pulled off the useless mask and turned to Mycroft, concerned. “What’s happening? Where’s Anthea?” He looked back at Sherlock, who had relaxed slightly as John moved away but still seemed agitated. “Have they examined him yet? Or given him anything for pain?”

“Anthea is off bringing me officially back to life, among other duties. Sherlock is extremely confused, and very…volatile,” Mycroft said carefully. “They had given him a mild sedative and analgesic, to keep him calm while they prepped him for tests and, presumably, surgery. They used medication that, I’m told, normally has a waiting period of roughly 10 minutes to full concentration. But because of Sherlock’s history, it had little effect, and he continued to experience agitation and pain. So, they gave him additional medication through his drip. What they didn’t realize, however, was—“

Sherlock suddenly noticed that John had removed the mask. “John. It’s John,” he chirped happily. “Can I go home now?” His cheeks were rosy with fever. His eyes were glassy, and his head wobbled on his shoulders.

Mycroft frowned, and continued. “What they didn’t realize was, Sherlock had, in the interim, found the remaining two pain tablets you had placed in your jacket pocket, and swallowed them. I didn’t notice as I was under treatment myself at the time. I realized what had happened when I saw the blister pack on the floor.”

“Sherlock, you idiot,” John said. He moved to check the medication currently flowing into Sherlock’s drip, but was arrested mid-step by the look on his friend’s face. Those pale eyes were wide and tragic, and filling rapidly with tears. Sherlock’s bottom lip was trembling.

“Oh my,” John said, horrified.

“I did warn you,” Mycroft sighed.

John leapt into damage control. He put his hand on the back of Sherlock’s neck, and shook him gently. “I was joking, Sherlock, I promise. You’re not an idiot.”

One tear had spilled over and trickled down the detective’s cheek. “That wasn’t nice,” he warbled. “That was a mean thing to say.”

“You’re absolutely right. I’m so sorry,” John crooned. He petted Sherlock’s head reflexively, as if soothing a child, noting the heat radiating from his flushed skin. It seemed to help a bit, as the tears stopped.

“Can I go home now?” Sherlock asked again, still upset.

“No, my dear,” Mycroft said soothingly, from his place on the far cot. “You have to wait for the doctors to make you well. Why don’t you take a nap, and when you wake up, perhaps you’ll feel
"I don’t want to take a nap," Sherlock said crossly. He blinked, very slowly, then again, before his eyes slid gradually closed. John reached out and helped him settle down in the cot, removing one of the pillows to ease him towards a prone position. Halfway through that process, though, Sherlock’s eyes popped back open and his face crumpled. “I don’t feel well,” he moaned. John, knowing what that phrase almost always meant in Sherlock-ese, nipped sharply to one side as Sherlock abruptly leaned over and vomited down the side of the cot.

While Mycroft rang for the nurse, John tucked Sherlock, who announced happily that he now felt much better, back under the blankets. “At least now we don’t have to worry about him aspirating under anesthesia,” John said philosophically. “And he mostly missed my shoes.”

Ten minutes later, a dozing Sherlock was carted off for scanning. Anthea, returned from her resurrection duties, went with him, while John waited with Mycroft for the surgeon to arrive. John suddenly heard a small commotion out in the hallway, and opened the door to see a cortege of American soldiers striding down the hall with a tall, ginger man in blue scrubs in their midst. As the group came even with the doorway, the tall man caught John’s eye and broke into a delighted smile.

“Watson!” he boomed. “As I live and breathe.” He nodded to his entourage before entering the room alone, reaching out and pulling John into a rough embrace.

“Rog,” John gasped, trying to catch a breath. He was aware of Mycroft raising his eyebrows inquisitively at the name, and gave his friend a gentle shove to break the hug before answering the unspoken question with a laugh.

“Americans and their nicknames,” he said. “His last name is Dodger—so, of course, he became ‘Roger Dodger’.”

Rog snorted. “Not just us, my man. Shall we recall that your name, for some considerable time, was ‘Popper’? And that was coined by your folks, not mine.”

Mycroft made an inelegant noise, as John felt his face flame.

“It’s from the pistol thing,” he muttered defensively. “I shot it in the air one time for a party, and they never let me live it down.” He could sense Mycroft’s silent amusement, before moving resignedly forward to make introductions.

Rog looked Mycroft up and down. “So, you’re the bigwig who made this a command performance on my part, then? Really, if you’d told me John was here, I would have come regardless. I didn’t have anything all that urgent on my plate this evening.”

“Time was of the essence, and still is,” Mycroft said. “My brother is critically ill, and we needed a superior surgeon who was also of undoubted loyalty. John vouched for you, and for your skills—that was sufficient for me.”

John felt an unaccustomed flare of gratitude at that—securing Mycroft Holmes’ trust was no small thing.
“We have reason to be concerned about security, Rog,” John said. “Long story, that I can tell you about later. But, in the short run, I wanted your expertise in wartime injuries as much as any other skill. Your patient had a near-fatal GSW to the chest in August, followed by a history of repeated abscess formation. He’s been unable to keep up with his antibiotic protocol, and has been under extreme physical and mental stress over the past 10 days. I’ve been throwing stopgap treatment at him, but he’s gone septic, I’m pretty sure. They just took him down for imaging—I can fill you in with the rest of the history while we wait for the results.”

He looked over his shoulder at Mycroft, making sure the older man would be content with John’s departure.

Mycroft nodded. “Go,” he said. “Anthea will be back as soon as the scans are completed, and we will have work to do.” He hesitated, then continued. “I would ask, though…if you…I would appreciate your letting me know when you are preparing to take Sherlock into surgery. I would like to see him first. Even if he is not aware of it.”

“Course,” John said. “We’ll come get both of you. Shouldn’t be too long.”

The next fifteen minutes were an intense session of medical review, planning, and prep work. As expected, the scan showed a large abscess in Sherlock’s chest, in roughly the same site as the previous ones. Antibiotics had already been started, but his fever continued to resist medications designed to lower it.

“We need to go,” Rog said, as they stood beside the unconscious detective’s cot. “I’m not happy with his breathing, but that’s not going to be improved by waiting. I’ll have someone go get his brother; do you want to scrub in with me?”

John shook his head. “No, I…,” he paused, aware of an internal tremor that had nothing to do with his old injury. “He’s my dearest friend. Even if I didn’t have nerve issues, I couldn’t. Just…keep him alive, Rog? Please?”

The surgeon gave him a look that combined sympathy with a touch of asperity. “I didn’t plan on killing him, you know,” he said, with a wry smile.

“Sorry, sorry,” John said. “It’s just…he really matters, you know? To a lot of people, not just me.”

“Yeah, I got that,” Rog said. “I’ll fix him up, OK? I promise. Don’t see anything here that makes me think otherwise.”

Ten minutes later, Mycroft and Anthea stood by Sherlock, as John hovered in the doorway. Rog had gone off to scrub in, while the operating theatre was prepped. John would move to the observation
balcony above the table; that, at least, he felt compelled to do, even though he wouldn’t—couldn’t—stand in at the table himself.

As John watched, Anthea picked up Sherlock’s limp hand and rubbed her thumb gently over the palm. “You have to stop this, dear heart,” she said softly. “We can’t keep doing this. When you get better, you and I are going to have a very serious conversation about self-preservation.” Her mouth worked briefly before she rallied and continued. “And if you die, I will resurrect you and nail you to a desk job for the next forty years, see if I don’t.”

Mycroft, from the other side of the bed, smiled briefly before leaning forward and brushing, very lightly, over his brother’s head. “I will second that, Brother Mine,” he said, on a shaky breath. “I wish to never, in either of our lifetimes, stand vigil by your bed again. I need you to promise me that, my dear.” He gave one more soft pat, then resolutely stepped away, and pulled ‘Mycroft Holmes’ back around him again, reaching out to take Anthea’s arm. “Come,” he said. “Let’s go find the waiting area, and have some appalling tea.”

At 2 am, Sherlock was wheeled into the operating theatre, sedated and intubated, as John watched from the balcony. Rog had said that the surgery should take roughly two hours—three, if more-extensive exploration for infection was required.

Five hours later, the detective was still on the table.

Chapter End Notes

The decontamination foam looking like "Car Wash"? Happened to me (on a smaller scale), after my adventure with nitric acid in college. And yes, the tech did start humming the song.
Rog told John—well, reminded him, actually—that imaging only gave him a superficial view of what he would find once he made his incision. John knew that, of course he knew it. But hearing Rog give a time estimate—two hours, three at the outside—was nonetheless something to latch onto, to quiet the fear climbing up his spine.

Because John was afraid. It was like one of his med school professors used to say: A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. But a lot is damn near terrifying.

Even though John refused to scrub in at the table, he had taken Rog up on his other offer—a Bluetooth headphone, so that Rog could give John a running description of his findings as he went. John could see, of course, but the distance to the balcony made his own observations largely useless.

The first half hour was spent simply working open, and then widening, the second of Sherlock’s original incision lines, to access the affected area. That led to the first unpleasant surprise.

As the surgical assistants applied spreaders to keep skin and muscle clear of the opening, that initial snag arose. Rog picked up a surgical probe and gently touched tissue and bone, before making a dismayed noise through John’s headphone.

“Well, that’s not good,” he said, while John craned his head over the railing to see. “The rib work they did the first time—cadaver bone, I assume—is necrotic, presumably from infection at the cartilage joints.” He hesitated briefly before continuing. “I have a possible alternative solution to redoing that work, but we’ll come back to that. For right now, I’m going to just remove the grafts and move on.”

“Yeah,” John said. “The two ribs were damaged enough by the bullet that the decision was made to replace them, rather than leave the gap as it was after removing the fragments. Active young adult—
they felt it was wiser. But he had a long bout with costochondritis post-surgery, and that came back while we were on-mission. I was afraid it was infection all along, the second time.”

“ Seems likely,” Rog said. He continued to delicately sift through tissues. “There’s a lot of infection here, period.” The next half-hour or more was spent removing the results of that infection; as Rog said, the more he removed, the more he found.

Roughly two hours in, Rog made a small, surprised sound. “Well, that’s…” he began, as John barked “What?” over the headphone.

“I think I just found the source of the continued abscesses,” the surgeon replied, his hands deep in the incision. “There was…something… that impacted along and under the lobes of the right lung and the chest wall. Tiny little bits, most likely. I think some of those particles got encapsulated in adhesions—scar tissue, partly from the initial infection. But when those little particles got enclosed, they became reservoirs of infection that remained present even after the main abscess was cleared. They would stay intact until the ongoing infection process made the adhesion ‘walls’ perforate, and then spill back into the surrounding tissues. Bingo—relapse.”

“That’s great, Rog,” John said. “If we can keep this from coming back…”

“That’s the good news,” Rog interrupted. “The bad news is,” he said, running his fingers along the lines of the incision, “I can feel a lot of it—little rough areas. And if I don’t get them all, we’ll be right back here at some point. We’re probably talking another couple of hours here to be positive.”

“If that’s what it takes,” John said reluctantly. “Is someone keeping his brother updated?”

Rog nodded, and went back to work.

They were well into that second hour when things took a turn for the terrifying. John and Rog had kept up an ongoing light conversation while the surgeon worked, occasionally turning to shared memories of their service in Afghanistan, to the amusement of the rest of the surgical staff. That suddenly stopped, however, when first one alarm, then another, began going off, while the anesthetist went into rapid motion and Rog barked orders. John—John just stood, and shook, and prayed.

“Cardiac irritability,” Rog said finally, in a tense tone, after a dose of epinephrine was delivered, the alarms were silenced, and normal heart tones had resumed. “Can’t say definitively where it’s coming from, but my money’s on pericarditis, and maybe myocarditis as well. Makes sense, when you consider that the abscess was so close to the pericardium, and he apparently had a small nick in the sac at the time of his original injury, according to the operative notes—probably a fragment from one of his ribs.” He looked up at John, frozen in the balcony. “This wound should have killed him. You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” John said softly. “I know.”

“This really complicates things, John,” Rog continued. “I’m not comfortable continuing with the surgery until we have the cardiac issues under control, assuming we can achieve that. The rib repair
is going to have to wait. I’m going to set up a temporary external pacemaker, just in case, and we’re going to have to draw some fluid from around the heart to get a culture. You’re OK with all of that, I assume?”

“I’ll have to be,” John said. “The last thing any of us wants is for him to end up with permanent heart issues. Do what you need to do.”

John stayed while the team closed the wound with temporary stitches and sterile mesh, then bandaged Sherlock tightly and bundled him off to Recovery, still intubated and sedated. He would have preferred to wait until the intubation was withdrawn, but felt an obligation to let Mycroft and Anthea know how things stood.

When John rounded the corner to the waiting area, he was surprised and dismayed to find it empty. As he stood, confused, he heard footsteps behind him, and turned to see one of the surgical assistants.

“I came out earlier to give them an update, when we had to close prematurely, and the young lady became quite upset,” she said softly. She pointed down the hallway. “I think they went down there—last door on the right.”

John walked down the hallway, and saw that the indicated door opened to the hospital chapel. He cautiously, quietly opened the door and was relieved to see Mycroft sitting in the front pew. As John entered, the older man spun around, and John saw cold terror light briefly in those pale blue eyes, before the usual bland mask slid into place.

“He’s fine, well, as fine as he can be under the circumstances,” John said, in as reassuring a tone as he could muster. “Sorry—didn’t mean to scare you.”

Mycroft nodded magisterially; it didn’t escape John’s notice that the bureaucrat didn’t deny his fright.

As John came even with the front of the pew, he saw Anthea, lying on a pile of parkas, with an additional coat draped over her. She was soundly asleep, oblivious to the conversation taking place right next to her.

Mycroft looked over in a manner that could only be described as “fond”. “I drugged her tea,” he said. “She was becoming quite distraught.”

“Rog’s nurse said she was upset,” John replied. “I hope the nurse didn’t terrify you both—Sherlock isn’t in immediate danger. It’s just, well, we need to resolve the heart issue before--”

Mycroft shook his head. “Unfortunately, both of us know just enough about medicine to be aware of the potential issues, without needing detailed explanations,” he said. He looked over at his sleeping assistant before continuing, on an entirely different front.

“They’ve known each other since they were little more than children,” he said reflectively. “You wouldn’t know it, to see the two of them together under more-normal circumstances. But they are quite close, in their own way.”

“Yeah, I know,” John said, and settled on the pew next to Mycroft with a sigh. He leaned back,
closing his eyes briefly before giving a deep, long yawn.

When John opened his eyes, Mycroft had slid down until his head was propped against the high back of the pew, long legs extended out towards the altar. He, too, yawned, then turned back to John.

“I have, I think, been in hospital chapels three, now four, times in my life. All have been because of my brother,” he said.

John raised his eyebrows enquiringly, encouraging the older man to continue. Mycroft searched John’s face for something, briefly, and apparently found it, nodding before continuing.

“The first time was at his birth,” Mycroft began. “It should not surprise you that he entered this world with just as much drama as he brings to his current existence.” He gave a quick sideways grin, which John found himself returning. “He was ten weeks early; very tiny indeed, and spent several weeks in hospital before being allowed home. I knew just enough about it to be properly terrified; my parents had to spend considerable time reassuring me that he would survive.”

John thought about that. “That doesn’t shock me, actually,” he said. “He has that fine-boned look that a lot of former preemies have—looks a little delicate when he’s not bundled up in that coat, despite his height.”

Mycroft gave an indelicate snort. “If you intend to share that description with him, please wait until I am in the room,” he said, with a smirk. John shot two fingers in his direction, then sobered suddenly, remembering Mycroft’s earlier comment.

“So, what was the second? Since I can guess the third already,” John asked.

Mycroft, too, sobered, his face looking drawn in the dimly lit room. “His last overdose. The one where we thought he would die,” he said bleakly. He took in John’s involuntary flinch, sighed, and continued.

“It was roughly six months before he met you,” Mycroft said. “I have never known for sure, but I always suspected it was at least partially intentional, though he denied it.” John’s heart twinged in his chest; based on things Mrs. Hudson, Greg Lestrade, even Sherlock himself had said, he knew, knew, how unhappy Sherlock had been, in the bad days, but it didn’t make it any less painful to hear it confirmed yet again.

Mycroft looked solemnly at John. “I spent 4 hours in the hospital chapel, part of it on my knees,” he said simply. “Our maternal grandmother was a devout Catholic; our mother is a more unorthodox believer, and I tend to lean towards the agnostic in my own dealings with deity. But…I have found, in moments of great loss, great crisis, that I do, after all, recognize the human need for some overarching authority, however distant and, perhaps, indifferent. I have seen things which can not be rationally explained, more than once. While I don’t believe that we have our own personal ‘guiding hand’ in our lives, I do think, sometimes, that there is something to which one can appeal and, very, very rarely, be heard.” He gave a small, rueful grin. “I am well aware that Sherlock disagrees. But then, Sherlock isn’t the one who has seen his dearest wish granted—several times, at this juncture, under circumstances which defy logic. His very existence, after walking a tightrope between life and death multiple times, is the definition of ‘miraculous’.”

John gave his own reluctant chuckle at that. “I don’t know if he told you,” he said, “but when he was…when he ‘died’, I went to his grave. I asked him for one more miracle--I asked him not to be dead. So I suppose I got my own prayer answered as well, though there was probably less divine intervention involved than there was for you.”
“Perhaps,” Mycroft said, but looked pensively at John. “Or, perhaps, Sherlock surviving those two years, against all odds, was the answer to a prayer you were not aware you were making.”

Rog came looking for them, roughly an hour later. He looked exhausted but pleased.

Mycroft rose jerkily when the surgeon entered, but relaxed as the American waved a genial hand. “He’s fine.” Rog said. “Didn’t mean to scare you. But I have a plan I’d like to discuss with you, before we go much further down the road.”

Mycroft raised his eyebrows enquiringly, and John mirrored him. Rog, though, looked past both of them to Anthea, still sprawled along the pew. “We should take this elsewhere, I think,” the surgeon said. “And I’ll have someone come take her to a bed, shall I?”

Ten minutes later, a groggy and somewhat cross Anthea was tucked away in an on-call room, and the rest of them had adjourned to the surgeon’s lounge, large cups of good coffee in front of them.

“So,” Rog began, “I know John told you that I’ve put a temporary external pacemaker in place.” He looked at Mycroft, who nodded. “And, at this juncture, I think it best we wait 48 hours, to give the antibiotics a chance to work on the pericarditis before going back to the table. I’ve pulled fluid from the pericardium—the sac around the heart—and it tested positive for the presence of bacteria. I’ve sent it for a quick culture, but we’re going on the assumption that this is the same infection he’s been treated for all along.”

“Is this likely to develop into chronic heart difficulties?” Mycroft asked. Only someone who knew him would realize that he was not unaffected by the question.

“I don’t believe so, at least not from what we’ve seen so far,” Rog said. “He doesn’t have excess fluid in the sac, and I believe the issues earlier arose from irritation to the heart—the stress of the surgery. We get him antibiotics, give them a couple of days to work, and start him on some temporary medication, and I think it will resolve.”

John, though, had picked up an undertone to that assurance. “But…” he prompted.

Rog gave a wry grin. “No fair—you know me too well,” he said. “Yeah, there’s a bit more. I really think, unless you object, that we should keep him under sedation until we go back to theatre. Two reasons, really: first, I want as little strain on his heart as possible. The less movement, the less stress, the better. The second reason really links into the first—pain. Hard to find a greater stressor than pain. Given that we had to remove the necrotic bone grafts, and he had a touch of osteomyelitis in the remaining rib fragments, leading to the removal of even more bone, he’s going to have a hell of a lot of pain to deal with.” Rog looked at Mycroft before continuing. “And…well, John told me that your brother was a recovering addict,” he continued, and Mycroft nodded. “If we can get him past the worst of this while he’s still sedated, that’s going to reduce the duration of heavy opiate use he’ll need.”

John and Mycroft looked at each other, saw agreement, and nodded to Rog. “No arguments here.”
John said, “With the caveat that we limit the sedation to 48 hours. I don’t know about you, but I’m uneasy about the incipient pneumonia. He’s got some minor lung scarring and weakness, and this isn’t going to help.”

Rog nodded. “Agree completely. And, as it happens, 48 hours gives us almost exactly enough time to complete the other thing I want to talk to you about.” The other two lifted their eyebrows expectantly.

Rog pulled out a tablet computer and laid it on the table between them, bringing up a website with a schematic of a patient’s ribcage, enhanced by an odd-looking artificial structure.

“A little information to preface this. I mentioned that Sherlock lost all of the original rib graft material, and some additional bone, to the most-recent infection. So, he now has a hell of a deficit on the right-hand side of his ribcage. Now, under some circumstances we wouldn’t worry about it too much—say, with an older person, or someone who leads a sedentary lifestyle. But he’s young and, going by his muscle definition, quite athletic.”

John nodded, peering over at the tablet to see where this was going.

“Stop cheating,” Rog scolded. “I’ll show you in a second.” He tapped on the webpage, enlarging the schematic to fill the screen before continuing.

“There’s a new technique being used in similar cases—still experimental, but not terribly so. It creates artificial ribs and, if needed, a sternum, though in this instance only a portion of the sternum, the bottom half, will be necessary. The kicker is that the replacement ribcage is actually created using a 3-D printer and titanium powder. We can use the CAT scan we just ran as our template. The end result is completely shaped to his anatomy, and it’s flexible. And I don’t believe it will heighten his bone pain—might make it a bit better, even, since we’ll be removing the cartilage joints that were causing a lot of the pain in the first place. And the beauty of it is, Landstuhl is one of three facilities in the world doing hands-on work in this field. We have the printer, and 21 successful outcomes out of 23 patient volunteers. If we place the order today and forward the scans, the apparatus will be completed in 40 hours.” He reached over and pushed the tablet towards John, who scanned quickly over the material before passing it to Mycroft.

Mycroft looked it over carefully before looking up. “Will this have an impact on his physical rehabilitation process? Make it more difficult, make it slower?”

The surgeon shook his head. “No. Rather the opposite, in fact—he’ll have immediate stability in the bone joins, which wouldn’t really be the case with cadaver bone.” He looked at them both earnestly. “Don’t get me wrong, though. His rehab is going to be an absolute bitch. His musculature has been sliced and diced way too many times, and you always lose something when that happens—scar tissue isn’t as flexible, or as effective, as normal muscle. He’s in for significant pain while he works through it, and it will take months before he’s back to normal—if he’s willing to do the work. If not, well…”

“He’ll do the work. Probably do it quicker than any patient you’ve had, and come back for more. But—and it’s a big ‘but’—he will also be an absolute nightmare, once he has the energy to do so,” John said, as Mycroft gave a slight smile and nodded. “As soon as he’s physically able to access any kind of electronics, he will know more about his condition, and the treatment options, than either you or I, and won’t be shy about saying so. Loudly. Rudely. And the worst part is, he will almost always be right. He will add to the joy by whinging, and snarling, and insulting everyone who comes within reach. And then we get to add the wrinkle of weaning him off morphine—again.”

“So, good times ahead, then?” Rog asked, with a smirk.
They agreed with the treatment plan. Of course, they agreed. That was the easy part. The hard part was the waiting—two solid days of sitting in Sherlock’s Critical Care room, watching his fitful sleep, listening to monitors and hoping nothing changed. Even though he was kept sedated, none of them were comfortable leaving him completely alone, so they took meal/sleep/toilet breaks in turn, always leaving at least one person in the room.

Very early on the second day, John reached the end of his tether. This whole situation had too much resonance for him—sitting endless hours at the bedside of an unresponsive Sherlock. In desperation, he asked Mycroft if the facility needed an additional pair of skilled hands; the medical director of the facility accepted with flattering speed. John spent the next eight hours treating wounds, assessing post-surgical patients, triaging a group of agents recovered from a disastrous mission in Bosnia.

He left his temporary duties, abruptly, in late afternoon, when he received a terse message from Mycroft, asking for his immediate presence in Sherlock’s room. He didn’t run, quite, but it was a near thing.

When he hurriedly opened Sherlock’s door, he found Mycroft, Anthea and Rog already there, engaged in what looked like a low-level argument at the bedside. All three looked up at John in relief.

