On the Rack

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Summary

The sequel to The Breaking Wheel, in which Sherlock goes to rehab (of the other sort), starts scraping his life back together, attempts to solve a case, and tries to make sense of what it actually means to be in a relationship.

Notes

The main page of the series contains information on the full chronology of the fics that belong to it.
Chapter Notes

There are two oneshots in this series which take part between the events of The Breaking Wheel and this story. They are: Management Issues and Swept Under The Rug.

Chapter 1: The Two Sherlocks
John is asleep beside him, warm breath ghosting on Sherlock's cheek.

At times he finds this proximity reassuring, but right now, left to his own devices at night-time, it's claustrophobic. This intimacy, so freely offered, is something that he doesn't know how to counter with his own.

He refuses to sleep. Insomnia is something he's skilled at. Or at least, it had been. It's not the only ability of his that seems to have evaporated.

Sleep sometimes sneaks up on him, now, which is annoying — yet another sign that he isn’t really in control of his body anymore. These days, when he wakes up, there's a sense of plummeting down a chasm, when he mistakenly thinks that he has been locked into himself again, like he had been at the hospital. Before his mind catches up with reality, he almost succumbs to panic, convinced that this isn't his bedroom; that this is still the same white ceiling he had spent months staring at, because it had been the only thing he could do. All that gives way to an even greater transient fear: that everything good that has happened lately, in regards to his relationship with John, has merely been a figment of his imagination.

He's like an amnesiac now - someone who has to be told over and over again each morning what he has lost, and the impact never seems to lessen. He's tired; exhausted in a way sleep doesn't cure. Not even John’s presence and the lovely warmth the man is radiating are of any help, because Sherlock can't possibly sleep here.

As he has done on too many nights before this, Sherlock slips out of bed as quietly as he can because, if John wakes up, he'll ask why Sherlock wants to leave the comfortable confines of their - their, not just Sherlock's anymore - bed. That enquiry will then invariably be followed by a suggestion to talk about it, and an offer of some sort of assistance.

He's not a child. He's not an invalid. He doesn't need anything... except for his life back.

If only that were John’s gift to give.

He makes his way to the bathroom. The cold, draughty hallway floor makes his still infuriatingly oversensitive soles ache. He's quite certain he can feel every uneven surface more keenly than before: every grain of London grit brought in on a shoe feels like a boulder, every fleck of dust like a coin discarded on the floor. He would appreciate this refined sense of touch if it weren't so distracting - if it didn't cause him outright pain. He has enough trouble filtering the constant barrage of signals the universe offers his senses to start with - this added burden of false information is too much to handle.

Months ago, his nerves had gone mad, cannibalized by his immune system. They're still mad, and his brain seems to be adding a further layer of processing errors upon their lies. Most of the time he can't even tell the difference between pain and touch. They turn into one another like shapes in a kaleidoscope. It's like his very own version of Chinese water torture: he never knows what to expect, or when. Will this touch feel like a branding iron, or this pain like nothing at all?
In the bathroom, he places his palm on the mirror above the sink. The world seems to shift; reality bends and distorts. He isn’t in the bathroom anymore, but on the other side of the mirror, looking in at a reflection of himself. Trapped, imprisoned, where he cannot escape, but on that side at least it’s safe, and things still work the way they are supposed to. He can hold on to the illusion for a moment, not longer. For a longer blissful period out of mind, he’d need chemical assistance.

The version that is on this side of the glass is faulty. The other him, holding an identical hand against the glass, is the one who knows how to operate this body, how to properly govern his life. The Sherlock on this side doesn’t match the reflection in his mind of how his mind and his body are supposed to be connected.

Ill fit. Such an apt expression.

There are ways, of course, to transform this body, to sculpt it back to how it was. Some of those ways are illegal, some plain tedious, and some he simply can't even try out at his current level of fitness or energy. The lethargy left behind by his illness is still so pervasive, and his appetite - what little there had been of it to start with - is gone, eaten away by the hell of recent months, and probably the useless medications John insists he swallow down several times a day.

He often wants to laugh - incredulously, hysterically - when he sees his own reflection in the mirror during daylight hours. What used to be pale is now sickly wan, what used to be slender is now borderline emaciated; what used to be lush is now dull. In the darkness, at night, he can usually lie to himself that this isn't actually how he looks now, that it's just the shadows distorting everything.

Tonight, he can't fool himself like that, because the other Sherlock seems to be taunting him.

John doesn't seem to mind these changes in his looks, at least some of the time he doesn't, when he looks at Sherlock like he used to - with open adoration but still like an equal. Those times are all right, and when they are paired with the still-careful touches of a fledgling relationship, Sherlock can momentarily imagine that things are as they should be. Imagine that he's still the man who lives here, who works these cases, who plays the violin, who belongs in a fit body; the man who wakes up in his own bed and feels happy about it, instead of succumbing to panic and the disorientation of knowing he'll never be safe again, not even in the self-deceptive way that most people live their lives believing that illness and tragedy won't touch them, at least not today. As much as he's tried, he'll never be able to file away or delete the past months. It's all permanently etched into his memory.

It's incontrovertible proof that The Transport is destined to betray him. Evidence of this is now engraved on the shape and angles of his body. It stares back at him in his reflection, and against such a backdrop his old fondness for danger, spontaneity and unexpected things now feels rather naive.

Sherlock turns away from the mirror and sits down on the floor, back against the side of the bathtub. He should have brought his phone, set an alarm just in case. He always tries to make sure he gets up before John, and pretends he has spent the night in the bedroom. John wouldn't understand the reasons, or possibly consider them worrying. Three nights ago, when Sherlock's vigilance had failed, John had found him sleeping on the bathroom floor. Sherlock had claimed that he'd simply been too tired to drag himself back to bed. He doubts John had taken that at face value. There are cracks in the construct of the two of them, and they are getting bigger.

It's chilly, and the sharp angles of the furniture and the hard floor make his limbs and back ache, but he welcomes it. Pain helps, at least momentarily, to connect his mind to what remains of his body, at long as it's the real sort and not a confusing false sensation produced by his misbehaving
nerves.

Not that he actively wants more of pain, of course - he has experienced plenty enough of it recently. It's merely that some of it he welcomes. Pain means that his brain and body momentarily understand one another. It's a rare thing these days. It's a good reference point - this is what unpleasant feels like. This is what it feels like to hurt. Avoid it. If someone should ask about it, Sherlock wouldn't know how to describe this in a way that makes sense. I need to feel the pain to feel real sounds demented and alarming. Even he knows that. So he keeps quiet.

John insists he knows what this must be like due to his war-injured shoulder. It's not the same, not at all. What had happened to John had been simple - a piece of the body had broken, and the injury had been too devastating to heal well. End of story. No one had cut the wire that connected his physical reality to what goes on in his head.

People keep reiterating their astonishment at how they think he has bounced back from several months of hospitalisation in what they see as a remarkably short time. Many others afflicted by severe Guillain-Barré take much longer to regain their ability to walk, if they ever do. By all accounts and opinions, Sherlock should be content, but what others fail to understand is that it's all so infuriatingly relative.

What other people see is this: he has been discharged from hospital, he went through rehabilitation, he's back home. He has jumped through the hoops, so he's made what they call progress. They think he should be fine, that he should be happy.

If he only knew what those words even meant. Surely someone can think they're fine, when everyone else sees the opposite and vice versa? He knows he isn't fine, no matter how many times he repeats that meaningless word when people ask him how he is feeling.

Has he ever really been happy, in the context of how normal people feel? What is the definition of such a state of happiness? Is it something to be pursued, or something one simply is, without much effort? How tied is happiness to the state of the corporeal body?

Some of the time, when he thinks that Sherlock can't see him, John looks at him like he's fragile - as if he were one of Mrs Hudson’s fine china tea cups that might break, or a rare bird he doesn't want to startle into flight.

That's when Sherlock wants to scream and smash every mirror in the house.

It's too cold in the bathroom. He sighs, and scrambles to his feet. As he walks out and heads for the sofa, he feels as if the pitying eyes of the other Sherlock are still on him.
"Try again."

The burly physical therapy instructor kneels to pick Sherlock up off the floor by grabbing him unceremoniously under the armpits. Once Sherlock is back on his feet, the man points to the balance board, as a command to resume.

Judging by the pain, Sherlock suspects a bruise is going to form on his bony hip. Instead of the dull ache one would expect, the feeling is the equivalent of a buzz saw firing off on his thigh, and there are echoes of the pain crawling up his sciatic nerve, making his toes curl. For a moment, his visual field blurs, the peripheral edges taking on a strange cerise tint. The scents converging on his nose - lactic acid from sweat, peach-scented esters in the cleaning solution used on the floor, hydrocarbons in the plastic cover and the foam interior, thank you pointless overwhelmed brain - add a further layer of assault to the hurricane of sensations he's battling to keep from overwhelming him.

Usually he can tune out such things, but the pain is making it hard to concentrate.

He grits his teeth and fights the sensory overload by closing his eyes and mentally fractionating the sweat—mostly water, but sodium, potassium, calcium and magnesium, all present in trace forms. This time he manages to get a hold of himself before he has to take the next step of identifying the atomic weights of the elements. A deep breath and he knows he has averted another meltdown. He needs information to do that, it's always been the best antidote. If he gives the doubt and fear threatening to creep in even an iota of his concentration, they will grab him and not let go.

When the burning pain finally turns to mere embers of its full force, he lets out a ragged sigh and shuffles forward gingerly, stepping down onto one side of the balance board before trying to get himself centered.

It had all started out so well. Before he had been discharged from The National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, he had been more than adequately motivated for physical therapy. After being trapped motionless for so long, all movement had felt like a novelty, and he had gladly accepted the pain associated with it as just a sign that his nerves were reconnecting. He had meant what he'd said to John: he had been, and still is determined to come back to Baker Street not as an invalid, but as someone capable of getting up the stairs and tackling other such minutiae of everyday life without assistance.

As much as he would have wanted to go straight home from the National, it wasn't realistic. In order to reach an independent enough state, he needed a half-way house, since there wasn't much more that a neurological bed ward at the National could provide once he no longer required constant monitoring. It all meant that a facility needed to be found, where physical therapy could be intensive and where he wouldn't be distracted.
By calling in some favours from old associates, Mycroft had managed to bump Sherlock up a waiting list and arrange for him a spot at Harwich Manor, an exclusive private rehabilitation unit on the seaside east of Colchester. As impressed as John had seemed with the facilities, Sherlock couldn't help but notice John's dismay at how far the place was from London.

Sherlock hadn't initially liked the idea either; not at all. Then Mycroft had told him in no uncertain terms that his only options were something like this, or the installation of a wheelchair lift at 221B. That image had been so horribly permanent and upsetting that Sherlock had acquiesced to the former option.

He hadn't expected for the distance between Essex and Baker Street to feel like a downright advantage. He now recognizes that he needs space and time to get himself back to the physical form he once was: the man John fell in love with, the one who leaps across roofs, dashes after suspects down dark alleyways and who plays the violin at 4 am to soothe John when he wakes up from PTSD-fueled nightmares. To go back to that is the target, and Sherlock is not about to settle for less.

The past weeks have proven that it's going to be harder, much harder than he had thought. The slowing pace of his recovery is worrying, and the pain constantly drags his mood down. There is another, more insidious reason for a delay in getting home, and it's not as simple to resolve as getting back on the balance board.

As Sherlock’s left foot comes onto the board, Gerry places a hand on Sherlock’s back.

"Now try again."

Sherlock dislikes being touched, and overcoming the instinct to flinch away from a helping hand is almost as hard as finding the centre point on a board that wobbles violently from right to left, and then back again. That hand—and his reaction to it—reminds him of that other reason why he embraces the chance to delay a return to Baker Street.

He's still proud of confronting John in the hospital’s winter garden, and, on a theoretical level, incredulously happy about the outcome of that conversation. A massive chasm has been crossed, but he'd been so preoccupied by getting over that first hurdle that he hadn't anticipated the further obstacles waiting behind it.

He is, for all intents and purposes, in a relationship now. A romantic one - whatever that even means - and with all that such a concept entails. It's implicated that there will be intimacies involved. Touching, kissing, more.

Before, it had all been so abstract and safe. It's an easy blanket statement to say that he wants John, but what then? How are they going to shape their lives around the newness of having taken a fantasy - something invisible, intangible, exciting and a little excruciating - and making it real?

It will mean having to deal with aspects of his body that Sherlock had never really come to terms with in the first place. With the added baggage of how disconnected to his body he feels now, the prospect of exploring all that is nothing short of daunting. Now that he is officially free of the illness that had landed him at the ITU for weeks and weeks, he'll need to re-boot his sensory system and re-learn muscle memory that he had been taking for granted ever since he was a child. All this, whilst dealing with the maelstrom of emotions stirred by John.

He had always avoided such attachment in the past, for the very reason that this would be a formidable challenge even if he were himself - if he felt like himself. He doesn't have that luxury anymore, because he isn’t himself. He isn’t sure what exactly has replaced the person he once was,
but things do feel fundamentally different. All that he can say for certain is that, when he had been ill, John was his anchor. John's touch, his presence, his creative ideas at fighting the claustrophobia and the tedium, and John's selfless caring had been the only things that had kept Sherlock somewhat tethered to reality. He is certain that he would have gone mad without all of it.

When sensory input had been very limited, he had wanted it all to come from John. Anything else had felt like a waste of his time - irritating at best, startling and frightening at worst. He had agreed to this relatively remote location, knowing that it been a coward's thing to do. What sort of an idiot would wait years to get what they wished for with someone, and then when it finally happened, get so childishly scared that they ran away like this?

This sort of an idiot.

He needs time. It's pathetic and weak, but it's the truth. When he had been discharged from the National, everyone else had breathed a sigh of relief. Molly ceased appearing, always so out of context when not in the mortuary. John had gone back to work. Mycroft had stopped visiting daily. Everyone had taken up their old lives, the crisis now passed. He’s getting better. No need to watch him like a hawk. Everything is going to go back to normal.

Sherlock has never known what normal feels like, but he is certain that this isn’t it. He had never been described with such a word, but thankfully people had often accommodated his idiosyncracies. To improve enough to even reach his old level of dislocation from the neurotypical world, one that he had endured all his life —well, that was a target yet to be reached.

He falls again, but this time Gerry catches him before he hits the floor.

"I think that’s enough for today. You’re making progress."

There’s that word again. Sherlock bites off a bitter retort. If this is progress, it isn’t very impressive. He’d been downright suspicious at first because at Harwich, they seemed to share his neurologist’s fondness for that same word, one that had also been used when the illness had gradually been getting worse at the hospital – progress. It's as though horrible changes in the abilities of a human body were simply part of a time-line where a certain destination was given and there was no room for disapproval in the semantics of it. The only thing the word seemed to speak of was meek acceptance and submission.

He refuses to accept this ethos.

Any change in his body is cause for alarm, if he has not initiated it, and he'd vowed that it would all be under his control. The schedule set by the rehabilitation unit feels wasteful of time, and he isn't improving half as fast as he'd like to. If they could guarantee a quicker pace he'd be willing to put in twice the hours, thrice the work he does now. He doesn't lack the will, but this current sluggish pace is certainly grating on his motivation.

He mostly grits his teeth, ignores the condescending lingo and does what he's told. If it doesn't work, Mycroft will hopefully ensure there will be consequences later. His brother should at least demand his money back.

The corridor Sherlock walks down to get from the gym back to the accommodation wing looks out
onto the Manor’s orchard. The large windows have probably been installed for a maximal uplifting
effect, but when Sherlock gets back to his room, he sits on the edge of the bed feeling more gloomy
than elevated.

The Manor lies on acres and acres of endless, immaculately mowed lawns, and there are ponds
with quacking ducks, and lovingly tended gardens. It's flawlessly beautiful, picture post card
perfect. After the novelty had worn off, Sherlock had grown to hate all of it.

Everything feels at a distance, slightly unreal - like the things that happen in the fatuous television
programmes John rots his brain with. The days blur together, retreating into sameness. It doesn't
matter whether it's the weekend or not, if it rains or shines.

The sea is supposed to be close by, but he can't get to it without arranging transport and a minder.
He can't be trusted to get by on his own, not even for a stroll on a sandy beach. The effort needed
to arrange it seems pointless, as he knows that no sooner than he walks a few yards on the sand, he
will feel too tired to continue. He does walk around the garden, at least when John or Mycroft
comes to visit, but those walks are very short. Yet another reminder of the distance between what
he once was, and what he is now.

There is somehow comfort, now, in routine, which seems rather uncharacteristic of him. The ony
moments of his day he looks forward to are those of rest, of time alone in his room.

What has happened to the energy levels that made him shoot walls, shout ”BORED” at the top of
his lungs? Where is his enthusiasm? He feels blunted, his brain a knife whose edge has been
allowed to become nicked and dull, shoved in a drawer with too many other things.

He lets himself sink down onto the bed, feeling boneless and lethargic.

An hour later he is prised out of his room and escorted to Group Therapy. It's compulsory,
otherwise he would have opted out right from the start. John finds the idea of him attending such a
thing an endless source of amusement. He's even trying to make it into a running gag in his daily
messages: 'how was group therapy today', expecting Sherlock to counter with a synonym to boring.
These sorts of scripted interactions are good - they require little energy, and distract John from
trying to pry about things Sherlock doesn't know how to address.

At the therapy sessions, he always sits at the back, silent. He's astonished at the way other people
willingly discuss their bodies, their difficulties, as though there exists a perfect sync between how
they feel physically and how their emotions work. Little of what he hears in those sessions is
worthy of filing away in his memory - most of it is just overemotional wailing about this and that.
He doesn't relate to any of these people - why would he, because none of them are him?

Sherlock has always seen physical sensations as nuisances to be tolerated, nothing that would
warrant much time or effort. They exist somewhere alongside him, but not within him. Best not pay
too much attention and failing that, he's done his best to control them. It’s just The Transport, its
gripings nothing but an obstacle to clear thought.

Emotions are more troublesome to control and recognize. He knows when he's angry. Sadness is
easy, too, and so is faking it. Both are reactions governed by an evolutionary need to survive,
regulated by a set of very precise hormones: adrenaline, oxytocin, serotonin. The chemist in him has explored what is known about their effects on neurotypicals, leaving him to wonder just how differently his brain actually interprets those things. Lust is another emotion that serves a purpose. Perhaps the most corporeally governed of them all, it ensures the survival of the genes. Attachment, empathy and protectiveness also serve a purpose in strengthening bonds inside human groups, ensuring survival.

But, what purpose does friendship serve? And what of love? What of loneliness, of missing John even though he knows they'll be together once this place has served its purpose? Why does a lack of John make Sherlock so miserable in the evenings, yet he still doesn't pick up the phone and call the man, or pack his bags and go home where he belongs?

Whatever emotions float through his head these days, he chooses not to show them in front of others. In order to concentrate on his efforts to get back to what he was, he has to put those useless things aside.

As usual, Sherlock tries to tune out the conversations at Group Therapy. He's relieved when the session is over, so he can get on with the more important things on his schedule.

This afternoon will offer another form of physical therapy—this one is more applied, 'recreational' they even call it. He appreciates the option of not having too much time for himself. While in hospital, he'd spent too many hours locked into his Mind Palace reliving memories and observing his thoughts going around in vicious circles. The Palace is not always a good place - Moriarty is there, always ready to taunt him.

There is a wide choice of recreational options on offer, but most he had dismissed as boring. Several that don't seem boring per se, he's too unnerved to consider. 'Music' is among those. He can still hardly hold a toothbrush without his fingers shaking terribly, and the effort of holding up his arm when he shaves with an electric razor makes his muscles ache. He cannot even conceive of trying to hold a bow at this point. He doesn't want to even think about it. Besides, since all clients at Harwich can't possibly be skilled at playing an instrument, the music sessions would most likely consist of banging a tambourine along to a folk song singalong. Not exactly his scene.

He’d tried out the swimming option just once, despite numerous recommendations that it could well help in regaining his muscle mass. He’d waded in until his feet only barely touched the bottom. He had then bounced on the balls of his feet with the intention of starting a slow backstroke. The moment his feet had lifted off the bottom, the weightlessness had made him panic. In an instant, he’d been thrown back into the hospital bed, the white ceiling of the swimming hall a dead ringer for the one in the ITU, and for a horrifying instant he’d thought he’d lost all sensation and all control again. He'd sunk under the surface completely for a second before his feet had hit the bottom again.

He had scrambled out of the pool as though trying to escape from a shark, coughing and trying not to hyperventilate. After making hasty excuses of being deathly allergic to chlorine, Sherlock had retreated to his room and collapsed on the bed, his soaked curls making wet streaks on the bedding. Sleeping on the damp pillow had added an extra layer to how miserable he’d felt.