“What’s wrong?” John asked, stepping to Sherlock’s bedside to check monitors and do a rapid assessment. Nothing seemed immediately wrong, though Sherlock’s respiratory rate was faster than it should be.

“I think we need to go back to theatre,” Rog said. “The prosthetic ribcage is en route, with an expected arrival within two hours.”

“But why not wait until it gets here?” Anthea asked behind him. “It seems risky to start surgery again without a guarantee that the materials will get here. What happens if it doesn’t, and you have to close again? Won’t that stress his heart?” Mycroft didn’t speak, but it was clear he agreed.

John looked closely at his unconscious friend, and reached his own conclusion before Rog answered. “The pneumonia?” he asked.

Rog nodded. “I think the antibiotics have made good inroads on the pericarditis—even though the fever hasn’t completely abated, he hasn’t needed the pacemaker, and there have been no more irregular beats in the last 12 hours. But his breathing hasn’t improved, and if it gets much worse we’re going to be looking at more-invasive support. I’ve had a culture done—I suspect the pneumonia needs a different antibiotic. But the problem is, the pneumonia, even while he’s undergoing treatment, is going to start putting strain on his heart as well, and that could mean we wouldn’t be able to do the orthopedic surgery until it had resolved. Do you really want him to spend another full week awaiting repair? For me, doing it now, knowing that he’ll have a rough couple of days and may require short-term ventilation support, is the better option.”

“John?” Mycroft said. “I would welcome a second opinion.”

John thought about it—the risk of waiting, the risk of not waiting. In the end, though, he came down
“I think we need to go,” he said, earning a glare from Anthea. “I know—we’d all like to be sure this is the right approach. But that isn’t the way that medicine works. For me, the deciding factor is time: I can’t imagine keeping Sherlock bed-bound for a week or more, knowing that he’d be heading in for more surgery at the end of it. We couldn’t possibly keep him sedated that entire time, so just keeping him quiet and calm would be a horror story all its own. He’d be very ill, still, but aware that he had harder times ahead.”

Anthea scowled, her arms wrapped tightly around her torso. “I hate this,” she said. “I hate having to watch him go through this kind of thing again, and I hate not knowing if we’re doing the right thing, and I especially hate doing any more fucking waiting.”

Mycroft lays a pale hand on her shoulder. “You’re not alone in that, my dear.” He hesitated momentarily before continuing. “I could, if you wish, arrange for your transportation back home…”

Anthea drew herself to her full height on a gasp of outrage. “Mycroft Holmes,” she hissed.

John grinned as the Great Man recoiled, blinking. “Apologies,” he said, with a jerky little bob of his head. “Objection noted.”

And so it was decided. Sherlock was prepped quickly for the return to surgery, while Mycroft went off to call his parents about this latest development, and Anthea, with a rattling sigh, trudged back to the surgery waiting room. John received his Bluetooth headphone from one of the surgical assistants, and climbed back to the balcony above the table.

The replacement ribcage arrived just as Rog had reopened the incision and rechecked the state of the remaining bone, making sure that the edges were clean and clear of any residual infection. John was happy to hear Rog’s pleased murmurs as he inspected the wound.

“No residual infection that I see,” he said, “and all of the bone looks clean and normal. I think we’re in business.” He turned to give John a smile and a thumbs-up, which John happily returned.

The theatre doors opened suddenly, and a surgical tech entered with a sterile pack cradled in her hands. When she unwrapped the package, John was fascinated to see the dark grey, futuristic-looking array. The “ribs” were thinner than he expected, looking almost like power cords connected to plugs of some kind. And the “sternum”, of perforated metal, looked like some sort of odd microphone.

The insertion of the unit didn’t take as long as John had feared. Rog, keeping up his usual commentary for John’s benefit, said the same thing.

“I knew what had to be done, but I didn’t expect it to be this smooth,” the surgeon said. “At this rate, I can close in ten minutes.”

He proved correct. No alarms, no set-backs—Sherlock was in recovery in thirty minutes, then transferred back to his room in a little more than two hours.
By the time Mycroft and Anthea arrived, John was experiencing a strong feeling of déjà vu—here they were, yet again, waiting by Sherlock’s bedside. The difference was, this time he was expected to wake.

It took longer than anyone wanted—he was still very ill, still running fever, still stitched and pasted together with the surgical equivalent of gaffer tape and baling wire. But, in the depths of the night, while Mycroft played on his phone, Anthea snored (quietly) on the extra cot, and John fretted over a paperback book in which he had read one page in the past hour, things changed. Sherlock began to move around—not a lot, and not with conscious volition, but a clear indicator that the sedation was leaving his system. And, finally, at 4 a.m., the man in the bed suddenly coughed, then made a pained gasp, then coughed again, while John leaned forward to press the call button and reached for the cup of ice chips on the bedside table.

As John stood and walked to the head of the bed, those pale, pale eyes suddenly blinked open, looking perplexedly around the room—lighting on Mycroft, then John, then back on a circuit of the room. Then Sherlock coughed once more, groaned, and opened his mouth.

“Who the hell kicked me in the chest?” he demanded in a hoarse whisper, and was outraged as John and Mycroft looked at one another, and laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Some medical "stuff":

Pericarditis refers to an infection of the tough little sac that contains the heart. It's normally filled with fluid, and in severe cases the heart muscle, and that fluid, can also be infected (though, luckily, Sherlock hadn't progressed that far). But it can cause permanent heart damage if not promptly treated. Myocarditis is infection of the heart muscle itself.

Osteomyelitis is bone infection, and the only real treatment, other than antibiotics, is to remove the infected bone.

"Necrotic" means dead. Necrotic tissue or bone must be removed.

Sherlock's final overdose is also referenced by Greg Lestrade in "Scheherezade". Some things stay the same in all of my "universes".

The circumstances of Sherlock's premature birth is told from Mycroft's perspective in "First Things First".

And the 3-D printing of replacement rib cages is REAL, folks--I found the article while checking current treatment for rib replacements. You can read it at: https://singularityhub.com/2015/09/11/we-can-rebuild-him-patient-receives-3d-printed-titanium-ribs-and-sternum/#sm.00013vhnbuwdrff1pob129q56c55k
As it turned out, Rog was right: Sherlock did have a very rough two days, following his initial awakening. The pneumonia blossomed overnight, most likely in response to both the stress of surgery, and the introduction of the ventilator and anesthesia. The fever proved persistent, despite copious doses of antibiotics, and led to the application of ice blankets twice. Sherlock was miserable, in pain and (much of the time) delusional.

Towards noon on the second day, things seemed to reach their worst: the doctors were beginning to make noises about putting Sherlock back under sedation and reinserting the ventilator, to give his system a better chance at fighting off the infection while not working so hard to breathe.

John and Anthea walked back from a run to pick up a packet of clean clothing sent their way by Mycroft’s office to find Mycroft, Rog and the head of anesthesia engaged in a near-whispered, vehement argument at Sherlock’s bedside.

“He’s not getting adequate oxygenation as he is,” the anesthetist said, quietly but angrily. “It will make it harder for him to heal. Adding the ventilator, even for twenty-four hours, will—”

“Put him at risk for never being able to be weaned off of it,” Mycroft hissed. “His lung function has been mildly compromised for weeks at this point. We must do nothing to compromise it further, unless we have no other choice.”

Rog put his hand on Mycroft’s shoulder. “If he fails to get enough oxygenation for any length of time, weaning him will be the least of our worries,” he whispered.
John raised his eyebrows, and gestured towards the doorway. “Can we, maybe, take this outside, so we don’t have to whisper?” he said quietly, and all parties seemed to simultaneously realize how ridiculous they appeared. They turned, in a huff of ruffled dignity, and followed John out. Anthea stood by, arms crossed and eyebrows raised.

“So, what’s the issue?” John asked when the door had swung shut behind them. “I’m gathering his sats aren’t good?”

“Still in the 90s, but dropping,” Rog said, getting his response in before the anesthetist, who glared but stayed silent. “Dr. Patel thinks that a limited period of ventilator use would be of benefit.”

“But it also puts him at risk of having difficulty getting off it,” Mycroft said, looking to John. “Is that not correct?”

“It could be,” John said, a little reluctant to get into the middle of this. “He struggled with it after the shooting—he needed two weeks of respiratory therapy afterward.” He thought about it, then continued, looking at the other two doctors. “I come down with Mycroft on this one, I’m afraid. Is there some other less-invasive option we can pursue?”

Rog looked thoughtful; the anesthetist scowled, but also looked thoughtful, and, in the end, they came to an agreement on a new, high-volume external oxygen feed technique.

It worked. Praise be, it worked. In looking back, John saw that day as the turning point.

It started slowly. The high fever finally left for good, after two off-and-on days filled with miserable evening peaks and morning lulls. Sherlock was still terribly weak, and slept most of the time, while making little or no sense when he was awake. But, now, it was truly sleep, rather than feverish oblivion.

Anthea saw the next change, since she happened to be on solo duty in Sherlock’s room at the time. “He woke up!” she said excitedly, as John and Mycroft came back from a breakfast run. “Really woke up, I mean—I had a five-minute conversation with him while I was feeding him broth, and he managed to complain about both the room temperature and the food before he fell asleep again.” She beamed at her unconscious charge, who was now snoring softly after that notable exertion.

The biggest change, the one that truly let everyone know the detective was on the mend, came the following day. Sherlock was awake early, uncomfortable and in pain, but lucid. After his morning meds were administered and his minimal breakfast downed (with considerable whinging—actually a good sign), his consultant doctor, Dr. Girard (since Rog had returned to Landstuhl, doing his follow-ups via Skype) came in and chirpily announced that “today is the day you ambulate, Mr. Holmes!”

John didn’t need to see the eye-roll to know it happened. But the chirpy doctor was undismayed. “We will have you walking, with balance assistance at first,” he said, beckoning to a burly therapy assistant in the doorway.

That, though, was where things went a bit awry. John saw Sherlock look over at the assistant, freeze momentarily, then say “No” in a wavering voice, shaking his head. The assistant ignored him,
moving to briskly throw the bedcovers aside, as Sherlock continued to shake his head and cringe away. It wasn’t clear what was going on, but it was enough for Mycroft to step in between the assistant and his brother, while the consultant stood uncertainly behind.

“I can do it,” the bureaucrat said. “I presume my purpose is to help him up and then stand ready to ‘catch’ as needed?” He raised his eyebrows enquiringly at the consultant.

“It should be…ideally, we should proceed with professional help,” the man said uncertainly, not liking the ice-blue cold stare from Mycroft, still sporting his somewhat-piratical red-gold beard. It was the kind of look that promised Bad Things.

“I will take responsibility,” Mycroft said, and waved a hand to move the beefy assistant out of the room. The consultant stayed, hovering in the doorway. John took the opportunity to ask what was expected from this exercise.

“So, is it ‘one circuit of the room’, or ‘let’s sit in the chair first’?” John said, while Mycroft helped his brother shift to the edge of the cot, hands gentle but firm.

“I can walk,” Sherlock rasped, Mycroft’s right arm snaked firmly around his waist as he stood, wobbled, then straightened with a hitched gasp of pain. “How far?”

“Ideally, at least one full round of the room,” Dr. Girard said, “but as far as you can, otherwise. While you do need to move, pushing too far, too fast is not a good idea. Bearable pain is inevitable; unbearable is not wise, and you must say if it becomes too much.”

John, however, recognized from Sherlock’s mulish expression that Hell would host ice skating parties before the detective would say anything of the kind.

As John had predicted, Sherlock proceeded to excel—did the requested slow circuit of the room, both arms firmly clutched around his torso, while Mycroft hovered protectively six inches behind him. At the end of that slow loop, though, Mycroft moved as if to guide his brother back to bed, and was stopped by a jerky motion of Sherlock’s head. They started off again, even slower this time, Sherlock weaving a bit in his path. Mycroft moved to his side, right arm hovering close to, but not touching, Sherlock’s back. By the time they were back to the side of the cot, Sherlock had reached out his left arm and grabbed his brother’s shoulder, but refused to stop, starting off on yet another circuit. This time, though, John felt obligated to step in.

“Enough,” he said quietly, lifting Sherlock’s arm from Mycroft’s shoulder and hooking his own hand under his friend’s elbow. “Too much is as bad as too little, at this juncture.” Mycroft stepped deftly out of the way, while his brother’s face slid into a discontented frown.

“John, I can still—” the detective began, in a breathy whisper, before dropping to the cot with a pained huff.

“The fact that you are struggling to breathe enough to speak is the best reason why you can’t,” John interrupted. “Lie down, have some water, and you can try again this evening.” He handed Sherlock the cup of cold water from the table next to the cot.

That evening, he took four circuits, and fell back onto his cot with a triumphant grin.
Sherlock improved rapidly at first, walking further each day, beginning the very mildest of physical therapy regimens, diligently taking the myriad medicines and treatments as required. After that first week, though, he seemed to plateau; no better, though no worse. He was uncomfortable, bored and (so Anthea thought) a bit depressed. He put on a brave face for John, and a snarky one for Anthea and Mycroft. But, every so often, something troubled peeked out from behind.

Anthea

It had been a long ten days at the “Facility Which Shall Remain Nameless” (a designation which Anthea and John had used often, if only to enjoy the face Mycroft made when they did so). Mycroft had left for London three days ago, after Sherlock had reached the point where he felt well enough to be creatively rude (the true indicator that the detective was on the mend). The older man was due to return tomorrow, to act as Sherlock’s attendant for the flight home.

John had left two days ago, protesting all the while. Sherlock had insisted that he go—his “vastly pregnant” wife needed him more than Sherlock did, or so Sherlock said. John was to meet the flight at the private airfield outside London, and help get Sherlock settled temporarily at Mycroft’s home. Physical and respiratory therapists had already been lined up for home visits, as well as a rotation of on-site nursing staff. While some hospital visits would be inevitable, it was hoped that setting up the appropriate equipment at home would suffice—they all knew that Sherlock wouldn’t do as well in an inpatient setting, if it was possible to avoid it.

Those departures, though, meant that Anthea, for her sins, had been appointed Interim Sherlock Minder.

It had been an especially difficult two days. While Sherlock was much better overall after surgery, the pneumonia was proving a stubborn opponent. They had changed antibiotics once already, but the infection continued to linger. Sherlock had a miserable cough that would often lead to gagging, and caused him excruciating pain, which lead to a need for continued use of opiates, which affected his respiratory rate, which…

It was a vicious circle, and Anthea was nearly as exhausted as Sherlock in trying to deal with it. These two days, as well, had been made more unpleasant by the presence of Dr. Ashford, long-time medical director and (because it was the weekend) replacement consultant for Sherlock. Unlike the timid Dr. Girard, Ashford was a typical surgeon, big ego and all. While he was certainly competent, with a long list of innovative procedures bearing his name and many prestigious awards, he was also arrogant, overbearing and intolerant.

He was particularly intolerant of Consulting Detectives, as it happened. Anthea had had to intervene twice when Sherlock had taken offence at the physician’s high-handed discourse; the doctor couldn’t bring himself not to talk over Sherlock, if Anthea was in the room.

It was exhausting. Anthea was counting the hours until Dr. Girard’s return.

She had been tied up all morning, dealing with detailed planning for the trip home as well as ongoing tasks for her “real” job. Sherlock had therapy and medical appointments scheduled for the bulk of
that time, so she wasn’t worried about leaving him alone. At eleven she wandered down to the cafeteria in pursuit of coffee and a pastry or two. She lingered to have a chat with one of the nursing staff, commiserating with the woman on dealing with physician quirks.

But then—Anthea was running before her conscious mind registered what she had heard: an urgent announcement, summoning Security to Sherlock’s room.

She heard it before she rounded the last corner—a wordless howl of despair and pain, punctuated by crashes and thumps from inside the room. As she slid to a stop, she saw a clutch of nurses and support staff huddled opposite the doorway, looking apprehensively at a furious Dr. Ashford. Two Security staff stood indecisively to one side.

“What’s going on?” she snapped at the physician. “Why did you call Security?”

“He’s having a psychotic break,” Ashford said. “He is a danger to others, as well as himself. He struck one of his nurses.” A ginger man, in the clump of staff near the door, was holding a cloth to his cheek.

Without bothering to comment on that idiocy, Anthea moved towards the doorway, only to have Ashford grab her arm. As she looked disdainfully at the man’s hand, he pulled it back, but stood his ground.

“He is dangerous, Ms. Holder. I’ve read his file,” Ashford said.

“He is autistic,” Anthea snarled, “and that,” she said, pointing through the open doorway, “is a meltdown. The first one he’s had in more than five years. And if you’d actually read all of his file, you would know that. Assuming that autism was covered in whatever third-rate online medical school you bought your diploma from.”

Grabbing hold of the last shreds of her temper, she turned her back on the outraged surgeon and appealed to the nursing staff.

“I need a heavy blanket or duvet, immediately,” she said. “Not wool. Hurry, please.” The howling from the room had trailed off, and Anthea could now hear Sherlock wheezing, while the intermittent crashes continued.

A dark-haired nurse darted off down the hallway, and was back within two minutes, a navy blanket in her hands. She thrust it at Anthea with a bob of her head. Anthea was surprised to feel weights woven through the fabric, and looked at the woman in surprise.

“We use them in some of the therapy settings,” the woman said. “The PTSD patients sometimes find them soothing.”

Anthea smiled her thanks, then turned, took a deep, calming breath, and stepped into Sherlock’s room.

She immediately hit the light switch, killing the glaring overhead fluorescents—those were supposed to be left off, given their effect on Sherlock’s hypersensitivity. The side-table lamp, used in preference to the overhead lighting, was now a pile of fragments beside the door. That left the room illuminated solely by filtered sunlight coming through the opaque windows. She also heard a host of monitoring equipment emitting electronic alarms, and hurried to turn those off as well before moving towards Sherlock, crouched in the farthest corner of the room.

The room was a tip—every movable object had been tossed, overturned, or broken in Sherlock’s distress. Only the cot and the nightstand remained in place, too heavy for the detective to dislodge. It
was fortunate that there had been no glass in the room. She slipped off her shoes—any additional noise would be like a slap to Sherlock, in this state.

Now that the alarms were silenced, she could hear her friend’s heavy, hoarse breathing, a raspy wheeze interrupted by frequent choked coughs. Holding the weighted blanket carefully in her hands, she finally spoke.

“Sherlock?” she said, very, very softly. “Can I come over there?”

She waited, as patiently as she could. She had learned the hard way, back in their early days together, that this process couldn’t be rushed. When Sherlock hadn’t responded in two minutes, she took silence as consent and padded to his side, moving around until she could kneel behind where he huddled, knees tucked under and right hand and arm clenched tightly against his side.

Quietly opening up the blanket, she leaned carefully forward and placed the weighted fabric gently atop his shoulders, waiting for a reaction. When none came, she extended the movement, until she had wrapped the blanket completely around his body, letting one corner fall over the top of his head. Then she reached her arms around, on top of the cloth, and pulled Sherlock into a loose hug, the blanket secured under her grip. She could feel him trembling, shaking, really, in her arms. His teeth chattered, either with cold or from reaction—maybe both.

A minute passed; two. Then a tiny voice said “More”. That was all he could manage, evidently, but it gave Anthea an idea.

Very carefully, she slid her arms under Sherlock’s elbows and lifted—not enough to feel like she was forcing him up, but rather a suggestion—could he rise?

He could; not well, and not without considerable help on her part. But, over the next two minutes, she managed to edge him to a mostly-standing position, and from there, to the edge of the cot. After that, it was easy—she guided him wordlessly to sit, then supported him while he subsided onto his side. She carefully lifted his legs as well, and saw him settled in the bedding before moving behind, climbing up herself and sliding into place as the ‘big spoon’ behind him. She reached her left arm back over his chest, pulling his upper body firmly against her own without putting pressure on his wound. Then she settled in, once again, to wait.

It took more than ten minutes; she thought he had fallen asleep, once the shaking slowed, then stopped. Just as she was preparing to carefully disengage herself, though, he spoke, in a wrecked, hoarse whisper.

“Thank you,” he said, before launching into a wracking coughing spell. She gave him water, wiped his mouth, then settled in to wait again. When he seemed calm, heading towards sleep, she tried one question.

“Can you tell me why?” she asked. No judgment, no pity—neither would be accepted.

His face worked momentarily, before he turned to bury it in his pillow, shutting her out along with the rest of the world. And that was the last real contact she had; though she waited, almost patiently, for another ten minutes, by the end of that time he had slid into an uneasy doze.
She stepped back into her shoes in the doorway, looking back to the cot one more time before stepping outside. It was time to take names and kick arses, after some interim tasks were accomplished.

She was glad to see, as the door shut behind her, that the little crowd outside had dissipated. The Security staff were gone, as was the ginger nurse—and Dr. Ashford. The dark-haired woman remained, though, and Anthea was happy to have a sympathetic ear.

“Can you get someone to come give him a light sedative, and then check him over once it’s kicked in? Not Dr. Ashford,” she said. “The sedative’s a necessity—if they try to go in there now without it, it’ll very likely set him off again.” She paused, then continued, wanting this nurse to understand. “He really can’t help it—he’s hypersensitive, and the drugs he’s on seem to make it worse.”

The nurse nodded briskly. “I’ll get Dr. Harrison; he works with most of the PTSD patients, so he’s used to panic attacks—and this was very like, wasn’t it?” She, too, paused before looking earnestly into Anthea’s eyes. “You might want to speak with Mr. Holmes about this morning, once he’s feeling better. There was some sort of ruckus earlier about the lights and monitors, I know that. Dr. Ashford wasn’t best pleased when he arrived and found them all turned off. I wasn’t here, but I heard about it from the floor staff.”

From there, once she had her temper under control and was assured that Sherlock, though once again requiring light supplemental oxygen, had taken no serious hurt, Anthea started on a series of phone calls. The first was to the nursing supervisor who had been on duty that morning; what she heard had her struggling not to track Ashford down and gut him immediately. But reason ultimately prevailed—she owed it to Sherlock to let Mycroft handle this one.

The second went to Dr. Girard, asking him politely, but firmly, to return to the facility that evening. She assured the man that he would receive replacement time-off later in the week, but his presence was required tonight. The timid physician sighed, but said that he would be there within a couple of hours.

The third was to Mycroft. That one, she found a private room to make. While she had no illusions about keeping any of this from the facility staff, she didn’t want to provide Ashford with advance warning of what was coming. And oh, she felt a frisson of delight at the prospect—Mycroft’s voice, when she gave him the details, descended into arctic tones she had heard only a handful of times. Not good times, either.

The final call, after giving herself a stern talking to about keeping her temper, went to Ashford himself, letting him know that his presence was required at a meeting scheduled for 8 pm—roughly five hours away. The man blustered, attempting to decline, attempting to defer the meeting until a time of his own choosing. But Anthea’s suggestion that he get Lady Smallwood on the phone, if necessary, cut off that approach quite quickly. She hung up, and felt a warm glow of anticipation. Then she grabbed a sandwich in the cafeteria, and took her laptop back to Sherlock’s room to wait.

Sherlock was still soundly asleep, his oxygen feed whistling softly in the background, when Anthea heard a slight commotion from the corridor. She looked at her watch—just after seven. Mycroft had
been angry.

She stepped out of the room, pulling the door quietly closed, and looked up to see her employer striding down the hall, wearing his typical business attire, looking groomed and cool. She was surprised, though, to see John Watson at Mycroft’s side, looking rumpled, tired, and concerned.

“How’s he doing?” John asked without preamble. “And what happened?”

Anthea glanced at Mycroft, and saw his silent nod of permission.

“He had a meltdown,” she said. “I’ll give you the details once you’ve seen him—*quietly*, please—but, long story short, the attending physician chose to ignore his hypersensitivity, and followed up that stupidity by delivering upsetting news while I was out of the room.” She paused, then decided she was done sugar-coating things. “Ashford doesn’t like Sherlock—he made it painfully obvious. My own perception is that this was spite, pure and simple, and he was ignorant, or uncaring, enough to not realize the potential outcome.”

John’s lips grew tight and his shoulders drew up—that temper Anthea had heard about from Sherlock was very much in evidence. But he held himself back, and nodded towards the closed door. “Let’s go—I want to see him, before we see Ashford. I want to give him a quick check myself.”

John did his assessment quietly and quickly, as Mycroft stood at the foot of the bed, noting the renewed dark circles under Sherlock’s eyes, and the plasters and ripening bruises on his arms and hands. Then John jerked his head towards the door, and they left the detective to his drugged sleep.

Once outside, John lost no time. “Where is that son of a bitch?” he gritted out.

Anthea found herself smiling. “I’m *so* glad you see it my way,” she said. “I took the liberty of ordering him back here this evening, and setting up a meeting for all of us. He’s due in about twenty minutes.” She cut her eyes over to Mycroft. “I had to threaten him with Lady Smallwood to get him to agree.” Mycroft nodded, and pulled out his phone, tapping rapidly while they walked. Once he received a reply, he smiled.

It was not a nice smile.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter owes a lot to Rebecca, the Aspie daughter of my friend that I’ve mentioned before. She had a similar experience with a medical clinic, and remembering it made me think that Sherlock would have similar issues, and might, or might not, encounter sympathetic staff.
Chapter Summary

Dr. Ashford receives a rough education. Mycroft enjoys the process, probably more than he should.

Chapter Notes

Well, looky here--this one is actually ON TIME. No, things haven't gotten dramatically better on the money front, and I'm still working seven days a week. But in this case, half of this chapter was already written when I broke the previous one in half, so here ya go.

The meeting took place in the surgeon’s lounge; Anthea would have opted for somewhere less comfortable, ideally, but the options were limited. She made a point, though, of pouring coffee for John and Mycroft, while pointedly omitting providing any for Ashford. The surgeon raised his eyebrows at her, and she gave him an intentionally vacant stare in return.

Pettiness was fun. Especially when the victim turned an angry red, but was afraid to say anything in Mycroft’s presence.

After a moment’s uncomfortable pause, Mycroft gestured at the one open chair (the one with the uncomfortable split in the vinyl seat. Anthea checked).

“Please have a seat,” the Great Man said coolly. “And then, if you would, I would like your precis of this morning’s events.”

Ashford clearly considered refusing, looking over his audience: John, glaring death from his eyes; Anthea, giving him precisely nothing with her expression; and Mycroft, who, with his newly-acquired beard and close-cropped dark red hair, looked oddly dangerous. Much sharper, more intelligent; he had abandoned his normal camouflage of ministerial blandness.

Ashford sat. He did not immediately begin to speak. After nearly two minutes of silence, though, he yielded.

“I came on duty this morning at six,” he said tersely. “Your brother was already awake when I entered; the nursing staff told me that he had refused his breakfast, and his fever had spiked again. When I came into the room, I noted that the overhead lights had been turned off; I turned them back on, and told the nurse to ensure that they stayed that way, so that the caregivers didn’t have to fumble around in half-dark. The heart and respiratory monitors had also been muted, so that the alarm would register only at the nursing desk; that was completely unacceptable, and I gave the nurse a talking-to about it while she reset them.” He looked sternly at them. “It was particularly irritating, since I had had the same conversation about the monitors with the staff yesterday.”

“And did it not lead you to ask why the nurses had disregarded your orders?” Mycroft asked.
“Oh, I already knew,” Ashford said. “Your brother told me he had requested it. He was very rude about it. And he insisted the lights be left off—said he found them ‘intolerable’, and became quite agitated when I refused.”

“Why?” John barked. Ashford raised his eyebrows inquiringly. “Why did you ignore his requests? Particularly since you had presumably read his file, and knew about his hypersensitivity?”

“Because I also knew that he clearly has a penchant for drama,” said Ashford. “And I remain unconvinced about the hypersensitivity—if he’s so sensitive, how on Earth would he be able to function as an active agent, as I’m told he has done?” His tone made it clear he had his doubts about that, as well.

John was now smiling—that terrifying smile that Anthea had heard Greg Lestrade memorably say made him reach instinctively to protect his privates.

“Did you also disregard his autism?” John asked. “Or does that fall under the category of ‘drama’ as well?”

“I don’t believe it. Misdiagnosis of autism in young children was quite common in the late eighties,” Ashford said curtly. “He doesn’t… he makes eye contact; he has no problems speaking coherently and fluently, in a variety of situations; he doesn’t stim. He’s certainly strange, but he’s not autistic.”

Anthea couldn’t let that one pass. “He’s a person, not a batch of symptoms,” she snapped. “And they refer to autism as a spectrum for a reason, you utter—”

Mycroft interrupted, in a quiet, glacial voice that nonetheless commanded attention. “My brother did not speak until he was 4; he rocked under extreme stress until he was 6, and he could not reliably make eye contact until he was almost 10. He suffered from meltdowns distressingly often, into his late teens, but, until this morning, had not had one for, I believe, the past six years. What you see today is the result of many years of diligent, unending effort on his part to mask his non-neurotypical traits. He is a genius; he is an exceptional actor, and is highly motivated to retain an unaffected façade. But it is a façade, and that is spelled out clearly in his file, so that medical professionals are aware of his underlying nature and are prepared to make any necessary adaptations to his regimen to ensure his comfort. I find it fascinating that you choose to disregard documented medical history because you dislike the patient.” It was clear that ‘fascinating’ was a substitute for ‘unconscionable’.

There was a long, charged silence. Ashford still look mulish, but was wise enough not to comment further. Anthea also found it notable that he didn’t correct Mycroft’s assertion that he disliked Sherlock.

John spoke, finally. “Why, in God’s name, do you still see patients?” he asked bitterly. “You clearly prefer research and pure surgery, and you’re shite at everything else.” The smile was back. “If Sherlock suffers a setback as a result of all of this, I’ll have both your license and your arse, mate. And his brother,” and he jerked a thumb at Mycroft, “will help me.”

And then, just then, Ashford lost his temper—a critical error on his part. “His brother,” the surgeon sneered. “Oh, yes, I know all about that. That’s why I am spending valuable time treating a rude, entitled, soi-disant ‘former’ junkie, who can access this facility solely because he is the sibling of one of the high and mighty. I understand that his original injury wasn’t even in the line of duty, and that his ‘mission’ was so secret that, even though it is now completed, no one seems to know anything about it. That’s extraordinarily convenient, isn’t it? And let’s not even mention the covert importation of an outside surgeon, a foreigner, whose expertise is in combat surgery rather than research, to perform an experimental procedure without consulting anyone at this facility.”
He held his chin high in defiance before turning to address Mycroft directly. “Care to respond?” he asked dismissively.

The look in the bureaucrat’s eyes, once those eyes met his, made Ashford take an involuntary step back. Anthea waited with unholy anticipation.

“You really should have read all of my brother’s file,” Mycroft began, in a deceptively mild tone. “If you had, you would then be aware that he had completed more than twenty successful missions as an agent before he was old enough to shave more than once a week. Missions, I should add, that he paired with me on, in my days as a team leader. His final mission as a full-time agent was unsuccessful only through internal betrayal, and he, and others, paid a very heavy price. His serious substance abuse issues arose, in large measure, from that time, and are documented thusly in the file you didn’t bother to read.”

He paused and looked, coldly, into the surgeon’s eyes. “That addresses, I believe, the majority of your initial objections to treating a critically-ill patient entrusted into your care. His, our, most-recent mission is so far beyond your security clearance that I have no intention of sharing any information whatsoever with you, nor would it be appropriate to do so even were you so cleared. Not to put too fine a point on it, it is none of your business. Your function, and one that you are evidently spectacularly inept at, is to provide exemplary, state-of-the-art care to wounded agents who enter this facility. It is not within your purview to decide who is entitled to that care, nor to make value judgments about their past or present service.”

His phone chirped, and he looked down briefly before snapping his attention back to Ashford, whose face was now a deep brick red. “I believe your final issue was in authorizing the enrollment of Dr. James Dodger in my brother’s care. You seem to feel that you should have been consulted on this in some fashion. I confess, I am mystified by that assertion—what, I wonder, leads you to believe that I am in any way concerned about observing your picayune internal protocols? Or, in fact, that I am concerned about anything to do with you, except insofar as it concerns your criminally negligent care of my brother?”

“I am the head of this facility, and make all decisions regarding care and staffing,” Ashford blustered. “I work at the pleasure of Lady Smallwood, and don’t concern myself with the machinations of Whitehall policy wonks like you, even if you did spend a brief period ‘putting in your time’ in the field.” He looked over at John and Anthea, and sneered. “Not much of an entourage, either. Doesn’t that speak to the pecking order, among you lot?”

Anthea reached over and put a warning hand on John’s arm. She considered reaching for Mycroft’s arm as well, but realized that Ashford had sealed his own fate.

Mycroft’s smile, that not-nice smile, was back. He stood, and walked slowly over to Ashford, brushing pale fingers lightly across the smaller man’s shoulder. “You appear to be under a misapprehension,” he said, beginning to walk slowly around the surgeon, as Ashford turned to keep him in sight. “I am not under the supervision of Lady Smallwood; in fact, in some instances, she would admit that she comes close to being under mine. It may surprise you to learn that the recent mission, the one which is, let’s remember, none of your business, was undertaken at her behest, and she has expressed her profound gratitude to each of us for its successful completion.”

The taller man continued to amble, quite slowly, around the now-somewhat-unsettled surgeon. “I mention all of that to make sure you understand one truly pertinent point,” Mycroft went on, then suddenly leaned forward, grabbed Ashford’s chin in one long, pale hand and brought it sharply up to face directly into Mycroft’s eyes.

Mycroft’s voice suddenly dropped half an octave, just verging on a snarl. “I can, and will, do
whatever I damn well please to you, and no one will object. If I say so, with just one word in the right ear, you will disappear tonight, and no one will ever raise a single question. At this moment it would give me a great deal of personal satisfaction to do so. So, I strongly suggest that, in the next five minutes, you answer me truthfully and completely, and hope that I do not utter that word.” He looked sternly into Ashford’s now-ashen face. “Are we clear on this?”

Ashford’s mouth opened, but no sound came out. He settled, finally, on a jerky nod.

“Excellent,” Mycroft crooned. “Now. Other than your heavy-handed bullying in relation to the lights and monitors in my brother’s room, I am told that you also chose to deliver distressing news to him, in the absence of his support network and in the aftermath of your upsetting actions. I would presume that this latter action was the ultimate trigger for his meltdown.” He raised his eyebrows at Ashford, who, after a moment’s consideration, nodded slowly.

“And what was the information that my brother found so painful?” Mycroft asked, though in fact he already knew.

“I…I would presume that he was upset when I informed him that he is not currently cleared to fly,” Ashford muttered.

“Which means…,” Mycroft prompted.

“That he can’t be released to travel home, for at least another week, possibly two, depending on the results of updated lung capacity tests and the efficacy of the new antibiotic for the pneumonia,” the surgeon said. He radiated a mild smugness, despite the situation. Anthea hoped this didn’t end in bloodshed—such a headache to clean up--but it was looking increasingly likely.

“And you chose to deliver this cheery news to my brother, when he was already agitated, and when all of us were absent, because…?” Mycroft said.

“He’s not a child,” Ashford sniffed. “And I had just completed my examination, so I naturally was obligated to pass along my conclusions.”

“And you were enjoying seeing your annoying patient taken down a peg,” John said flatly. “Until things got away from you, in spectacular fashion.”

“And you called Security, since you felt unable to control a febrile patient who is only ten days post-surgery and is suffering from pneumonia. You told me he was dangerous,” Anthea added helpfully.

“He hit Nurse Davidson,” the surgeon said defensively.

“Did he?” Mycroft said. “Or did Nurse Davidson simply walk into range while Sherlock was undergoing his meltdown, and encounter one of the many thrown objects in mid-air?” He looked at Anthea. “Because that’s what Nurse Davidson told Ms. Holder, you see. And would probably have told you, had you asked. But you didn’t bother, because, as it turns out, you don’t much care for Nurse Davidson, either.” He paused, and looked pensively at Ashford. “I sense a pattern here, Doctor.”

Ashford drew himself up in offended dignity. “I’m not sure what you’re implying. My credentials speak for themselves. I’m not obliged to discuss these matters with you, and you can take your objections up with Lady Smallwood. I have duties to attend to.” He backed carefully away from Mycroft and started to edge towards the door. Mycroft, however, nodded sharply at John, who moved to stand between the surgeon and escape.

“No, you don’t,” Mycroft said. “You are no longer involved with this facility. That position will be
temporarily held by Dr. Girard, until a decision can be made on a permanent replacement.”

Ashford’s face went puce, and he opened his mouth to reply, but the bureaucrat cut him off and continued.

“In the civilian world, you would be summarily sacked, if not officially sanctioned and turned over to the licensure board,” Mycroft said. “But, because of your long-term, if inadvertent, access to large amounts of classified information, MI6 is saddled with you, until such data is no longer relevant. It is profoundly tempting to have you sequestered indefinitely at some deeply uncomfortable holding cell. But, on reflection, I have realized that your skills can be an asset in another setting, even given your myriad other failings.”

He held out his phone briefly. “I had a conversation about this vexing issue with Lady Smallwood, and she mentioned an existing need for a medical director for a long-term research program that has been underway for several years. We have decided that you are ideally suited for this…unusual position. You will begin immediately; your possessions, most of them, will be carefully stored awaiting your return, but someone will pack a bag of necessities that you may take with you.” Mycroft gave a delicate pause. “Do you have any questions?”

As Mycroft spoke, Ashford’s mouth had dropped open. He spent long seconds like that, suspended in disbelief, before finally managing to produce a sound.

“What would…where is…,” he began, before stalling out. Mycroft, apparently tiring of the game, moved to fill the gap.

“The research relates to cold adaptations in far-northern larger mammals. While there are several active locations, the one in question is in Lapland, at a research station just a few miles north of the Arctic Circle. The staff consists of two full-time researchers, as well as the soon-to-depart medical director, who live, as you will do, at the station year-round. There are a floating group of support staff who rotate in on a monthly basis, but they are secured through an outside contractor and you will have no contact with them, as they have their own quarters. There is also a herd of roughly 150 reindeer, who are the research subjects.”

Ashford had managed to get his mouth working again. “But I…of what use would I be, with a staff of only two people? Giving annual medical checks and managing frostbite? It’s absurd.”

Mycroft raised his eyebrows. “Oh, no, you misunderstand,” he said smoothly. “Your primary function will be to assist in the research. And the bulk of your medical activity will be with your primary patients, who are the research subjects.”

“But…I don’t…I’m not a veterinarian,” Ashford babbled. “I don’t know how to… I couldn’t begin to…,” he trailed off, all colour now drained from his face.

“Oh, don’t worry.” Mycroft said reassuringly. “The outgoing director has agreed to extend his stay by six months, in order to give you some on-the-job training. The reindeer are not difficult to treat, and are quite docile, so I don’t really anticipate any issues. And,” he suddenly turned quite stern, “since the station receives on-site visits from representatives of the RSPCA every month, you will be unable to visit the same kind of petty cruelties on these animals that you have historically inflicted on your patients and staff.”

“And, who knows, it might actually give you some free time to examine why you’re such a massive dick,” John added cheerily.
Ashford seemed now to recognize his doom. “How long?” he asked, in a bleak voice.

“Until I no longer feel the urge to have you gelded,” Mycroft snapped, before continuing in a calmer tone, after a beat. “Five years, give or take,” he said, waving a dismissive hand. “Dependent, of course, on your whole-hearted acceptance of your role. Believe me when I tell you that this is by far the most-desirable of the options open to you.”

He nodded briskly at John, who moved over to open the door, revealing two dauntingly large Security types waiting outside.

“I suggest you hurry along now,” Mycroft said, motioning Ashford towards the two large men. “I could still change my mind about the gelding.” Then he turned his back on the trembling surgeon, who staggered his way out of the room and, presumably, out of their lives.

Once the man was out of earshot, John turned to Mycroft and applauded. The bureaucrat nodded serenely, but broke character suddenly by sliding into a pleased grin, so like Sherlock that Anthea’s breath caught momentarily. He launched into a theatrical bow, before standing back up and readjusting his clothes, sliding back into “Mycroft Holmes” once again.

A shadow of that delighted grin remained, though, just for a moment. “Well,” he said, “that was surprisingly entertaining.” He paused, then continued. “Imagine how much Sherlock will enjoy his monthly photos of Dr. Ashford amongst his new patients.”

Anthea rolled her eyes. “You didn’t tell Ashford about that part,” she said.

“No, I didn’t,” Mycroft replied. “But then, I also didn’t tell him about the broader aspects of his new role. Among other things, his duties will include obstetrical examinations and care for the female members of the herd, which, I am told, involves a fingertip-to-shoulder glove and the insertion of one’s entire arm into some less-than-hygienic areas. I believe I will keep a copy of the photos from that aspect for myself, as well.”

That smile was back, and this time the rest of them joined him.

Chapter End Notes

What can I say--I really love me a good verbal smackdown.
Mycroft

Mycroft was alone in the room when Sherlock awoke, having sent John and Anthea off earlier to have a late dinner. He would like to say he planned it that way, but would have to admit, if pressed, that even he couldn’t accurately predict the half-life of IV sedation. Much though he hated the terminology, it boiled down to his “best guess”. Though he would never, ever, say that aloud. Ever.

The planning, though—that was real. Given the circumstances, the last thing Sherlock would want was an audience for this awakening. And Mycroft was particularly anxious to limit any further damage, emotional or physical, from this debacle. He knew from painful experience that Sherlock would not be doing well after such an explosion, in this case a *public* explosion.

Mycroft sat patiently beside the cot, working sporadically on a tablet Anthea had brought him earlier. His brother had begun moving in the past half hour, making small distressed noises, shifting his head on the pillow—all early indicators of the waning of the sedation.

The first real sign of wakefulness was almost silent—a tiny gasp of what could only be pain, followed by a rigid silence and total stillness from the cot. Mycroft waited to see if Sherlock would, could, initiate conversation on his own. After a further five minutes of silence, though, the older man took the reins himself.

“Do you need additional medication?” he asked, very quietly—the odds were quite high that Sherlock was still extraordinarily sensitive to sound and light. “Are you in pain?” That last question was unnecessary—it was clear that Sherlock was. But Mycroft hoped that giving his brother something simple to respond to would break this impasse.
More silence. Sherlock was attempting to regulate his breathing, to appear as if still sleeping. He was less than successful, however, given his slight wheeze and the occasional suppressed cough.

Mycroft waited, waited—and finally sighed in resignation. “All right. I am going to step outside for a moment to request an update to your pain medication. When I return, I hope to find you more willing to engage.” He paused, as he stepped quietly towards the doorway. “Remember, brother. Not your fault.”

Once he had made the request, Mycroft stayed outside the room long enough for the nurse to add medication to Sherlock’s drip (after cautioning her firmly about the need for quiet), then counted off an additional five minutes before returning to his brother’s side.

The room was still silent, save for the quiet hum of the oxygen feed. Sherlock was in the same position, still wielding that unnatural stillness, like a small animal hiding from a predator. Mycroft sighed again, before settling back into his chair.

“I thought we were past this,” he said softly into the silence. “Not the…incidents…themselves, but rather your belief that they somehow represent a failing on your part.”

There was a tiny hitch in the breath from the cot. Not ideal, but nonetheless a reaction.

“I have often wished for the right words to use to convince you of that truth,” Mycroft continued. “A neurological firestorm is not a choice on your part, nor is it something you can train yourself out of, no matter how hard you try.” He paused, then continued. “And I have no illusions about how hard you have tried, brother mine. But in this case, you are the victim of a cascade of adverse circumstances—your illness, your medications, and a willfully ignorant troll in a position of power.”

“Not unlike yourself,” came a wisp of a voice from the cot. Mycroft was startled into a true crack of laughter.

“Willfully ignorant—well, at times, perhaps. But a bit too tall for a troll, surely?” he replied, in an amused tone.

“Ask me again when I’m not under the influ- inful—” His brow furrowed in frustration. “I’m too stoned for…I’m too stoned,” Sherlock rasped, his voice wrecked. He tried to shift position, only to stop with a gasp. Mycroft hurriedly stood and helped him settle on his back, adjusting the oxygen line carefully and shifting pillows. A pale hand gestured towards the head of the cot, and Mycroft hit the controls to lift Sherlock’s shoulders slightly.

Sherlock’s irises were near-colourless in the dim light, around large, dark pupils; his hair was a mad snarl on the pillow. He looked ill, and tired, and, well, drugged. He blinked, quite slowly, before speaking again.

“He found it amusing,” he said, in a voice that was now slurring noticeably. “When I…the lights. He didn’t laugh. But.”

That was as far as he could get, but the meaning was clear. Mycroft was reconsidering the gelding
“He has been dealt with,” Mycroft said, saving the details for later, when his brother would remember (and, hopefully, appreciate) them. “You won’t see him again.”

Sherlock nodded owlishly. He blinked again, as if awaiting some signal to speak. Lacking that, however, his eyes slowly slid back shut again, and he relaxed into the pillows with a sigh of relief.

By the time John and Anthea returned, forty minutes later, Sherlock had lapsed back into fitful sleep and Mycroft had returned to his work. The two pushed the door open quietly, and Anthea raised her eyebrows inquiringly, knowing the need to limit unnecessary stimuli.

“Well enough,” Mycroft near-whispered. “Currently dozing, but likely ready for interaction soon.” Anthea beamed, and waggled her fingers at her employer to urge him out of his chair, so that she should could take his place.

John moved quietly to the edge of the cot, checking the monitor readings and tweaking gently at the oxygen tubing. The twitch on the line pulled slightly at Sherlock’s nostrils, and those pale eyes blinked open again. Sherlock’s face morphed into a somewhat loopy smile.

“I thought you went home,” he said, still slurred but less so than previously.

“I did,” John said, nodding. “But I came back, because you needed me.”

Sherlock frowned. “Yes,” he said. “I had a…I was upset.” Another frown, growing deeper now. “He said I can’t go home.” His eyes closed, and he turned his head away like a child, refusing any further interaction.

**Anthea**

It wasn’t quite a vigil, at this juncture. Sherlock was, would be, fine. While the pneumonia wasn’t resolved, and he had definitely been put back a bit by the meltdown (if only through the extreme exertion and stress on unhealed tissue and bone) he wasn’t in any danger. The fact that his fever had never risen above 38.5 degrees in the past 12 hours was a sign of impending victory for the antibiotics.

It felt like a vigil, though. They had once again spent hours sitting in this quiet, dark bubble, taking turns at making brief excursions outside, but never leaving their charge unattended. The danger from over-stimulation was probably past, now, but none of them wanted to put that to the test, so they stayed quiet and had minimal interaction with one another.

It made Anthea want to throw something through the window. Dr. Ashford would be a good choice.

She hadn’t been able to sleep, despite the late hour. John had taken himself off to the on-call room—
he had been awake for nearly 30 hours, and was fading fast. Mycroft had informed her that he had an idea he wanted to pursue; the gleam in his eye told her it wasn’t anything unpleasant or difficult, so she didn’t worry when he stayed away for the next three hours. As it happened, she was pretty sure she knew what he was up to.

She was fitfully reading one of the paperback thrillers John had brought along when a small noise from the cot made her startle. When she looked over, she saw ice-blue eyes looking back.

“There you are,” she said, feeling a large smile slide across her face.

“It’s not like I wasn’t here the entire time,” Sherlock rasped, though he, too, bore a hint of a smile. He looked around the room. “Where is everyone? John was here, wasn’t he? And Mycroft? I know I didn’t dream that.”

“It’s half-three,” Anthea said. “John is sleeping the sleep of the just in the on-call room. Your brother’s working on something. But I suspect it’s a surprise for you, so I’ll let him tell you about it when he gets done. Probably in the morning.” She paused. “Well, later in the morning, actually. Even he will need to sleep at some point.”

Sherlock gave a discontented huff. “That’s the worst thing about hospital. All the sleeping. I’m sick to death of sleeping.” He gave her a commanding look—well, as commanding as a man lying prone, with oxygen prongs in his nose, could manage. “I don’t want to sleep anymore. Entertain me.”

“Not on your life, Holmes,” she snorted. “You’ve been awake a grand total of four minutes, and I can confidently predict you’ll be back down for the count after your next dose of medication, which is due in,” she checked her phone, “fifteen minutes. So, enjoy a brisk bit of conversation, I’ll have the nurse help you to the loo, and then you can pop off again.”