After the swimming debacle, he'd managed to find something much better on the list of recreational therapies on offer: the Manor stables.

He had not been on horseback since Harrow, where show jumping had been something he'd enjoyed. Competing in it had had the added perk of sparing him from having to endure team sports. Equine-assisted physiotherapy is what they call horse riding here at Harwich. In Sherlock's opinion, it perfectly befits his recovery: a borrowed body, much more functional than his own.
currently is. A brief respite, a moment out of himself.

Today they give him Hestia, a black twelve-year old mare. She's on the lazy side, but they're hardly going to gallop off for a steeple chase anyway.

He's not allowed proper control. He can hold the bridle reins, but there is a lead rein clipped to Hestia's halter. He doesn't have enough strength in his arms to control the situation, if she gets startled. He's being walked around by a staff member who is leading the horse down a circular path near the stables.

He had been a good rider at school, won minor competitions, but now he can hardly get on and off the animal without at least a stepladder and an assistant. His thigh muscles can barely keep him centered and balanced in the saddle, which is in stark contrast to the praise he used to get as the teenager for his 'natural seat'.

There is another difference between then and now: he used to love the sense of danger and the speed of the sport, but now, when on the horse’s back, an unprecedented, uncharacteristic fear of falling has emerged. Even with his eyes closed, he is conscious of the distance between him and the ground.

God, if Moriarty saw him right now, being led around like a child on a Shetland pony at a village fete. Sherlock certainly wouldn't have to worry about registering on the man's radar as a formidable adversary ever again.

Their meeting by the pool had been a revelation. Sherlock had been exhilarated that he had finally met his equal in terms of an opponent, but at the exact same time, when John was at risk, Sherlock knew that he’d have done anything to save his life. Whatever the other option on offer, he would choose John. The realization had been sobering and surprising, and it had taken Sherlock months to accept what it actually meant.

John had made him break his promise to himself: do not get attached; do not fall in love and thus expose yourself to disaster. Caring is not an advantage, Mycroft had always insisted, but Mycroft had been wrong. Without that very advantage, Sherlock is convinced he would have lost his mind in that hospital bed.

He closes his eyes and tries to relax, taking one hand off the reins and snaking his fingers into the thick mane in front of him. The hairs are coarse. For a moment, the familiar tactile sensation is soothing.... until it reminds him of his violin, which he's not allowed to think about. He simply can't.

He opens his eyes and distracts himself by patting the muscular neck next to the mane. Hestia turns one ear backwards towards him in acknowledgement.

"Are you tired or would you like another round? We could go by the orchards as long as we don't get too close to the beehive enclosure. Our next appointment isn't until four p.m. so there's plenty of time," Jane, his current 'minder' offers.

Being confined to a place such as this has one upside - since all the staff and other guests know that the purpose of his stay is not a holiday in the countryside, there's no having to explain to others why he looks the way he does; why his old clothes are ill-fitting on his now much thinner form, why his steps are slow or his fingers clumsy. The others patients - or clients, as is the preferred term in this place - don't demand explanations from him, either. They didn't know him before this, so they can't compare. Some of them may have seen something about what happened to him on the papers, or read John's blog, but they've never met him before or seen him in action. Only Sherlock
really knows just how awful this inability to function is, how great the chasm. They're all just strangers in this place. No point in getting to know each other better.

He gets anxious if he thinks about walking onto a crime scene as he is now, his current disabilities plain for everyone to see. The pity and the schadenfreude. He doesn't know which would be worse. Frankly, he'd rather quit his self-appointed job than face that.

"I'd like that," Sherlock tells Jane.

His voice is back to normal - has been that way for weeks, now, but he still doesn't trust it. It had remained hoarse for days after the intubation tube had been removed, and John had been worried his vocal chords might have been damaged by the extended period during which the tube had lain between them. Thankfully, this had not been the case.

He'd declined a tracheostomy during the worst of the illness, a decision he's now glad of. One had been recommended due to the length of time he had needed a respirator. The sight of a tracheostomy scar would have been a hit with those not fond of him. To lose his natural voice would have been too much for him to consider even temporarily; he might well have been tempted to retreat into mutism. Even a leaky, hoarse version of his own would have been better than whatever sad excuse of a voice a speech valve on a tracheostomy could have offered, no matter how temporarily. He wouldn't have even received one during his ITU stay - most of them require for the tracheostomy wound to have healed, and he would have needed to be able to produce some airflow to be able to use it.

Hestia stops to stare at something in the bushes. Jane coaxes her to move. Despite their size, horses are wary creatures. They are instinctively aware of how many predators in the wild would see them as steaks on legs.

Sherlock finds that he sympathises with the horse. At the hospital, he had realised the vulnerability of his own predicament. It would have been easy to arrange an assassination. He wouldn't have been able to even fight off a desultory fly, let alone a contract killer. Mycroft had tried to reassure him, told him it was simply paranoia brought on by the illness and the sensory deprivation of a hospital environment. Sherlock wasn’t mollified by such placations. He’d never, ever felt so helpless.

He needs to stay out of the limelight until he gets himself back together. He'd be way too easy a target still. It's yet another reason why a retreat away from London seems like a reasonable decision, but even that doesn't erase his guilt over John's expression when he and Mycroft had left him here on that first night.

They pass another client, also on horseback. It's Roger, a management consultant with newly diagnosed multiple sclerosis. His wife is cheating on him, which Roger does not yet know. Infidelity is dreadfully dull, and Sherlock finds that he can’t get the enthusiasm up for puncturing the man’s belief. Perhaps his own weakness is making him more tolerant of others’ sad predicaments. He doesn't enjoy the devastation often created by revealing the secrets of others, but he does like to think he’s doing them a favour by preventing them from wasting more time lying to themselves.

"Shit, that must be hell," John had said when Sherlock told him about Roger's plight. Sherlock had found this mildly perplexing, for reasons he couldn't really grasp. Roger's hardships had nothing to do with his own, yet John’s empathy for someone else had made Sherlock feel uncomfortable, almost jealous. Has he become a glutton for John's attention and pity in some way? He certainly hopes not.
Roger seems in better spirits than in days. "The missus is coming for a visit," Roger confides as they pass one another.

"Splendid," Sherlock says, unable to muster much enthusiasm into his voice. Roger's face falls.

John had once told him this is how sarcasm works. It had been enlightening.

Roger's horse is different from Hestia. Most of the horses are a mix of Welsh cob with a dash of English thoroughbred, but the creature currently carrying Roger is a Norwegian fjord horse—apparently a popular choice for therapy due to their amicable temperament, and there are several at the Manor.

John likes the look of them - gentle and pony-like, with a blond mane that sticks up with a wiry line of black in the middle. "I couldn't imagine you on one, though," John had told Sherlock when they'd visited the stables as part of an introductory tour of the Manor grounds in a golf cart.

John had been desperately trying to study his expression that day, trying to find evidence that Sherlock would not mind a stay in such a place. "You'll be home in no time. Just enjoy it," John had encouraged him. It had been said in that same tone of voice used when people talk to Sherlock about 'progress'.

It's been months since he's been home. The more time passes, the easier it becomes to believe that he perhaps doesn't even belong there. Baker Street is for the Sherlock of the past.

During his hospitalization, John had hesitated in initiating a change in their relationship because Sherlock had been so ill, assuming that his illness somehow made him emotionally incompetent. Who does John see now, when he looks at Sherlock? A doppelganger, hopefully at some point in the future to be replaced with the real deal, substituted with someone who isn't in too fragile a state for whatever the two of them are supposed to be, now?

Maybe John sees something in-between.

The physical side is improving - progress.

Sherlock grimaces. He isn't worried that he might not be able to whip himself into his old physical condition - all the signs are there that he might even make that full recovery one day, if he really puts in the work. It will take months, perhaps years. It's not impossible. His case of Guillain-Barré had been exceptionally severe. He had been told that long-term effects are likely, but he simply refuses to accept it.

What worries him the most are the contents of his head. He has only very recently begun to notice that something isn’t right. Something in his brain. And it isn’t getting any better here; in fact, it is getting worse. There are sensory storms that come out of nowhere. One moment, he can be sitting quietly reading and then the next he is assaulted by a tsunami of sounds washing over him—a conversation down the corridor suddenly sounds like shouting right into his ear, a floor cleaning machine becomes an avalanche of vibration and the smell of a disinfectant overwhelms everything. As the myelin sheaths re-establish their neural pathways, the brain that is interpreting the data coming through seems to have changed. He feels irreparably damaged in some way he has yet to understand.

He suddenly realises that the horse beneath him has stopped, and that they have arrived back at the barn. He suspects these lapses of concentration are part of the same issue as the sensory processing issues.
This shouldn't happen. Guillain-Barré does not affect the brain, not usually.

His control is slipping.

When he dismounts, Sherlock has to forcibly drag his right leg over the horse’s back. He stumbles a bit coming down the step ladder and there is a momentary sense of panic as his right foot fails to connect with the step. The sensation triggers a muscle memory he’d rather forget; when he’d first realised that he couldn’t feel where the end of his foot was.

This time, he doesn’t fall. At least, not physically. But the flashback provokes anger, and he walks away from Hestia and Jane without a word. Undeterred, she calls after him,

”Same time tomorrow, Mister Holmes. You’re doing really well.”

Chapter End Notes

We're sooooooo changeable! I bet you never expected several new chapters this close to one another? There will be a third one this evening, after which we'll be posting about once every three days.

We love to hear from readers, so do comment, argue, ask questions, or speculate if the mood hits. We can't wait to share this journey with you! As is the J. Baillier way, the whole story has been written prior to launch day, so there is no risk of being stuck in the limbo of an abandoned tale.

Lockedinjohnlock is our meticulous proofreader, Emma221b has provided skilled MedBritPicking assistance, and we have also had the pleasure of picking the brains of a pathologist and a forensic pathologist for this. Much obliged.

This is dedicated to The Coven. You know who you are.
"I need a progress report."

Mycroft lets his voice carry a tone of authority that he knows should trigger the right response from Sherlock's case manager at the Manor. Gerald Glusko, a highly recommended physical therapist, has a reputation for expertise in assessing and rehabilitating issues related to prolonged intensive care and neurological illness. He also has one other credential that had made him the case manager of choice for Mycroft: he is a qualified psychologist, who considers mental coaching and assessment a key part of any physical recovery programme - more so than the average traditionally trained physiotherapist. Mycroft has naturally not mentioned this part of the man’s credentials to Sherlock. No need to be insulting. If his brother has retained his powers of deduction, he will be able to work it out himself. If not, then no need to alarm him unnecessarily.

Still, as highly recommended as he and Harwich Manor might come, Mycroft feels a need to again remind the man of the fact that Sherlock’s recovery likely demands closer monitoring than usual. He visits several times a week, his duties permitting, and calls Sherlock daily, but doesn't really expect for him to be capable or willing to provide an objective analysis of how things are going.

“Sherlock’s making good headway in his recovery,” Glusko answers in his smooth but still heavily accented English. The effect of the man’s Latvian origins has been tempered by the seventeen years he has spent in the UK. Idly, Mycroft places it in Daugavpils, in the south east of the country, where the Russian minority are actually in the majority. He wonders if Sherlock has been able to pinpoint the man’s origins yet. During Mycroft's visits, Sherlock has not offered many insights about the unit, its staff or even its other clients, which is surprising. They could have offered a perfect opportunity for a friendly game of trying to best Mycroft at deduction, but Sherlock had not engaged.

“It’s only been two weeks, but he is now participating well in his daily physical training sessions. His therapists say he is showing determination and resilience,” Glusko says proudly. “He seems to respond positively to being given challenges, so we are using specific targets to recruit his competitive instincts.”

Mycroft’s left eyebrow climbs of its own accord. Fortunately, that tell of surprise cannot be seen by the therapist at Harwich Manor. “An unusual choice of word. Sherlock has never been one to be very interested in competing against others.” This is mostly because in the pursuits that his younger brother has deemed worthy, he has tended to be gifted enough that there has been no competition whatsoever. He had always cared little for victories in sports, unless they underlined his own individual progress in learning something. Team sports were most certainly not his thing. In recreation, Sherlock had always favoured individual sports, when forced to engage in such pastimes at school. Even his other hobbies he had always chosen based on practical applications, scientific interest or a level of peril to satisfy his thirst for excitement, rather than competitive potential.

“I didn’t mean against another person, Mister Holmes. No, he is extremely driven to return to what he sees as his normal functioning. I could wish that I had some baseline against which to measure
his strength and physical competence prior to the illness, but the files you sent contain little about this.”

Mycroft had ensured full access for Glusko to the National Hospital of Neurology and Neurosurgery's treatment notes about the GBS - a feat that had required some subterfuge, since he’d made sure they only existed in traditional paper form; better to err on the side of caution, when there was a risk that Sherlock's enemies might take advantage of the situation. Mycroft had also taken the precaution of sending Glusko the edited highlights of Sherlock's medical reports from before Guillain-Barré. Sherlock would likely have protested, but it is important for the case manager to know that he is dealing with a highly intelligent, neuro-atypical individual with sensory issues. As much as both Mycroft and Sherlock have loathed labels, they are useful at times, if they trigger a maximally effective treatment regime.

Mycroft returns to his stern tone: “And what can you tell me about his state of mind?”

In all honesty, this is what has worried Mycroft more than Sherlock’s physical recovery. The fact that Sherlock wasn’t even interested in their usual friendly game of trying to out-deduce each other worried Mycroft more than almost anything else.

Sherlock has, of course, spent time in rehabilitation facilities before, and as far as Mycroft suspects, there is at least one similarity to the situation at hand: there are physical issues to address, but the biggest hurdle must be what happens in the mind. The underlying physical issues here should be a simple matter for his brother to cope with - he is capable of practical thinking when the situation requires, but capability is not the same as willingness. In all his previous... incarceration, Sherlock’s mental state had taken considerable time to re-set to some degree of normal functioning. Well, normal for him anyway.

Glusko’s voice is still cheery. “Well, apart from not engaging yet in group therapy sessions, he is remarkably compliant. Of course, he gets tired from the physical therapy, but he is sleeping regularly and eating properly. There is no evidence of anxiety, he seems calm and patient. None of his therapists have seen any evidence of sensory distress, no meltdowns or attempts to avoid sensation. His expression of frustration is appropriate and it seems to stir him on to try again. This is good, very good.”

“How closely is he monitored outside of organised activities?” Frankly, what Glusko has just described, sounds more like Sherlock on heroin than Sherlock still sober and getting well.

“Do not be concerned about his past addictive behaviours, Mister Holmes. When he is asked about pain, he refuses any medication. He says he worries about side effects. There is a quiet determination, which is good. I think you can rest assured that your brother is settling in well. He has a positive mental attitude; he does not cause trouble like you told me he might. This must be different from anything he has done before. He wants to be here.”

The notion that his brother might actually want to be in rehabilitation worries Mycroft, terribly. There is only one plausible conclusion to be drawn here, one pertinent question to be asked: what is Sherlock trying to evade?

For a moment, Mycroft stares out of the window at the trees behind Number Ten. The room he is using today is on the third floor of the Cabinet Office, overlooking the back garden of the prime minister's residence, and beyond it to Horse Guards Parade. The winter light and bare branches match his mood - somewhat bleak and sombre. The bronze statue of Kitchener in the garden feels like a dark brooding presence in the hour's already growing shadows. Mycroft stifles a sigh. He still has a long day ahead of him. “I will be visiting this weekend, probably early evening on Saturday. Don’t tell him I’m coming.”
“Of course not; what a pleasant surprise it will be for him.”

Glusko’s unwavering optimism grates a little. Mycroft ends the call.

It seems that Sherlock has recovered enough to be at least able to to fool Glusko, and presumably also the other therapists reporting to the case manager, into believing that he is on the mend. Mycroft has too much experience of his brother's ways to mistake this for a good thing - the whole affair stinks to high heaven of avoidance and denial. Still, Mycroft decides that there is some comfort in all of this after all. If Sherlock is in control of his outward emotions, enough to maintain that degree of play-acting, then on some level he actually must be progressing. Towards what exactly, is hard even for Mycroft to say. Although there may exist a silver lining, Mycroft is under no illusion that things are as well as Glusko wants to believe. Instead of wasting time and energy on keeping up appearances, Sherlock ought to be focusing on getting better.

The fact that Sherlock had readily acquiesced in his sequestration at Harwich Manor had told Mycroft volumes about his brother’s fragile state of mind. His uncharacteristically emotional decision to meet John Watson in the hospital's winter garden suggested a change in their relationship. But if so, the illness would have given a reckless, desperate flavour to it, making Mycroft wonder if illness and tedium had distorted his brother's ability to analyse the consequences of his actions - Sherlock had never been much of a forward planner to start with. Mycroft fears that, in hindsight, he may well be regretting his act of sentiment, now that he's had time to think. What else could a willing exile from his beloved Baker Street, and the good doctor, possibly mean?

Sherlock has no idea what it means to sustain a simple friendship, let alone a more intense - perhaps even intimate - relationship. Mycroft worries about the consequences—when things fall apart at some point, will John be committed enough to stay, instead of getting thoroughly fed up and moving on? That such a disaster could happen, Mycroft has no doubt. He thinks it likely, even. No sane man could put up with Sherlock at that level of connection. No sane man would even seek out such a thing, but Mycroft had seen past the doctor's harmless facade right from the start. John Watson is certainly in love with danger, and time would tell if his interest in Sherlock will extend beyond that.

Mycroft is deeply grateful for John Watson's presence during the last months. Clearly the man had been of utmost importance in ensuring Sherlock survived the long hospitalization with his sanity somewhat intact. Now that the focus has moved from survival to recovery in preparation of an unknown future, what is John's role now? Will Sherlock even allow him one, in his attempts to act as though everything is business as usual, that what he's going through is just a minor setback, instead of a life-altering event?

Brother mine, what have you done?

The intercom on the desk phone buzzes, interrupting.

“The Cabinet Secretary is here to see you, Sir.”

Mycroft carefully stows away his thoughts about Sherlock in the Mind Archive. Sherlock has a whole wing in Mycroft’s memory system. Efficient compartmentalization allows Mycroft to both do his job, and worry constantly about his brother.

“I’m ready; send him in.”
In his temporary office at Bridle Lane Surgery, John is trying to keep his focus on the patient sent in mere moments ago—an obese middle-aged Filipino woman, who is complaining of chest pains, and telling him that the Emergency Department at Whippscross had sent her away, telling her that there was no problem. She is most irate. “They did not believe me. Is this how NHS tells me I am not worthy of their service because I'm an immigrant?”

John is into his second week as a locum, standing in for a GP who had been called up north to deal with a dying parent. John casts an eye surreptitiously at the computer screen to remind himself of the patient's name.

“Mrs Bautista, let me reassure you...”

It’s only the first of a whole series of conversations with patients who want him to solve their problems, regardless of whether those problems are medical in nature or not. He has the means to deal with those, and they give him satisfaction. Condition diagnosed, prescriptions ordered, referrals made, next patient invited in.

The routine is soothing, and John realises that he has missed some of it - being a doctor, being useful, knowing what to do, how to help. The four months of Sherlock’s hospitalisation had been a constant exercise in futility. He wasn’t responsible for Sherlock’s medical treatment, so all he could do is watch the palliative measures put into place while Sherlock's body dealt with the GBS. John's role had been that of emotional support.

It had been nothing short of soul-destroying to watch the rapid assault of the illness on the man he now knew he loved unconditionally. John had never felt so helpless—not even when undergoing his own recovery from the bullet wound. It is not an exaggeration to say it has altered his view of medicine—to be forced to witness someone be on the receiving end of sustained treatment that seemed to make no difference at all to their wellbeing. John's father had died after extended hospitalization, having fought and lost a long battle with alcoholism and depression, but he had been estranged from the family for decades. John had barely made it to his bedside in time, and he'd adamantly hidden behind the role of a physician back then. This time, he had not been allowed such an escape, since Sherlock himself had demanded he stop acting like a doctor.

During his medical studies, John had felt uneasy dealing with patients whose illnesses could not be slowed down or cured by anything concrete medical science had to offer. He suspects it's the same for all doctors, but some can withstand that pressure and frustration better than others. The ventilator had kept Sherlock alive, and the various treatments may or may not have helped him to some extent, but there was no cure for Guillain-Barré, and no sure-fire way, even, to stop the illness from getting worse.

It's no wonder John had been drawn to becoming a surgeon - the process of it is often straightforward and concrete. When in doubt, cut it out - that old adage was an oversimplification, of course, and it was somewhat outdated, but the gist of it rang true. He had longed for something definitive like that, when sitting by Sherlock's bedside; yearned for some medical magic trick with a ferocity that had nearly sideswiped him at times. All he could do was be present, to listen, to console. Sherlock had even asked that of him explicitly, telling him he wanted John to stop being his doctor. It had still left him feeling utterly useless, akin to a soldier frozen under gunfire, unable to act because nothing of use came to mind.