“I don’t want to be back on so much pain medication,” Sherlock whinged. “It makes me stupid and sleepy. And they were supposed to shift to oral medication today.”

Anthea flinched mentally, but refused to let it show on her face. “Yeah, um, John consulted with your doctors after, well, after, and decided that, since you’ve had an obvious upswing in your pain level, you’ll do best if we put that off a couple of days. Let you sleep, even though you don’t want to, and help things settle back down before you make the shift.”

“Because I will be here long enough for it not to matter, as it happens,” Sherlock said bitterly, and reached for his call button. “Is it one week, or two?” He was trying to appear unconcerned; he was failing.

Anthea didn’t want to say too much, in case she was wrong about Mycroft’s current activities. But, at the same time, she didn’t want Sherlock to remain this upset. Because he was upset, though he’d be perturbed to know she realized it.

“I don’t think that’s been decided yet,” she said carefully. “Certainly, no one is following any of Dr. Ashford’s recommendations, I can tell you that.” She grinned at her friend. “And Mycroft, I know, is dying to tell you about Dr. Ashford’s new position.”

That generated a spark of interest, at least. “Do tell,” he commanded, raising his eyebrows.

“Nope,” said Anthea. “Not going to spoil it for either of you. He has it all planned; I believe it may include visual aids. And John is going to help.”

Just then, the nurse popped his head in, and offered a strong arm while Sherlock shuffled his way to the toilet and back. By the time he’d been lowered carefully back onto the cot, Sherlock’s lips were
pressed firmly together and his eyes clenched shut. When the dose of pain medication hit his system shortly thereafter, he gave a grateful sigh, and dropped quickly back into the sleep he’d earlier been protesting. Anthea shut off her light and crawled onto the extra cot, pulled up the blankets and closed her eyes.

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**John**

John stumbled out of the on-call room at Mycroft’s knock, looking at his watch and swearing. *Eleven a.m.*, for God’s sake.

“I asked the nurse to rouse me at 8,” he grumbled. “I wanted to be there for morning rounds with his doctor.”

“As it happens, I was already awake and present,” Mycroft said serenely. “Anthea and I made an executive decision to let you sleep, since nothing new of note was discussed—Dr. Girard agrees that Sherlock’s lungs will not tolerate pressurized flight, for the foreseeable future. His other functions are improving, however, and Dr. Girard now has every confidence that the current antibiotic regimen will complete the job.”

“God, I wish there were some other way to get him home,” John sighed. “I know he’s doing better physically, but the mental side—I mean, this whole thing wasn’t good, and he was already struggling to stay positive. He’s got a very long road ahead once he gets home, and I think he’s obsessing about it.” It was true—more than once, John had walked in on a somber Sherlock, sitting in near dark and staring at nothing. It wasn’t a Mind Palace thing—this was depression, of a kind that John was all too familiar with.

Mycroft nodded. “I concur; the sooner he is back in a familiar setting, the better. Which is why I have a bit of a surprise to offer him; since it affects you as well, I wanted to wait until you were present to mention it to my brother.” He paused, and broke into a small, true smile. “I also have an update on Dr. Ashford’s activities that I believe Sherlock will appreciate, and I knew you wouldn’t want to miss that.”

“Oh, yeah,” John grinned, and followed the tall man towards his brother’s room.

Sherlock was awake, alert, and, to be honest, cranky. As John and Mycroft entered the room, Anthea threw them a silent “*Help!*” look over her shoulder.

“No,” Sherlock said to Anthea, clearly in the middle of a continuing conversation. “I won’t.” He looked suspiciously at the bowl Anthea was holding, then sniffed dismissively. “Porridge is for children. It won’t hurt me to miss one meal.”
“But you like porridge,” John said, perplexed.

Sherlock blinked; apparently John wasn’t supposed to remember things like that. He rallied quickly, though. “It’s not made correctly,” he sniffed. “It has lumps.” The last was said in a tone of utter disgust.

Anthea gave the bowl a brisk stir, her voice rising to a near-shout in irritation. “No, it doesn’t. And, anyway, how would you know? You refused to taste it. Or the scrambled eggs. Or the toast. Or—”

Sherlock abruptly closed his eyes, his hands gripping the rails on the side of the cot. Anthea’s voice snapped off as if a switch had been hit.

“Too much noise?” she near-whispered, after a pause. Sherlock’s head gave a jerky nod, eyes still closed.

John had a sudden realization of what the likely problem was (beyond the immediate one of too much noise)—even when healthy, the detective was exquisitely sensitive to texture. If his senses were currently in overdrive, food would be a huge issue. They had fought through a similar problem once when Sherlock was weathering a migraine—when the pain had faded enough that food could be considered, he remained unable to tolerate much of anything in his mouth.

The solution then might well be workable now as well. He moved to the side of the cot, so that he could speak very softly indeed. “Broth?” he asked.

Sherlock considered, before giving another one of those minuscule nods.

John trotted down the hall to the nurses’ station, coming back with a cup of warm, fragrant chicken broth. He’d made sure to ask for a mug rather than a bowl, remembering Sherlock’s past reaction to the noise of a spoon clinking against china. When he reached his friend’s side, he reached over, gently pulled Sherlock’s hand loose from the rail, and put the mug in it.

Ten minutes later, Sherlock had finished the broth, sip by careful sip. His eyes were now open, but he made no attempt at eye contact. As he set the empty mug carefully on his tray, he muttered “Sorry,” with a wry twist of his mouth.

“Stop apologizing,” Mycroft and Anthea said together, drawing a smile from both Sherlock and John.

“You usually complain when I don’t apologize,” Sherlock said, with a rusty chuckle.

“Only if there’s something to apologize for,” Anthea said briskly. “And that’s not the case here.”

After a moment, Mycroft gave a genteel huff and stepped into the silence. “We have other things to discuss, as it happens,” he said, pulling out his tablet. “More relevant, and, I suspect, more interesting for you.”

Sherlock’s head came up at that, making fleeting eye contact before dropping back to his tray, where
his hands continued fiddling with the empty mug. Interested, but still uncertain, then.

“Yeah,” John said, “Mycroft says he has some information about Dr. Ashford that you’ll really want to hear.”

“And afterward, he has a present for you,” Anthea added.

“Not actually a child,” Sherlock said, without any particular animosity. But he gave another darting bit of eye contact, looking over to his brother with obvious interest.

Mycroft, a pleased look on his face, launched into the story of their meeting yesterday evening with the infamous Dr. Ashford. John and Anthea each contributed their own bits, without giving Sherlock a word-for-word transcription of Ashford’s ugly assessment of his patient (even though John was sure Sherlock had a fairly good read on what Ashford’s opinion had been). When Anthea gleefully repeated Mycroft’s threat to have the man gelded, Sherlock gave a deep chuckle before grabbing at his chest with a wince. His smile, though, stayed in place.

Mycroft tapped carefully at the tablet at the conclusion of the tale, and held it to his chest briefly. “Now, I knew that Dr. Ashford would be anxious to begin his new duties as soon as possible,” he said. “So I made sure that his transport had him there late last night. And, as it happened, the medical director had already planned an excursion early this morning to visit the herd, so he was able to meet his new ‘patients’ immediately.” He made one more quick tap to the tablet, and dropped it carefully onto Sherlock’s tray with a bit of a flourish. “I believe it went exceptionally well, don’t you?” he said, with a smirk that was echoed by Anthea.

The picture was of somewhere very cold. The ground was a mix of drifted snow and glazed ice, with early-morning sunlight shimmering across it. Dead center in the picture were two men. The first, a genial-looking older man in an enormous parka, held the reins of a very large antlered beast which filled the right-hand side of the picture. The second, wearing an equally-large parka that did nothing to conceal his look of congealed distaste, was a horrified Dr. Ashford, who was in process of “greeting” the first of his patients—a patient who, large brown eyes calf-like and soft, had reached across and swiped a huge pink tongue along the side of the doctor’s appalled face. The photographer had snapped the shot at precisely the right moment.

Sherlock gave a sputter, clutching at his side, and continued in a deep, stuttering laugh interspersed with little grunts of pain. Mycroft’s higher chuckle was quieter, and Anthea grinned. John, though--John howled. Just howled.

“Well,” John said, once he’d gotten himself largely under control, “that one’s going on the blog, I think.”

“No need,” Mycroft said smoothly. “It was sent out to several enthusiastic social media sites earlier.” He glanced at the tablet again. “Oh,” he said. “And it’s received over 100,000 hits already.” That was enough to set everyone off again.

After the laughter had finally settled, Sherlock raised his eyes fully and glared at his brother. “So, was that my present?” he asked. “I was under the impression I was promised something more.”

_Not actually a child, huh?_ thought John.

“Mmm,” Mycroft hummed. “I know that Dr. Girard had confirmed the loathsome Dr. Ashford’s earlier assessment, that your lung function was not currently adequate to air travel,” he said.

Sherlock’s face slid into a scowl. Mycroft glanced over, and hurriedly continued.
“Yes, well. As we know, that would mean that you would likely have to remain here an additional one to two weeks,” he continued. Sherlock’s scowl deepened. “But I realized that your restriction applied not to travel itself, but rather to the mode of travel.”

The scowl was replaced by a look of mild regret. “While I appreciate your forward thinking, I don’t believe that I am up to another cross-country automobile tour,” Sherlock said. “I had quite enough of that over the past weeks, when I was in somewhat better physical condition.”

It was Mycroft’s turn to scowl. “No, of course not,” he said, in mildly offended fashion. “If nothing else, I couldn’t contemplate spending another two to three days trapped in a car with you either.”


“So, he borrowed a train,” Anthea said, tired of all this mucking about. “A very nice, very big train.”

Mycroft gave her a reproachful look, which she ignored.

“How do you ‘borrow’ a train?” John asked, once his mouth caught up with his brain.

“Not an entire train,” Mycroft said modestly. “A couple of carriages, no more.”

“Oh, just a couple of carriages,” John said. “I see…no, I don’t, actually.” Sherlock looked equally perplexed.

“Well, they’re very special,” Anthea said. “They’re normally available to heads of state, but your brother called in a variety of favours.”

Mycroft smiled, looking just a bit smug. “They’re medical carriages—rarely used, but held ready in the event of a serious illness or injury to a high-ranking individual, where it’s inadvisable to travel by other means. They contain a full medical array, equivalent to an upper-echelon surgical unit, and have space for patient cots, staff accommodations, and a separate small kitchen. I believe we will find it quite comfortable, and because we will be able to travel virtually non-stop, the trip itself should only take one very long day. We’ll travel through the Chunnel, of course, and from there directly to London.”

“When?” Sherlock said, a little breathlessly. “When can we go?”

“Well, it will take two days for them to reach us,” Mycroft said. “And, from what John tells me, it would be wise for us to delay your travel for that long regardless, to give you an opportunity to recover from your recent…exertions.”

Sherlock flushed. “But, after that…,” he looked to John. “When the train comes…we can go home?” There was an aching feel to that question.

“Yeah, Sherlock,” John said thankfully. “Yeah.”

Sherlock’s smile could have lit a small city.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone's interested, here's a visual of Mycroft's new look (which, oddly enough, makes Mark Gatiss look a little hot. Although I will confess that, for me, brainy is definitely the new sexy):
They've got a plan for the return, now. If they can just manage to get through it without killing Sherlock first.

Chapter Notes

I know, I know--sadly late, but you guys know enough about my situation now to know why. I apologize for not replying yet to everyone's comments--I WILL get that done, but I'm just too tired this evening.

Only 1 or 1 1/2 more chapters to go (sniff)

The next two days were some of the longest of John’s life—almost as long as those in Sherlock’s last lengthy sojourn in hospital, though considerably less fraught. It was as if, now that Sherlock knew deliverance was at hand, he was determined to make himself as annoying as possible, so that everyone within hearing distance could attest that they never wanted the detective to darken their door again.

The irony was, Sherlock was actually the one most concerned with never, ever returning. The nursing staff had finally learned to (internally) roll their eyes and keep their mouths shut. Nurse Davidson, in fact (the same Nurse Davidson Sherlock had inadvertently clocked with his water carafe) had confided to John that he actually found Sherlock rather funny, especially in his comments on hospital cuisine and the curious habit of waking patients up to ask how they were sleeping. Sherlock, overhearing the tail end of the conversation (even though pretending to doze) wasn’t sure whether to be offended or gratified, going by the look on his face.

That first full day after Sherlock’s meltdown was the hardest. He was in quite a lot of pain, in no small measure due to his exertions during the meltdown, but needed to begin the process of tapering down his IV morphine so that he could be switched over to oral medication for the journey. He took it stoically enough, but none of his entourage enjoyed watching him shift miserably from side to side in the cot, his face grey and brow furrowed. He lacked the energy and concentration to do much more than watch listlessly whatever mindless show the others pulled up on the wall telly.

By later in the evening, though, he was beginning to regain his equilibrium, especially after Dr. Girard gave the OK for a shower, so long as he used the patient chair throughout. The detective came out of the bathroom, leaning heavily on Nurse Davidson but almost purring with contentment at finally being truly clean. He laid back down in the cot and smiled lazily as Anthea worked the knots out of his hair.

“God, that feels good,” he near-moaned.

“Your hair, or the shower?” Anthea asked, continuing to work her magic with towel and comb.
“Both,” he replied, closing his eyes with a sigh.

John took the last shift in Sherlock’s room that night, settling down in the extra cot at midnight to the sound of Sherlock’s slightly wheezy breaths. The supplemental oxygen was no longer needed, thank God, but his friend continued to struggle with coughing and congestion from the pneumonia.

John woke suddenly, in that “instant awareness” way that most doctors and soldiers develop, unsure what had roused him. He looked quickly around the room, and saw Sherlock staring back at him, the head of his cot raised and his dim bedside lamp lit.

“I thought I would die,” Sherlock said suddenly.

John froze, resisting the urge to blurt out a reflexive “What?” He went with a more-cautious approach, not sure if Sherlock was asking for comfort or information.

“I didn’t realize you were aware enough to worry about your surgeries,” John said carefully. “I’m sorry if I didn’t tell you that I thought you would be fine, and that you had the very best surgeon I knew. I would have done, if I’d known you could hear me.”

Sherlock shook his head. “No, I don’t remember any of that. I meant before,” he said. “I thought, once Moran hit me, that I might just never wake up. It seemed…I’ve never been that ill. It was…I thought it wasn’t survivable.”

John felt like someone had kicked him in the chest. That he had never realized, never even thought about how Sherlock, knowledgeable as he was about virtually everything, would understand all too clearly what his symptoms meant, and be frightened. And he had been frightened—he wasn’t using that word, but…

“I wish you had asked me, so that I could have explained,” John said, still careful. “It was very serious, certainly,” he continued. “And you know how worried I was—I know you heard at least some of my conversation with Mycroft. But, Sherlock, believe me—if I thought for one minute that our delaying even the short period of time we did would have put you at that much risk, I would have put you in a taxi and taken you to hospital myself, even if I had to kick Mycroft’s arse to do it.” He paused briefly. “And Anthea probably would have helped.”

Sherlock gave a snort of laughter, then grabbed his chest and cursed softly before coughing harshly three, four times. John got up and handed him his cup of ice water, waiting while the coughing trailed off, leaving Sherlock limp against the pillows again. John raised the head of the cot a bit more and reached over to turn on the portable nebulizer on the tray table, making Sherlock breathe the vapours quietly for several minutes before letting him speak again.

Once the breathing equipment was put away, Sherlock, still a little winded, looked up from where he rested flat against the pillows. “Will I recover?” he rasped. “Back to…will I be able to lead a normal, well, my normal life?”

And there it was, John thought—that was the question that had prompted this whole conversation. Sherlock hadn’t just feared dying—he also feared (perhaps more than the first) returning home to a
life altered, *limited*.

“Yeah, you will, Sherlock,” John said, with every ounce of conviction he could cram into his voice. “It’ll take a lot of bloody hard work, and you’ll hate every minute of it, but…yeah.”

Sherlock stared into John’s eyes, as if looking for something. He evidently found it. “Okay,” he sighed, and closed his eyes before pulling his blankets back up to his chin and settling back down. In five minutes he was back to sleep, small wheezing breaths and all.

The next day started punishingly early; a nurse came in to give Sherlock his medication and breakfast at half-six, and by 7 had carted him off in a wheelchair to the first of two daily rounds of physical therapy. The intent was to teach him exercises to begin doing on his own, several times a day, that would tide him over until he was strong enough for more-intensive sessions.

The staff were being extremely cautious in the levels of exertion he was allowed, in light of his earlier cardiac issues. Sherlock complained about that, a bit—while he clearly didn’t have the strength yet to do much, he nonetheless was anxious to get started on the path back to “normal”. The therapist, though, reminded him that incurring any kind of new cardiac strain would mean additional weeks flat on his back, and he subsided into a sulk that lasted until mid-morning.

By lunchtime, all of them were anxious for a break—for something, anything, to break the monotony. Sherlock had devolved into obsessively checking his new phone for the train’s path, complaining bitterly every time it showed a stop or delay.

“The minor delays and stops are built into the schedule I gave you,” Mycroft said patiently, for at least the third time. “It is still expected to arrive by 10 this evening. I would have been informed otherwise.” Unsaid was the fact that, if some greater delay occurred, it would be outside of Mycroft’s power to do much about it. Not something that Sherlock needed to hear right now.

“I was hoping it would be early,” Sherlock muttered, before tossing the phone on the nightstand in disgust.

John caught Anthea’s eye and jerked his head towards the large hamper sitting on a chair in the corner. A delivery had come late yesterday, full of potential amusements for a near-bedbound patient: board games, packs of cards, chess and checkers sets, books of crossword and Sudoku puzzles, handheld video games.

After initially sneering, Sherlock was coaxed (through the combined powers of Anthea and a packet of chocolate biscuits—his favourite brand from Belgium) into a marathon session of chess with his brother. This worked better than anyone would have suspected; the competitive nature of both Holmeses came into play, as well as the similarities in the way their minds worked. They put in six games before dinner, all ended in a frustrating tie. Sherlock had refused his 3 PM dose of pain medication; he “refused to allow Mycroft to capitalize on his slowed thought processes”. Mycroft rolled his eyes but stayed silent.

By the time the dinner tray was brought in, just as the sixth game was completed, Sherlock was white-faced and sweating. John took a closer look, then marched off to the nurse’s station to secure the earlier rejected oral dose, plus a small dose of injectable morphine that he pushed into his friend’s
IV port. Sherlock’s sigh of relief, five minutes later, was accompanied by a scowl at his brother.

“I suppose this means you’ll win the remaining games,” he huffed.

“Eat your dinner, and I may let you win one or two,” Mycroft said. “Hardly the first time.” Realizing too late how that could be taken, he threw up a hand to forestall Sherlock’s explosion. “Not what I meant,” he said. “I simply meant that you have, after all, beaten me in the past, without me ‘allowing’ it.”

“Then you should have said that,” Sherlock sniffed, before turning to pick fitfully at his plate.

In the evening Sherlock’s mood deteriorated rapidly. John noticed that the detective was starting to demonstrate some of his anxious “tells”—those long fingers rubbing fretfully against one another, legs twitching under the blankets. Mycroft, sensitive to his brother’s moods as always, put forward what John assumed was a valiant attempt at throwing their last chess game, only to have Sherlock reach out abruptly and sweep all of the pieces off the board, to carom off the cot and linoleum.

“Don’t patronize me!” he snarled, before grabbing his chest and erupting into a coughing fit that ended with him panting, eyes closed, against the pillows.

Things didn’t improve from there. Once he was over his pained breathlessness, Sherlock picked up his phone again and began obsessively updating the feed on the train’s location. After ten minutes, Anthea reached over and pulled the phone away, then yanked the blankets off of Sherlock’s legs.

“C’mon,” she said firmly. “You’re supposed to have one more spin around the ward before bedtime. Looks like the time is now.” The ensuing stare-down ended quickly; Anthea had many years of experience in handling strops and wasn’t worried about Sherlock holding a grudge (one of his better characteristics—he didn’t, generally, with anyone other than Mycroft and, back in the day, Anderson). She held out her arm, firmly, and waited while Sherlock sullenly shifted his legs off the cot, placed one large hand on her arm, and stood gingerly, taking a bit of time to find his balance. The two walked slowly and carefully to the door and headed off down the hallway, Anthea’s hand tucked firmly under Sherlock’s good arm.

Once they were out of earshot, John looked over at Mycroft and blew a breath roughly out. “God. The suspense is killing him,” he said. “If that train doesn’t get here this evening we’re going to have to threaten to reinstate the sedation.”

Mycroft hummed in agreement. “It’s to be expected, I suppose. He had managed to convince himself that he was never going home, and now that the converse is finally coming true, he is adrift.”

John’s head jerked up in surprise, only to look into Mycroft’s knowing eyes. So, the elder brother had realized Sherlock’s earlier distress, even before Sherlock had voiced it in the night to John.

“I wish he had asked me,” John said. “I hate that he felt…that he was afraid for so long.”

“As do I,” Mycroft said solemnly. “Sadly, I was also concerned that he was correct, despite my best efforts to convince myself otherwise.” He paused, then continued. “To be honest, this is part of why
Sherlock and I rarely work together. It is difficult to maintain the necessary distance under extreme circumstances.”

And, John thought, there was a wealth of history in that statement, about which John knew virtually nothing. He hoped that someday Sherlock might be inclined to share some of that history with him, but he doubted it.

Mycroft, as so often happened, managed to read his mind again. “It’s not an easy story, John, and not one I feel comfortable sharing in my brother’s absence. Suffice it to say, though, that I was sincere in my wish to never again find myself sitting vigil by Sherlock’s bedside, especially in circumstances where I am at least partially responsible for putting him there.”

The older man saw John’s face and shook his head. “No, I’m not being dramatic, John. I recognize my own failings when they appear. Sherlock’s condition, at least his condition during this journey, leads back to my own decision to handle this on my own. As it happens, I would likely still make the same decision, given the circumstances—but I would not have willingly brought my brother along had I known how ill he was, or would become.”

“Then we would likely have failed,” John said bluntly, as Mycroft blinked in surprise. “Remember the times during all of this that Sherlock was the deciding factor, made the definitive leap of deduction, saw something you didn’t. You’re a genius, Mycroft—but even you don’t know everything. Cut yourself some slack. The only bad guy here was Moran, and he’s finally dead. Yay, us.” He gave the bureaucrat an ironic thumbs-up.

Mycroft gave him a nonplussed look. “I…suppose so,” he said, while John grinned back.

Five minutes later, they heard Anthea and Sherlock’s voices from the hallway.

“I told you,” the agent said. “The train is two hours away. That two hours isn’t going to pass any faster because you check the timeline every two minutes. And it really doesn’t make any difference either way, as long as we’re sure it will be here in time to leave in the morning.”

Sherlock was clearly not in the mood to be sensible. “It makes a difference to me,” he said, in a whispy rasp. He still grew winded easily during these excursions.

They could hear Anthea’s sigh all the way down the hall.

By the time the train arrived, Sherlock required a third trip down the hall to burn off anxious energy, two chocolate biscuits to coax him into taking his evening medication, and a rousing argument with Mycroft on the subject of…honestly, John wasn’t quite sure. It had something to do with 12th-century musical notation. Or early violin-making. Maybe.

Once the clock turned to 10 pm and the train had been officially confirmed as arriving at the main train station, the campaigning began.
“Why don’t we go to the train tonight?” Sherlock said. “I would presume it is already fully provisioned and staffed—we could simply spend the night there and be ready to leave immediately in the morning.”

“Because the only sleeping accommodation is the hospital cot,” Mycroft said calmly. “The rest of us would be sleeping on the floor, or on chairs or couches.”

He gave Sherlock a bland look, knowing all too well that Sherlock would have no problem condemning them to that fate, if he could come up with a pressing enough reason for doing so. The long pause thereafter (while Sherlock blinked, opened his mouth, closed it, then blinked again) was the best indicator that his brother was unable to come up with one. The thunderous scowl thereafter sealed the deal.

After ten (blessedly) silent minutes, the next round began. Anthea had headed off to the on-call room for the night, since that afforded her privacy she couldn’t find taking shifts in Sherlock’s room with the rest of them; John and Mycroft had begun a game of checkers, while Sherlock flipped through screens on his phone amid periodic irritable huffs.

“John,” Sherlock said suddenly, directing his oh-so-untrustworthy earnest look at his friend, “why don’t you go survey the medical accouterments on the train? You could Skype us in, and Mycroft could arrange any needed changes this evening.” He paused thoughtfully. “Although I suppose we could all go…”

John snorted. “No, we couldn’t,” he said. “It’s going to take a major effort to get you there tomorrow as it is. I’m not about to try anything like that at night, and I’m certainly not going to put you through that kind of exertion twice. Cardiac issues, remember?” He looked over at Mycroft. “And I’m pretty sure your brother already had his minions ensure that the train contains anything we’d need for treatment of all possible ills, up to and including bubonic plague.”

Mycroft smirked and nodded, while Sherlock scowled and turned himself to face marginally away from them—he couldn’t actually move in the cot that much, but John gave him points for trying.

After the next attempt (Sherlock called Anthea on her phone, trying to convince her that there might be a security issue with the train based on the limited footage he could upload, and could she go and check?) Mycroft reached over and took the phone away, while Sherlock tried, in between gasps of pain, to bat his hands away. In the midst of this fraternal set-to, John sighed, got to his feet, and marched off to the nurse’s station.

When he returned, the brothers were locked in silent argument—lots of brow lowering, huffing and significant looks. They both blinked when John moved to stand between them—they had evidently forgotten he was there.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the syringe he’d had the night nurse prep for him. “See this?” he said. “This is your chance to be a reasonable adult, Sherlock.”

The detective gave him a mutinous look but stayed silent.

John sighed. “Look, I know you’re really, really anxious. I know it’s making you mental—well, more mental than usual. And I know you can’t help it. But it’s making the rest of us just as mental, and it’s accomplishing nothing.”

Sherlock’s stony mien didn’t change.

John set the syringe carefully on the tray table and out his hand on Sherlock’s good arm. “Do you
really think there’s any way we’ll go to that train tonight? Seriously? Do you believe that any of these oh-so-subtle ploys are going to work?”

Sherlock resisted momentarily, before suddenly deflating with a despondent sigh. “No,” he near-whispered.

“But am I also correct in thinking that, as things stand, you’ll never sleep tonight?” John continued. “Because you’re so anxious, and you can’t move about to burn it off like you normally would.”

Sherlock looked down at his hands, twitching and flexing in his lap. “Probably not,” he said finally.

John nodded. “Good. I appreciate the honesty,” he said. “So, I have a proposition for you. Mycroft and I are going to spend the next little while packing things up—anything we don’t need tomorrow morning, so the bags are all ready to go and we can leave right after breakfast and meds. I’ll ask Anthea to do the same. You can supervise if you like.”

John ignored Mycroft’s noise of mild protest behind him. Sherlock was listening intently—that was a very good sign.

“But before we do, I’ll give you that,” John said, pointing to the syringe. “Sleeping meds. It’ll put you under in about five minutes, and keep you there for the next eight hours or so. And when you wake up, it’ll be time to get ready to go. No more worrying, no more anxiety—just a good long kip, and it’s time.”

He looked at his friend earnestly, trying to read his mood. Sherlock’s eyes flitted about the room, looking at his brother, looking at John, looking for something he didn’t seem to find. And, finally, he looked back to John, and nodded.

“OK,” he sighed, picked the syringe off the tray table and held it out to John.
The train is here, finally, and they can head home. So why does it seem like moving house would be easier than this?

So, once again, I'm splitting a chapter in half--this puppy kept growing and growing, and I was already at almost 5K words, soo...

The good news (the EXCELLENT news, actually) is that I finally sold my house! So I no longer am concerned about ending up homeless and penniless (not an exaggeration, sadly). But it won't make an immediate difference in my timeliness, I'm afraid--it means that we will be moving in less than a week, and (because my older son had emergency surgery two weeks ago--his appendix suddenly went south) I must pack up the entire house on my own in 6 days.

Did I ever mention that my life is a sitcom?

The next morning dawned just as early as John had feared. He had taken the spare cot in Sherlock’s room again, since Mycroft had been spirited away on a midnight crisis that took both he and Anthea off to parts unknown. They had yet to return, though when John checked his phone at 2 am he discovered a text message assuring him that they would be there in plenty of time to help transport Sherlock to the train (and wasn’t that a relief—John had gone to bed dreading the thought of handling a bundle of agitated Holmes by himself).

True to John’s prediction, Sherlock had gone down a treat yesterday evening, the medicine taking him under quickly and smoothly. John wasn’t sure he’d seen his friend move all night, and had drifted off to the sound of Sherlock’s raspy but even breaths.

John was engrossed in a lovely dream (something to do with palm trees and coconut drinks and a warm, blue ocean) when he was jolted awake by something poking rhythmically against his bad shoulder. While not painful, exactly, it was nonetheless enough to pull him quickly out of the dream, to see Sherlock standing (well, wavering) beside the cot, long, bony fingers extended for yet another poke.

“Whazzamatter?” John said, not yet able to get his mouth under control.

Sherlock frowned and extended his hand for another poke. John had just enough coordination to grab those pale fingers before they connected. “Stop,” he said, swiping his hand roughly over his face. “I’m awake.”

His faulty circuits re-engaged, then, and he realized what was wrong with what he was seeing. “You’re not supposed to get up without help,” John said, rolling off the cot and grasping Sherlock’s
teetering shoulders to guide him to sit on the edge. “What would happen if you fell, you tit?”

Sherlock gave a disgruntled huff, but John noticed that he didn’t attempt to get back up.

“I’m fine,” Sherlock said, in that disturbingly quiet voice that he used when pain was an issue. “I tried saying your name first, but it wasn’t loud enough to wake you, and if I tried louder I started to cough.”

Which, of course, begged the question of how long he’d been attempting to wake John before getting up.

Sherlock, predictably enough, read John’s slower-than-usual mind.

“Twenty minutes,” Sherlock said. “I waited until 5 am, since I knew you would complain that it ‘wasn’t morning’ otherwise. I’ve been poking you for almost five minutes. You can be surprisingly resistant to stimuli when sleeping sometimes, as well as hyper-vigilant at others.” He made that sound as if it were a personal failing on John’s part.

John checked his watch—not quite 5:30. Fan-fucking-tastic.

He turned to look sternly at his friend. “I’m going to hit the loo. You stay right there. Do not get up.” He thought about that for a second. “Unless you’d like me to help you back to your own cot, so you can sleep a bit longer?”

Sherlock’s eyeroll was brisk but thorough. “Sleeping,” he said disdainfully. “It’s always ‘sleeping’, with you.”

“And God forbid you should allow me to have a full night of it,” John muttered as he headed to the bathroom.

By the time John came back, marginally more awake if not necessarily happier about the prospect, Sherlock had inched himself back slightly, so that he was sitting more completely on the edge of John’s cot. The detective looked alert and focused—well, to be honest, he looked wired and anxious.

“Have they brought your meds yet?” John asked, looking over at Sherlock’s tray table.

“No,” Sherlock said. “Breakfast is not for another hour, and they usually bring the two together.” He shifted a bit, his right arm drifting back to press against his side.

“And are you in pain?” John asked. “Wait, scratch that. Of course you are, given that you haven’t had your meds and have been standing up for five straight minutes.” He stood and pulled on a hospital-issue dressing gown, then slid his feet into the slippers tucked under the edge of the cot. “I’ll go down to the nurses’ station and order your meds, but you’re going to have to eat something with them. What do you want?”

Sherlock’s expression froze. “Nothing, thank you,” he said, going for disinterested but not quite getting there.

“Not an option,” John said firmly. “They can fix just about anything you’d like, within reason, but
you have to have *something*, especially today. So, what’ll it be?”

Sherlock was silent, still wearing that glazed look.

The other shoe dropped, finally. “You’re anxious. So, you’re nauseous,” John said. It wasn’t really a question, after all.

“A bit,” Sherlock said, his gaze dropping to his lap. “I can eat later. Maybe,” he offered, in a voice that inspired very little confidence.

In the end, they settled on one of the detested meal replacements. Sherlock loathed them, but usually managed to keep them down, and the calories were necessary. It took him ten minutes to down the container, with one alarming gag in the middle that he managed, thankfully, to suppress. It was enough to get his medication started, though, so John had to be content with that.

After a half-hour pause while Sherlock laid back on the cot, eyes closed and hands in prayer position (“I’m letting things…settling, John”) and John used the en suite for a shower/shave/tooth-brushing session, Mycroft and Anthea breezed in, looking not at all as if they’d been working all night.

Anthea bustled over and began shuffling the bags packed the previous evening, moving them to a convenient pile next to the door. Mycroft handed John a cup of coffee (the *good* stuff—from the café in the lobby), while Sherlock gave a wordless whinge of protest.

“You can’t have coffee,” the bureaucrat said. “Your stomach isn’t up to it.” He took a closer look at his brother. “Evidently, it’s not up to much, this morning. Have they offered you something for anxiety?”

Sherlock scowled. “I do not require ‘something for anxiety’,” he huffed. “I require *activity*—specifically, activity that will include our leaving immediately.”

“No quite immediately, surely,” Mycroft said. “In addition to organizing the actual transfer, I would assume that departing visits with your doctors are a prerequisite.”

Sherlock’s scowl intensified. “John can do that. The regular rounds visits aren’t for *hours*.”

“And we likely won’t be leaving for hours,” Mycroft said. “We have a great many things to set up first, not the least of which is deciding which mode of transport we will take to the train station. It’s more than an hour away, and your injuries mean—”

“My injuries aren’t the issue here,” Sherlock snarled. “The issue is your wanting to micromanage every aspect of this, as usual. We could leave right now—we could take a *taxi* if need be—and my injuries wouldn’t—”

“ENOUGH!” Anthea shouted. Both Holmeses snapped their heads to look at her, mouths open. John found himself wearing a sneaky smile that he hoped neither of them noticed.

“Enough. Honestly,” she continued, more quietly this time. “We are literally a day from being home, and safe, and I refuse to spend any part of that day listening to the two of you try to tear each other into shreds because you’re anxious and can’t figure out any other way to handle it.”

She looked first at Mycroft. “Is there any reason to think that we can’t have everything prepped and ready to go upon Sherlock’s release? Ideally within the hour, once we decide on an approach?”

Mycroft, a bit of pink at the top of his cheekbones, nodded slowly. “Very likely, unless the doctors throw up some new objection.”
She turned next to Sherlock, whose mouth was now set in a thin line. “Do you agree that embarking on this kind of journey without making sure you are fit to undertake it is a recipe for disaster, and a guarantee of you spending another several weeks in hospital?”

Sherlock sighed, looking away. “I suppose so,” he said grudgingly.

Anthea beamed. “Excellent! We’re in agreement, then. Let’s see that we stay that way.”

She turned and looked at John, who’d been trying very hard to be invisible, to avoid getting sucked into the Holmesian drama. “Do you think you could, maybe, ask if Dr. Girard could come through on his visit a little earlier than usual? Like, say, now?”

John nodded, reflecting that Anthea could be even more of a force of nature than Sherlock’s mum, when she wanted to. “Yeah, on it,” he said. “But while I’m doing that, you lot need to think about transport pretty seriously—ambulance or car? Since I’m sure Dr. Girard is going to want to know before he gives his OK.”

He looked over at Sherlock, still sitting in a tense huddle on his cot. “You need to be honest about what you can bear, too, Sherlock. Don’t make us guess.”

His only response was a sullen sigh.

On reaching the nurses’ station (for the second time that morning), John was pleased to see Dr. Girard standing by the monitors, beginning his initial review of the overnight charts. The consultant was amenable to seeing Sherlock as soon as he had completed his review.

John swung by the cafeteria to grab a bacon butty for himself before heading back to Sherlock’s room—odds were, it would be his only chance at breakfast.

He heard the argument from halfway down the corridor—Sherlock’s baritone rumbling, not as loud as usual but forceful, and Mycroft’s tight tenor, louder than his brother but not quite shouting.

“I do. Not. Want. To,” Sherlock said, as John rounded the corner into the room.

Mycroft gave his “Responsible Adult” sigh, the one that made Sherlock run mad. “I know that, brother mine. But an hour’s trip, sitting upright in the car seat, will be extremely uncomfortable and place undo stress on your incision and your new apparatus. The ambulance will—”

“No!” Sherlock near-shouted, before going off into a violent coughing spell that brought both Anthea and John to his side, bearing a pillow (to clutch against his spasming torso) and water (to hopefully quell the throat irritation), respectively.

Anthea gave John a despairing look over the detective’s shoulder, then turned the same look onto her nominal employer, who huffed and stalked over to sit stiffly in a chair on the far side of the room.

It was John’s turn to be “Responsible Adult”, evidently.

“Right, then,” he began briskly. “Dr. Girard will be here shortly, and I guarantee he will require an answer about transport—which, if you’ll recall, was the question I asked you to resolve before I left,
twenty minutes ago.” He gave Mycroft a speaking look, but received only a sardonic eyebrow lift in return.

“There are two options,” he continued. “Taking an ambulance, which would allow Sherlock to lie on a padded gurney but would mean the rest of us would likely need to be in a separate vehicle; or taking a car, which would mean we could travel together, but Sherlock would have to sit up, mostly, for more than an hour.”

Sherlock lifted his own eyebrow this time. “Amazingly enough, we had already considered both options in your absence,” he sniffed. “For the record, I will *not* travel by ambulance, like a helpless sack of meal. I am perfectly capable of sitting for whatever length of time required, so long as the car seat is adequately adjustable.”

“Mmm,” John hummed. “Like yesterday afternoon?”

Sherlock flushed. Yesterday, his therapy session had included a 20-minute period of sitting in a chair. By the end, he was sweating and grey with pain, and had required help to climb back into the cot. It took him another 15 minutes to recover himself afterwards.

“What do you suggest, then?” Sherlock said, with an aggressive scowl. “Given that I will not agree to an ambulance under any circumstances.” If it hadn’t been so painful to do so, he probably would have crossed his arms sternly across his chest.

“Well, I was just thinking about that, while listening to you two going at one another,” John said, while moving over to pick up the tablet sitting on Sherlock’s tray table, skimming through screens before sending a quick email. “Maybe there’s a way to make the car a little more workable, if only in the short run. I just need to see if they have a particular piece of equipment in-house.”

One minute later, John’s mobile gave a little chirp, and he opened it to find happy news.

“Excellent,” he said—knowing full well that he had the detective’s full attention (and, very likely, the elder Holmes as well. Mycroft, for all his caginess, was just as inquisitive as his brother. He was just better at hiding it from people who didn’t know him well).

Unsurprisingly, John lifted his head from the screen to see two sets of fiercely intelligent eyes boring into him. He waited, a slight grin on his face, to see if either of them came up with the answer on their own. They didn’t—to the visible displeasure of each.

Just at that point, there was a light tap on the door, and Nurse Davidson came in, carrying a peculiar piece of equipment, consisted of metal and plastic rods and connectors, combined with bits of vinyl padding.

The nurse smiled and handed the apparatus off to John. “It’s been used once, briefly, but it’s the only one we had. It’s been appropriately cleaned. Might need to adjust the lengths, but that’s easy,” he said. “Shouldn’t be used for more than a couple of hours a day, though. Don’t want the muscles to get lazy.” He waggled his fingers at the group and popped back out the door.

John took the equipment over and dropped it on Sherlock’s cot, so that his friend could examine it. “It’s a brace,” he said. “Really designed to use for severe back injuries or weakness, but it occurred to me that most of your problems with sitting come from the fact that the muscles in your torso are damaged and/or weak at present.”

He pointed at the largest vinyl pad. “That sits in front, just even with your collarbones,” he said. He flipped the brace over. “There’s a corresponding one that goes low on your spine, in back, and then
the struts support on the sides, with little supporting pads here and there. We’ll have to fiddle with placement on those—can’t have anything that puts pressure on your incision or the new sternum—but, bottom line, the brace will take the load off your muscles, and do the work for them. You’ll still have some pain, just from the pressure of sitting up, but it should be much more manageable.”

Sherlock was examining the equipment now, moving the slides carefully and pushing to test the strength of the supporting rods. When he looked up, a smile had crept across his face.

“Help me with it?” he asked, holding it out to John.

Five minutes later, after some initial misalignments and a few pained gasps from Sherlock, they had found a setup that both provided adequate support and didn’t press on sensitive areas of Sherlock’s damaged torso. To demonstrate the brace’s effectiveness, he rose gingerly from his cot and walked over to sit in one of the chairs next to his brother, wearing a smile that was just short of a beam.

“I should have started wearing this days ago,” he said happily. “It would have made therapy much easier. It would have made everything much easier.”

John shook his head. “Nope,” he said. “It’s a double-edged sword: it’ll provide support, so your muscles don’t have to keep trying to hold your torso erect while they’re so weak. But, if you use it too much, those muscles will never regain their strength, and you’ll develop some weird stiffness in areas that need to move fluidly. You’re also going to find that everything hurts like the dickens when you take it off. An hour a day is the longest I’m comfortable with you wearing it, bottom line.”

Sherlock made a disappointed moue but didn’t argue. “Can I just leave it on until we leave, then?”

Anthea piped in at that juncture. “Not unless you want to travel in a hospital johnny,” she snorted. “Can’t very well put you in clothes with that thing in place. And I, for one, have no particular desire to see your bits, if the johnny falls open wrong.”

Sherlock was struck by the logic of that. But—“Do I have any clothes, come to that?”

“You can wear something of mine,” Mycroft said. “I believe I have a heavy cardigan that should suit in one of the bags, since you can hardly pull something over your head, and a pair of jeans that Anthea insisted on including.” Since all of them knew that Mycroft would never voluntarily choose jeans, after all.

“And I bought you new pants,” Anthea added cheerily. “Since I know how important that is to you.” She blew Sherlock a kiss in the face of his rude hand gesture.

In short order, Sherlock was dressed in an oversized nubby brown cardigan, slightly-too-long jeans and the trainers he’d been wearing on arrival. He stood in front of the wardrobe mirror, tweaking at the cardigan and frowning. “I look like someone’s grandfather,” he said.

John privately thought he looked like a 12-year-old wearing his dad’s clothes, but managed not to share that little tidbit. He caught Anthea’s eye, though, and suspected she knew what he was thinking, if the twinkle in that eye was any indication.
John helped Sherlock to re-don the brace once his clothes were settled. It was a success, going by his friend’s expression—the cardigan provided a little extra padding, which made the pressure from the supports and pads more comfortable.

When Dr. Girard came in ten minutes later, he found his patient sitting on the edge of the cot, fingers twitching and toes tapping on the metal side rails along the edge, while his entourage stood by (somewhat impatiently). The consultant made Sherlock remove the brace for the examination, which led to a series of winces and complaints, but no serious issues.

As he lifted his stethoscope away from Sherlock’s mangled chest, the physician gave him a wry smile.

“Well, Mr. Holmes, it looks like your incision is healing well, and, based on your blood and urine samples from last evening, both infections are officially in retreat,” he said as he replaced Sherlock’s bandages. “I’ll send your cardiologist and the pulmonary specialist along shortly, but from my perspective you are cleared to travel to your alternate care setting in England, so long as you undertake nothing more strenuous than checkers, your breathing exercises and the odd nap along the way.”

He dropped his head a bit and looked through his lashes as he continued. “And I…I would like to apologize, once again, for the shameful treatment you were subjected to by my predecessor. It was indefensible and inhumane, and I feel a great deal of regret that I was not more vocal with the administrative board in my concerns about Dr. Ashford.”

Sherlock gave an airy, dismissive hand flutter before beginning to rebutton his bulky cardigan. “I believe Dr. Ashford has already received his just deserts. I’m sure this facility will be the better for his absence, and his new charges will be much better suited to his particular skillset. He prefers patients who can’t talk back.” He gestured to Anthea, who slid the printout John had made of Ashford’s “reindeer” photo across the tray table and showed it to Girard. The doctor’s quickly-suppressed hoot of laughter brought a pleased smirk to the detective’s face.

Ten minutes later, the cardiologist had carted Sherlock off for one last EKG, and the pulmonary specialist was waiting in line to complete one last set of tests as well, none of which would take more than a few minutes to complete and read. In Sherlock’s absence, the rest of them finished the packing and, now that the use of a car was settled, enlisted the help of Mycroft’s security team (who had also mysteriously appeared this morning—apparently “returning to life” required the bureaucrat to be escorted once again) in loading everything into the two luxury vehicles waiting under the porte-cochere at the facility’s main entrance. The “Gang of Four” (as Anthea had dubbed herself, Sherlock, Mycroft and John, earning her an eyeroll from Mycroft) would ride in the first car; the security team would follow in the second.

Sherlock came back forty minutes later, irritable and tiring already, which John observed with a sigh. So much for a pleasant drive, then. The test results had all fallen within acceptable parameters, so they were cleared to leave by 9 am. Sherlock was loaded (with a scowl) into a wheelchair for the trip to the car; even the re-donning of the brace didn’t wipe away his distaste for this form of transport. He settled into the front passenger seat wincing but silent, as Anthea climbed into the driver’s position, waiting for departure.
The wheelchair had been folded and placed in the capacious boot, over Sherlock’s strenuous objections. The last thing loaded was the large bag of medications and medical equipment for the journey, which Dr. Girard handed to John personally.

The quiet physician looked at Sherlock, glowering from the front seat, and turned back to John. “He’s going to struggle to endure this ride, you know,” he said, too soft for his patient to hear. “No matter how much he wants to leave, he will have significant pain, and he is already exhausted by this morning’s events. I have included a few anti-anxiety tablets in the bag; you may wish to utilize them in a pinch. If nothing else, they will make him very drowsy, and perhaps more…tolerant of adverse conditions.”

John snorted with laughter. “That’s a really genteel way of putting it, mate,” he chuckled. “I figure, if we make it to the train without bloodshed or thrown objects, we’re ahead of the game.” He shook the physician’s offered hand and climbed in the back seat beside Mycroft.

It was no surprise to anyone that Sherlock had downloaded the “best” route for travel to the train station in Prague, and was prepared to argue about it.

He was visibly nonplussed when, in response to a rather aggressive question about how Anthea planned to proceed, the agent simply looked and him and said, “How would you like to go?”, her hands remaining passive on the wheel, awaiting his answer.

He blinked, then recovered himself, thrusting the phone under her nose. “This one,” he said. “It’s the fastest by four minutes, this time of day.”

“OK,” she said mildly, pushing the phone gently to one side and touching the navigation screen in the dash to make the change. “Four minutes is four minutes. And it makes you happy, so we’re all good.” She gave Sherlock a smile, which, after a few seconds, he hesitantly returned.

The Facility Which Shall Be Nameless, as it turned out, was located not far from historic Karlstejn Castle, and their initial route took them across farmland and along a medium-sized river before passing the castle itself. Sherlock, who’d been drinking in every sight along the route like a lost soul in the desert, launched into a history of the building.

“Much of what you see is actually a 19th-century reconstruction, but the main structure dates back to the 1350s. It has historically been used to store the royal regalia and jewels for Bohemian and Czech royalty,” he said. “It included the Imperial Crown of the Holy Roman Empire until the 1400s.” He peered intently out the window. “It is also the source location for the tales of medieval besiegers launching corpses over the walls to attempt to introduce infection.”

John had heard of that, actually, and looked closer at the enormous structure himself.

“Those tales rarely mention that the attackers also launched 2000 carriage-loads of dung,” Mycroft interjected drily. “I find it fascinating what portions of history catch the popular fancy, and which ones do not.”

“Attempted biological warfare is interesting,” Anthea said. “Hurling shit is just nasty.”
None of them could argue with that assessment, actually.

As they grew closer to Prague proper, “interesting” structures thinned and were replaced by utilitarian ones. Sherlock’s interest waned along with his energy; he never quite asked “are we there yet?”, but John could see that thought run through his head several times.

By the time they reached the access road to the station, the detective was leaning back against the seat corner, propped awkwardly against the side pillar. The brace held his torso erect, but the rest of him was wilting.

He rallied, though, once the car turned into the parking structure for the station, some of his usual energy bubbling to the surface.

“Where’s our train?” he said, peering around as if it was likely to suddenly appear in the car park. “How long before we depart?”