John hits the intercom to the reception desk. “Please send the next patient in.”
By the time John starts home to Baker Street, he’s exhausted. He stops at their favourite curry house and orders take-away for one. The familiar young Sikh behind the counter tuts sympathetically. “The Great Detective on a case, not eating again? Maybe we can tempt him with something not on the menu?”

The man’s solicitude makes John’s stomach tighten, and he answers more tersely than the poor fellow deserves, “No, he’s away at the moment. It's just me.”

That is the problem. As horrid as the previous four months have been, at least John had seen Sherlock every day. He knew, almost hour by hour, how things were progressing. Even when reduced to communicating solely by a tapping little finger, Sherlock had been present in his life. When even that function had failed, they could still communicate by eye contact and a white marker board with preselected phrases. And John could, of course, talk to him. He did, sometimes until his throat ran dry and he'd gone through what felt like anything and everything he'd ever thought and wondered and seen and heard and read. It had felt like a race against time, a battle to keep the light of resilience from going out in Sherlock's gaze. Even when John had made brief visits home to fetch fresh clothes and hastily catch up on sleep, he'd continued talking to Sherlock in his head, planning what he'd say the minute he got back to the hospital and to Sherlock's bedside. The safe distance they always kept when it came to physical proximity had fallen by the wayside when Sherlock's paralysis had advanced. It was exhilarating how natural it had felt to be touching practically all the time - hand in hand as Sherlock made his wishes known with that resilient little finger. John can't remember ever feeling closer to anyone.

Now that closeness is missing, and John feels like a limb has been severed.

It would be fair to say that for the past two years, his world has completely revolved around Sherlock. Before the GBS took Sherlock into hospital, they’d been sharing the same space in the flat for two years, enjoying a lovely domesticity in-between the crazy world of crime scenes and cases. John had loved every minute of it - even the strops and the periods of stir-crazy in between cases. He did sometimes long for a breather, and his part-time work as a temporary GP suited their lifestyle in that respect, giving him as much time out of Sherlock’s orbit as he needed. It had been a revelation that Sherlock reciprocated the attraction that had startled John so much when he'd realised such a thing existed in his own heart. Looking back, John resented himself for all the time he had wasted on dates, out with women he had no intention of being serious about. If only one of them had spoken up earlier.

Those four months of hospitalisation had been an almost 24/7 immersion in the minutiae of Sherlock. John had learned more about the man than he would ever have believed possible. It was almost as if once deprived of speech, Sherlock’s communication became more intuitive, more emotional. His state of mind was harder to read, of course, having even been deprived of command over his expressions. Still, with every passing day’s decline, John felt as though his ability to deduce what his friend was feeling was growing more and more acute.

By the time he had found himself in the winter garden at the hospital, John had been willing and able to respond to Sherlock’s revelations. They’d been through so much together that it felt as though this was certainly the next logical step, the best step forward for both of them.

They finally got there, but now they're apart again.
John knows he needs to be patient. Sherlock will come home, and they can start sorting everything out. He knows that it would not have been realistic for Sherlock to be discharged straight to Baker Street. Their flat, with its narrow spaces and the many steps that lead up to it, are ill-suited for someone with even a temporary disability.

He receives his meal, packed in a small white paper bag where the chef had, as is his habit, drawn a smiley face with thick yellow marker - not knowing, of course, what it would mean to John. Maybe the universe is trying to tell him something. John awards a courteous smile to man behind the counter and bids him goodnight.

When he gets home, he finds that he's actually hungry. He tucks into his curry, and freezes the leftovers. Afterwards, he sits by the kitchen table in the empty apartment, phone in hand.

It's late. Sherlock might not even be awake.

He types up a text: **GOODNIGHT**

He briefly considers adding something after that single word, an endearment of some sort, but decides to refrain. Perhaps Sherlock does not care for such things. When it comes to what the man used to dismiss as “sentiment”, John finds he doesn't know Sherlock as well as he'd like to.

John presses 'send'.

After a few minutes, his phone assures that the message has been read, but no reply ever comes.

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Chapter End Notes

From now on we'll be posting once every 4 days or so. Thank you for the scorchingly hot reception that has blown us away!
Compromises

On his third visit to the Manor stables, Sherlock's muscles are beginning to cope better with the balance issue, but he's still unsteady. Now he finds Jane's walking pace and that wretched lead rein to be a continuous reminder of the slowness of his recovery.

He's been prescribed painkillers, three types, all of which seem utterly useless. The mild anti-inflammatory one does at a pinch when he needs something to stop his fresh bruises from aching after a physiotherapy session. The tramadol, a mild opiate, is akin to pouring a thimble of water on a bonfire. The neurologists had insisted he wouldn't be completely cross-tolerant to it based on his heroin use, but it's still such a mild drug that he may as well go without. Then there's the third one, the pregabalin, which supposedly somehow prevents chronic pain, but he isn't fond of that, either. He had been on it after his discharge in 2007, and although there's no way of knowing which of the several drugs he'd been forced to take then had caused the most side effects, it doesn't change the fact that it's an unknown factor that can potentially cause of exacerbate many of the things that now seem to be off kilter. It had been prescribed back then with the purpose of curbing his anxiety. He had meant to argue against it at the National, but John had been present during those conversations, and he hadn't wanted to raise the subject of 2007. Even asking for John to step out would have lead to questions he wouldn't have wanted to answer. Since he has a past history of drug use, the staff insist on watching him take all his tablets. Yet another condescending thing he has to put up with. Once he returns home he hopes to be less under scrutiny, but there's a nagging doubt that John might be as keen as keeping tabs on his recovery as the Harwich staff are.

On the bad days, all he wants to do is sleep. The doctors call it fatigue and tell him it's a common feature of the so-called post-intensive-care-syndrome, and also a common feature of the recovery period from severe Guillain-Barré. To Sherlock the word 'fatigue' sounds like nothing but another arbitrary blanket term for a set of problems he is claimed to have, a box to fit into, so proper treatment can be initiated.

It's a box that is likely modelled after normal, ordinary people. He has never fitted into the boxes the medical establishment has presented to describe his challenges, and he doubts that'll change anytime soon.

He sleeps surprisingly well at nights. The fatigue ensures this. There's a mural on the ceiling that he likes looking at if and when he wakes up in the middle of the night: geometrical shapes and floral patterns. It's a major improvement to the bleak yellowish white of the hospital, and a nice instant reminder of where he is in that moment of disorientation that always happens right after his mind returns online.

His brain is rotting here, and he knows it. He tries to adapt, tries not to become apathetic from the sameness of the days, but even at home tedium had been a corrosive rust that set into the cogs and grated at his intellectual abilities. Here he doesn't even have the distractions of John, his books, his chemistry equipment or his viol-- no, mustn't go there. He's never been a poster boy for routine, and now he's practically choking on it. Wake up, breakfast, physiotherapy, collapse into bed, lunch, more physiotherapy, collapse into bed, riding or group therapy, collapse into bed, ignore evening text from John and a pointless call from Mycroft, fall asleep. He doesn't answer those calls or texts, because he doesn't know what to say to either, and somehow their polite enquiries after his health irritate him no end. It's a relief that no one else has tried to visit, Harwich is far enough from London to make it cumbersome. Lestrade and Molly have messaged him, and Mrs Hudson always sends food with John. Their communiques feel much less laden with expectations than John's, although Lestrade's do act as a grating reminder of the Work, which isn't what Sherlock should
really be thinking about, not yet. Not for some time.

He withdraws his feet from the stirrups, even though there are still a few steps left before they reach the edge of the courtyard. Thankfully Hestia's gait is exemplary in its steadiness, and he doesn't need to grab onto the front of the saddle to keep himself from falling during the last few feet of the ride.

As Jane ties up the lead rein, John comes around the corner of the stable block.

His presence startles Sherlock, since he had said nothing about coming to visit. Mycroft doesn't usually give prior notice, either. Why? Do they assume Sherlock doesn't care, since it hardly matters in terms of his daily schedule what the date is, or whether it's the weekend or not?

It is actually easier this way - when he knows John is coming, he tends to worry how he is expected to be, and frets about whether he will be able to live up to expectations John is bound to have about his returning abilities. It seems to make John so happy to hear about all he's been doing, all the imaginary milestones he's supposedly reaching, that he tries to plaster on a smile and list his daily schedule. During a visit, they will get something to eat. Watch television in his room. Take walks - as long as Sherlock's energy level allows. Sometimes it's just once around the Manor’s garden maze, when it's a bad day.

Before John reaches the side of the horse, he glances up at Sherlock with a smile. "God, you look gorgeous on that thing," he comments, probably not having realised Jane is on the other side of the horse and thus very much within earshot.

Sherlock sees her mouth quirk up to a grin.

"It's not a thing, it's a her," Sherlock corrects John.

"Sorry," John says with a sheepish grin and pats Hestia on her flank.

Jane disappears into the stables, presumably to fetch a brush. Sherlock expects John to get him the high stepladder with wheels that allows easy mounting and dismounting. It's embarrassing having to use one. At Eton, Sherlock remembers being able to get his right foot into the stirrup from the ground to step on for mounting, or simply leaping up, leaning over the saddle and swinging his leg over a horse, no matter what the animal's height was.

Instead of making a move to get the stepladder, John extends his arms upwards in invitation. "Come on," he says, smiling playfully, "I'll catch you."

Sherlock looks down towards the ground at John's feet. Hestia is a horse of significant height. John is four inches shorter than Sherlock, but currently much stronger. In all honesty, John has always been much stronger than he looks. He has easily hoisted Sherlock up over fences and given him a boost up to reach windows. John has never failed in his attempts to render this sort of assistance.

John is perfect. John is the way he's always been.

It's Sherlock who's broken.

"Get the ladder," he says firmly.
In the golf cart, which Sherlock needs to get back from the stables to the Manor house since the walk is too long for him, neither of them talk, as if both of them are unsure how to begin even a casual conversation. Sherlock tries to snap open the chin strap on his helmet, but of course his fingers fail him again. Without a word, John does this for him, briefly ruffling his curls which have been flattened by the helmet.

It's obvious that John likes doing such things. Long before the GBS, Sherlock had fallen asleep on the couch, and woken up to something bothering his hair. His sleep-addled brain had first suspected a fly, but then he had registered movement on the side of his head - a hastily retreating hand, having stolen a feel. It's not the only thing that belonged in the land of things not spoken but which had happened anyway, from the earliest months of their acquaintance. Sherlock had thought nothing of it, blaming his own inexperience and difficulty in interpreting social cues. Men of John's age did touch each other when social convention offered a fervently heterosexual context to do - clapping a hand on someone's shoulder, as was Lestrade's habit, arms on shoulders when playing sports, hugs at family functions. Sherlock had hated all that with a vengeance, since many of those intrusions into his space happened without warning.

John had always been the exception to the rule. The reason for this Sherlock had fully realised only recently. Obvious, in hindsight, but so very strange and unsettling, as long as it remained unrequited.

Once back at the main building of the Manor, Sherlock focuses his energy on climbing up the three steps from the foyer towards the west wing, and then the long walk down the corridor to the library. When John offers an arm to steady him, Sherlock shakes his head. "I'm not supposed to - I need to re-learn without relying on someone else; holding on changes my balance."

There is a little sigh of frustration from John, who steps a little further away as Sherlock starts out.

The childish mantra the physical therapist keeps repeating appears in his head like an earworm: B.O.T.H.E.R.

_Breathe._ "If you don't get enough oxygen into your system, your muscles will swap to producing lactic acid instead of burning glucose. You need to breathe properly." Gerald Glusko, the therapist who he still refuses to call Gerry, is quite certain that this lies at the heart of Sherlock's problem. "You had to let a ventilator do the heavy lifting for you for so long that you've switched your breathing to manual; it's no longer on automatic," Glusko had theorized, which is so physiologically preposterous that Sherlock doesn't even bother correcting the man. Breathing is among the most primitive, most automatic functions human bodies have - even deeply unconscious people will attempt doing it for themselves, unless the breathing center in the medulla oblongata in their brain has been overridden with medications, toxins or brain injury. The problem is that the machinery of his breathing - the muscles - have suffered due to a lack of function in the nerves governing them.

During a normal day at Harwich there are times when he gets positively light-headed, with spots dancing in front of his eyes. On more than one occasion, his vision has completely tunnelled, signaling an imminent fainting, and Sherlock had been forced to sit down quickly. Head between his knees, he would drag in oxygen and the room would steady. His blood pressure has always been on the low side of normal, and what the doctors are calling autonomic dysfunction caused by the GBS is the likely culprit. The regulation of his bodily functions still refuses to return to normal - what used to work in terms of his Transport doesn't seem to anymore. Everything about his body is
unreliable, and no doctor seems to have anything useful to tell him about it these days. They had probably lost their interest once he no longer manifested any interesting symptoms. At the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery's Intensive Treatment Unit, he had been quite popular among medical students. He was lucky to escape without permanent harm to his patellar tendon from their overenthusiastic testing of his reflexes practically every day at teaching rounds. Idiots.

*Open*, is the explanation for the second letter in Glusko's little rhyme. Sherlock can feel John putting even more distance between them, as he broadens his shoulders, straightens his back and lets his arms swing in unison to the strides he is taking down the corridor to the library, which is where he prefers to go when he has visitors. Taking John to his bedroom feels uncomfortable—it makes him feel like a patient, and the bed in the room takes on a suggestive meaning that he is not quite ready to entertain. He finds his physical appearance distressing these days; he keeps wondering what John will make of the thinness. He's lost so much muscle while lying inert on the hospital bed. What flesh he has feels soft and squishy. The thought of undressing in John’s presence, of feeling those warm strong hands on this damaged body downright repulses him. He's not going to indulge in anything that takes their relationship to a more intimate level while he feels like this: too self-conscious, too aware of the chasm between before and now, too preoccupied with the minutiae of how to even breathe and move.

*Toes* come next in Glusko's inane rhyme. The therapist had been happier with his heel strike yesterday, and also commented on the improved roll of his foot. ”Now you have to dig in with your toes. Don’t let the shoes stop you.” It is a sore point. Sherlock wants to wear his usual leather oxfords, but the staff here won’t let him. 'You don’t have the dexterity in your fingers yet to tie the laces properly,' he had been told. Because of this he is forced into wearing slip-on trainers, and they are hateful.

The clothes he has to wear are equally strange. He's no longer confined to a hospital gown or his own pyjamas, but in the first days after his arrival, his new-found sensitive skin couldn't deal with the rasp of even his finely woven cotton dress shirts, and with the weight he's lost, a leather belt to hold up proper trousers ends up making him feel like he’s wearing a corset. None of his old clothes fit any more. Mycroft has brought in a selection of casual clothes: trousers with tie waists, soft jersey long sleeved tee shirts, a cotton fleece zip cardigan in boring, muted brown that he'd expect to see John wearing. No doubt, the doctor in charge of his case here had informed his brother that he wasn’t able to do buttons up yet. All in all, this damaged body can’t manage to wear clothes that Sherlock associates with who he is. *Not good enough for those clothes, might never be again.*

His annoyance at that thought makes his stride falter, and he loses his rhythm. Is this punishment for never appreciating how many muscle groups were required to work in unison in order to produce a normal, balanced, bipedal gait? He can sense John raising a protective hand to steady him, but he shakes his head. He has to concentrate. *Hips*, Glusko says in his head, like it's a magic word in a children's book. He has to rotate them, roll without an exaggerated swagger that could lead to him over-balancing. The whole thing feels so bloody awful: contrived, artificial. He feels hideously conspicuous doing this beside John’s natural military gait, and the man doesn't have to spare a single thought about the process involved when producing it.

*Exercise* and *repeat* are the last two elements of BOTHER. Non sequiturs, self-evident buzzwords. This is his daily life, now, listening to such nonsense. It will end, of course, but that notion hardly consoled him at the hospital, either, when everyone kept repeating it about the GBS.

Just when is any of this going to be feel normal? He is left feeling so useless, having to pour all his energy into himself instead of doing something worthwhile with his time. Weeks and weeks of him serving The Transport, when it should be the other way around, like it used to be. When will he be able to stop wasting his limited brain power on thinking about something as mundane as walking?
By the time they get to the library, all Sherlock can do is collapse into a wing-back chair by the bay window. There is another one facing it, with a small table between the two. He leans back and tries to catch his breath. He’s sweating and that annoys him. In fact, just about everything feels annoying right now. If he only had the breath for it, he wishes he could just scream his frustration. He keeps his eyes closed.

John busies himself with making them a cup of tea. There is a hot water urn in the library and a full range of tea bags on offer- even chamomile and ginger. Sherlock hears the clink of the cups, the sound of the tea bag wrapper being torn, the gurgle of water being released from the spout. His acute hearing can tell the difference between cold water, and the effect that steam makes on the sound. His hearing had never been so desperately important to him as in hospital, when touch was so profoundly affected, sight limited by his inability to move his head, and taste eliminated by GBS affecting his cranial nerves and the nasogastric tube bypassing his tongue and making his nostrils stuffy. Only hearing had been unaffected.

“All mod cons here,” John snarks, peering at the label of the cardboard box he'd dug two teabags out from. “Better choice than most five star hotels. You’ll have to get used to my bog-standard Yorkshire Gold when you get back.”

“Hmm.” It’s about all Sherlock has the strength to offer.

As John settles in the chair opposite, Sherlock imagines the visuals to accompany the sounds: the tiny splash as the tea bag is caught on the teaspoon, then the quick twirl to use the string to pin it against the spoon and squeeze. Then three quick circles of the teaspoon in the mug, to help dissolve the two teaspoons of sugar, the tap against the top of the cup to dislodge the last vestiges of the liquid, and then the clatter as it was laid to rest on the saucer. John always makes his tea first, and only then does he tend to his own. The same routine is repeated for John’s cup, only minus the stirring. John never has sugar in his tea. Not in his coffee, either.

Most things taste wrong, now. There's a metallic undertone that makes enjoying food difficult - the effect had been even stronger when he was still at the hospital, and it lingers even now. His neurologist had said that it's not an uncommon GBS symptom in severe cases. 'This should resolve', the neurologist had told him. Another vague promise with an in-built bail-out: *should*. Whose fault will it be, if and when it never does?

“Tea's ready when you are,” John reminds him.

Sherlock almost groans at the choice of phrase. Will he ever be ready again, in the grander scheme of things? Or is this as far as he will ever get? He still feels totally winded and almost too tired to open his eyes.

“You’re walking much better,” John says casually. "You've put in a lot of work into it, haven't you?"

Mere weeks ago, the best Sherlock had been able to do was walk a few steps between two parallel bars, assisted by a PT therapist, as part of his discharge process. A final exam of sorts, to make sure he was ready to leave the hospital ward for the rehab unit. He'd arrived at the hospital almost unable to walk, and he'd left in a wheelchair.

To John it might seem like progress has been made. To Sherlock, it doesn’t, not at all. It feels like a painful reminder of the fact that he is decrepit. Incapably damaged. The problem is not just the muscle strength - it's *everything*. His fluidity, his restless energy, his posture - all gone, all needing to be relearned. The patterns are there in his brain, of course, but the damage to the myelin sheaths of the nerves that control his muscles means that he needs to reconnect those patterns in order to
execute them. He had naively assumed that once the nerves began to function again, the connection would still be there. Muscles don’t have memory, and his brain is arguably intact, so how has so much been lost? Why is it taking so long to recover?

“Drink up before it goes cold.”

Sherlock opens his eyes but lowers them immediately to evade John’s gaze, fixing his line of sight, instead, on the teacup. Can he manage to pick it up without a tell-tale tremor; will he be able to control his fingers, so that most of it will not end up on him, instead of in him?

In the mornings, when someone delivers his breakfast tray to his room, the tea is placed onto a table that slides over the bed. Once they’ve left the room, he can bend over it and slurp the level down low enough that it doesn’t end up spilling when his shaky hand brings it to his mouth. He can’t do that here. Not in front of John.

“I’m not thirsty.” He decides that he’d rather risk dehydration than make a mess in front of an audience.

He knows he has become risk-averse. That makes him wonder, as he watches John looking at him with concern, whether this self-consciousness is the result of not just his current physical state, but also due to the fact that their relationship has changed. Before their conversation in the winter garden, he had never spent a great deal of time worrying about what John thought of him. There was a steady supply of ‘amazings’ and ‘brilliants’ and other such reactions that stroked his ego; they counter-balanced the ‘bit-not-goods’ and hissed comments about ‘timing’. John used to be his weather-vane, his social compass helping him sort out what was or what wasn’t appropriate. He finds he now wants to practically hide behind the effortless social competence John has always had, because he seems to have lost the pitifully small reserves he’d painstakingly gathered. Does he now care far more about what John feels about him than he used to, because he’s become so disgustingly reliant on other people?

He certainly hadn’t told John of his feelings at the hospital’s winter garden because of a need for a caretaker. He’d shared them because he had realised how close he’d come to being robbed of the chance to ever act upon them. Had he never recovered enough to come off the ventilator, he would have been abandoned in some care home while John moved on with his life, perhaps sometimes visiting on Sundays. He had wanted John to know, so that John could make an informed decision about what John himself wanted out of all this.

Or maybe he just likes to think his motives had been that charitable. In all honesty, the reason why he had told John everything was that it was the simple truth he’d held onto over a year now: he wanted this man, in every sense of the word, and seeing John head off to a date without being able to control the scenario, to prevent disaster, had made him panic. He had been able to derail the attempts of all the previous suitors, usually just by being present, but it’s hard to ruin dates when lying on a hospital bed with an intubation tube stuck down one’s throat.

Emotional investment - the thought is unnerving. Worse than Moriarty. Worse than his emergent phobia of falling, which is likely caused by his balance issues. It gives him nightmares. It’s not solely about making a fool out of himself in front of others - at the moment he’s clearly at risk of seriously injuring himself. Scarcely a night has passed at the Manor without his dreams dealing with something connected to falling. Stairs, rooftops, bridges. Some of it seems very irrational - he’s hardly going to go anywhere near those places or try some balancing act on the edges of them anytime soon, now is he? It’s as though his body is preparing for every possible scenario that could go wrong, and his brain is being dragged along for the ride.

Working out his anxieties in his sleep is understandable in a way that his fear of embarrassing
himself in front of John is not. He cares what John thinks of him, now, in a novel way, which means that when John had asked him during the last visit if he was having any problems with sleeping, he had lied and said no. There's a fierce desire to stop being so pathetic. There is no way he can tell John that last night’s version of the night-time entertainment his brain keeps cooking up had centred on a memory of falling out of a tree when he was nine. He couldn’t wake up, and the sensations were so vivid that he could feel the panic, the inability to brace his body for an impact that never came. Maybe, somehow, all this falling has something to do with being trapped, being unable to stop what's coming. He had been in an unresponsive body on that hospital bed, waiting for death, or news of a forever in that state. In a way, it had been like falling down a bottomless proverbial chasm.

It could happen again. He's going to be wary of every stumble, every bit of numbness, every flu, every harmless gastroenteritis for the rest of his life. Anything could detonate his immune system for a second time, and it could happen years from now. It might not even require a new infection as a trigger. Anything that feels off with his body could be the first sign of a relapse. Relapses are rare, but they do happen. If he can be unlucky enough to get GBS in the first place, surely he could be unlucky enough to succumb again. The thought terrifies him. He doesn’t think he could put John through that again, not to mention himself. He knows that his sanity would not survive.

His slow recovery could also mean that this wasn't Guillain-Barré to start with, after all. It could also be CIDP, a chronic form of demyelinating polyneuropathy, and they just don't know it yet. Sherlock has used some of the idle time at the Manor to do his research.

“I’m an idiot.” John’s comment interrupts Sherlock’s train of thought, and he watches as John gets up, collects the tea cup he'd made for Sherlock, and goes over to the urn again. He pours out about a third of the tea into the collection tray under the spout. Then he returns and stands in front of Sherlock’s chair. He holds the cup out, close to Sherlock’s chest, handle now carefully turned to face outwards.

“No, you’re not.” Sherlock forces a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes, takes hold of the cup and drinks deeply.
Déjà Vu

"What do you think you’re doing?"

Mycroft puts the question in as neutral a tone as possible, wondering whether Sherlock will get the point of that effort. Sherlock, sitting in the single armchair in the room, staring out of the window, is clearly attempting to ignore his visitor.

Undeterred, Mycroft carries on with unpacking the shopping bag he'd placed next to the bed. After years of experience, Anthea has learned exactly what clothes suit Sherlock, but on this occasion she had needed to consult Sherlock’s case manager at the Manor regarding size and design. A size smaller in clothes, even underwear. No buttons. If it has a zip, there should be a big tab on it. Only slip-on shoes: no laces, no socks that are loose, nothing too tight either. Sherlock is still finding it challenging to manage the fiddly bits.

By the time he finishes hanging up the various items in the wardrobe, and putting things into the chest of drawers, the elder Holmes knows that he isn’t going to get an answer to his earlier question unless he prods again. He sits down on the edge of the bed and surveys the wreckage that is his brother. Sherlock had lost twenty percent of his body weight over the four months in hospital; the muscle just melted away. He’d always been at the lower end of acceptable weight for his height; now he's well below. While he has already put some of the weight back on, his cheekbones are still more pronounced than in his worst days as a drug addict. Thanks to an eidetic memory they each have, Mycroft can remember with pinpoint accuracy just what his brother has looked like at different stages of his life, even when he first saw his little brother as a newborn. There is an entire photo gallery down the corridors in his Mind Archive.

Unfortunately, the physical image is not all that is wrong. The elder Holmes allows himself to stop considering Sherlock's bodily infirmities for a moment. After all, that’s what Harwich Manor is supposed to be all about— getting Sherlock back to a state of semi-competence when it comes to the things most people take for granted at his age: washing, dressing, feeding himself, walking up and down stairs, moderate exercise. Mycroft is quite happy with how those things are progressing. What he's here for today is to discuss other issues, which he doubts are in any way addressed by the Manor's therapists. Taking them up with Sherlock would require that the man willingly talk about them. That very notion is preposterous.

Unlike the enforced rehabilitation in 2007, this time Sherlock seems to be much quieter, more self-contained, almost resigned to his fate. The staff here all sing his praises for his patience, his determination to recover his physical capabilities, but not one of them has spotted the truth about his brother’s state of mind. That doesn’t merely worry Mycroft - it terrifies him. Where is your anger, brother mine? Mycroft decides a little provocation may be in order. Looking around the room, he asks, "Has this become just another bolt hole? If so, it’s at least a step up from the usual squalor in which you habitually hide."

Sherlock actually winces at the question. He's very capable of fooling other people when it comes to his emotions, but not Mycroft. How could he? After all, Mycroft had grown up honing his deductive skills on his younger brother. After a lifetime of practice, the only real surprise is that Sherlock still thinks he can avoid conversations like this.

Sherlock’s time at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery had shaken Mycroft badly. To see him reduced to such total immobility had been profoundly shocking. Unable to breathe on his own as the illness progressed, his brother had become unable to communicate except through that hideous white marker board, using the laborious movements of those bright
heterochromic irises.

Sherlock’s quicksilver mind reduced to a few dozen clichés would have been bad enough, but even worse was the idea that he might be trapped forever. 'A brain in a jar' is an expression Sherlock had used half-jokingly a week earlier when Mycroft had asked how it had all felt. In general, such enquiries rang on deaf ears - as a rule, Sherlock adamantly refused to discuss any details of what had transpired.

The notion of Sherlock's life being reduced to such a state seemed unacceptable, and there is no doubt in Mycroft's mind that Sherlock would have seen it as such. Still, the contingency plan for that was something so terrible to contemplate that it had taken a timeout of a few days, and a sturdy shot of whisky for Mycroft to be able to tell their parents that they might, at some point, have to make the decision to switch off the ventilator, and let nature take its course. He knows with an unflinching certainty that Sherlock would not have wanted to live locked into himself, once the medical consensus agreed that he would not recover.

In such a quest for his brother's dignity, Mycroft knows he would have had to battle one formidable dragon. He is grateful beyond words for the fact that John Watson had borne the brunt of offering support during the terrible time at the hospital. Mycroft, relieved at the man's devotion and resilience, had stepped back, only attempting to provide anything and everything in resources and knowledge that was in his power to give. Clearly John Watson had been of tremendous help, but had the illness never relinquished its hold, Mycroft is quite certain John would not have been able to support a decision to withdraw life support. His faith in the possibility of a positive outcome, belief in some way in which their friendship and Sherlock's life could have been preserved, would, in all likelihood, have been unwavering. It would have been a devastating thing to witness for all concerned - the army doctor turning into a medical Don Quixote and Sherlock, in his hopeless state, having to witness it.

Now, Mycroft has begun to wonder if it is such a good thing after all, that his brother's already dangerously strong attachment to the army doctor seems to have taken some sort of a pivotal turn after the Guillain-Barré finally begun to ease its grip. While Mycroft could never fault his brother for seeking things which all humans yearn for - understanding, companionship, even love - he does wonder if the timing of it might be destructive, bordering on delusional.

Neither John Watson, nor their parents, seems to be aware of the fact that the hardest part of Sherlock’s recovery hasn't even begun. The fact that Sherlock is willingly accepting the rehabilitation regime here is proof of that. It is not Sherlock’s body that troubles Mycroft; it is what has happened to that mind when it turned in on itself, with no one else in there with him. This withdrawn, apathetic acquiescence must be the result of whatever he got up to in there when he was alone. If left unchecked, depression might well do what the Guillain-Barré couldn’t—defeat him utterly. That had nearly happened once already, years ago.

In order to coax out a reaction, Mycroft knows he must go for the soft underbelly, to provoke and to challenge. Even as a boy, Sherlock had been vulnerable to anger, and thus prone to revealing himself through it. The fury that is now missing, but which normally burned within, is an integral part of what makes Sherlock who and what he is… and will be again, if there's anything within Mycroft's power to bring it back.

"Are you having second thoughts about the good doctor?" Mycroft puts just enough ironic twist on those last two words to get this conversation going - a match to dry tinder.

The answer is instantaneous and firm. "No."

Mycroft lets the tiniest of smiles show, knowing that Sherlock will see it with his peripheral vision.
It irks him that he had not been privy to the conversation at the winter garden of the hospital. No longer 'just friends' seems like a reasonable assumption. What else could the theatrical rendezvous have been about? Nothing else would have prompted such a spectacle. Sherlock had been hardly able to sit up at that time, yet he'd insisted on wearing his own clothes and meeting John at a location where he could outwardly pass for someone other than a patient. Most certainly, something significant had happened. Watson would not have looked so utterly smug afterwards, had it not.

Not much had changed in their outward demeanour after that. Sherlock had seemed in better spirits, until discussions of discharge had begun. Once a date had been set for his departure from the hospital, Sherlock had appeared much more lost in thought and less delighted at even John's company. It's as though he'd got used to being hospitalised, accustomed to the way in which his and John's relationship worked inside those walls. Once the prospect of walking - or more accurately, being wheeled - out of the hospital, to really start working on returning to his old life had become reality, Sherlock's confidence had positively deflated. John had remarked on this once to Mycroft, expressing his surprise at how Sherlock didn't seem happy to be discharged. "Maybe he's just tired," Watson had then said. What a *non-sequitur*.

"Are you really sure about that? Your behaviour would seem to indicate otherwise," Mycroft tells Sherlock. He feels those sea-glass eyes fixing on him, sees the jaw line tighten. Tension is now running in the muscles that had been uncooperative just a moment ago. *Good*.

"And you’re supposed to be a role model for relationships, are you?" Sherlock’s waspish tone drips with derision.

"Unlike you, I would never be so foolish as to start something when I was in such a position of dependency, brother mine. Logic would have prevailed. I should have counselled against anything so foolish."

Now, to add some accelerant, Mycroft raises a sceptical eyebrow. "Perhaps you’ve come to realise your mistake; judging by your half-hearted protestation, you might well be having second thoughts. All I am saying is that if you need help now extricating yourself from something you are regretting, then I can help."

Volcanic anger flares in his brother’s eyes. "Don’t you dare interfere. This has nothing to do with you."

"I’m afraid it does. Who else is going to pick up the pieces, when you realise that you are not able to be the person that you think John Watson professes to care about? Take a good hard look at yourself, Sherlock. This isn’t some minor illness you’ve just survived. It isn’t going to be a quick recovery."

Mycrof is aware that this statement is unfair - John Watson has stood by this man through all this hell so far, which is why he expects Sherlock to eagerly come to his defence. That is, if Sherlock isn't too wrapped up in himself to think about how his counterpart in this mess might be feeling.

"I’m making progress! Ask the staff; they’ll tell you." Sherlock waves a hand, dismissively, towards the door.

"Of course you’ll do what is needed to restore what you so obliquely refer to as ‘the Transport’. It will take a lot out of you - it already has. You’re tired in a way you’ve never been before. Which brings me to what they’ve missed as they sing the praises of your physical recovery - you know as well as I do that you are currently not… how does that saying Doctor Watson is so fond of go? ‘Firing on all cylinders’."
Sherlock snorts and turns back to the window. "I’m sure I’ve told you this before, but it bears repeating: you can be a prick, Mycroft. Haven’t the doctors here told you that I am supposed to be encouraged in my efforts?"

"The pertinence of encouragement depends on whether those efforts are directed at something sensible. They don’t know you the way I do."

"And that is supposed to be helpful, how? Maybe I prefer being here instead of being constantly watched by you at home, because the people here don’t judge me the way you always do, being the self-righteous toss-pot that you are."

"Or perhaps you like it here, because you don’t have to admit what is really worrying you."

Sherlock’s lip curls in a sneer. "And you think you know what that is."

"Of course. I also know that your worries are made worse by the realisation that Moriarty is out there, and you’re vulnerable."

"You told me two months ago that I was being paranoid, when I raised that very same point."

"In the hospital, I could protect you. Even here, I can - you can rest assured that there are measures in place. When you get back to Baker Street, the threat level from Moriarty can escalate, and it won’t just be you in the frame. John Watson will be vulnerable, too. Pretending that you can somehow protect him in this state, with your judgment impaired by sentiment and self-pity, that is your weakness, Sherlock. It will lead you to make mistakes."

"Anything else cheery you feel a need to impart before leaving? If not, then take your doom and gloom and go. I don’t need reminding about Moriarty, especially on a day when you’ve clearly got out of bed on the wrong side, and are hell bent on taking it out on me."

"You would do well to remember that I’m the ally here. It was solely your decision to add to the burden by impulsively starting something with John Watson, right in the middle of taking on Moriarty. Being here at the Manor will give you time and space to make sense of what you’ve done, but a day will come when you go home." He sighs in an exasperated manner, knowing it will irritate Sherlock. He pushes the proverbial needle in a bit more firmly. "But, then you were always impulsive. I should not have been surprised."

Sherlock scoffs. "Hardly impulsive. I wasted nearly two years just thinking about something rather than having the courage to do anything about it. Carpe diem, big brother."

Mycroft is not moved by this protestation. "When the smoke clears, where will you find the courage to tell John the truth?"

Sherlock’s glare is pure vitriol. "What truth?"

"Does he really know what he’s letting himself in for? We’re not talking about weeks, Sherlock. It could be years before your life will resemble the one you lead before falling ill. It might dawn on you at some point that you are never going to recover fully. You need to be prepared for that, mentally prepared, for never being able to be an equal partner. Will the good doctor extricate himself, or soldier on out of a sense of duty? In either case, is it really what you want? If and when the burden of watching you go to pieces over it all falls on John Watson’s shoulders, what happens when compassion fatigue sets in? How will he react if and when the stress gets too great, and there’s a repeat of what happened in---"

Sherlock finally rises to John’s defence - quite literally. He stands up as quickly as he can, leaning
his palm on the bed for support, and faces Mycroft. "Get OUT!" he screams, no longer sparing any attempt to curb his fury. Even in his current state, Sherlock can look admirably menacing. "You have no right to tell me what I can or cannot do - you don’t know John at all! GET OUT OF MY SIGHT!"

_Mission accomplished._ Mycroft gives the tight-lipped shrug that he knows his brother expects of him, and gets to his feet.

As he walks down the corridor towards the front reception, Mycroft sincerely hopes this will be enough for now. Sherlock can’t pretend any longer that there won’t be serious issues ahead. If he and John Watson are going to weather the coming storm, then they both need to be aware of just what they are getting into. Moriarty will hardly give them the time or leisure for some sort of a fumbling honeymoon. Sherlock needs to get his head sorted out, because thinking that he has to keep up pretences with John and sham normal, instead of putting in the work needed to get forward, will be a recipe for disaster.

Mycroft knows what happens when Sherlock tries to ignore his demons. He can predict with chilling precision exactly where that would lead Sherlock — an uncontrollable downward trajectory, pushing himself into extreme situations that he would fail at, then into despair and breakdown. After all, Mycroft has seen it all before, in 2007.

As the car takes him down the A120 towards Colchester, Mycroft closes his eyes to the passing Essex countryside, and considers his next step.

Two days later, it’s time to address the issue of John Watson. Mycroft needs to see whether the doctor reciprocates Sherlock’s emotional attachment, and to what degree it might help or hinder his brother’s recovery.

He watches through the tinted window of the armour-plated car, as the doctor leaves the Shoreditch Park Surgery, one of the clinics he locums in, striding off in that military manner of his, towards the tube station a quarter of a mile away without a backward glance. Behind him, a number of medical staff are chatting as the clinic doors are locked for the evening. While Mycroft approves of John resuming his medical work, it’s clear that the man is not investing anything of himself to build a social relationship with his work colleagues. This is not the first time Mycroft realises how much John’s friendship with his brother has isolated the doctor, and how much narrower still his world must have become after Sherlock had become bedridden due to the Guillain-Barré. Yet he hasn’t complained, not once, at least not in Mycroft’s presence.

This works both ways, of course: John Watson’s devotion to Sherlock puts significant pressure on his brother’s shoulders. John had always shown a high threshold of tolerance for Sherlock’s peculiarities in the past, but that had been in exchange for the thing that Mycroft had deduced at their very first meeting — the thrill of the battlefield. What happens when that is gone? How will he fare when the battlefield is within the four walls of 221B Baker Street?

Mycroft leans forward and taps on the privacy screen. The car moves away from the kerb and catches up with the doctor, then edges just far enough in front to catch the doctor’s eye. He stops suddenly, looking warily at the vehicle.
Mycroft touches the button and his window glides down. "You were expecting someone else? Moriarty perhaps? Or some other admirer of Sherlock's work?"

John just looks away from the car and its occupant, as if deciding whether to ignore and walk on.

"Get in. We have things to discuss." Mycroft gives his tone that little edge of authority that should connect with anyone with military training.

John hesitates. "Has something happened to Sherlock?"

"Yes and no. Get in."

John obliges and the car draws away from the kerb and into traffic.

Mycroft waits, letting John’s anxiety at his statement stew a bit longer. He decides to make small talk first. "Shoreditch. Such an interesting microcosm of London. Council housing estates cheek-by-jowl with the gentrified properties of City professionals. Must make for an interesting range of patients."

John is looking out at the traffic as they leave New North Street, circumnavigating the Old Street roundabout before heading west on the City Road. "Does it? I hadn’t noticed. But then I don’t have your built-in radar for class distinctions. A person I diagnose with testicular cancer is a patient in need, whether he is going to be referred to a private oncologist or the NHS. But you didn’t kidnap me to talk about medical things. Or did you? Has something happened to Sherlock? Are we going to Harwich?" Tension sets into John's shoulders and his posture straightens. He's preparing for combat. Or disaster.

Mycroft wants the doctor to be relieved, when the news is delivered, so he wheels out a stalling tactic: "We're merely dropping you back at Baker Street."

John looks around the car pointedly. "Well, I suppose I should be glad that this time you're not dragging me off to some abandoned warehouse first." John’s eyes then lose their warm humour. "I can afford the tube, you know. And I have more than enough time on my hands these days, so I don’t mind the longer travel time. Just get to the point."

Mycroft smiles and lets a full minute pass before answering, "Sherlock’s likely to be coming home to Baker Street soon. Have you thought more about what that means?"

John just snorts and rolls his eyes - it seems that some of Sherlock's mannerisms have rubbed off on the man - before looking back out of the window. "I don't think about much else these days, Mycroft. What are you getting at?"

"Just what are your… plans?"

John’s eyes widen, and then he laughs. "I was thinking tea and cake. He'll probably have eaten at Harwich, so I suppose we could just have a bit of a treat as supper. You're welcome to join us for a cuppa, of course. I assume we'll go pick him up?"

"Sherlock has expressed a wish that I bring him home, where you will receive us."

This certainly seems to surprise the doctor. He frowns. "He doesn't want me to come with you? Why?"

"His reasons sometimes elude me." In this case, they don't, but Mycroft is curious to use this lie to gauge how much thought John has put into how being reunited with Sherlock will go.
"If that's what he wants, then fine. I just wish he had told me himself."

"Do you communicate often?"

"He texts," John says, clearly reluctant to get into details regarding frequency or content.

Mycroft realises he needs to rephrase his original question. He can't really tell if John had deliberately tried to derail the conversation with talk of transport and tea, or if he genuinely doesn't realise there's an issue here that needs addressing.

"What are your intentions regarding Sherlock?" Mycroft asks bluntly.