“It’s at Platform 14B,” Mycroft said. “And our departure will be in roughly 40 minutes. But we can board immediately, if we wish.” He looked momentarily at his phone, then continued. “Our on-board staff is already in place, and the kitchen is stocked, so we can eat now, or wait until we’re underway.”

“Nothing for me, thank you,” Sherlock said absently. John resisted the urge to respond—they could fight that battle once they were on the train.

Anthea pulled the car up to the area closest to the platform walkway before stopping. Before Sherlock could get up a head of steam to complain about it, John had nipped out and pulled the wheelchair out of the boot, then rolled it smartly over next to Sherlock’s car door.

Mycroft, in the meantime, had stepped out and opened Sherlock’s door, waiting for his brother to stand and be assisted into the chair (whining the entire time, most likely). Sherlock looked at the chair, scowled at both it and his brother, turned to swing his legs out of the car—and stopped halfway through the motion, a gasp hissing through clenched teeth. Mycroft, in a matter-of-fact way, leaned forward, grasped his brother’s legs at the knees, and gently turned his body until he was facing the street, teeth still clenched.

Anthea pushed the chair as close as possible, and Mycroft leaned forward. “Put your arms around my neck,” he said, lacing his own arms around his brother’s hips. Then, in one smooth motion, he lifted and swung Sherlock off the car seat and into the chair, then waited.

Sherlock sat motionless in the chair, breath rasping rapidly through his teeth, eyes closed. Then, after more than a minute of silence, he sighed, relaxed minutely, and opened his eyes. “We can go now,” he muttered.

They started off across the walkway, the chair in the lead, when Mycroft’s phone chirped discreetly from his pocket. He stopped, pulled the phone out and looked at the number, then raised his eyebrows at John and nodded towards the handles of Sherlock’s chair before striding off towards the trains in the distance.
John stepped up to the chair and laid a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “All right, then?”

Sherlock gave him a thin smile. “That’s a relative term,” he rasped. “I’ll do. Let’s leave it at that, shall we?”

Five minutes later, after what seemed like a twenty-mile trek along walkways and past hundreds of identical trains, Anthea pointed over to their left.

“It’s down there,” she said. “The one with the dark green carriages in the back.”

That was John’s first indication that this was not quite your typical train. The carriages in question were, indeed, dark green—but they also looked like something out of a Victorian novel. They were ornate, even pretty—almost whimsical. They stood out among their more-modern counterparts like pearls among swine.

Even Sherlock broke free of his grim-faced “endurance” mode at the sight, a delighted grin on his face. “Murder on the Orient Express!” he chortled softly, looking in amazement at the gilding, the chrome, the enameled decorations.

That delight lasted exactly one minute, until a more-modern figure suddenly appeared at the top of the steps leading to the first carriage. For there, clad in no-nonsense scrubs, a brown cardigan and sensible shoes, was Sherlock’s nemesis from Mycroft’s London home (via MI6), Nurse Denny.

“Oh, look,” Sherlock said, with a sour smirk. “She can be the victim!”
Convalescence: Part Two

Chapter Summary

They make a long, long, trip. It's a very nice train, but it's a long trip. It's not very exciting, but it definitely isn't dull.

Chapter Notes

And I'm baaaaack. Now, granted, I'm still not going to have oodles of spare time--I am simultaneously starting to work a great deal on my startup business, while unpacking from our move and working through the many things in the new house that don't seem to work very well (case in point--they're replacing the entire heating and air conditioning unit this week). But it won't take me another month to post that next chapter--and, as you may have noticed, that's the LAST ONE. It will be long, as this one is, but it's definitely the end. Whatever will we do???(I know the answer to that one, incidentally--I have a list. Mycroft may have a file, who knows?)

Nurse Denny wasn’t any more impressed by Sherlock’s antics now than she had been in London. She leaned over the railing to take a closer look at her erstwhile patient.

“Typical,” she tsked. “I leave you well on the road to recovery, and then find you a month later looking like warmed-over porridge and weak as a bag of used tea. You have some serious explaining to do, Mr. Holmes.”

John saw Sherlock’s shoulder muscles tighten as he tried to force himself more upright in the chair. What he suspected Sherlock didn’t see was the amused glint in Nurse Denny’s eyes.

“I was hardly ‘recovering’ as a result of your efforts,” Sherlock said with disdain. “And I am much improved over last week, actually. I expect that your services on this journey will be entirely unnecessary. Feel free to convey that to my brother—I’m sure he will pay you regardless, and you can be on your way to…wherever it is you lurk in between torture assignments.”

“I think we’ll leave that up to your brother, actually,” John said. “I could use an extra pair of hands, I’m sure, if only to keep you and him from going at each other’s throats for 18 hours.”

“And I’m an excellent poker player. Always comes in handy on long trips,” Nurse Denny said with a smirk, before heading back into the carriage, presumably to tell Mycroft they had arrived.
Getting Sherlock into the carriage was quicker (and more painless) than John had feared. Just after Nurse Denny departed, a uniformed porter appeared at the top of the steps, followed by two men carrying a shiny metal ramp that they hooked deftly to the sides of the steps. John and Anthea pushed Sherlock’s chair up with relative ease.

The inside, as it turned out, was just as opulent and old-world as the exterior, with the exception of the more-modern requirements such as power outlets, central heat, and en-suite baths. The walls were an extravagance of polished, carved oak and mossy-green velvet curtains; the flooring, at least in this first “parlour” carriage, was a lovely dark-red oriental carpeting. The fabrics, though, were not original, but were clearly modern, clean, detailed copies.

A fireplace (a real one, John realized) was set into one wall, surrounded by lovely leather armchairs and two velvet-covered settees. An elaborately-carved dining table with eight chairs was placed in one corner, and stacks of glossy books and magazines were visible in the glass-fronted bookcases set in the wall behind the table.

Sherlock looked around, silent for once.

Anthea blinked. “Hercule Poirot would be right at home,” she said finally.

“As would Queen Victoria,” Mycroft said, strolling from the rear of the carriage. “Which is appropriate, since these carriages were originally crafted during her reign, and were used to carry her ailing husband Prince Albert at one point.” He waved a hand towards the corridor. “The sections back there are much more modern, but this part has retained its charm, I believe.”

He walked up to Sherlock’s chair, as Nurse Denny appeared in the doorway behind him. “I would suspect you are more than ready to check out the accommodations, brother. A private room, of sorts—next to this parlour, with the medical storage room, toilet and kitchen on the far side.”

Sherlock, eyes still darting around, taking everything in, nodded absently. “Yes,” he said. “As long as it contains a bed, and access to drugs.” His gaze came around to meet his brother’s. “The latter is the more imperative at the moment.”

Nurse Denny stepped into the breach on that one, before John could react.

“Well, let’s go and get you settled, then,” she said briskly, without any indication of undue concern. “Dr. Watson, do you have his record of medication from today? That’s the only thing not included in the paperwork transferred electronically to me.”

John caught on to the “professional speak” in her tone, aware of Sherlock’s focused attention behind him. “Nothing new since the last entry at six this morning,” he said. “The medications bag is still in the boot of the car—I can—”

“No need,” Mycroft interjected. “My team is bringing all of the luggage. They will be here momentarily.”

That was proven instantly true—one of the security detail suddenly appeared behind the bureaucrat and dropped the medication bag and the duffels before disappearing silently back down the rear corridor.

John picked up the bag and dropped it carefully in Sherlock’s lap, resting his hand on his friend’s bony shoulder. “You want to keep the chair, or try to walk?” he asked. He was pretty sure he knew the answer, but wanted Sherlock to feel like he was being consulted in all of this.

“The chair, regrettably,” Sherlock sighed. “Unless one of you feels like carrying me.” He gave Nurse
Denny a hopeful, doe-eyed look, but spoiled the effect by smirking in response to her snort of derision.

Once they rolled the detective down the corridor to the next chamber, John looked around in awe at the “accommodations”—except for the metal-clad walls and floor, you would have thought this was a room in an upper-end hospital in a major city. Sparkling equipment, all of it appearing unused; airflow mattress on the cot to prevent pressure sores; multiple rows of glass-faced cabinets holding plastic-sealed tools and medical paraphernalia. A wheelchair-accessible loo was visible through a door on the left. It even included a shower, not something you expected to see on a train.

John pushed Sherlock’s chair next to the cot and locked the wheels, before crouching to look his friend in the eye.

“You’re not going to enjoy this, but we need to take the brace off. It will hurt, and it’s going to take you a while to find a comfortable position afterward since the brace has been holding things a little stiffer than you’re used to. Do you want to take it off now, before getting up, or wait until you’re sitting on the cot?”

“Does it matter?” Sherlock rasped, the exhaustion he’d been resisting now clear in his voice.

“The brace will make it easier to get up on the cot,” Nurse Denny said from behind John. “But taking it off in that more-erect position may be more painful for you. Your muscles will be forced to try and hold you in that position on their own.” Her tone was neutral, but not uncaring. John was beginning to understand that there was more to Nurse Denny than he’d first thought.

“On the cot, then,” Sherlock said, and reached his arms out to his silent brother, who once again laced them around his neck before lifting Sherlock deftly onto the cot.

Removing the brace was every bit as traumatic as Nurse Denny had predicted. John took charge of unbuckling, shifting, and pulling off the pieces, while Sherlock’s face went grey and he gasped little panting breaths in John’s ear. Anthea reached out and took one of Sherlock’s shaking hands, and kept possession until he was settled, still panting, onto the pillows.

“Let’s not do that again,” Sherlock finally said, in a wisp of a voice.

“Agreed,” Nurse Denny said, pulling a portable drip stand out of a cupboard. “And now I’m going to hook you back up to this long enough to give you your antibiotics, and perhaps Dr. Watson would be agreeable to giving you your pain medication this way as well, to save time.” They all knew that “saving time” wasn’t the reason, or at least not the primary one—oral medication would take at least 20 minutes to be effective, and it would mean 20 additional minutes of pain for the patient, who was already at his limits.

“Sounds like a plan,” John said, and handed the medication bag to the nurse, who began prepping a bag of saline while John drew up the morphine dose—smaller than Sherlock had received in prior days, but still stronger than the oral version he was transitioning to.
Ten minutes later, Sherlock was comfortably sleeping, mouth slightly open and body finally relaxed. Nurse Denny was settled at his side in a comfortable lounge chair, tablet in her lap.

“Go on,” she said. “I don’t think he’ll have any issues, but I’ll stay put just in case.”

“Yeah,” John said, “it’s just—he doesn’t do well if he wakes up in hospital alone. Just let me know if you need a break and I’ll come spell you.”

Nurse Denny held up one hand and airily twiddled the fingers in John’s direction. “Go,” she said firmly. “If I need you I’ll text Mr. Holmes. Well, the other Mr. Holmes,” she added, with a wry smile.

John walked back into the ornate parlour and was surprised (and amused) to see Mycroft Holmes, jacket and waistcoat removed, nestled into one of the leather chairs, head back and eyes closed. Anthea was nowhere to be seen, and nothing seemed as enticing to John just then as the possibility of a few hours of, well, nothing. He decided a bit of food wouldn’t go amiss, certainly, but he wanted to explore the rest of their little kingdom and see what else was on offer.

He wandered back through Sherlock’s room, smiled at Nurse Denny and pointed silently down the corridor, then headed that direction. The first thing he found was the kitchen—restaurant grade, with big cooktops and ovens, and a large gleaming stainless-steel fridge. He rummaged around briefly before settling on a small roast beef sandwich, then carried it with him while he headed on to the next carriage.

He was surprised (and somewhat amused) to find that Mycroft’s claim to his brother that there were no sleeping accommodations aside from Sherlock’s cot was a bald-faced lie. Just past the connector between the carriages was another parlour, not quite as over-the-top as the front one, but nonetheless on a par with some of the nicer hotels John had seen. Mycroft’s security team were comfortably placed in club chairs and sofas, while the telly played rugby highlights in the background. They looked up inquiringly at John’s entrance, but relaxed when he gave them a friendly smile and pointed towards the rear of the carriage.

Next came a largish bathroom, complete with a small tub compartment and two toilet stalls. Then, through a sliding wood door, he found himself in what was probably originally “staff quarters”—a series of small staterooms, then a row of several double-decked bunks on each side of the corridor, protected by heavy curtains. The door to the first stateroom was slightly ajar—when John peeked inside, he saw Anthea, still fully dressed, blissfully asleep on the bed tucked into one corner.

That looked remarkably attractive, actually, given John’s spotty record of sleep over the past several days. (Mary had mentioned, in a recent phone call, that John needed to follow the mantra of new parents with Sherlock—“sleep when the baby sleeps”—since, if nothing else, it would be good practice for the future. John reminded her that this particular “baby” rarely slept much, period, unless drugged or drunk).

John slipped into the next stateroom, shrugged off his shoes and jacket, and climbed into the welcoming bed with a gusty sigh. The last thing he heard (and felt) was the mechanical grind and surge as the train gently pulled out of the station.
John wasn’t sure what had awakened him—his eyes popped open, and he felt a momentary dizziness when he realized he was in a moving vehicle, but wasn’t sure where or why. A blast from a train horn, though, brought him back to the present—train. Sherlock. Home.

He stretched, rolled off the bed, and padded out to the hallway towards the staff parlour, making a quick stop in the loo on the way. The security staff were still ensconced in their chairs and gave John a cheery wave as he passed. Anthea’s stateroom, though, was empty.

He was surprised, on reaching the kitchen, to find two cooks busily working away, on something that smelled amazing. They chattered away in what sounded like Polish, nodding politely as he passed. God, he hoped lunch was coming soon—even though his watch said it was not quite 12. His stomach had completely lost track of what time of day it was, and didn’t care.

He had heard raised voices as soon as he entered the kitchen, but wasn’t sure if anything was amiss—not enough detail. As he got closer, though, he heard Sherlock’s voice give a raspy chuckle, followed by Mycroft’s slightly-nasal tones of lofty disdain.

As he entered the “hospital” room, he saw a surprising scene: Anthea, Mycroft, and Nurse Denny were arrayed in wooden chairs around Sherlock’s cot, cards held in their hands and a pile sitting on Sherlock’s bed tray.

Anthea looked over at John and smiled, then looked back at Sherlock. “Give me all of your threes,” she said, with an oddly-knowing tone.

Sherlock’s face congealed in a thunderous scowl, and he tossed three cards in her general direction. “You cheated. I don’t know how, but you cheated,” he said darkly.

Anthea positively beamed. “Yes,” she said. “And I’ll never tell you what I used.”

Sherlock flitted rapid-fire through a battery of facial expressions before settling finally on “mildly impressed”, with a side serving of “sly”. “I will, you know,” he said. “Find out.”

“Good luck with that,” Anthea chortled.

Anthea won the grand title (four out of five rounds), though not before facing down a spirited challenge from Nurse Denny. Sherlock was a distant, disgruntled third. John had stepped into Mycroft’s seat at the beginning of the second round, while the Great Man wandered off to do something governmental. John didn’t even attempt to keep track of his cards, content to just watch and enjoy the snarky interchange of the other three. Just hearing Sherlock viciously intone “Go fish!” in triumph made John giggle every time.
Lunch was called at the end of the final round, which was good timing—Sherlock was due for medication and a spell of physical therapy, and the others were finding the stiff wooden chairs not as comfortable as the sybaritic seating in the parlour.

Sherlock decided that he wanted to dine with the rest of them, rather than eat off a tray yet again. Nurse Denny wasn’t opposed to the idea, though she did suggest Sherlock recline on one of the sofas rather than try to sit through the meal upright in a dining chair.

John looked around for the wheelchair, but Sherlock, as usual, read his mind.

“I’ll walk, John,” he said, edging cautiously to the edge of the cot. “It’s not far, and I’m not tired.” He made to stand up, before Nurse Denny nipped that in the bud.

“No standing on the train without a minder,” she said. “Your balance isn’t up to adjusting to the motion. And you need to wait until the food is already set up—don’t want to spoil your meal by wearing yourself out before you eat.”

The detective gave an affronted sniff but stayed put. It didn’t seem as if they’d have long to wait, since the catering staff began bustling back and forth to the parlour, carrying tableware, plates and linens to prepare for the meal. Tantalizing scents wafted through the open door to the kitchen each time they passed. John was pleased to see that even Sherlock watched with interest as the staff turned to carrying serving dishes through.

Finally, the head of the catering crew announced that the meal was ready for service, and John, Anthea and Mycroft turned to head through to the front room.

Nurse Denny stood and started to follow. “I’ll go set up the couch for you,” she said over her shoulder to her patient. “I’ll be back for you shortly.”

John moved to the doorway, slightly ahead of the nurse, and had just turned his head to speak to Sherlock when several things, mostly bad things, happened at once.

First thing: Sherlock, because he was an impatient six-year-old, decided not to wait to be escorted, stood from the cot and began to totter towards the doorway. Second thing: the train reached a long curve and began to lean into it at a high rate of speed, inclining the floor slightly and giving small lurches along the way. And third thing, the worst thing: Sherlock began to fall, eyes wide and hands outstretched. And John knew he couldn’t get there in time.

But then the final thing, in its way the most startling thing: Nurse Denny spun in place, checked Sherlock’s motion with her left hip, swept her arms around his torso and hips, and lifted him deftly back onto the cot while he yelped in pain.

There was a long, long pause, in which they all stared at each other, wide-eyed. Then Nurse Denny broke the silence by giving John a wry grin.

“I wasn’t always a nurse,” she said. “And he’s not really very heavy, thankfully.”

Then she dropped the grin and turned to Sherlock, who was stock-still on his pillows, arms clutched tightly around his torso.

“I have soft restraints in that cupboard behind you,” she said tightly. “And if you get up without a minder again, I will use them. Are we clear on this?”

“Fair enough,” Sherlock said, spots of colour high on his cheekbones, obviously a bit shaken by the whole thing. “But—when I’m better, will you teach me that move?”
Sherlock ended up eating from a tray after all—his near-catastrophe had wrenched his chest and made sitting up sound much less attractive than it had ten minutes before. John volunteered to eat with him, and Nurse Denny cued up a recent symphony concert on the telly facing the cot before leaving to join the others. John also dispensed medication with the meal, so that soon his friend was comfortable enough to hum along to the music while picking at his plate.

Once the plates were cleared away, Nurse Denny came back in and made shooing motions at John.

“Physical and respiratory therapy,” she said sternly. “Nothing too strenuous, under the circumstances, but that means more repetitions of the easy things. It will take a while.”

John ignored Sherlock’s pleading look and headed for the parlour, planning on looking for a good book, a comfortable chair and another world-class cup of tea.

He did get his chair, and his tea, but the book was replaced by the offer of an educational round of chess with Mycroft. Anthea was engrossed with her laptop, but the older man appeared willing to spend at least part of this unexpected downtime in actual, honest-to-God relaxation.

Sherlock had started teaching John chess while he was recuperating from the shooting last fall. John had reached the point of being described as “not quite hopeless”, which was quite flattering compared to Sherlock’s earlier assessments. Sherlock normally spotted John three pawns; Mycroft removed four, and John accepted without a word, knowing that Sherlock grudgingly acknowledged losing to his brother roughly half of the time.

Mycroft let John make the first move, and they settled in to a leisurely pace (at least in part because it took John so long to figure out a not-quite-hopeless move), while making similarly leisurely conversation.

“So,” John said as he completed his second move, “how long should this trip be, then? I know you said earlier it was a ‘day’, but that can mean many different things depending on how you define it.”

“Our route will run from Prague, to Munich, to Frankfurt, to Brussels, and then to London,” the bureaucrat said. “Counting layovers and train changes, the best travel estimate is just under 19 hours’ time.” He pulled out his pocket watch (of course Mycroft Holmes used a pocket watch) and gave it a quick glance. “Which means we have roughly another 15 hours to go.” He didn’t quite sigh, but the feeling was definitely there.

John did the math in his head. “So, we should reach London at, oh, 5-ish tomorrow morning? What’s the plan thereafter?”

“I have arranged transport to my home,” Mycroft said. “We’ll be coming into St. Pancras Station, which is only about 20 minutes away, perhaps less at that time of morning. I know that Sherlock would prefer not to take an ambulance, but I can’t imagine him being up to another car trip after this ordeal, even if he does spend most of it reclining.” He gave John an inquiring look, clearly asking for confirmation.

John nodded. “The time of day will make that an easier sell,” he said. “He won’t have to worry about being a spectacle when there are no spectators.”
Mycroft gave a tiny smile. “I’ll rely on you to convey that information, then.”

“You really are an evil bastard, aren’t you?” John replied amiably. The smile grew broader, before Mycroft turned back to the chessboard again.

The day passed slowly, if comfortably. They stopped for 45 minutes in Munich, but none of them felt ambitious enough to get off the train, especially since the security team would be required to go as well, leaving Sherlock alone with Nurse Denny. Sherlock took a long nap after therapy, and Nurse Denny spent the time doing some form of intricate needlework in the armchair near the cot. John and Mycroft played two games of chess before Anthea came and collected the older man—the two went back to the staff quarters and didn’t come back until the caterers started preparing dinner. John spent the intervening time reading, napping, and standing out on the small front covered platform, watching the chilly scenery roll by.

By dinnertime, Sherlock was awake and, well, *cranky*, for lack of a better word. Boredom, partly; anxiety, almost certainly, but that was a word that would never be mentioned without duress.

“I can come sit in the parlour for dinner,” he said firmly, sidling to the edge of the cot. “I will go now.” He held his arm out imperiously for John, while Nurse Denny looked on in amusement.

“You know they just started setting up the table, right? So you’ll have to sit there for a bit,” John said, knowing all along he’d be ignored but feeling obligated to point it out nonetheless.

“Given that the staff has had to walk through this room to deliver tableware and food, numerous times, I’m painfully aware of the process,” Sherlock sniffed. “I would prefer not to remain on display like a landed fish yet again while they finish their work. I can lie comfortably on the sofa until the meal is ready, according to my captor,” he continued, shooting Nurse Denny a sour look that she answered with a pleasant little wave.

Anthea suddenly appeared behind John and snagged three pillows and a blanket. “I’ll go prepare His Highness’ couch,” she said. “You can be Honour Guard and ceremonial Train Bearer.”

“Only if I get to strew rose petals along the way,” John said. “Always wanted to do that, but it always went to the girls at weddings.” Anthea’s chirp of laughter floated back through the doorway.

Sherlock made a face like he’d just licked the bottom of a bird cage. “Are you done now? Can we actually move, or do you have more impromptu comedy to offer? And I use that term simply because I can’t think of anything else insulting enough to employ.”

Well, then. Definitely in a Mood.

“Yeah, yeah, we’re going,” John said peaceably, holding out a crooked arm for Sherlock to grasp. “Not too fast, now.”

“Yes, Mummy,” Sherlock sneered. John noticed, though, that the detective did move with a great deal of care; apparently not all that interested in falling, then.
He perked up considerably, though, once they reached the couch, and he was deposited in the nest of pillows. Anthea had shifted the orientation about so that he could look out one of the large side windows without having to sit sideways, and Sherlock’s attention was caught quickly by the passing mountains and icy fields.

“Where are we?” he asked, just as Mycroft came in from the rear door.

“We passed Nuremberg about half an hour ago,” Mycroft said. “Our next stop, a brief one, will be in Frankfurt, in roughly 90 minutes.” He gave a smug little smile. “I’ve arranged a small surprise there that I think we will all enjoy.”

“Oh, God, pastries,” Sherlock moaned. Anthea reached over and lightly smacked the back of his head.

“I’ll take yours, then,” she said, and enjoyed his look of outrage.

Dinner was excellent, John thought, considering where they were. They had a choice between two entrees, four side dishes, and a very good selection of wines (and, predictably, Sherlock complained about not being allowed any). Nurse Denny didn’t join them—she had taken her meal to one of the staterooms for a well-deserved break.

They were just finishing up, the wait staff rolling in large carafes of coffee and tea, when the train slowed as they entered Frankfurt.

Shortly after they pulled to a stop in the station, white-uniformed men carrying two large boxes came aboard, carrying their burden through to the kitchen before accepting a generous gratuity from Mycroft on their way back out. The wait staff soon came forward with two impressive confections on cake stands: a cake coated in dark chocolate ganache and slivered, toasted almonds, and a cherry tarte dusted with sugar and ground nuts.