This time John clearly has understood. And judging by the look on his face, he's unimpressed with the turn this discussion has taken. "You asked me that same question the first time we met. It wasn’t appropriate then, and it isn’t now. It’s really none of your business. I said that then, and it’s still my answer today."

For some reason, John has always been immune to Mycroft's best attempts at intimidation. "Things have changed. Words were exchanged between the two of you, at the hospital."

John’s tongue does a quick slide across his bottom lip, a sardonic smile forming. "He hasn’t told you anything, then? I’ll bet you just wish you’d planted a bug in that conservatory. Is this the don’t mess with my brother’s heart or I’ll break your legs and bury you in an unmarked grave in Denmark -speech?"

"Excuse me?" For once, Mycroft is slightly bewildered.

As they pass Kings Cross station, John’s smirk broadens. "I suppose you haven’t had all that many occasions to do this sort of thing. After all, you don’t think he’s capable of having any friends at all, let alone this kind of a friendship."

Mycroft realises he is starting to lose control of this conversation, but before he can wrest it back again, John continues, "I love him, and he now knows it. He loves me, and he's the one who sort of said it first, so don’t go assuming that he is some damsel in distress here. Even Sherlock thinks that you’re not an idiot, so you will have worked this out. Why does the thought worry you so much?"

"You don’t know my brother."

"Yes I do. I know him better than you do, because I'm not thinking of him the way you still are - as a little brother who needs protecting from the big bad world. Have you ever once considered that maybe he deserves the chance to get out from under all that history that you push onto his shoulders? It’s like you decided years ago all sorts of things about him, and haven’t realised that he can change, and change for the better."

"Is that what you think has happened here? The illness has made him change for the better?"

Mycroft can't help the disbelief practically bleeding out of his words - the doctor's naivety is astonishing. "Sherlock’s just been through one of the worst periods of his life, and you think he is better for that experience?" He puts enough incredulity into the word to drive home his point.

John’s smile disappears. "Of course not. It's going to be difficult. I know that far better than you do, Mycroft. I am not doubting your intelligence here, but you aren’t a doctor. It’s going to drive Sherlock mad with impatience, and I’m probably the last person to minimise the challenges he faces, but there's one important difference that I am aware of, that you don’t seem to be. He won't be alone. Whatever comes, we will deal with it."
"You think he will let you help." Mycroft phrases it in such a way as to make it clear he thinks John is delusional.

Watson doesn’t answer for a moment. The car is now travelling westwards on the Euston Road, just past the junction with Tottenham Court Road. In less than ten minutes they will be at Baker Street.

"I think we’re done here, Mycroft. You can tell your driver to let me off at the next corner."

When the car turns left onto Park Crescent and pulls into the kerb to let the doctor out, Mycroft knows he has only seconds to make his point.

"Be careful, doctor. For both your sakes, do not underestimate Sherlock’s ability to fool even those closest to him."

John does not reply, but strides off quickly to catch the pedestrian crossing signal, still lit in green.

Mycroft watches him enter the park across the Euston Road instead of heading for Baker Street. Perhaps he's taking a moment to think. That would be beneficial.

Mycroft sighs as he taps on the privacy screen again. The conversation has left him wondering who will do the worst damage to whom. Will Sherlock’s inability to deliver on what he had so rashly promised in the winter garden, drive John Watson away? Or will the doctor’s naïve assumptions about the healing power of love and companionship prove to be the breaking point for Sherlock?

Mycroft wishes he knew the answer, and he fears for them both.
John stands by his chair in the sitting room, shifting his weight after finally spotting a familiar black car drive up to the house. He has waited by the window for thirty-five long minutes.

Sherlock had given him strict instructions: wait in the kitchen; do not come downstairs to meet the car.

It doesn't take a consulting detective to work out why.

The door opens downstairs. John hasn't opened the door to their apartment, assuming that wasn't allowed either, but he can still make out two familiar voices. Mycroft and Sherlock.

Sherlock is coming home.

After months fighting for his life and his ability to speak and move, after weeks of slowly regaining control of his bodily functions at the regular neurology ward, and after so many weeks at Harwich, he's finally going to be where he belongs. At the rehab facility, Sherlock had always appeared overly courteous in a way John had connected to being in unfamiliar surroundings and trying to please John with his progress. Their relationship had essentially been put on hold for the time being - until now. John has been so looking forward to actually finding out what it all means - all that Sherlock had finally said out loud after years of the two of them hiding behind phrases such as 'not gay' and 'married to my work'.

'What I want is you by my side, forever,' Sherlock had said, with conviction that had certainly been missing from his conduct lately. 'This is not a result of illness distorting my sense of boundaries, not residual gratitude. This is how it's been from the beginning. Am I making sense? Am I right in suspecting that I ruin your dates because, in fact, you let me do that, for a certain reason?' he had asked, calling John out like he always does, with piercing precision and ruthless honesty. It had been a strange, unexpected moment. In all honesty, John had not expected Sherlock to be the one to initiate such a game-changing conversation, especially after their disastrous interactions before the disease had finally taken a turn for the better.

He is, to all intents and purposes, in a relationship with Sherlock Holmes. What the hell does that even entail? Given what little has happened between them at Harwich, John is even less sure now.

Shuffling footsteps in an uneven rhythm are coming up the stairs. It sounds less like walking, and more like an unco-ordinated stumble.

John's heart begins pounding, even though Sherlock making his way up those steps isn't exactly unheard of.

Finally.

John takes a few steps closer to the door. It opens. Mycroft enters first, lingering sideways in the doorway. In his hand he is precariously balancing an umbrella, his briefcase and his own coat. His left hand ushers in Sherlock, who quickly slips his own right arm off Mycroft's shoulders. This is what those strict instructions had been designed to keep out of John's sight - Sherlock needing assistance.

Sherlock had said that he didn’t want to come home until he could manage the stairs on his own.
That goal hasn't exactly been met. John couldn't care less. Isn't part of the purpose of rehabilitation to lose all unnecessary embarrassment over these sorts of things? To get used to the idea of how things are?

John's silent musings on the subject must be kept brief, because there are more urgent matters at hand. Mycroft helps Sherlock shed his Belstaff, and then walks back down the stairs, presumably to fetch bags. Finally alone with Sherlock, John locks his gaze onto those strangely coloured irises he had spent months looking into at the hospital. He knows every fleck of black in them, every shift in colour in their margins. He could draw them by heart.

"Hi," John says quietly, as though being louder might break some sort of a spell. "Hi," he repeats and steps in to hug Sherlock tightly, because he's been looking forward to this for months and damn it if he isn't going to give the man a proper greeting.

Sherlock staggers back slightly from John's enthusiasm but then regains his balance. His hands creep up to circle the small of John's back, squeezing briefly and gently. John disentangles and takes a good look at him.

"Welcome home," John says, and he knows he must be grinning like a madman. God, he's missed this. The flat is so lonely without Sherlock. This flat isn't home without him.

Mycroft ascends the stairs again carrying a familiar suitcase, which he takes to Sherlock's bedroom.

"How was the drive?" John asks, not that he cares, but he just wants to hear the voice he's been missing so badly.

"Mycroft should sack his driver. Who the hell takes the A12 at this hour? The M25, while longer, would have been much faster. To add insult to injury, he used a sat nav," Sherlock says, spitting out the last words as though there was a live viper in his mouth.

"Not everyone has all the roads in the country memorized in their head," John chuckles.

Sherlock makes his way to the sitting room, briefly placing his hand on the back of John's chair for support.

Mycroft returns from the bedroom to join John in the kitchen, and he appears to be watching Sherlock carefully, worry lines making no attempt to disappear from his forehead.

Sherlock doesn't now seem to be paying the two of them any attention. He is making a slow parade around the sitting room, at one point running his finger along the window sill, as though checking for dust, but the gesture feels purposeless. He picks up seemingly random things with both hands, careful not to drop anything, and puts them back down. To John he seems to be behaving like someone who has returned home after years of absence, not just after a few months - as though he doesn't quite remember where everything belongs.

"Sherlock?" John asks, "I've got some cake. Tea in 10 minutes?"

He gets a noncommittal hum as a reply, before Sherlock walks past them to head to his bedroom. Watching him move down the hall, John sees that walking on an even surface appears mostly unproblematic to him, now, but he knows how fast Sherlock still tires.

Sherlock closes the bedroom door behind him for some reason.

John is tempted to follow, but why would he? He doesn't know what he had expected. Some level
of joy at this reunion, at least? Sherlock is understandably a little bewildered, having been gone for so long, but he seems downright detached, distant even. Maybe it's because of Mycroft. It's possible, but somehow John still doubts Sherlock will be leaping into his arms the minute that black car in front of the building drives away.

Mycroft opens a cupboard and takes out the sugar. "I strongly recommend that you call his doctor at Harwich," he practically commands John, glancing at the closed bedroom door.

"Why? Didn't you bring his discharge papers?"

"I did," Mycroft says, reaching inside his jacket pocket and passing John a thick envelope. "There are... issues that would, perhaps, be pertinent to discuss, physician to physician."

"I know he'll still need further physical therapy. I've been looking into some of the local---"

"I've compiled a list of highly recommended practitioners," Mycroft cuts in.

Of course he has, because he's an overbearing big brother with seemingly unlimited resources and an army of minions.

"Not that Sherlock will probably be contacting any of them," Mycroft adds.

"Why?" John asks, leaning on the table while idly watching the kettle. "I thought he liked the physiotherapist he had at Harwich?"

"'Like' is too optimistic a word. When there was nothing else to do, he might have been willing to comply. Now, back at home, I suspect he will lapse into avoidance, or think he can rehabilitate himself, without any outside expertise."

"How would he do that?" John asks. He's mildly annoyed at this lecture. Surely Sherlock's opinion in what would benefit himself matters in what they're going to do next.

Mycroft frowns at the closed bedroom door again. "Probably by doing nothing at all, assuming everything will go back to the way it used to be just by the sheer power of his will. He's never been good with authority. I doubt he'll heed any of the advice given at Harwich for long. He's waited months to get back to his life. He may not have accepted that it isn't that easy. Especially when there are new, difficult challenges at hand," he says, pointedly homing his gaze on John now.

John plonks a pile of three saucers on the kitchen table a little harder than necessary. "You don't think he's noticed what he can and can't do? The world's most observant man, missing something that obvious?"

"I still can't decide which one of you is the more stubborn," Mycroft muses.

John scoffs, assuming that no explanation will come as to what Mycroft is referring. Always so bloody cryptic.

"A recommendation that you talk to his doctor shall be my last word on the subject."

Sherlock emerges, having shed his jacket. He's in his shirtsleeves, barefoot. He'd admitted to John at Harwich that his feet had always been sensitive, making him hate socks and shoes, and the GBS had exacerbated the problem. He'd always been able to get used to items of clothing after a few minutes before, but not at current. It had been one of the only things he'd seemed willing to discuss, when it came to residual symptoms from the GBS. John knows there are plenty; some are plain to see, such as the weight and muscle loss, some much more subtle.
Without a word, Sherlock slides into the seat opposite Mycroft and accepts the slice of cake John places in front of him. "Mrs Hudson?" he asks.

"Waitrose," John replies, "I thought it looked a bit like the salted caramel and chocolate cake you like to have at the British Museum Court Cafe."

They eat in silence. John half expects some cheap shot of a quip from Sherlock about cake and Mycroft, but it never comes. John tries not to pay attention to the fact that Sherlock's eating is much slower than normal, and that he even has to steady his teaspoon with his left hand when he stirs in sugar into his tea. John had briefly considered giving Sherlock a bigger mug instead of the nicer china Mrs Hudson had insisted was due for this occasion, but that would have stuck out like a neon sign pointing to Sherlock's current state.

Still, even though doing so is clearly painstakingly difficult, the cake gets eaten, and Sherlock also drinks the tea he's given. John silently berates himself for paying so much attention. What does it matter if eating takes longer than usual? Sherlock will practice these things every day, and it's all going to be fine. Everything must get better, because they've got each other, now, haven't they? Properly, this time. Whatever that means at this point. Not much will probably change in terms of their daily life, though. There's the Work, and John's work, and telly and restaurants and case-related legwork and the tackling of murder---

Scratch those last two. Not yet. Not for a while.

Sherlock rises from the table, unsurprisingly leaving John to clear the dishes away. Mycroft picks up his umbrella and briefcase from where they rest against a wall in the foyer, and opens the door to the staircase. "I'll be on my way, then. Be well, brother. Doctor Watson."

"Bye," John says, slightly relieved at no longer having to listen to any more talk of portents from the man.

The moment the door downstairs closes, Sherlock crowds John. "Where is it?" he demands, and his gaze feels as though it's drilling straight into the back of John's eyesockets.

John has an idea what he could be talking about, but there's still a chance to avert this. "Where's what?"

"Don't be obtuse. You know perfectly well. I distinctly remember leaving it on the table in the sitting room."

John considers his options. A white lie laced with honesty? He's facing a human lie detector, after all. Will Sherlock accept his good intentions as reason enough to try to postpone this discussion? He regrets it now, hiding that thing, but he had hoped not to rub Sherlock's nose in what the situation still is. Since Sherlock is still struggling even with buttoning up his shirt, he's hardly going to be able to pick up----

"The violin, John, what else?"

"If I didn't know better, I might think you were looking forward to seeing that thing more than me," John jokes.

Sherlock's fingers are curling onto his own thigh, the fabric of his trousers distorting under the grip. His fingers have regained only some of their former strength and fine motor skills.

Sherlock slips past John and then lets himself sink down on the sofa.
John definitely regrets hiding the violin now. Maybe he could still try the white lie? "Mrs Hudson put it in your room, I think, when she was cleaning."

Sherlock flicks his wrist in a dismissive gesture, gathering his knees under him. "Mrs Hudson doesn't go in my room."

John sits down next to him on the sofa. Sherlock's expression changes from irate to slightly alarmed. Why?

"Anything else you feel I'm not currently qualified to handle?" Sherlock asks with irritation.

"I missed you," John says, smiling at the familiar snarkiness. "I know that place was the best, and it was good of Mycroft to arrange everything, but I missed you."

"You visited," Sherlock points out in the tone he uses when he thinks a conversation John has initiated is boring, and he wants it to come to a quick end.

There's a startlingly stark contrast between Sherlock now, and the Sherlock who had sat waiting for him in the winter garden at the National. John had never had any delusions of thinking this was all going to be easy, but now he actually wonders if Sherlock is having second thoughts about the whole thing. It all sinks a cold rock on the bottom of his stomach, but he can't retreat right now. There's a related issue they need to discuss. Tonight. Can't be avoided. "I haven't changed or moved anything else here. But I think I should, if you're willing," John says.

Sherlock's expression softens - there's mostly curiosity there now. His facial features had been well-defined and sharp-angled to start with, but the weight loss has made him appear borderline caricaturish. Still, Harwich has done wonders when compared to how he'd looked post-ITU: his eyes no longer appear so sunken, his hair no longer droops sadly without any of its usual luscious sheen, and he's developed a slight tan on his face to offset his paleness.

"What I mean is, I think we should discuss sleeping arrangements," John says, tempted to not look at Sherlock, because the connotations of this conversation could be huge.

"Elaborate."

"I know you've become pretty good at everything already, but I'd be less worried if I wasn't at a distance of a whole flight of stairs at night."

Sherlock's curiosity disappears completely. "Oh," he says, and there's a disappointment there John had not expected.

"What do you think?" John asks hastily.

"It's practical, I suppose, although I don't really require assistance in anything I might need to do during the night." Sherlock splays his fingers on his knee, watching them with half intent.

To John's ears he sounds carefully neutral, disinterested. For some reason John is reminded of their first restaurant meal together, and the misunderstanding that happened then. This is, in a way, the polar opposite of that moment, because John is now certain something is amiss - that what he's been told, in words, is not the entire truth.

He needs to clarify. If Sherlock can pluck up the courage to tell him what he wants, then John knows he should return the favour. "I'm not trying to rush into anything, I'm really not, because this is all new to me, too, but I'm not ---- it's not just for practical reasons, you know."
Sherlock's chin snaps up so that he can study John's face. He doesn't say anything, but clearly, John has his undivided attention now.

"It's also because I'd like to do it," John says, and leaves the rest for Sherlock to deduce.

"Share a bedroom?" Sherlock clarifies.

John licks his lips. "Yeah," he says.

"I always liked that you were up there," Sherlock says, glancing towards the stairs.

For a moment John is confused - does Sherlock mean he'd prefer it that way? Is there some eclectic benefit from Sherlock's perspective to John sleeping in his old bedroom, all the way upstairs?

"I've shared a bedroom with other people at university," Sherlock says.

John's mind scrambles for answers. Is this Sherlock trying to change the subject, to derail the conversation? Has he imagined everything Sherlock had told him in that winter garden? Had he somehow dreamt it all?

"Honestly, I'm getting a little worried here," John blurts out, "It sounds as though you don't want to. At least not now. It's fine, I get it, it's a big step---" John hurries to explain, wanting to give Sherlock a chance yet to turn this around, to derail this train that seems to be headed for bitter rejection.

"My answer is yes," Sherlock interrupts as though he hadn't heard a word of what John has just said. "I think I would like that. Move downstairs."

After the evening news, John fetches his pillow, his alarm clock and his duvet from upstairs.

The sheets in Sherlock's room have already been exchanged for fresh ones, courtesy of Mrs Hudson's compulsion to make the flat presentable prior to Sherlock coming home. She would have cooked and baked as well, if John hadn't insisted that she leave at least some of the preparations to him.

Sherlock is sitting on the bed, struggling with his dress shirt buttons. What he's wearing today is in stark contrast to his wardrobe at Harwich, which had been selected solely based on practicality. It's obvious that Mycroft has helped him with dressing up today, just as he had on winter garden day at the hospital, wearing his usual battle armour of a dress shirt, a jacket and matching trousers.

Without a word, John drops his loot on the floor, and steps in to help with the buttons. Sherlock lets his hands drop onto his sides and looks out the window, even though the curtains are closed. He acts as though John isn't there - as though he's tuning out what is happening.

That won't do.

John leans his forehead to touch Sherlock's, and finally he gets some attention. "We're here", he says, certain that Sherlock will be able to deconstruct the more abstract interpretations of his words. "Imagine that."

"I have," Sherlock answers, and John kisses him. His position is slightly awkward, since he needs
to lean down. As kisses go, its level of passion does not rival their first one, but it's every bit as good as John had imagined because it's real, instead of just being a guilty thought in his head. Sherlock does kiss him back to some extent, but not very enthusiastically. His arms remain at his sides, his eyes closed.

John retreats, admiring the sight of Sherlock's slightly parted lips, the rapid, distracted blinking that starts when their connection breaks, and the odd look in his eyes that follows, as though he's trying to understand what just happened.

The bewilderment seems to pass soon, however. Sherlock stands up, manages to get rid of his trousers, which he throws onto a chair, lets the unbuttoned shirt slide off his shoulders and then slips under the covers. He looks cold - pale skin broken out in goosebumps, and John wonders if he'd want more clothes on for the night, but on the other hand Sherlock usually sleeps naked. This is something John had learned on their third morning of cohabitation, when he'd received a full flash of Sherlockian arse in the kitchen when the sheet he'd dragged with him had slipped.

Sherlock turns off the lamp on his bedside cabinet before John has even managed to crawl in, as though he'd already forgotten there was someone else present who he needed to pay attention to.

"Hey, I can't see a thing," John protests, and the light is switched back on.

They have a lot to learn, yet, about this cohabitation thing. This relationship thing.

The bed creaks when John makes his way into it on the opposite side from the door. He straightens his T-shirt and places his hands on the duvet next to his torso, feeling rather ceremonial.

Sherlock kills the light, remaining turned on his side, facing away from John.

John wonders if he ought to do something besides just lying there, but he's quite certain he's being silently asked for some space. Sherlock must be tired and a little disconcerted. If the last time he'd shared a bedroom had been in university, that must've been roughly a decade ago.

This is all so very new for John, too, but sleep overtakes him in the end.
"Fuck!" is the exclamation that John hears eight days later, when he takes the last step towards the downstairs hallway. He’d been up to the wardrobe and drawers in his former bedroom to get dressed for work. Sherlock might be willing to share his bed, but messing with his sock index and carefully colour-coded wardrobe hanging system is not part of the deal. At least not yet.

It isn't like Sherlock to curse, unless something has gone very wrong with an experiment or a case.

When John arrives in the kitchen to see what’s happened, he finds Sherlock in his pyjamas and a dressing gown - a black one he doesn't remember Sherlock having worn before. There's a loaf of bread on the kitchen counter, next to a breadknife. Sherlock is leaning on the kitchen table, his left forefinger in his mouth. This could look lewd, if it weren't for the look of profound disapproval and concentration on his features.

"What happened?" John asks politely, even though he has deduced from the tableau that Sherlock has probably cut his finger.

"What does it look like happened?" Sherlock asks acrimoniously after removing his finger from between his lips.

John steps closer and gently grabs his hand in his own. It's not a big cut, but wide enough to be still bleeding significantly. Sherlock attempts to reinsert the digit in his mouth, but John isn't about to give up his conquest. "Don't. You should clean it with something antiseptic."

"Saliva contains clotting-promoting tissue factor and lysozyme, which both ward off grampositive bacteria."

"I wonder why it isn't used in operating rooms," John says with a smirk. Sherlock doesn't usually care this much about small injuries - he mostly ignores them, especially if he's working. "Clean it out properly, apply pressure and a bandage. You're not going to need stitches."

"This shouldn't have happened," Sherlock says and it sounds as though he's trying to convince himself more than he is John. His forehead is crunched up in bewildered annoyance.

John lets go of his hand, which Sherlock begins inspecting as though it was an alien lifeform.

"Anyone could cut their finger in the kitchen, you know," John tells him.

"I never do."

"I remember differently."

"Then you remember wrong", Sherlock corrects him petulantly.

John pinches the bridge of his nose. "You're not perfect, or invincible, and you should stop using those as a standard, because it'll only set you up for disappointment."

"I've never had a habit of making stupid mistakes such as this."

"Well, you do now, so best get used to it," John says without thinking.

Sherlock's gaze narrows and he turns away. "Since it's my stupid mistake, it should be mine to correct."
Sherlock locks himself in the bathroom, presumably to swaddle the finger in toilet paper, which is what he tends to do when he doesn't have the patience to look for an actual plaster.

John lets out a breath, staring at the kitchen ceiling momentarily to get his frustration under control. Then he strides to the bathroom door and knocks.

"Occupied."

"Sherlock," John chides.

"I'm fixing my stupid mistake, for which I need my concentration, given my manual dexterity is not what it used to be - thank you for pointing that out by the way. Be a dear and bugger off."

"You know I didn't mean it like that."

"You usually say what you mean, which is what you have thought about right before you opened your mouth, so best leave it at that. I can't fault your honesty."

"You've always held yourself up to impossible standards. Maybe this is a good time to---"

"---Legitimize your insult by turning to pop psychology?" Sherlock snarks through the door. It doesn't sound as though he's doing much in there, save for arguing with John.

"The plasters are in the kitchen cupboard, since that's where I usually patch you up."

"I know perfectly well where they are, thank you."

John has enough experience of dealing with Sherlock to know he's not going to win this. He'll need to wait until the worst of it has passed. Calling this a strop, and asking Sherlock to be sensible will make everything worse. John utters a sigh of defeat and wanders back into the kitchen to clean up the mess. Thankfully there isn't much blood to be wiped up, and the slice of bread is only half cut, so not a lot of crumbs, either. John cleans the knife of blood and then finishes the slicing, cutting two pieces for Sherlock and a third one for himself. He puts one round of bread in the toaster, knowing that if he were to put the second one in, somehow it would be stone cold or unwanted by the time Sherlock got over his sulk in the bathroom. While John waits for his own slice to toast, he mechanically reaches into the fridge, gets the butter and jam out, and pops on the kettle.

Being on autopilot gives his brain a chance to assess what has just happened. The doctor in him accepts that Sherlock trying to fix his own breakfast is progress. It means that he is actually hungry, and willing to do something about it, without needing to be nagged first. Perhaps the stay at the Manor has given Sherlock time to reflect on the importance of a regular schedule of calorific and nutritional intake on his physical recovery, as Sherlock would probably phrase it.

*Chance would be a fine thing.* John knows better than to think that the man could have gone through a personality change as profound as that. Sherlock had probably conceived of the whole bread business as merely another deliberate test of his motor skills. John has caught him doing similar sorts of things a lot after coming home - holding an ice cube against his forearm and other extremities, lighting a match and seeing how close he could get a finger to it before it began to feel unpleasant and protective reflexes kicked in. John supposes it is logical, given the man’s propensity to experiment, but he can’t help feeling that the constant testing is just making Sherlock even more anxious about what he sees as an unacceptably slow pace of recovery.

And now, as more than a flatmate, beyond a friend or colleague, John can’t help but worry about how Sherlock is putting more than the bathroom door between them. When he tries to provide reassurance, or any other kind of emotional support he assumes is needed at this point, Sherlock
just backs off or willfully misunderstands.

*My stupid mistake.* Far from being reassured by how ‘everyone makes stupid mistakes’, Sherlock’s reaction to John’s ‘better get used to it’ seems to have hit a nerve. Instead of being the person who’d be able to help Sherlock more than anyone else, John seems to be making matters worse. Is Sherlock still fighting to even accept what has happened? He’s had all of his time at Harwich to realise his current limitations, for God’s sake! Weren’t they supposed to hammer exactly those sorts of things into his head at that place? What exactly had Mycroft been paying that place a fortune for?

John tries to tell himself to be fair. No rehab facility on Earth would likely be very suited to Sherlock Holmes. John is aware that his anger at Harwich may have less to do with the rehabilitation results than the separation from Sherlock it had caused. Harwich had been a regrettable hiatus, one John had accepted as necessary, to let Sherlock focus on the kind of intensive therapy that was needed. Still, this must be a critical time for the two of them in many ways. After both of them hesitating so long, when Sherlock had surprised him in the winter garden, John’s joy and relief had been palpable. Finally, their feelings were out in the open, and they could admit how much they meant to one another. John had been eager to move forward from there; he still is, but he's completely clueless as to how to proceed, because the Guillain-Barré is no longer the only thing Sherlock seems to be pretending never happened. There are so many things John had looked forward to when Sherlock came home, and he couldn't help being disappointed now that none of them were actually happening: spending time together, working things out, seeing where the momentum would take them, sharing a life without constantly having to think about boundaries.

At Harwich, they’d both been out of their comfort zone. The ghost of the winter garden conversation was clearly lingering over them, but somehow their relationship had never felt like the right thing to discuss at the Manor. John could have stayed the night - it would have been allowed, and Sherlock's spacious room - courtesy of Mycroft - would have easily accommodated the two of them. Why hadn't either of them suggested it, or even brought it up?

During the hair-raising roller coaster ride of Sherlock’s hospitalisation, John had never once given up hope that things would turn right in the end. GBS is not a killer, statistically speaking. John has clung to that fact like a lifeline, and dared to hope that Sherlock’s recovery will be straightforward. This is Sherlock, who always bounces back from things unscathed. At least, that's the front Sherlock works hard to put up. John knows he wants that recovery just as much as Sherlock does. He had hoped that the connection they'd found during those terrifying weeks at the hospital would bring them closer during the recovery period. Now, he feels as though he should feel guilty for wanting more. The first days John had just been so happy to have Sherlock back, that he floated around with a silly grin on his face, ignoring all the things that had now begun to truly worry him. He'd put it down to nerves, to an adjustment period, to Sherlock's residual exhaustion from the illness. Now he has to accept that those things aren't going away.

*This isn’t how it’s supposed to be.* In all of his earlier covert moments of fantasising about the two of them moving from friendship to something more, John had never anticipated anything like this.

Mrs. Hudson still teases him about the supposed change in their relationship, luckily not within Sherlock’s earshot. It was not possible to hide from her the fact that they are now sharing a bed. John had words with her about it all, asking her to tone down her enthusiasm for what she now keeps declaring she’d always known would happen. “It’s early days, my dear. I understand. Wouldn’t want to frighten him with too much too soon. But let me be happy for you, for you both,” Mrs Hudson had said and kissed John on the cheek.
She comes up regularly, bringing them food, fussing about, clearly just to have an excuse to beam at them both. John has decided that he will not let her presence stop him from whatever tactile contact he might make - a touch on a forearm, a gesture of affection. "Coming out" is something that was going to have to be managed for both of them—and the thought of it does unnerve John. Whatever he could have learned from Harry in that respect, he'd ignored, due to anger over other life choices she was making.

On the first days back at home, it had seemed that Sherlock had wanted to be around John - to the point of following him around from room to room on occasion, just watching him. No longer confined to surreptitious glances, he could really look as much as he wanted; they both could. On occasion, John has found himself almost getting flustered under such intense scrutiny. Still, apart from things that Sherlock has always done - such as ignoring John's personal boundaries when it comes to privacy in the bathroom, or unceremoniously propping his feet on John's lap when he refuses to move from the sofa - there's nothing new. They're acting like an old couple who had indulged in a wilder sort of intimacy in their youth, and were content with just being. To John it feels like they've missed something.

It's an odd limbo, a strange in-between John finds himself in: they share a bed, but they might as well not be. John relishes every chance to entangle himself in those long limbs, but he isn't sure his enthusiasm is being mirrored.

At first, Sherlock had seemed to be sleeping well. Given his past history of insomnia, it was a pleasant surprise, and for a moment John had contentedly suspected he was the cause. Then, he had realised that while Sherlock only seemed to retire early, and to be almost always asleep before John climbed into bed, his side of the bed is most often empty if and when John wakes up sometime during the night. John had assumed it was due to a bathroom break or needing a glass of water, and he'd been too groggy himself to go and investigate. During the past few nights, however, he has grown more aware of whether Sherlock is actually present or not. Last night, when he'd woken up around one in the morning to find Sherlock's side of the bed empty, John had dragged himself out of bed to investigate.

Sherlock had been asleep on the sofa. John had watched him, both endeared by the sight and disappointed that Sherlock had wanted to make such a tactical retreat. John had snuck back into the bedroom to get Sherlock's duvet, and covered him with it before returning to bed.

Before the illness, Sherlock had often spent nights on the sofa. Maybe he'd ended up there simply out of habit? John wondered if he is reading too much into this. After all, Sherlock had insisted that John move downstairs, to move into the same bedroom. There had been no doubt as to his wording. John is still amazed to find that it is real, that they have crossed that particular rubicon - that there is one form of physical intimacy Sherlock not only had accepted, but had seemed to welcome, at least in theory.

John lets himself get lost in the memory of their second evening of sharing a bed. The first night had been awkward, bewildering, strange, yet wonderful in its simpleness, but the second one had given John some real hope.

They had retreated to bed in an amicable silence and slid under the covers. John had read a few pages of a paperback he'd been trying to get through for weeks, but it could hardly compete with the company for his attention.

Sherlock had lain on his back, fingers crossed on top of his sheet, looking up at the ceiling. "John," he'd said at one point, not to raise attention, but in that dreamy way he does when he's talking mostly to himself.
"Mm-hmm?"

"I'm home," Sherlock had breathed out in amazement as though he'd solved a mystery.

John had sought out his hand and given it a little squeeze. Part of him had half expected to find a pulse oximeter clipped to a finger - residual memory of hospital days. "Yes, you are."

Neither of them had felt the need to explore any boundaries that night. It was enough that they were both present, at home where they belonged. Still, sometime during the night - John isn't quite certain if it had been a dream or a hazy sort of reality - he's quite convinced there had been a thin arm sliding onto his waist.

Where had that Sherlock gone, and where had he been on the first night home? Or all the nights after?

A plume of black smoke curls out of the toaster and the scent of burning wakes him from his reverie.

"Damn it!"

John slaps the cancel knob, and up pops a completely incinerated piece of toast. He uses the wooden tongs to extract it, and take it to the sink before it sets off the smoke alarm.

The awkwardness escalates when Sherlock chooses that moment to emerge from the bathroom. He sniffs the air and then snarks, "Eat something at Speedy's, or you're going to be late." He squeezes by John at the counter, and uses his height to reach over him into the cupboard for the box of plasters.

"Let me help you."

The offer leads to an eye-roll. "I am quite capable of putting a plaster on myself."

Still reeling from his prematurely aborted trip down memory lane, John unsuccessfully tries to curb his annoyance. "I'm trying pretty bloody hard here, you know!"

Sherlock, though less intimidating than he used to be due to his current gauntness, is clearly in fine form when it comes to scathing glares. "Oh, I'm aware. We're all practically drowning in your trying. Go to work."

This touches a sore point. Sherlock had not wanted him to return to medical practice, but John could hardly justify staying unemployed for any longer. While Sherlock stayed at Harwich, John resumed his work. The locum service had been decent about his four months off, but if he stayed away any longer, they would remove him from their lists. John had managed to squeeze nearly a week off to be with Sherlock when he returned, but he’d had to get back onto the availability list. He’d told Sherlock as much, even before he came home.

Two days ago, when John had actually signed up for a shift, it had somehow changed things. Sherlock started wandering around more. When John questioned the restlessness, he was told tersely, "Exercise. Isn't that what I am supposed to do?"

Granted, between cases Sherlock was always on hot coals, pacing about, craving stimulation, but the restlessness has now taken a new form. According to Mrs Hudson’s reports, he is walking about the flat a lot once John leaves for work. When he gets back, Sherlock looks as though he's so exhausted that he's practically dead on his feet, but something keeps him wandering around the flat in the evenings, too, as though seeking something he never finds. He won't settle, try to read, or
open a laptop. Now that it's been three days since John had returned to work, more old habits are returning. Sherlock behaves like someone who's in pain, but he vehemently denies that this is the case whenever John asks. Then there's the sleeping - or the lack thereof. He’s almost always up before John, as he had been this morning.

John reaches for a still-unburnt slice of bread that he had cut. "I’ll make you a cup of tea - and this time I won’t burn the toast."

"GO TO WORK!" Sherlock orders, shoves his headphones on and gingerly lowers himself onto the sofa. John is struck by the contrast and the difference to how things had been before. Sherlock’s flounces onto the furniture used to be wildly theatrical - all carefully controlled, fluid movement and swirling dressing gown, a symphony of body language communicating what he was feeling at the time. Now, it’s as if he doesn’t trust himself to act the way he wants to - and that seems to add to his frustration and grim mood.

John gives up on breakfast. Eyeing his watch, he knows that he has to leave now or he will be late. He shoulders on his jacket. "It’s a short shift today. I’ll be back at four."

There is no reply. Sherlock’s eyes are closed and the headphones are on, so it is quite possible that he hadn't heard a single word. John decides to let it go, rather than to make a scene, and disappears down the stairs.
An Outstanding Performance

At least running a bit late means that the busiest time in the tube network is already over. It allows John some time to recover his equilibrium before getting to work. When he had left home, his bad mood had easily matched Sherlock’s.

At the clinic, he settles into the familiar routine of ten minutes per patient, mind mostly occupied with the necessities of reading notes, asking questions, examining the patients, running differential diagnoses, then selecting treatment and writing prescriptions. As each patient leaves, there is just enough time to type up the notes. Writing referrals and organizing procedure appointments have to wait until the end of the day. He can do most of it on autopilot, which means that the back of his mind tends to wander, but today's patient load is heavy on those with multiple ailments, requiring his full attention. Perhaps it's for the best; at least it will get his mind off on what awaits at home.

One patient doesn’t show up for their appointment, awarding John an extended lunch break. He's not in the mood for anything but convenience, so he heads for the nearest cafe for a depressingly soggy tuna sandwich and a cappuccino.

He resists the urge to text or call Sherlock to see what he's doing. Perhaps because of his own anger that morning, John is now less worried than usual about whether Sherlock is wrecking the flat in some manner. Most likely he isn't doing much of anything. It's unlikely that Sherlock would have gone out; he's not yet left the flat, and seems daunted by the stairs. John wonders about when he should try to get him to make the effort. Mycroft had seemed concerned about enemies getting wind of his current condition, but a slow walking pace notwithstanding, he could easily pass for the old Sherlock. Maybe they should have a go at it, go to the park, see a movie. Anything must be better than letting the claustrophobia continue to drive them both mad.

This isn't how John had imagined the two of them, if and when the monumental shift from friends to something else. What is even the right word to describe them? John had enjoyed being a boyfriend before, but now he doesn't know what to call himself - Sherlock would likely laugh at such a term. John imagines that Sherlock has been, well, *not straight*, all his life, but since he doesn't adhere to the usual rules of social conduct when it comes to anything, John can't expect much help from him in working out how to wrap his own head around a shift in his own identity.

In the minds of others, he's already Sherlock Holmes' assistant or Sherlock Holmes' sidekick. Adding Sherlock Holmes' *boyfriend* into that mix would leave very little left of his own identity separate from Sherlock.

It is now with a level of embarrassment that he remembers all the vehement denials, all his insisting that *it isn't like that, he's not my date, I'm his colleague*. He'd been so adamant in announcing his intents, or lack thereof, that he's probably unintentionally insulted Sherlock several times in the process. Only once has Sherlock actually shown it: at the bank with Wilkes. Colleague, he had said, as though they only knew one another because they were on the same payroll. *I don't have friends*, Sherlock had admitted to him in that graveyard, and that is the very picture John had reinforced in Wilkes' head. John realises he should probably, one day, tell Sherlock how sorry he is for letting his fear get the better of him that day.

*Gay. Straight. Bisexual.* Sherlock likely does not care about such labels. John finds that he still does. It's probably because of how Harry had been treated when she came out.

John would love to have someone to talk to about this, someone who would understand. Sherlock would, of course, be the logical choice since he's the other party in their strange duet, but at the
moment John hardly feels like he has the right to burden Sherlock with such troubles - the man currently has plenty enough of his own. Harry, despite her extensive personal experience in the matter, isn't an option, either. The utterly destructive way in which she had handled her own relationships is still an open wound in the family, and the only thing she could teach John is how *not* to handle these sorts of things. John knows he can't really blame her for all of it; Harry must have suffered the worst in all the commotion, and it must've been hell growing up gay in a household such as theirs. Still, there is so much frustration between the two of them that it would invariably taint whatever advice she might be able to give.

This is something that he and Sherlock need to find a way to deal with that's suitable for the two of them. John is certain most of his friends will probably be more than a little surprised. He doubts that they'd be uncomfortable around him after the announcement, but they could hardly relate to any of it, either. Three Continents Watson shagging a bloke. That'll go round the gossip circuit for some time.

He knows he should give it a rest, to go with the flow, to focus on more important issues, to not worry too much what others think. It's just that there is so much uncharted territory here. With women, he had always felt like he knew where he stood. The role he'd learned to play as the man in a relationship is now gone, and he's somehow expected to cater to the emotional needs of someone like Sherlock, who had been a formidable challenge even just as a dear friend. The burden of sorting out this relationship that they're trying to build seems to fall squarely on John's shoulders. Trying to understand his own reactions to what is going on offers plenty of challenge, and it's nothing short of overwhelming with the added stress of living with someone who seems wholly uncomfortable with both the direction their relationship is taking, and himself.

Sherlock often acts as though the effect of his good looks on others doesn't even occur to him. John hasn't been able to discern whether this is actually true, or if it's just a very devious tactic. Judging by what he's seen, he rather suspects such things don't cross Sherlock's mind unless he wants to manipulate someone. It makes John wonder whether, despite his deductive skills, the man truly even realises that John is, in fact, very attracted to him. Part of it is John's own fault for verbalizing fervent denial of those facts for a long time. Thankfully, they've now established that no other word than love could describe what's been going on between them. But, as to which variety of it this is, they haven't really discussed. John realises that there's a great risk here that he may have false assumptions of how Sherlock would define their relationship, or what he expects of it. Does he understand how John being in love with him means that sex, in this case, isn't about someone getting off? It's about so much *more*.

John is painfully aware that the conversation they had had in the hospital, as bravely initiated by Sherlock, was only a beginning. There are other important discussions to be had, and John has a hunch that some of them he needs to initiate himself, since Sherlock might be very uncomfortable and confused as to how best approach such subjects.

John enjoys sex. He's had it, plenty of it. He suspects some of that knowledge will probably be applicable to being with a man, but he has no idea as to Sherlock's experience in the field, or if he even wants something like that. There's no way to know for sure. Even that strange episode with Irene had left John with more questions than answers. Sherlock never did anything by the book, so it was hardly surprising that his flirting - or non-flirting - would be difficult to decipher. Not knowing what to expect is making it hard for John to know what the next move should be. Sherlock is clearly reluctant to make the first one, but it feels somehow against the nature of their relationship for John to take the reins. He has actually wondered if Sherlock might be asexual. How does one ask about such things? To John it seems that Sherlock doesn't seem to have any qualms about dragging other people's embarrassing secrets and personal issues to the light if he thinks it will crack a case wide open, but when such scrutiny turns to himself the defences go up
instantly.

John feels alone in this, very much so. The air of indifference and dismissal that now surrounds Sherlock when it comes to interacting with him has become a barrier between them, and John doesn't know how to talk to Sherlock about that, either. It feels like a big puzzle to be solved, but without Sherlock's involvement, there are too many missing pieces. It's ironic, since Sherlock is the one who says he never judges without all the pertinent facts. Until he gets honest about what is bothering him, John doesn't know how to move forward.