Much though he tried to hide it, Sherlock’s eyes lit up at the sight of the latter. He glanced over at his brother, waiting expectantly.

“Oh, very well, your instincts are spot-on,” Sherlock sighed grudgingly. “Thank you. I haven’t had one of these in many years. Not since Grandmere died, I think.”

John raised his eyebrows at his friend, hoping for more information.

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“It’s called a tarte tatin. It’s baked upside-down and then inverted for serving,” Sherlock said, watching as a waiter carved a generous slab of the confection, then scooped vanilla ice cream on the side before placing the plate carefully at Sherlock’s elbow. “If, as I assume, this is from Grandmere’s recipe, it includes a browned butter and vanilla bean infusion for the cherries.”

Mycroft nodded, reaching for his own plate, containing a smaller portion of each dessert. Anthea and John requested the same, and John tucked in with a will.

The remainder was removed by the wait staff, and Mycroft asked that the treats be shared among the
catering crew and his security team. Sherlock looked a little longingly at the tarte as it departed, but stayed silent.

Now replete and comfortable, they moved from the dining table over to sit near Sherlock’s couch, lighting the fireplace against the chill as the sun went down. After twenty minutes or so, though, the detective had paled, shifting uncomfortably and wincing with the motion.

John took that as his cue. “Back to bed, I think,” he said, moving to hold his arms out for Sherlock to grasp. “You’re due for antibiotics and pain meds, so we have to hook the drip back up.” They had left Sherlock’s IV port embedded in his forearm when they left, simply covering it with bandages and tape—saved him from repeated “sticks”, as well as saving time.

John hauled Sherlock up, flinching at the tiny gasp of pain that ensued, then walked them both very slowly back to the hospital room and cot. Sherlock perked up quickly, though, once settled and hooked up to his pain relief.

“So, what do we do now?” he asked. “I’m not sleepy, and I can’t bear another several hours of watching whatever drivel the telly will produce. You’re my doctor; it’s your responsibility to keep me comfortable and content.” He gave John a dose of puppy eyes through his lashes.

“Not a performing seal,” John said. “My responsibility is to keep you medically comfortable and content. The oath doesn’t say anything about bloody entertaining you.”

Sherlock’s immediate downcast look, though, gave John second thoughts. With this particular patient, boredom and agitation (or the absence thereof) and physical wellbeing were intertwined, to a startling degree.

John sighed, and went to collect the others. He wasn’t doing this alone.

It ended up being one of the strangest (and most entertaining) Game Nights John had ever attended. Just as John came back from the parlour with Mycroft and Anthea, Nurse Denny returned from her break, took in the situation, and went to a side cupboard, returning with tablets and pencils, dice, and cards. She rolled Sherlock’s tray back in place over the cot, pulled the wood chairs back in a semicircle, and dropped into the nearest one.

They each got to choose a game in turn, and played that game until there was a mutual (not just Sherlock, no matter how much he whinged) decision to quit.

They started with Charades, Anthea’s choice. After five minutes, it was clear why: the Holmes boys were terrible at it, given their truly dire acquaintance with popular culture. Well, unless one of them was giving the clue, in which case the other always got the answer while everyone else blinked in mystification. After four rounds of that, with the two batting the clues back and forth while no one else so much as presented a guess (what did a right-eyebrow-twitch, one raised finger and a pretend throat cutting have to do with a “popular pastime”, anyway??), the others held up their hands in surrender and reached for the cards. Mycroft sniffed in mild disapproval, but subsided graciously enough. Sherlock held his arm to his chest and glowered.

Nurse Denny ignored both of them, and started dealing. “Strip poker,” she said succinctly, giving Anthea a grin. John raised his eyebrows, and Anthea deigned to explain.
“We, Sherlock and I, have a long-running history on that one,” she began. “Starting when we were kids. Whenever he was ill, or…whenever, we would get together whoever was available and go at it. We modify the rules—” she looked sternly at Sherlock—“as I’ve told Sherlock repeatedly that I’ve seen his bits before, and have no ambition to see them again.” John noticed she didn’t look at Mycroft when relating that part—he wondered idly if she’d ever seen the other set of Holmes “bits”, but managed not to say so.

“In this case, because we have mixed company, we’ll follow Modified Holmes Rules,” she continued briskly, as she dealt cards with nimble fingers. “For the men, whoever ends up down to pants is out. Women, pants and bra. Because Sherlock is wearing fewer clothes than the rest of us” (since he had long since been stripped down to pants, socks, and a soft, knee-length nightshirt that Nurse Denny had produced from a cupboard), “we’ll give him a bonus—each sock will count as one item, but the rest of us have to take off the pair if we lose them. And, because I’m a nice person, we’ll let him count the robe on the foot of the cot, even though he’s not currently wearing it.” She looked at her friend. “That seem fair?”

“Throw in my cardigan,” Sherlock commanded, reaching over to pick that item off the side table and draping it over his chest. “It’s chilly in.”

Nurse Denny won. As she pointed out, she’d warned them she was a good poker player. But the most interesting part, to John at least, came as each player lost a major item—shirt, trousers, and, in Sherlock’s case, nightshirt, only to reveal some serious scars. John had been a little uncomfortable about that, actually—Sherlock had seen his scar, but none of the others had.

That discomfort vanished when Mycroft Holmes lost a hand, removed his shirt, and revealed a broad, shiny white scar that ran around the right-hand side of his chest and continued on his side. “Knife wound, fifteen years ago,” the older man said calmly. “One of the many reasons I hate field work.”

On the next hand, Anthea lost, and chose to remove her grey trousers. She glanced down at the round divot in the middle of her left thigh. “Bullet wound. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Sherlock looked at it knowingly. “It got infected,” he said. “It was disgusting. I had to wait on her hand and foot for over a week.”

“No, really?” John said. “I can’t imagine.” That earned him an eyeroll from both brothers.

John’s turn was next. He matter-of-factly skimmed off his jumper and displayed his shoulder, courteously turning so that each side was visible. “Sniper,” he said. “Afghanistan.”

Nurse Denny looked on with interest. “Through and through, then,” she said. “You’ll have to tell me what approach they used for your surgery sometime. I’ve heard differing opinions on which is best.”

And that was that—no surprise, no disgust, no angst whatsoever. John felt…surprised? Relieved? And a little stupid for having worried.

Nurse Denny finally lost enough hands to have to take off her tunic—she was, as she had said, a very good poker player. The broad burn scars across her left shoulder and back were evidence that this was a woman who understood pain, and rehabilitation, and everything that went along with such a serious injury. John noticed Sherlock looking on with grudging respect.

Nurse Denny also noticed, and gave a wry smile. “As I said—I wasn’t always a nurse.”
From strip poker, they moved on to *vingt-et-un*, with Nurse Denny continuing to rake in extravagant (and largely imaginary) winnings. They finally quit at sometime after 1 am, when John noticed that Sherlock was taking a long time to make his wager, only to look over and see the detective’s cards strewn across his chest, his head back and eyes closed. John waved his hand and directed the others’ attention that way, then gestured towards the parlour door.

Nurse Denny shook her head and nodded towards her club chair, which now had a soft gray afghan draped across it. Mycroft gave her a courtly bow of thanks, and they padded quietly out of the room as the nurse reached over to turn off most of the lights.

Mycroft, Anthea and John arrayed themselves in the comfy chairs with a joint air of exhaustion; plush though the train was, this kind of journey was nonetheless tiring, especially when paired with their exertions over the past month.

“I’m tired, but I know I’ll not sleep,” John said, wiping his hands roughly over his face. “And I’m thinking we only have another 3 or 4 hours.”

Mycroft nodded. “While the prospect of a bed sounds attractive, I must confess that, at this juncture, only my own bed would do. I’m too aware of all of the hustle and bustle still ahead of us to relax.”

They ended up turning on the telly; there was a repeat of the past week’s British Bakeoff playing, and John enjoyed Mycroft’s dry comments on technique and results. It was very similar to Sherlock’s reaction to thriller and detective shows, just with less shouting.

By 4am, when Nurse Denny came quietly in and asked for help shortly in getting Sherlock prepped for departure, they had all taken turns dozing, and were more than ready to be off this train.

Sherlock, evidently, was more ready than they were. If he’d been physically able, he would have been pacing frenetically; as it was, he vibrated in place, and shot out questions almost continuously.

“Where are my clothes?” he said. “When can I put them on? I don’t need a shower, I haven’t done anything but lie in bed. Why should I eat anything? It’s too early to eat.” And on, and on, and on.

By 4:30, John had assisted Sherlock through a very quick shower, with the taller man seated on a sturdy bench and John wielding a hand-held spray. His clothes were retrieved and wrestled back on (with clean pants—Anthea presented them in a shiny red gift bag, bobbing a sardonic curtsy), and he had deigned to swallow a cup of very sweet, very milky tea and a croissant while the drip for his medicine was running one last time.

John waited until they were pulling in to St. Pancras before breaking the news about the ambulance, but was dumbfounded to learn that Sherlock already knew—Nurse Denny had told him yesterday evening, pointing out that the only alternative was the brace (and another removal of the brace afterward).
“I told you I didn’t want to do that again, John,” Sherlock said. “And the trip is only 15 minutes.” He seemed perplexed at John’s surprise. John’s estimation of Nurse Denny rose yet again.

As it turned out, the rise in Nurse Denny’s valuation was a very good thing.

Once they had staggered off the train, loaded themselves into their respective vehicles (John and Nurse Denny riding in the ambulance, the others in cars), and pulled up not long after in front of Mycroft’s home, John busied himself in helping carry in the duffles and sorting out Sherlock’s move to the sickroom. He knew Mycroft had prepared rooms for himself and Anthea as well, and was looking forward to finding his and collapsing.

He helped transfer Sherlock from the gurney to the top-range cot and helped settle his exhausted friend under blankets before bidding him “goodnight—well, good day, actually”, earning an airy wave of one thin hand. He turned then to Nurse Denny.

“I can’t thank you enough for your care,” John said, shaking the nurse’s warm hand as Sherlock looked on sleepily. “You were a tremendous help, and a real asset on the trip. I hope to work with you again sometime.”

Nurse Denny chuckled, looking over at her patient. “Well, as to that, it’ll be sooner than you think,” she said. “Didn’t the elder Mr. Holmes tell you? I’ll be in charge of the convalescent care here, including therapy. So I suspect we’ll all see quite a lot of one another.”

John didn’t quite manage to get his phone out of his pocket in time to catch the milk-curdling glare Sherlock produced at that news. But it made John giggle all the way to his own room. Mycroft Holmes truly was an evil bastard.
Chapter Summary

It's a long, long road, but, like all things, it finally comes to an end. And it's an especially satisfying end, leaving everyone in a better place than they were at departure.

Chapter Notes

Well, that's a wrap, ladies and gentlemen--what a wild ride this story (and my past year or so) have been. As always, I couldn't have done it without the constant support of my homies--maryagrawatson (my sister, separated at birth), the lovely KathyG, Boton, geekmama, fabricdragon, juliaoh, geometry--the list goes on and on, and if I didn't call out your name, that just means that I'm too sleep-deprived to post it, not that I don't kiss your feet in gratitude.

I'm now starting to work on a couple of things (though, given my schedule, they won't be as quick as in the past, at least not for a while, and I'll be working on the two simultaneously). One is The Elderly (Ex) Spies, and deals with the Holmes parents (in the Scheherezade 'verse) heading to John's wedding, or trying to; the other is a John story that I've realized I have to write in order to be able to keep writing John, basically. And yes, it's an S4 fix-it, though it won't be a long piece. Hope to see you there!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Early February

True to his word, Mycroft had managed to provide almost every service Sherlock needed in the comfort of the Kensington house. But even the Great Man couldn’t manage to borrow MRI or CT scan equipment, and re-scans had to be performed periodically, to track the healing of the implant as well as ensure that the abscess process was well and truly gone.

They had been home about a week when the first appointments came due. Sherlock was resigned to it; he was anxious about leaving the security of the house (much though he whinged and sulked and snarled about being “detained” there), but willing enough to get it over with. His only proviso was that John go along to act as his defender (well, that word wasn’t used, but that’s what John heard in his head).

When John came into the imaging center to meet up with Sherlock and his “keeper” (as Sherlock had now christened Nurse Denny), he was unsurprised to find the two in the middle of yet another melee in their ongoing battle of words.

Sherlock held up his phone (which he was, for now, allowed only limited access to, after going through a manic phase of some 20 hours of non-stop electronic mayhem, followed by a full day of lying limp on his bed in exhaustion).
“I called in some additional favours,” he said, with a smug little smile. “And I now know exactly where you worked, and for whom—Deborah.”

Because that was another aspect of this civilized little guerilla war the two had going on: Nurse Denny refused to give Sherlock any information, any real information, about her background, or, most importantly, her first name.

(“As far as you are concerned,” she told her patient multiple times, “it is ‘Nurse.’”) It drove Sherlock mad. And he now clearly expected his (typically) dramatic reveal to produce an equally dramatic reaction on her part.

It didn’t.

“Well, no,” she replied calmly. “That’s my name, but no one has ever actually called me that.” She caught the calculating look in her patient’s eye. “And no, I didn’t use a code name. Grow up,” she continued with a smirk, as Sherlock’s face congealed.

She waited him out, while John watched with amusement. The detective broke, of course—Sherlock never could bear not knowing.

“All right,” he huffed. “What did they call you?”

“Shark,” she said, with a bland smile. She obviously enjoyed the mildly stunned look on his face.

It wasn’t until after Sherlock had been carted off for his scans that she turned to John and grinned. “It was for cards. Card shark, get it?” She looked at him sternly. “Don’t you tell him, now. I want him to have to ask. Since we both know he will, eventually.”

Because that was the very best part of the “war”—that is was, without the detective’s knowledge, intended for his benefit. It was a distraction, a puzzle, something to focus on that wasn’t pain, or therapy, or anxiety about the future. It didn’t really matter who won, either the skirmishes or the war; it was about keeping that amazing brain from realizing how little real stimulus it had access to at present. It wouldn’t hold forever—once Sherlock’s pain meds consumption had begun to really taper off, he would realize on his own that he’d been led down a meandering path. But for now, it was both therapeutic and a hell of a lot of fun to watch.

Tomorrow, Nurse Denny was going to start dropping vague hints about her real prior employer. John couldn’t wait for Sherlock to figure out that the person she really used to work for was Mycroft.

Early March

Even after he started to pick up fill-in shifts at Kings’ A&E, John had made a habit of making himself available whenever Sherlock had medical follow-ups, either in-house or at Kings. When it included a trip to hospital, they usually made a day of it: John, Nurse Denny and Sherlock would go on their “mission”, John would return to Kensington with them, have dinner (sometimes with Mycroft and Anthea, sometimes not), watch movies or telly, and then John would spend the night since these evenings always ran late.
A week ago, that had proven to be a wise choice.

They had returned from Sherlock’s latest scans in late afternoon. After dinner, they headed in to the lounge and settled down to watch a movie—Nurse Denny’s choice this evening. John had noticed that Sherlock was unusually quiet during the film, but put it down to lingering pain. Trips in the car were still uncomfortable, and his medication had dropped far enough that he only received opiates (and a low dosage, at that) at bedtime, relying on OTC drugs during the day. So it wasn’t unusual for their patient to be achy and irritable in the late afternoon and evening hours. He went off to bed willingly enough, though, and Nurse Denny promised to bring his nightly medication once she was through with her shower.

John had headed off to his own room, down the hall from Sherlock’s, before remembering he’d left his book in the lounge. He swung through the kitchen to pick up a scone and had just reached the doorway to the lounge when he almost stumbled over Sherlock—a Sherlock who was now fully dressed, in an oversized hoodie, disreputable jeans, and old trainers. A Sherlock who stood, frozen in place, with spots of pink high on his cheekbones.

John resisted his first impulse and trained his voice low and quiet.

“What are you doing, Sherlock?” he asked, as he turned a clinical eye to his friend. What he saw was disturbing: the painfully-thin man was sweating, hands shaking lightly before he shoved them quickly into his pockets.

“I’m…I’m going out,” Sherlock stammered, opting for bravado.

John put down his scone. “OK, let me get my jacket and I’ll go with you. Where do you want to go?”

That was a loaded question. Sherlock didn’t make trips by himself yet—his strength wasn’t up to walking any distance at all, and no one was comfortable with him risking a fall or an encounter with one of their many enemies while unable to protect himself.

“Out,” Sherlock repeated, trying to edge around John. “I just need…you don’t need to come. I won’t be gone long.” He took his shaking hands out of his pockets and steadied himself against the wall, sidling towards the doorway.

John stepped back and moved to block his path. “No,” he said gently, reaching out to take one of those trembling hands. “Let’s go back upstairs, yeah? Get your medicine, and maybe a sleeping pill. I’ll stay with you until you’re good and drowsy.”

Sherlock tried to pull the hand away, grimacing as the movement pulled on his tender ribcage. “No, I need to…let me go, John! I need to go, I need…,” he stopped abruptly, raising his hand to cover his mouth. His face worked, then he continued. “I need,” he muttered, dropping his eyes in defeat.

“Come on,” John said, tugging lightly at the captive hand. “Let’s go upstairs. I’ll give you a shot to help you sleep, and stay with you tonight. And then tomorrow…tomorrow we’ll talk, and set up whatever you need to help you, OK?”

That was how Sherlock gained a new medication—low-dose methadone—and yet another physician, an MI6 addiction counselor (recommended by a concerned Nurse Denny), who showed up late the following morning and spent two hours closeted with the younger man. When the two came out, Sherlock’s face was blotchy and his hands were once again trembling, but he managed to give John a slight smile before heading off to his bedroom, where he stayed until dinnertime.
Dr. Collins now joined them once a week. The content of those sessions was never discussed—John didn’t ask, and Sherlock didn’t volunteer. But it was telling that Sherlock never complained about them either.

*Late March/Early April*

As Mary grew closer to her delivery date (and bigger. Don’t forget bigger—Sherlock never failed to point it out), she became Default Minder more often than not. It was good for both parties; while Sherlock wasn’t quite ready to move back to Baker Street, he was nonetheless far from bed-bound, and required a more stimulating environment. John had returned to his full-time work at Kings A&E, so large portions of the day were open for new participants (especially since Mycroft and Anthea were very rarely available. Running the country was quite time-consuming, apparently). Mary, who was past the point of doing much gadding about and had taken medical leave from the surgery, was the perfect choice: both a captive audience and a (reasonably) sane playmate for a bored convalescent. John would drop her off, then swing by and pick her up on his way home, often staying for dinner before they both headed home.

That “play” mostly took the form of cold case investigations, rationed strictly by both intent (while vastly improved, Sherlock’s stamina was still quite limited) and circumstance—neither Greg Lestrade nor Mycroft Holmes had an unlimited source for unsolved cases. They needed their supply to last, at least until Sherlock was able to return home.

One blustery, cold Tuesday John swung by the townhouse after his shift, hanging his coat in the entry under the eye of a grinning Denny (the “Nurse” part of her name having now been abandoned). John raised his eyebrows enquiringly, raising a snicker from the nurse.

“Just wait,” she said. “I’ve come up with a new PT routine, since he was being entirely too bolshie about the existing ones. Your wife’s getting a kick out of it, too.”

“What, she’s cheering him on?” John asked, as they headed to the back of the house and the lounge.

“Oh, no,” Denny said cheerily. “She’s participating. Sort of.”

There was a secondary, library-esque room off the lounge that had been pressed into service as both a workroom for Sherlock and a physical therapy area, with an assortment of exercise equipment that had rapidly expanded as Sherlock improved. That was the room that Denny headed for, with a mystified (and ever-so-slightly concerned) John in tow.

Hearing Mary’s delighted laughter, though, put that tiny bit of concern to rest. Seeing the source of that laughter was even better.

Some bright spark had completely re-jiggered the state-of-the-art resistance training equipment brought in for their resident patient. The wires and pulleys normally anchored to the steel framework on the far wall had been disconnected from that support, and now stretched laterally across the room.

In the middle of the complicated array was a very low, wheeled platform, roughly 3 feet square. And settled on that platform was a bolted-down kitchen chair, with a very pregnant, highly amused woman seated in it. A pregnant woman who, as John and Denny entered, was pulled briskly across the floor towards Sherlock, before sliding more slowly back to her starting position.
The two participants noticed John’s entry at roughly the same time. Mary turned a delighted grin his way.

“Isn’t this great?” she said, waving her arm enthusiastically. “Sherlock gets his exercise, I get a bit of fun. And, let me tell you, being this pregnant means ‘fun’ is in pretty short supply.”

“It’s about time she tells you that,” Sherlock grumbled. “I’ve heard nothing else all month.”

“Hush, you,” Mary said. “You know you’ve enjoyed the cold cases. You said just this morning that I was ‘almost as good as John.’” She shot a wry look to her husband. “You’re the one I must aspire to be, apparently.”

“Quite right,” John said, walking over to help her out of the contraption, while Sherlock flopped back on his bench with a gusty sigh.

“It’s good that the child will be delivered soon,” he sniffed. “Any further weight gain would make this exercise untenable, at least until I am fully recovered.” He raised an eyebrow just enough to let Mary know he wasn’t (well, not entirely, anyway) serious.

“Brat,” Mary said, with no particular heat. “Just wait until you have to do this with me and the baby both. I’ll lose weight, but she’ll gain it. At least we hope so.”

“Denny can help me,” the detective said, with a sly look at his “keeper”. “She could stand the exercise, God knows. The better I get, the less she has to do, after all.”

“Just you wait, Holmes,” the nurse said. “You’ll miss me when I’m gone.”

And Sherlock surprised them all—including, very likely, himself. “Probably so,” he said.

Late April

April was definitely a month of mixed blessings for John. The biggest blessing, of course, was the birth of a healthy baby girl. Rosamund was perfect; white-blond fuzz, big blue eyes, all the requisite fingers and toes. Mum and baby both fine, home in record time.

There was another big one—Sherlock finally was able to return to Baker Street, only three days before the baby was born. Mrs. Hudson was beside herself; though she’d of course made regular visits to the Kensington house, she’d never been completely comfortable around Mycroft, and the feeling was mutual (not that Mycroft would ever actually say so). Having her surrogate son back in her clutches (as Sherlock put it, gaining him a brisk tug on a curl from his “mother”) meant that she could relax into a regular schedule of hugs, baked goods and muttered complaints with impunity.

But April wasn’t all good things.

John (and Mary, in a “supervisory” role) had helped get Sherlock settled back at Baker Street, their last real outing together before the baby came. Their friend was excited but anxious (neither of which he admitted, but everyone knew). Mrs. Hudson fluttered in the background as Mycroft’s people hauled in boxes of clothing, medical gear and the exercise equipment (the latter being set up in John’s old room), offering tea every ten minutes and dashing down to her kitchen to produce snacks.
and biscuits. Sherlock hovered in the corner of the lounge, eyes darting everywhere, hands twitching together.

“I want them done,” he said fretfully, frowning at John. “They’re making a mess.”

John knew very well that statement actually meant “they’re touching my stuff” but refrained from pointing it out. He caught Denny’s eye, while Sherlock was moving his music stand further into the corner, and jerked his head at the bustle around them.

The nurse cast a knowing eye over her patient and stepped into the breach.

“All right, you lot,” she said, in a tone just under a shout. “I need you cleared out of here in the next five minutes. My patient is overdue for treatment. There’s nothing more to bring in, so we’ll finish the setup. Get done, get gone, and ta very much.”

Sherlock blinked. “I don’t think I have…” he began, but Denny hustled him to the sofa, picking up a large hand weight from the coffee table and handing it to him.

“You do now,” she said. “Give me 20 slow reps on each arm, two minutes’ rest, then 20 more.”

By the time Sherlock finished his assignment, he was flushed but calmer, and the workers had done their last tasks and departed.

Mrs. H., bless her, had already planned a celebratory dinner and made enough for 10. John helped her haul everything upstairs while Mary and Denny made appreciative noises and organized plates and silverware from 221B’s “eclectic” choices of old, new or tatty.