Mycroft's suggestion of calling the chief physician at Harwich is still sitting back there. John had resisted the idea until now, because he wanted to stop being Sherlock’s doctor, and to avoid invading his privacy in these matters. Meddling in the medical aspects of the recovery is now more unethical than ever, due to the change in their relationship status. John knows all this, and had already decided to take a step back, so why has this idea returned to poke at him today? Maybe it's because, at this point, he'll take any answers he can get.

At first, John had monitored his progress, taking his vital signs once a day just like the Harwich staff had. There was no sign that any part of the autonomic nervous system issues the Guillain-Barré had caused were still present, so no risk of cardiac arrhythmia or wild blood pressure fluctuations should remain. When Sherlock had told him he could dispense with these exams, John had agreed, in part because it meant that he could again step back from a physician's role, and allow the two of them to relax a bit.

Going back to work at the surgery was also part of that package, part of John's attempt at normalizing their life. Sherlock clearly needed time for himself, to relax and rest, John had rationalised. He had always had a habit of retreating to solitude when he got too stressed or overwhelmed. This time, however, giving him space doesn't seem to be helping.

Sherlock is as stubborn, as irritable, as strange as ever, but in addition to all that, something is wrong in a way that goes well beyond a transient black mood.

It's less about what he does, than about what he doesn't do. On a surface level, things seem to be as well as could be expected at this point. He's been back at Baker Street for less than two weeks, and his physical recovery is following a somewhat medically predictable path. There are obviously still moments of considerable pain, and trouble adjusting to the demands of re-learning muscle memory. Sherlock seems to know his limits, for which John is grateful, but it’s deeply uncharacteristic of the man not to overdo everything. John wouldn't be surprised if he pushed himself to total exhaustion if something came up that managed to inspire him to stop acting like a restless spirit, but John hasn't found anything yet that would have such an effect.

Take experiments. There are probably plenty Sherlock could be taking up, even without all of his dexterity having returned. Usually, when John talks about the experiments, his tone is exasperated, wary or plain angry. Now it's bordering on desperate, but not because of what is transpiring but what is not. He'd actually be glad to find an experiment happening, since it's one of the things Sherlock used to do but what seems to have been lost along the way. John finds himself grasping at straws: 'Is this an experiment?' 'No, John, it's a toaster that has not been de-crumbed for a while.' 'Is this an experiment?' 'No, it's your winter hat, on which tea was somehow mysteriously spilled.' 'Oh.'

Damn the older Holmes for planting that nagging seed of doubt in John's mind. It’s been slowly taking root and now, with Sherlock’s strop this morning, John’s concern blossoms into a need.

He makes the call from the clinic during his afternoon break - better this way than risking Sherlock eavesdropping at home.
"His performance here was excellent," Dorothy Platt, a sixty-something neurologist who's the director of Harwich Manor, tells him.

"I sense a but in there somewhere," John suggests.

"As I said - a performance. He acknowledged his limitations when acutely faced with them, but apart from that, he seemed to want to pretend none of it ever happened. He didn't engage with the staff or other patients any more than absolutely necessary--"

"That's how he always is. He prefers to ignore people who he doesn't see as being on his level," John says with a smile that he hoped would be heard on the other end of the phone; he didn’t want her to take offense at what sounded like normal Sherlockian behaviour.

"Perhaps. But what he used to do, and what he needs to do now, are two different things. It is important to realise that he won't just spontaneously get back to what he was before. His stay was a starting point, not the end of the project. He has to work at it, and that means both physical and mental rehabilitation. He can’t afford to ignore that fact. So, tell me, Doctor Watson, how has he really been getting on at home?" John can sense her curiosity about his decision to make the call.

A bit defensively, John explains. "He’s settled in. He’s managing things in the flat well, without needing much assistance. He sleeps more and eats more regularly than he did before the GBS, and seems to know his limits. In terms of physical exercise, well, he's actually stopped doing any of that altogether, to be honest. His brother has sent a stream of possible PT people around, and none of them have lasted long. I think the current record is an hour. I've let him get away with it, so that he'd act out less."

It's the one thing Sherlock has really put some effort into - making everyone sent in to help him leave the flat, running for the hills. The majority had not even lasted for a whole session, before that waspish tongue dispatched them.

That raises a wry laugh from Doctor Platt. "According to my team here, he can be quite stubborn and confrontational when forced to deal with the fact that he isn't fully back to fitness. Any signs of depression?"

"It's hard to tell with him."

All in all, Sherlock is just a bit quiet. Maybe just a teensy bit moodier than usual. It's to be expected, isn't it? Anyone would be a little exhausted after going through what Sherlock had. It's actually a relief that he isn’t bouncing around the flat, shooting at the walls and shouting about being bored. He is being sensible for once, the occasional strop aside. Sherlock frustrated or angry isn't anything new, either. It's how he is. Calling it this or that, black mood or depression or whatnot, hardly makes the situation clearer.

"Nevertheless, I'm left with the impression that he hasn't dealt with what has happened emotionally, and what you've just told me frankly doesn't sound very reassuring. I'd like to refer him to our outpatient service's psychiatrist. We try to have a low threshold for an assessment, to avoid missing cases that should have been nipped in the bud before they escalated into full-blown issues."

"No. Not a good idea. Not at this point, at least," John finds himself adding.

If Sherlock won't even talk to him about what's going on, the odds of him accepting a stranger in that role were about nil. To push too soon, would just provoke a mulish response.

John really isn’t sure how he’d expect Sherlock to behave at this point. Wouldn't it be more
worrying if he immediately reverted back to his old self? Surely the fact that things are different
means that he is processing what has happened?

It will likely take weeks for Sherlock to build his strength up to be able to easily negotiate stairs,
which will mean a lot of time spent indoors at the flat. John reminds himself of what he'd told
Mycroft - that frustration levels would expected to go through the roof at some point. The current
version of Sherlock that John has been dealing with has, thankfully, been manageable in that
respect – no demands for addictive substances yet. No mad experiments or harassing of
pathologists for spare body parts. No screeching violin.

Suddenly, an unpleasant suspicion sets in: is John's own relief at the ease of living with such a
subdued Sherlock, clouding his judgment?

Interrupting his thoughts, Dr Platt asks, "We're at your disposal if need be, Dr Watson. Does he
have a follow-up appointment set up with the National?"

"Yes, but that's in just under three weeks. It's at something they call a post-ITU assessment unit."

"Good, good, that's good. Many patients experience unpleasant dreams, have distorted memories of
their ITU stay or find they need time to come to terms with such an experience, even developing
something akin to PTSD. The post-ITU unit specializes in addressing those issues. Remind me: he
was hospitalized for how many months before getting here?"

"Four, give or take," John replies.

A memory of a conversation he'd had with Molly Hooper at the ITU returns to mind. It had
certainly been one occasion on which John had been too close to objectively see what had been
going on, because it had shocked him to see Sherlock in such a state. He wonders if Platt is aware
of what had happened. "He had a short bout of delirium during the worst days," John tells her.

"Does he talk about any of it?"

John laughs, but it sounds hollow. "Him? Talking about his feelings? Have you actually met him?"

Dr Platt chuckles. "He never said a word during his mandatory Group therapy sessions. Most
reticent."

"That's him all right. You still made him go?" John is certain Sherlock had mentioned these
sessions at least once, but without making much of a scene about it. That had been very odd, in
hindsight.

"That was never an issue. He did as he was told," Dr Platt says in a placating tone, but John finds
this to be the exact opposite of reassuring.

If Sherlock wasn't his---- his Sherlock, but instead one of his patients at the surgery he works for,
or at some hospital, what would he think of such deeply uncharacteristic behaviour? What would
he consider alarming? Sherlock seems to be teetering between being subdued, almost flat in his
behaviour, and being restless, even prickly. All that translates as anxiety. In both modes of
behaviour, he is unwilling to talk about what is troubling him. As much as John tries, he can't think
objectively, can't get past the fact that he knows the old Sherlock, who hadn't been too far from his
current level of volatility. He wishes desperately that someone could tell him what he should be
expecting at this point, and what should ring the alarm bells. Mycroft is worried, but John has
never viewed him as entirely objective, either, when it comes to Sherlock. Not by far.

There probably isn't much more Platt could tell him that he doesn't already know.
"Sorry for keeping you from your duties," John says.

"No trouble at all, Dr Watson," Dr Platt replies. They exchange a few pleasantries and then end the call.

John's next patient arrives, and he returns to the routine. Work feels like a relief. At least for this next person who takes a seat in front of his desk, he might be able to offer something that helps.

He brings home Chinese. Sherlock mostly just stares at the pieces of greenery floating around in his soup. The silence becomes oppressive, so John decides to try to lighten things up. "Trying to predict your future?"

"That's done with tea leaves, not spring onions." Sherlock pokes at something in the bowl. "Or pak choi; it's hard to tell. The Phoenix Palace prefers to use spring onions, but Wok to Walk will use whatever is cheap in the market."

John sighs. "Maybe, but the Palace had a thirty minute delay on takeaway orders and the place just down the road is quicker. After the day I've had, I didn't want to wait."

Sherlock sniffed. "You know I prefer the Szechuan Hot and Sour Soup from the Palace."

"Right, but this time my needs trump yours. You didn't have to get home late because a patient with fever and ecchymoses had to be sent to the A&E and I had to take a dose of ciprofloxacin in case it was meningococcal."

Sherlock looks unimpressed, and slurps a spoonful of the soup.

"Cipro upsets my stomach; always has. But it's not worth the risk of a meningococcal infection. So I wanted something a little simpler than your spicy version," John continues.

Sherlock shrugs. "Bland is boring. A bit like this discussion." He puts the spoon down and pushes the bowl away.

John raises his hands in surrender. "Just trying to make conversation."

"I thought you would've learned by now not to bother." Sherlock shifts around in his chair, intending to get up, but when he drags himself off the chair, he yelps in pain, doubling over the back of the chair and crunching his eyes shut.

John launches himself off his own chair, alarmed. Sherlock is cursing loudly, shaking his right foot in the air in a manner that looks quite useless and squeezing his hands into a fist to distract himself from the pain. John puts two and two together - Sherlock gets cramps nowadays when he doesn't eat or drink enough or overexerts himself. John had suggested yesterday he ask Mrs Hudson for some magnesium supplements, which Sherlock had countered by telling John he was not an old lady.

John sits down on his haunches and grabs hold of Sherlock's calf. He almost gets kicked in the chin.

"Let go!" Sherlock orders, looking pale with pain, cold sweat already glistening on his forehead.
John does no such thing. Instead, he grabs hold of Sherlock's foot as well as the calf, bends the ankle and digs his thumbs into the rock-hard gastrocnemius muscle on Sherlock's shin, which brings forth a hiss, but in a moment, Sherlock stops struggling and draws a long, ragged breath.

"I'd reconsider having the soup if I were you," John tells him, pats his calf after a bit more work with his thumbs on the cramp and then lets go, pulling himself up by grabbing the edge of the table. "I'm pretty sure you haven't had a single bite or drink since breakfast." In Afghanistan, dehydration coupled with loss of salt had resulted in more than a few cramps for most soldiers. "Shaking a leg isn't going to help; you need to stretch the muscles properly."

Sherlock is regarding him carefully, as though having been suddenly reminded that his default attitude towards John may not always have been disapproval. He keeps bending and flexing his ankle for a moment until sliding back into his seat and dragging the soup bowl back in front of him again.

John takes his own plate to the kitchen sink, and then loiters, unable to decide whether he should sit back down to keep Sherlock company or retreat to the sitting room. Since he's standing right behind Sherlock, he can see the tension in his shoulders. "You're not doing your muscles any favours, you know." He tries to keep the comment tentative, almost speculative.

Sherlock slurps the last of the soup and puts the bowl down. He's a fast eater, when he actually puts his nose to the grindstone. "What do you mean?"

John reaches down and rubs his palm along the shoulders in front of him. Sherlock stiffens slightly at the touch but does not move or speak. When no stronger protestation appears, John slides his right hand down on top of Sherlock's T-shirt to between his shoulder blades, and presses down with the heel of his palm. "You're all knots."

Sherlock lets his head lean in the opposite direction.

John digs his fingers into where the neck muscles attach to the base of the skull. He's standing slightly off to the right from Sherlock, which allows him a glimpse of a small scar near his clavicle, where a large-bore central line had been. He doesn't say anything about it, just like they never talk about smaller but still similar-looking scars on the network of veins in the crooks of Sherlock's elbows. "We should get you to a physical therapist, if just for a massage," John remarks.


"Granted, some sports therapists can be a bit rough, but who would say no to a nice massage?"

Sherlock shakes his head, slowly, as if careful not to lean into John’s fingers. "I don't like people touching me, especially if I can't anticipate what they're doing."

"You didn't seem to have an issue with the physical therapist at Harwich or at the National," John points out. He lets his hands fall away from Sherlock but remains standing beside him, his hand gently still in contact with Sherlock's bicep.

"I could see what they were about to do during the exercises, and it didn't hurt. It wasn't pleasant, either, but there was a purpose to it. Hence, bearable."

"You've had massages, though?" John presses on. He had already managed to mention the National Hospital and Sherlock hadn't fled. Considering his mood earlier that day, it's a step in the right direction.

"I tried a massage at Harwich, but stopped it after a few minutes. I have no intention whatsoever of
repeating the experience. The pain, combined with the unpredictability and lying face-down was—problematic."

"Problematic how?"

"Synesthesia. Nausea." Sherlock offers no detailed explanation beyond these two words, clearly assuming John will deduce the rest. Whatever that may be.

"Not your thing then, people touching you. Noted," John says, and he's quite certain Sherlock seems to pick up on the disappointed note in his tone, the one he had tried to keep away.

Sherlock turns to gauge his expression. "There's one notable and most particular exception," he says carefully but pointedly, looking John straight in the eye.

John's brows shoot up. Part of him wants to ask how long he's been that very exception. Somehow it's feels like the most flattering thing anyone has ever said to him, because it comes from a place of such careful avoidance.

He remembers a night at the hospital, weeks before the winter garden. Sherlock had been miserable and in pain, and he'd made a request to John the likes of which he'd never anticipated hearing from Sherlock. Well, not hearing per say, since they'd already had to resort to Morse code. In an attempt to do something, when little in the way of help seemed to be available, John had slithered his fingers into Sherlock's hair and tried to smooth the unruly curls into submission the way he'd wanted to do for over a year. Sherlock’s reaction had been a revelation. He'd actually asked for John to continue.

At Harwich, this very memory had floated to John's head and he’d been tempted to replicate what had happened, while they sat on Sherlock's bed watching television. That time, the reaction had been the opposite: the moment he’d reached his hand out, Sherlock had moved away and given him an angry glare. 'I'll not be petted, thank you,' was the icy comment. That had not been a good evening altogether, and the memory of it means John has hesitated to cross the dividing line once they were back in Baker Street.

"You'll tell me if I do something you don't enjoy?" John asks, giving Sherlock's shoulder a slight squeeze, which he hopes will be an honourable chance for Sherlock to back out if he isn’t in the mood.

Sherlock’s shoulders relax and he turns back to the table, bending his head forward – an open invitation to John to resume the massage. "You very rarely do."

As he starts to work on the knots, John realises how thoroughly pleased and relieved he is that he’s found something, after all, that he can do to help make things better for Sherlock. It's a start.
Testing Times

*If I love you, is that a fact or a weapon?*
- Margaret Atwood

Sherlock cuts his bare foot on the sharp, chipped edge of a kitchen cabinet. He tells John it was an accident, which it was, but a secret part of him might also want John to understand how he still has a need to keep testing himself, especially in the mornings, to make sure that what had worked the night before still functions. But he knows better than to say such a thing. As a doctor, John has been taught to read too much into everything that might point to anxiety or stress. Finding out how Sherlock pinches himself everywhere in the morning to make sure the nerves are still working, and realizing that Sherlock has practically grown attached to the pain that still lingers, would undoubtedly alarm John. So, he says nothing.

John cleans the wound and puts butterfly strips on it. He wraps a bandage around the foot and then pats it. "I love you, you great clot," he says, and lets go of the limb.

It's the first time John has used such a gently derogatory term as an endearment after the hospital. It's a very John-like thing to say, and it should all be a joyous occasion that signals to Sherlock that John no longer deems it necessary to walk on eggshells when it comes to his recovery. He finds the tease oddly comforting. It means that John has made note of the changes in him, but does not seem to judge him for them. Not yet, anyway. Sherlock tries to push aside the worry that his attitude might change if the progress doesn’t continue.

Others are not so forgiving. They take in his slow gait, his sunken cheeks and his gaunt body and they pity him because they can't stop comparing him to what had been before. Nor can Sherlock. In some ways, it’s even worse now, because here at home, his brain keeps making the mistake of assuming that he’s back to normal. Signals are sent - *move now, quickly, adroitly* and the body just can’t do it. Mistakes happen with alarming frequency.

The wound smarts, and blood is still trickling and soaking through the bandage, but Sherlock shoves his foot into a sock anyway.

Mycroft keeps rustling up physical therapists from somewhere. They come to Baker Street with good intentions and a cookie-cutter approach, and Sherlock practically delights in sending them packing. His skin crawls under the continued scrutiny of these so-called professionals, who keep telling him he is a long way from recovered.

*Idiots.* Don’t they know he is more aware of his infirmities than they can ever be? If he let his mind dwell on it even more than he already does, his control over his mood that's already slipping, would be decimated. Sherlock *knows* this in a way that no one, not even Mycroft, with his good yet still questionable intentions, is able to understand.
Besides, lifting weights and walking up stairs is hardly rocket science. He could do it on his own or even with John, but even John insists that he needs professional help. It's a source of irritation rubbing away at the fabric of their fledgling relationship. At first, John had been amused at his battles against the hordes of Mycroft-sent trainers, but clearly John is now convinced that he has secretly decided to call it quits altogether on the physical therapy and has begun nagging. He doesn't need anyone else, and even John's attention makes him feel cornered. Couldn't he be allowed a moment's peace? He has only just come home!

The way John seems so delighted at having him home tears at him. Clearly the man is expecting some happy ever after-type scenario, as delivered by Sherlock. It's just that something heavy is hanging on him, something that's keeping him from fully enjoying this monumental shift in his life. He feels he's being robbed of something and he doesn't know how to make things better, because he feels like a visitor in his former life. An impostor. The defective one stuck on this side of the mirror. It was one of the things he had hated most about the PT room at Harwich. It was lined with mirrors, supposedly to help the patients use all of their senses to help in their recovery. Sherlock just prefers to close his eyes from everything right now.

There are words and memories floating around in his head. They're safe as long as he doesn't grasp them, force them out of his mouth, or react to them. They don't really exist, don't reflect reality, if he does not allow them to. The thing is, they keep making themselves known when it's most inconvenient, triggered by the most arbitrary things.

Most of them are memories from the hospital. People often say time makes bad memories feel less upsetting, but when it comes to the worst of them, it doesn't seem to work that way, at least not for him. Maybe he's defective in the sense that his memory is too accurate, too vivid; the curse of an eidetic memory. It would probably break John’s heart if Sherlock told him that waking up in the middle of the night with John's arm on him often sends reeling over the edge of panic, his brain mistakenly thinking that he's still in that hospital bed, tangled up in the monitoring wires. Sometimes, at night, he gets practically mesmerized listening to his own breathing, just to confirm that it is actually him and not a machine forcing the air in and out again.

Now that he has access to his own laptop and enough manual dexterity has returned to allow him a hunt-and-peck style of typing, he’s doing his research—into all the things they wouldn’t tell him at the hospital, the things that John and Mycroft whispered about in the corridor, the things he could read on the faces of his parents during their visits. He'd sat by the visitor computer at Harwich, but his typing had been so slow then that he hadn't been able to achieve much in terms of data collection.

All his research culminates in one fact: there's a three percent chance he might relapse. It's not high, but not zero, either. What if the Guillain-Barré comes back when John is out? What if it comes back faster than it did the first time? It could. He finds himself reluctant to be alone in the apartment. He follows John around, he knows he does, and John must have made note of it, too. John says nothing, of course, merely tolerates his hovering and his excuses for once even distractedly attempting to follow the man into the bathroom.