It was a delightful meal. Sherlock indulged in a small glass of wine (with John’s approval), which, combined with his medication, made him calm, mellow and slightly giggly. Denny was in rare form, regaling them with tales of patients she had dealt with who made Sherlock look like Mother Theresa. John told a tale or two of his own, with Sherlock chiming in to correct him every thirty seconds, and Mrs. H. giving her side of the story (since they usually involved her as well). Mary just smiled and smiled.

After the second time Sherlock tried to stifle a yawn, Mrs. Hudson stood and announced she was off to make up his bed, before taking to her own. They all parted ten minutes later, with plans to have Mrs. H. come fix dinner for all of them at the Watsons’ house in two weeks (presumably with a newborn in attendance as well—still seemed surreal that it was actually time).

Nothing happened quite as planned.

The first blow came when Mary went into labour, followed by a mad dash to hospital. Baby Rosamund appeared only 5 hours later, howling with infant fury while her parents laughed and cried. The first person John tried to call (well, texted a photo first, followed by a call) was Sherlock. The call was picked up, surprisingly, by Denny.

“He’s in for his scans, and I’m holding his phone. I came along to run interference, since you weren’t available,” the nurse said. “But I’m glad you called anyway—and congratulations, before I forget. I’ll pass on your news as soon as he comes out, which should be any moment now. But can you call me back on my phone in about half an hour? I’m sending him home in his brother’s car, so I should be free.”

John called back as requested, mystified but a little concerned. The issue, as it turned out, was Sherlock and hospitals.
“Look, I know how much he’s been looking forward to seeing the baby,” Denny said. “Yeah, he wouldn’t say so, but he is. But...he really can’t. He can’t be in an open area, with a lot of people, a lot of sick people, wandering about. We can do the imaging visits because it’s in a very contained area—not a lot of the people through there have any kind of infectious process going on, and they’re militant about antiseptic routine. But the rest of a hospital, for someone whose immune system is still on holiday? Very bad idea.” She paused. “I can tell him, if you’d prefer. Let him be angry with me, if need be.”

And she was right, of course. It didn’t make it any more palatable, but she was right. John called Sherlock, set things up so that he could Skype with Mary, while she held the baby in her arms. It was fine. Before they hung up, they reminded the detective that they were still planning on Mrs. Hudson’s dinner in ten days, and he could examine Rosamund to his heart’s content.

That didn’t happen either.

This time the call came from Greg Lestrade, when Rosamund was a week old. Since Sherlock moved back home, the older man had taken up a routine of stopping by almost daily with cold cases, conversation and the odd movie night. It filled in a bit of the gap caused by John and Mary’s necessary absence and gave Sherlock something to concentrate on other than his health and rehabilitation. And, as Greg put it, it did a bit of good for NSY as well.

“Look, mate, can you pop by this afternoon?” Greg asked, after the initial flurry of baby-related questions had been dealt with. “I think you need to look him over. Oh, and with the baby, I think you’d better wear one of those masks.”

Because, of course, Sherlock was ill, really ill. Nothing dangerous, thank God, but confined to his bed with a terrible cold—mild fever, hacking cough, congestion that had him wheezing like an old church organ.

“Why didn’t you call me?” John asked as he sorted through his bag, his voice muffled by the mask. “You’ve let this go too long, and now you’re miserable.”

“You had other things on your plate,” Sherlock croaked. “Important things. And it’s just a cold. I’ll be fine in a day or two.”

“From what Mrs. H. tells me, you’ve been saying that for three days now. You’re not fine.” John huffed.

“I’m—” Sherlock began, and was cut off by a violent coughing bout, his eyes squeezing shut in pain while his right arm clutched his side in a gesture John was all too familiar with.

John got to work, trying to make his friend more comfortable. He dug the nebulizer out of the wardrobe, where it had sat unused since Sherlock had moved back in, prepped it with medication and settled the mask over his friend’s mouth and nose. In the meantime, he also pulled out doses of paracetamol and decongestant tablets and a couple of menthol throat lozenges from the kit under the kitchen sink.

By the time the nebulizing treatment was complete, the medication had been swallowed with a cup of hot ginger tea, and a throat lozenge had been grudgingly tucked into Sherlock’s cheek, Denny had arrived for the scheduled PT.

She took one good look at Sherlock, draped across his bed with blue-grey circles under his eyes, and shook her head. “No PT today, then. You should have told me you were ill, Sherlock—I could have come sooner and got you taken care of.”
Sherlock stiffened. “I don’t need to be ‘taken care of’ anymore, thank you.” His breath whistled slightly. “I’m quite capable of managing a slight cold. No one,” and he shot a glance over his shoulder at John, “should feel obligated to reschedule their day around me anymore.”

Denny’s face softened. “You need what you need, Sherlock. We’re all sorry you’re not—”

That was the detonation point—a catalyst for the relief of pent-up stress, and anger, and frustration at his continued helplessness.

“I am so fucking tired of people being sorry,” Sherlock snarled. “I don’t want to be this way anymore. I don’t want to be tired. I don’t want to have constant pain. I don’t want to have to remind myself, yet again, of the many, many things I can’t fucking do!” The wracking coughs after this impassioned speech served as punctuation, but also heightened Sherlock’s distress.

Denny reacted before John could.

“Stop this,” she commanded, reaching out and catching Sherlock’s flailing left hand. “If you don’t stop, if we can’t get this coughing under control, you’re spending the night in hospital, hooked up to a drip and oxygen. I know you’re disheartened. I get it. I do. As a Yank friend of mine once eloquently said, it ‘sucks brown bears’. But considering what you’ve already conquered, my dear, this is small potatoes. You are making stellar progress—you are the standard against which my other patients find themselves measured, and fail miserably, though of course I never tell them that.”

Sherlock continued to cough. John moved forward, levered him to a full sitting position, and put the nebulizer mask back in place, while Denny moved to the kitchen and returned with a glass of cold water which her patient sipped, glaring mutinously the whole time.

In the end, Sherlock did spend the night in hospital (as well as the next two days, ultimately), hooked up to antibiotics again just in case. His breathing had slowed, and the coughing eased somewhat, but the ominous wheeze John heard through the stethoscope stayed, along with a slight bluish tint to his lips after bouts of coughing.

“It’s just precautionary,” John told his silent friend, who refused to look at him, staring stonily out the window of the private room while the supplemental oxygen feed whistled in the background. “Denny will stay with you—I would do it, you know that, but—”

“But you have other priorities, and rightfully so,” Sherlock rasped. “Please give Mary my apologies for today.” Then he closed his eyes and pretended to sleep, until John sighed, nodded to Denny, and reluctantly left.

May

May was a good month. A very good month (well, with the exception of the total lack of sleep. Perils of parenthood).

Sherlock had found himself again. Oh, the first week of the month was a little rocky—after the detective was released from hospital, Greg Lestrade insisted on moving in until he was sure Sherlock was ready to care for himself.

Oddly, Sherlock didn’t fight him—well, not exactly. If anything, he seemed somewhat embarrassed by the offer.
Greg put paid to that notion pretty quickly.

“Pfft,” he huffed. “I’m a divorced middle-aged copper with grown kids, no pets and no hobbies. I’ve got enough unused leave banked up to last me to the Second Coming. Where the hell else do I need to be?” He glanced over at the beaming Mrs. Hudson. “And besides, Mrs. H. is a much better cook than I am!”

Though Mrs. Hudson confided in John that the two brought to mind the old “Odd Couple” telly show, there were no real problems. Greg helped Sherlock with his PT, made sure he ate, took his medicine and made it to his appointments, while Sherlock sat in on Skype discussions of current cases (with suppressed excitement, John noticed; his first exposure to non-cold cases in many months), complained about Greg’s rugby-watching obsession and ate whatever Mrs. H. chose to bring up.

By the time Greg left, though, Sherlock had received the OK from Denny to attend limited crime scenes in person, under very stringent guidelines that she made sure Sherlock, John and Greg all had copies of. Sherlock whinged about it but complied. Greg told John later that Sherlock actually cracked a smile at the first one, though the detective later vehemently denied it.

Towards the end of the month, John and Mary began to feel they were really getting the hang of this “parenthood” thing. Not much sleep still, but less howling, and even the occasional baby smile (the first of which led to John dropping his phone while trying to snap a photo, which then led to said baby erupting into startled screams. As Mary pointed out, that somewhat defeated the purpose).

In light of Sherlock’s improvement, then, Mary felt confident enough to take the car, and the baby, out for her first real expeditions—in this case, to Baker Street. Sherlock insisted on wearing a clamshell mask the first time, which lasted only until Rosie took one look and went off in hysterics. The shaken detective ripped off the mask and retreated, wide-eyed, to the farthest corner of the lounge while Mary patted and crooned her daughter back into good temper.

“C’mon then,” she said finally, when Sherlock showed no signs of moving. “She won’t bite. And it’s not the end of the world if she cries, either. It’s sort of her trademark move.”

After that rough beginning, the visits to Baker Street became a regular thing. Several days a week, Mary would bundle Rosie in her car seat and head out, staying until John swung by after his shift to ride home with them. Sometimes they stayed for dinner, but not often—the baby made that a bit more difficult, tiny as she was.

Sherlock found her endlessly interesting. He made flowcharts, he researched infant development online, he bought small gifts which he tended to present as if he had absentmindedly purchased them while ordering something else. It fooled no one.

John headed to Baker Street one evening towards the end of the month and heard Mary’s chuckle from the foot of the stairs, followed by a groan from a much-deeper voice. When he reached the landing, he saw the cause of both.

Sherlock was lying prone on the carpet in the middle of the lounge. The furniture had been pushed back to create a largish open space in the middle, and Mary was perched on the end of the sofa, camera up in picture-taking mode as she grinned with delight.
Sherlock was wearing Rosamund. The infant was strapped securely to his bare chest in her carrier, looking about herself with the stunned expression newborns tended to wear (well, when they weren’t screaming), making tiny birdlike noises to herself. As John watched, Sherlock scissored himself abruptly to a sitting position, letting out another groan in the process. Rosie waved her arms, apparently enchanted by the motion. Then the detective let out a gusty breath and lowered himself back to the floor with a grunt.

He looked up at John with a loopy grin. “Milo of Croton,” he panted. “Apocryphal story, from Greek legend. Supposedly lifted a calf every day of its life, and was eventually able to lift the fully-grown bull.” He dropped one huge bony hand onto Rosie’s downy head. “I doubt she’ll get quite that heavy, though.”

He rolled to his feet, careful of the carrier, and disengaged himself gently, handing the bundled baby to John. John looked over the bared, sweaty chest with a professional eye, gauging the healing scars and rib lines.

“That, Sherlock,” he said. “You have a six-pack, mate.” And Sherlock did—not one as outrageous as those sported by pro athletes and cinema stars, but it was definitely there.

Sherlock’s cheeks went a little pink. “Well, Denny pointed out that it’s much easier to see on me, since I’m thin. But I suppose it is some reward for all these months of oppressive exercise.” He ran a hand lightly over his torso, then grinned up at John through his lashes. “Mary suggested that you start joining my exercise regimen. She seemed excited by the prospect.” He looked at John’s torso speculatively. “Two or three hours a day for a month should do the trick.”

“Never mention that again,” John said with a shudder.

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John was surprised, in mid-June, to get a phone call from Anthea. The agent did text him periodically, usually with a sardonic take on a recent news story or the real version of a political event, but she rarely called.

“What’s up?” he said, hoping nothing alarming was going on.

“Relax,” Anthea purred. “Good news, for a change. You’re going to receive an invitation to dinner from Mycroft shortly—the proposed date is next Tuesday evening, since I knew that was one of your half-days at Kings. It’s semi-formal, so dress accordingly. But I’m putting my own spin on it. I’m going to text where to come to first—you might want to bring your dress clothes in a bag. There’ll be a place to change, don’t worry.”

“What’s this about, then?” John said. “I mean, not turning down a free dinner. But anything I need to know, or bring?”

“Nope. Just you. And trust me, you’ll like it,” Anthea said. John could hear the grin in her voice.

So it was that Tuesday evening found John, just at 5 pm, stepping out of a taxi in front of the Diogenes (a venue he didn’t really have positive feelings for, all things considered). He dodged around the bustling traffic and crowded pavement to slip inside, to be met by the same stone-faced
gatekeeper he’d encountered years ago.

He was surprised to be led, not towards the opulent wood-paneled rooms he’d passed through then, but rather down a long corridor and a half-flight of stairs to what was very possibly another building entirely. This area was much lighter in feel—more utilitarian wall coverings and flooring, but high ceilings and multiple windows opening onto a central garden. They finally passed through a set of doors protected by a card reader, and entered a large, airy gymnasium area, punctuated by multiple linear vinyl strips on the floor and mysterious wires and lights. The strips were currently unoccupied, with a cleaner toiling away at the far end.

John’s guide walked briskly along the edge of the open arena and took one last turn to a small hallway, leading to swinging doors. Those opened onto another gym—this one older, smaller, less high-tech, with polished wood floors and walls covered with racks of equipment—racks of swords, actually. And there, in the middle of the room, were five people in fencing gear—white meshed helmets/masks, white tunics and trousers, and thin rapiers in hand.

As John came to a stop by the doorway, the group suddenly spun into motion. The two tall, thin figures in the center arranged themselves back-to-back, with no more than a foot between them; the others began to warily circle around the other two. The outer group began to make darting sallies, testing the capabilities of the center two before retreating. Suddenly, the taller of the duo barked out a command, and the two spun into patterned motion—a motion, John realized, that he recognized.

It all dropped into place, then—this, this was where Mycroft and Sherlock practiced their fencing, that remarkable routine they’d perfected over years, decades. It was fascinating to watch—his first exposure had been while he himself was fighting, so his attention had been spotty at best. But this—it was dance. It was battle. It was amazing.

The display continued for a solid twenty minutes, the outer combatants sliding, gliding around the center two, the two breaking up and forming new patterns to engage their foes. Mycroft would call out a new pattern and he and Sherlock would float seamlessly into the new configuration while keeping their opponents deftly at bay.

John watched the entire time, enthralled. He found himself wishing he could join them—that sometime, in another life, John Watson had taken up fencing as a hobby, instead of rugby and darts.

Finally, one of the outer ring threw up a hand and dropped their blade. The others followed suit, and stood, shaking out limbs and removing masks while shaking hands. John knew the center two, of course, but was shocked to see that one of the outer ring was Anthea, who pulled off her mask and shook her hair out of a messy bun.

His favourite part, though, was Sherlock and Mycroft removing their own masks and sporting near-identical, beaming grins.

Anthea looked over from her smiling friends and saw John. She pointed him out to the Holmeses, then gave a “come on” wave of her arm as the three headed towards doors in the rear of the large space. John hustled to catch up with them, and Anthea chuckled as he reached her.

“Told you you’d like it,” she caroled.
In short order they had retired to their respective locker rooms. The Holmeses headed off to shower while John changed into his suit and zipped his street clothes back into his hanging bag. He has just finished when Sherlock padded out from the shower area, already dressed in black silk boxers and an unbuttoned dress shirt, a towel draped over his wet hair. His scars were dark pink but healthy, and the six-pack was still in evidence.

He smiled as he walked to one of the large lockers and opened the door, revealing a hanging bag much like John’s.

“Anthea’s been up to mischief again, I see,” he said over his shoulder. “I suppose we should be thankful you arrived before we entered the showers, so that we were aware we had company. I don’t think any of us would have survived you seeing a naked Mycroft.”

As John laughed, the man in question himself appeared through the doorway to the showers, clad much like his brother.

“John has already seen most of me,” he said blandly. “But he managed to bravely suppress his instinctive admiration. Medical men are inured to shock.”

This time Sherlock laughed.

The restaurant was one that John was quite sure he would never have otherwise attended. In fact, he would have never known it existed: there was nothing, no hint whatsoever, on the exterior of the building that would lead one to assume it housed anything commercial. Old, beautiful, austere stones faced a small cobblestoned parking circle, and three stories’ worth of old, wavy-glassed windows revealed warm lights within. In another life, it had been the mansion of a family both wealthy and influential—someone like the Holmes family, perhaps.

As usual, Mycroft read John’s mind. “It’s called *Auberge*,” he said. “Small but excellent. The building was originally owned by a cadet line of the Dukes of Devonshire. The upper floors house very exclusive guest quarters used by the diplomatic corps.”

“The head chef is a school friend of Mycroft’s,” Anthea said. “They share recipes, now and again.”

“Which is why we could get a reservation,” Sherlock added drily. “The wait list is normally six months. The personal connection dropped it back to ‘only’ six weeks.”

“No, *your health* took it to six weeks,” Mycroft said repressively. “Otherwise we would have been received on a moment’s notice. Landon has made that clear to both you and I, many times.”

Sherlock huffed but subsided.

The meal was glorious. They were shown to a private, wood-paneled room with a round mahogany table and carved, leather-seated chairs. A lengthy progression of small bites was proffered on tiny, beautiful plates. Left to his own devices John wouldn’t have been able to identify half of what he ate, but Mycroft kept up a quiet commentary, explaining both the ingredients and techniques used. It was easy to see, now, why the elder Holmes had considered a career as a chef.

The dessert course was brought in by their host himself. Both Sherlock and Mycroft stood to greet
the tall blond man in chefs’ whites and toque. Landon was affable and completely unaffected, and sat with the party while they ate, keeping them laughing to the exploits of his kitchen staff in the face of diplomatic snobbery and entitled nobility. It was like something out of a tell-all reality show: The Rich Behaving Badly.

After the last delectable bite, Landon’s staff came and cleared, and the chef departed with promises of a repeat engagement in the near future. A server came in with a pot of exquisite coffee, a large bottle of champagne with the requisite glasses, and a large silvery gift bag. The server put the coffee, champagne and glasses on the table, placed the gift bag next to Mycroft’s chair, bowed, and left, closing the door firmly as he went.

Mycroft waited while coffee was poured and sipped appreciatively before picking up his spoon and tapping his water glass for attention. He reached down for the gift bag, stood, and placed the bag in his chair.

“Well,” he began. “I must confess this is a trifle…daunting. I find myself before a potentially more-critical audience than the North Koreans, and this, what I have done, is something a little out of the norm.” He looked solemnly at his brother, whose own face was going through some complicated motions as he tried to ascertain what this was about.

“I will say this only once, Sherlock. I am unspeakably glad that you are well, mentally and physically, and happy. It is all I have ever wanted for you, and I very much feared that our recent exertions, and my own hubris leading up to them, would make it impossible,” he continued, spots of colour appearing on his cheekbones. He caught Anthea’s eye, and the agent gave him an encouraging nod.

He cleared his throat, then nodded back. “I have… I was asked to express my appreciation to all of you, on behalf of Her Majesty’s government, for your actions, your heroic actions, in foiling the ambitions of Sebastian Moran. You, we, saved potentially thousands of lives, and prevented untold upheaval across Europe. Under normal circumstances this would likely have taken the form of knighthoods all around. But I knew that at least one of you would find such a ceremony excruciating” (he gave his brother a mildly apologetic look), “and I found it curiously impersonal, for lack of a better term.”

He reached into the gift bag, and produced 4 small, gilt boxes, and one larger one. He placed one of the small boxes in front of each of them, then handed the larger one to Sherlock.

“Don’t open it just yet,” he said. “A little background is needed first.” He reached for his tie, and detached the sapphire pin currently holding it in place. Then he opened his own small box and took out a small gold filigreed object, with intricately-formed shapes in the center that were too small to identify. He pinned it in place before continuing.

“It was the custom, in days of old, for groups who had been through life-changing experiences together to form a sort of…society commemorating it,” he said. “This usually took the form of what we would today consider a club, with the members meeting for regular dinners and other social events. They would often have a motto or signature saying that signified the core of their union, even, in some cases, a coat of arms in the days of chivalry, with forms or sigils representing significant events or actions in their travails.”

He gestured towards the larger box in front of his brother. “The core of that I found in the pocket of your coat, when you were in hospital. I tucked it into my own pocket with a handful of other bits and bobs and forgot all about it. But recently, when I had begun considering this meeting, my staff had taken the parkas out for cleaning and brought everything the cleaners found inside to me. And it struck me that, in some ways, these are symbolic of our whole journey—improvisation, after all, was
the byword throughout.”

He flashed a quick grin. “Open the box, brother mine.”

Sherlock, brow furrowed, ripped through the beautiful wrapping paper in a heartbeat, and pulled off the lid of the box. He beheld the item inside, and blinked, and blinked—and then burst into peals of laughter. He kept on laughing even as his brother joined in, before John reached over impatiently and took the box—and joined them. For there, mounted to a beautiful mahogany plaque, were two curious, shiny objects—a length of silver wire, coiled into intricate, gorgeous swirls, and a gilded, tiny olive fork.

When they had managed to get themselves back into some semblance of control, barring the occasional snicker, Mycroft held up his hand for attention.

“I had a jeweler gild the fork and silver-plate the wire before he created the artistic arrangement you see now. If you will open the smaller boxes, you will find small trinkets much like my tie pin, each with a smaller version of the arrangement,” he said.

John and Sherlock did as he asked, and found gold cufflinks and a collar pin, respectively. Anthea opened hers, pulling out gold earrings with a hum of appreciation, and replaced the ones she was wearing with the new pair.

“I would call your attention now to the plaque once more, if you can manage to contain your hilarity,” he continued, giving John a stern look as the giggles threatened to return. “The wording is rather relevant.”

John still had the wooden piece in front of him. He raised it and read the beautifully-etched wording on a small gold plate across the base. “Ego redemi,” he read. “Sorry, my Latin’s not—”

“I am redeemed,” Sherlock’s deep voice cut in. He was suddenly serious, looking to his brother in a questioning way.

Mycroft nodded, as if Sherlock had asked a question aloud. “It seemed appropriate,” the older man said quietly. “Certainly, you may consider your earlier transgression with Magnussen forgiven—redeemed, indeed, a hundred times over. But it refers, it…you are not the only one who required redemption on this expedition.” Anthea shook her head, but her employer, her friend, shook his own.

“As I told John once, I try to recognize my own failings, and they were myriad in this matter. It was not a comfortable realization. But I like to believe that, in the end, I, too, redeemed myself for those failures,” he continued.

“When I started to consider this commemoration, I was reminded of something my grandmother once had me read, in preparation for my confirmation in the Church. One of my middle names is Ambrose—and yes, Sherlock, I am aware how amusing that is, thank you—and Grandmere gave me a book of some of the writings of my namesake saint. The saying that stuck in my mind was this: ‘I will glory not because I am righteous, but because I am redeemed.’ In this case, it is perhaps not in keeping with the original meaning of the phrase. But I nonetheless find it peculiarly apt.”

He reached for the glasses as he spoke and wrestled open the bottle of champagne, handing a filled glass to each of them.

He raised his own glass high and struck a pose. “So now, I ask that you raise your glass with me, in honour of our travails, our association, and our triumph, despite pain, despite tragedy, despite overwhelming odds. Ego redemi!”
And “Ego redem!” they echoed.

Chapter End Notes

Interesting little side note. I had had that final scene in my head for ages (ever since maryagrawatson mentioned her amusement at the continuing presence of the wire-and-olive-fork tools), and wanted to tie it in somehow. I thought this setup worked, given that (in my head, at least) Mycroft is a history buff and has a fondness for grand gestures. But here’s the funny part. I had established, in "With a Little Help From My Friends", that Mycroft's other middle name was Ambrose. I had a distant memory, in the Dustbin O’ Useless Facts that sits in my brain, of something connected to the phrase "I am redeemed", so I did a Google search for that. And lo and behold, who had the appropriate quote? St. Ambrose! (See, as I've told you--I don't just make all this crap up).

End Notes

Note--the chapter/section titles come from the medical descriptions of the stages of an infection.

My regular readers know that I often throw real medical issues into my work. In this case, a surgical abscess after a shooting isn't all that unlikely--a bullet usually carries in tiny bits of whatever it passed through on the way (in this case Sherlock's clothing), and the surgeons may or may not have been able to find it all. And it often takes more than one surgical or medical attempt to get it resolved, during which time the patient fluctuates between "almost well" and "very ill" depending on the current state of the infection.

Works inspired by this one

[Art] Meltdown Aftermath - Fanart for Sgam76's 'Redemption' by TheGracefulBlueCat, He Found it Amusing by dragonnan

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