On the second Monday morning after his discharge from Harwich, Sherlock thwarts John's every attempt at dragging himself out of bed by coiling himself around the man. John seems both surprised and delighted. It's as if he wasn't expecting Sherlock to do such things, even though they are sharing a bed. Is that not the point of doing so - to offer opportunities for proximity, even
though it might make Sherlock, for the most part, still feel strange and conflicted about the whole thing? Isn't this what John had had in mind upon suggesting he move downstairs? Or is he not doing this the right way; is John not enjoying himself at the moment, even though he's smiling and not retreating? Is there a right way? Or is there a way John would particularly prefer? Sherlock silently chides himself for not asking. He likes doing this, as long as it doesn't venture much further into unknown territory, but he'd like it more if it wasn't laden with so much expectations and assumption that everyone knows how. John had seemed positively surprised to wake up to Sherlock wrapping an arm around him. Sherlock knows he hasn't done many such things, but this morning, he had felt alone and nervous and John seems like the perfect antidote to all that. The proximity is grounding, and it's less unsettling now that Sherlock had initiated the contact. It's calming to be in charge. Not all touch is problematic, as proven by an impromptu massage a few days earlier. When it's not irritatingly gentle, or laden with complex expectations it can be fine, as long as Sherlock can anticipate what's going to happen, and John is the other party in the proceedings. He still hates that his head and his nerves enforce these rules on him and John. If he fails to adhere to them, things can get deeply uncomfortable. Will it ever be easy, effortless, enjoyable? Will a constant need for vigilance ever disappear? It's all just so disheartening and exhausting, fighting a sensory tidal wave, knowing it will always come back and he needs to start again from the beginning. It's like taking one step forward, then sliding three backwards.

"Sherlock, I'm going to be late for work," John whispers in his ear and tucks one of his sleep-messy curls behind it. His words signal disapproval, but his tone points to him enjoying himself, after all.

"I called the clinic," Sherlock mutters from under the sheet he has mummified both of them into. He hasn't actually called John's work - not yet, at least, but John isn't to know that. Sherlock will call them. He certainly will.

"You did what?" John asks, and Sherlock can imagine him frowning.

Sherlock slithers his hand from underneath the covers to flick his wrist dismissively. "You've got food poisoning. Very nasty. Bacillus cereus from the rice in the leftovers. You'll be bedridden for days."

"Sherlock, you can't do that. As much as I enjoy being bedridden with you, I need to go." John chides but his tone betrays that he isn't entirely displeased with the notion of yet another day off. It's one of John's good qualities that he's always up for breaking some rules with Sherlock if the situation calls for it. And this one certainly does.

"You can work later," Sherlock says, but he doesn't even know what he means by that. Later, when? When the silence in the flat stops screeching at him like a wailing violin? At the moment, being left alone means he starts watching himself, testing himself, doubting himself, which is vile and nerve-racking and he needs to not do it, and when John is present it's easier to make himself stop. John is a doctor, he will notice if there's something wrong with him, so he doesn't need to keep watch all the time. "You can work when I say so," he adds petulantly and wedges his hand under John's torso so that he can properly trap the man.

"I don't take orders from human octopuses," John teases mischievously and wriggles around so that they're face to face.

"Octopi, John," Sherlock says, not bothering to open his lids. He crunches his eyes even tighter closed when John gives him a kiss, and his stubble scratches Sherlock's face. Sensory acuity is one of the things that make intimacy beyond hugging difficult, but he's willing to endure a bit more of it, if it means John will stay in today.

"You used to like having time for yourself as long as there wasn't a case on," John muses.
"Pointless. You've stopped limiting my experiments in your presence, so there's no incentive for that anymore," Sherlock reasons. He decides not to mention the fact that all of his experiments these days are designed to test his own reflexes and reactions. He doubts John would approve.

"Look, I'm very flattered that your newfound appreciation of me won't even allow me to go to Tesco alone, but are you sure that's all there is to it?"

 Damn it. Suspicion has been aroused.

John’s mention of Tesco brings back an unpleasant memory of one of his recent experiments. He has never liked the over-stimulating environment of a supermarket - bright lights, clashing smells, too many people. Yesterday, he decided to go with John to see what his current defectiveness would make of it all. It had been horrid - in more ways than one. Before, on good days, he could easily regulate how much of the sensory barrage of such places he allowed himself to notice. This time, his concentration failed, because he had been so concentrated on the Transport - on trying to look as though nothing was causing him much trouble at all. When it all got to a point when the disorientation and the panic had nearly become overwhelming, he had managed to tune out of his surroundings. For the last third of their time in the shop, he cannot remember anything more than the thought that he was watching the two of them on CCTV. He had no idea if what he remembered had actually happened, and there is no way he could ask John, because to do so would be to admit his cognitive failures. This is exactly what has been bothering him ever since his discharge from hospital: something isn't working right, and he can't pinpoint the problem. He must have still been acting normally at the store, since John hadn't seem puzzled or asked him anything afterwards.

Sherlock rubs his forehead. What was it that John has just asked him? It's must be happening again, losing the plot of what is going on. His concentration has fragmented, and his mind keeps going off on tangents even worse than before. He had anticipated the time it would take to recover his physical equilibrium, but now his brain seems to be off-kilter, too, and it is getting worse, not better.

"Are you sure there isn't anything bothering you?" John asks. In all likelihood this is a repeat of his earlier question. What a relief.

"Why would you think that? I'm fine," Sherlock replies and wrenches his eyes open. When John's face is inches from his own like this, it's harder to keep his tone as nonchalant and warm as he would have liked.

John's eyes study him and instead of how it used to be - the attention feeling like a golden glow surrounding him - it now feels like it's stripping him, exposing him, cutting him up into neat little pieces. Sherlock resists the temptation to throw in a stern 'there's nothing wrong with me', but John seems to have decided after Dartmoor that the statement means the exact opposite. He should have just said 'no, why?' and maybe fluttered his eyelashes a little to signal that he's heartbrokenly shocked that John would think he isn't completely fine and utterly, madly happy.

He is happy, isn't he? He must be. How could he not be, when John Watson is in his bed? Why can't he feel it, then, this happiness, to the extent he believes he should? He could just speak this question out loud, pass the responsibility of solving the mystery to John, but somehow he suspects that might entail John engaging his physician's skills to slap some sort of a diagnosis on the issue, and Sherlock would rather jump off Vauxhall bridge than to submit himself again to the attention of the medical establishment at this point. He's had enough of that for a lifetime. Jumping into the role of a doctor was what John had done when Sherlock had first become ill —and the temptation would be there for John to do it again. Instead of listening to Sherlock and just being there as a
grounding element, John would insist on a full range of diagnostic torture, all the while conspiring with colleagues in the corridor the way he had at the National. The professional detachment, with which John had treated him when he'd first been diagnosed, had stung, more than it had any reason to. Granted, certain things hadn't been said out loud yet at that point, and Sherlock is aware that this remnant of rancor is more due to his own past experiences than anything untoward that John has done, but still the resentment is there. It's yet another example of how Sherlock doesn't know how to do any of this.

"Lord knows I already skirt enough of my responsibilities because you think the cases can never wait until my shift ends. I hope they at least believed your food poisoning excuse."

"I am an excellent liar," Sherlock reminds John, before realizing all the connotations of this claim. He disentangles himself from John and heads for the bathroom. Once the shower is running, he finds his phone and calls the surgery John works in from the bathroom.

Three hours later, Sherlock already regrets his ruse. The morning has bled into afternoon, and having John home is proving downright detrimental to his already wildly fluctuating mood.

He had always imagined that, should an opportunity ever arise to tell John how he really felt about the man, he'd feel as though his heart was in his throat, but he had never suspected it would stay there. The anxiety that he seems to wake up with every day - if he has slept at all - is eating away at him. This morning had offered a moment of calm, but once they'd left the bedroom everything had turned sour. Sherlock now finds that not only does he need to be an accomplished liar, but his acting skills need to be up to par, too, because John looks so happy and he can't look different, if he's not to give the man cause for alarm.

John had spent the morning in reassurance mode, telling him a lot of important things - such as 'I love you, you incredible nutter' - which only makes Sherlock fight the urge to stick fingers into his ears. The more the man makes such offerings, the more Sherlock has to face a fear he can't shake - one that taints and distorts and ruins these statements. It's a fear that whatever it is he thinks he's found with John is only transient, and possibly his own head will continue to make it impossible to enjoy it with proper relish.

"God, I loved you for so long and we wasted so much time," John says and holds him tighter on the sofa and their packet of HobNobs falls on the floor and disintegrates into crumbs. All Sherlock can think of is that it might as well be him on the floor in pieces. He has to stifle an immediate impulse to apologise for everything, for wasting this precious time being so wrapped up in worries he doesn't even know how to name. It's as though the assertiveness with which he'd endured the last days on the respirator at the hospital and the painstakingly slow early recovery at the Manor has not followed him to Baker Street.

John will notice. John might not be the brightest of thinkers, but he will notice.

In the evening, John orders in Thai with the staunch determination of a man who feels guilty for having eaten only HobNobs for lunch.
When the food arrives, John apologizes profusely about the fact that chopsticks still exist.

Even armed with a spoon, Sherlock just pushes the food around.

John has a beer, and Sherlock drinks enough coffee to make him want to strangle something.

As the evening wears on, Sherlock starts to worry about what is going to happen when it comes time to go to bed. Is this when John is going to expect something to happen? After what he suspects could be the man’s attempts to woo him all day, Sherlock wonders if there is a specific seduction scenario that John has envisaged ever since the winter garden, or possibly longer. A cosy day of close physical contact, murmurings of sweet nothings into his ear - is this how John usually seduces his dates?

He isn’t ready for this. Not physically, not mentally. He senses John’s attraction to him, but what should be a source of pleasure and delight is... not. His own libido seems to be hiding behind a curtain of despair. Sometimes his body responds to John’s presence the way it should, but most times his brain gets in the way. That makes him even more anxious. What happens if he can’t manage it? Would John take that as a rejection? Sherlock has a nagging feeling that John is looking to him for guidance, for him to take the lead when it comes to the genuinely new part of their relationship - sex, that is. Why? Certainly John's bisexuality is newly minted, but Sherlock has little experience of any kind of romantic relationship, or their more intimate aspects. As for acting as a guide to some sort of a sexuality-based community within society or other lifestyle issues, well, his lifestyle is hardly something that would be featured in _Attitude_, and he's never felt like belonging to any sort of community in his life, gay or otherwise. He doesn't even know if John would be interested in embracing some communal aspect of this - Sherlock certainly hopes he doesn't. The thought repels him.

This is how their dynamic has worked in the past: Sherlock leads and John follows. He's the soloist, John the accompaniment. This is how it appears, at least to the rest of the world. Or so it used to be. Currently, he's an empty coat held up by the sheer willpower of John. How is he supposed to be the one to usher in a new era in this relationship?

It's both a good thing and a source of anxiety that John hasn't spoken a single word out loud about any of this. There is still the possibility that John, with his longstanding preference of women may not even want all that with him. Maybe this is supposed to only be semi-platonic: a friendship sprinkled with some haphazard foreplay, but if that's the case, then where does that leave Sherlock? He has done perfectly well without sex in his life so far, but John's appearance in his life seems to have awoken certain... imagery. And his body responds; at times before hospitalisation, Sherlock had been forced to find stealthy ways to deal with the pent-up energy John's mere presence amassed in him. After all, there was no hope back then of having such feelings reciprocated.

No, John certainly hasn't asked yet if he wants to have sex. How would he answer such a query?

Would a simple 'yes' do, or will more proof of enthusiasm be expected? 'Yes, I'd be very amenable if and when we can find mutually agreeable parameters'? John would laugh at him, and probably counter it with something suggestive and positively crude, something that normal people would say. Sherlock is aware that there are such things; things people apparently say to each other about sexual congress, in moments when lust drives the physical impulses to overcome rational thought, pushing the brain into the background.

"Hey, you haven’t said a word for the past two hours. Is this programme so boring that you can’t even be bothered to condemn it as crap, or argue with the presenter?"
John is sitting at one end of the sofa, and Sherlock is stretched out, his feet in John’s lap. He’d had a muscle cramp in the calf of his left leg and John had kneaded it into submission. It's the kind of tactile contact that Sherlock will agree to at the moment. Since there's a purpose to it, his brain will accept it for what it is instead of stressing over how he thinks he ought to be reacting.

John’s question requires an answer, but for some reason, all this constant internal analysis of their current situation has taken Sherlock’s verbal ability offline. It makes him remember when his communication choices had been limited to the a few dozen choices on that white board after he had become unable to even use Morse code tapped by his little finger. John has kept that white marker board - what a morbid souvenir. Sherlock had been horrified to find it in his wardrobe on one of his days of restless pacing and pointless flitting about the flat. It had been in a canvas bag still containing things John had brought for him to the hospital. It distresses him to think that John might consider keeping it, and it still feels mortifying that John had felt the need to give him such phrases to communicate with. It's a sobering piece of evidence of how low he had sunk in those days.

scared

I don't know what's happening to me

get John

hold hands

He never used any of those four phrases at the hospital, and he doesn’t say such things out loud now, neither of them do. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? The leader of the group therapy sessions at Harwich had droned on about how he needed to verbalise exactly these sorts of emotional statements, to admit to embarrassing things and pointless sentiment, to reveal to his loved ones what should not be revealed to anyone.

John has experience of being put under such pressure; after all, he’d been going to a therapist about the PTSD when they had first met. Judging by what John had told him of his experiences, John hadn’t been much better at this opening up business than Sherlock is.

At the hospital, Sherlock had been like a raw nerve, exposed and prone to emitting false signals. He still is. No wonder John had thought it best not to approach the prospect of taking their relationship further at that point. Sherlock had been furious at what he felt was extreme condescension and a very one-sided approach to something that definitely involved both of them.

God, it's annoying to admit John may have been right.

He gets up and heads out of the sitting room.

"Good night, John."
"To be honest, I’m in need of your help." John tries not to put too much of an edge on his statement, lest Lestrade later demand a counterfavour. After all, this could be useful for all involved.

John's patience for the odd atmosphere in the flat has run out. Sherlock isn't raising a finger to continue the physical therapy, nor is he doing anything else sensible with his time. He mostly alternates between being comatose on the sofa, or sitting in his chair with the headphones on, listening to music. Neither option is exactly conducive to conversation. Communication, when it does happen, is stiff, as if both men are purposefully avoiding talking about anything other than the most mundane stuff. There's a brittleness to his demeanour that John finds frustrating.

When Lestrade had returned his call, he had made small talk at first. John had deduced this to be a sign that not much urgent business was at hand at the NSY.

"How is he?" Lestrade asks after lamenting about the cold, damp weather.

"Making progress." This has become John’s stock answer. They ask him, because anyone even borderline sensible would not dare to raise such a subject with Sherlock, and no one has really even seen him after he's come home. He doesn't answer messages, either, or take calls.

John prepares to fend off an offer of a visit. He has had to be gentle but determined to put all their friends off dropping by Baker Street, because Sherlock still seems horrified at the thought of even Molly coming to visit. "No visitors. He says he's not ready, but if a case came up, that might be different." John certainly hopes so. He knows dragging Sherlock out of the house might completely wear him out, but the stagnant routine needs to be broken. Of that he's now certain. After Sherlock had tricked him into staying home from work, he'd found himself saying no to the scarce offers from the locum agency. It doesn't take a consulting genius detective to deduce that Sherlock doesn't want him to leave the flat, even though he might not make much use of John's company, either.

"It's been quiet on the western front, thankfully, but I doubt this dry spell will last long. You think he'll be up for some action?" Lestrade asks.

"Action, hell no. A nice, easy but not boring case with no legwork involved, maybe. It might do him some good to get out of the house."

"Cooped up inside with him can't be easy."

"You have no idea," John adds out of habit. From an outsider's perspective Sherlock probably wouldn't have seemed all that much of a handful recently. No shouting at the neighbours, no stomping around bursting with nervous energy and complaining of boredom. He's been.... quiet, even. "Please try to make it a quick one, though, something he could deduce at the crime scene and be home for supper. I know it doesn't really work that way, but..."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Something nice and manageable to get back in the saddle."
The DI’s choice of words brings back to John’s mind the image of Sherlock being led around while sitting on the back of the therapy horse, and his prickly reply to John’s offer of help. It still stings. It wouldn't, if things had only changed, at least a little. "Just don’t say that when you do contact him, or he’ll probably bite your head off."

Lestrade gave a wry laugh. "Don’t forget; I’ve known him longer than you have, and my head's still intact."

Two days pass without any communiqué from the DI, before Sherlock gets a text message. John finds him standing in the middle of the sitting room, staring at it, frowning.

"What is it?" John prompts, craning his neck so he can see the screen. Sherlock slips the phone in his pocket.

"It's Lestrade. Body dump somewhere near Barking Abbey."

"Where's that?" John asks.

"Ilford."

"Oh. What's so particular about it that he'd contact you?" John asks.

"No idea. NSY does often struggle with even the most elementary of cases, but that doesn't mean it warrants my interest."

"You could call him and ask for details," John prompts, trying not to sound too enthusiastic, lest Sherlock start thinking there's some sort of a conspiracy here. If Sherlock gets wind of him trying to organize something behind his back, he'd invariably consider it condescending.

Sherlock says nothing. This non-reaction reminds John of how Sherlock does not like calling people. He texts, or emails. On the rare occasions when he has phoned John, the discussion has been stilted and strange - Sherlock had kept interrupting him, as though not realizing he'd been about to say something. This mystery had bothered John for a while, until he'd remarked on it to Mycroft. The older Holmes had not looked surprised. "I commend your astuteness. He does prefer to avoid calling people. He has enough trouble deciphering people's behaviour as it is, and being deprived of facial expression cues makes it very difficult for him to participate in a conversation."

John had experienced a minor epiphany at this news - what he had so often just shrugged off as Sherlock’s habitual rudeness might actually be a defense mechanism. If he's so oblivious to cues others find easy to interpret, Sherlock might be hiding behind intellectual arrogance more than John has previously understood. Sherlock often seems to realise only after the fact, that he may have gravely insulted someone. On the phone all he has is the tone of the other participant's voice, which could be kept deliberately neutral even when eyes and the lack of a smile might tell a different story. That would probably limit the use of his deductive skills.

Sherlock takes out his phone, but not to make a call. He fires off a text instead, and then makes for the coat rack.

"We're taking it, then?" John asks, no longer feeling the need to put a damper on his enthusiasm. Maybe they could finally start getting on with their lives, instead of sitting in the flat trying to pretend things haven't changed. Maybe this could get them back into their old routine - the cases,
the takeaway afterwards, the stakeouts, the chases - well maybe not the chases just yet - but most importantly, the contented nights at home afterwards, watching telly together while both of them are pretending the polite distance between them on the sofa is necessary. Only now, after what had been said in the hospital conservatory, they might just be able to make a start on erasing that distance. They've made some progress, but not as much as John would have liked or even expected.

"I suppose," Sherlock says, shrugging into his coat. John watches him slowly negotiate the buttons, stifling the impulse to step in. Sherlock does, eventually, get them all done.

John dons his coat, feeling bright-eyed and expectant. The deja vu is liberating - this is what they do, this is how it's supposed to feel, isn't it? John wishes that there had been a modicum of excitement in Sherlock's voice. He tries to remind himself that Sherlock often gets that way only after deciding that a case is above a six on his scale of interest, and that can't happen until he has seen the scene and assessed the facts. The fact that he's decided to go in the first place is a good thing. A huge thing.

Sherlock starts down the stairs well ahead of him - understandable, since he's much slower than John in negotiating them. He's halfway down, when John closes the door to their flat. He doesn't know what to do now in regards to the stairs. Should he make his way down and wait for Sherlock there, or match his pace, making sure he gets down fine? John's first instinct is to hover, even offer an arm, but since they're going to work and Sherlock needs to switch to consulting mode, he might be even more resistant to assistance than usual.

Sherlock's knuckles are white as he seems to be holding on to the bannister for dear life. John's fingers practically twitch at wanting to help, but he forces himself not to. In the end, he waits for Sherlock to reach the last few steps, and then walks down so that they arrive at the front door simultaneously. John turns to steal a glance at Sherlock before opening it and facing the afternoon traffic. Sherlock is pale, a thin film of sweat on his forehead, and he's out of breath as they step outside.

"Do you want to sit down?" John asks quietly, looking at one of the metal chairs outside Speedy’s. He grits his teeth as he expects a scathing command to stop the mollycoddling.

"No," Sherlock says and coughs. "Get a cab."

John heads to the kerb while Sherlock slowly negotiates the front steps of the building, chest still heaving.

Thankfully, cabs are plentiful at this hour and soon they're safely deposited in the back seat of one.

"This morning, did you take your meds?" John asks. Today will be hell, if Sherlock has to try and concentrate while in pain.

"Yes," Sherlock dismisses the subject with a flick of his hand, looking out the window onto the rainy streets of Marylebone.

During the first few days, John had suspected Sherlock had been skipping doses of the medications he'd been prescribed, because he had announced that they are making him tired and slow. Judging by what John had been told by the Harwich physician, it's highly recommended to continue at least the pregabalin as long as there are significant issues with the sensory nerves not functioning the way they should. The evidence for their effect in preventing chronic pain isn't waterproof with GBS, but there is no arguing the fact that the level of pain Sherlock had been in when they had been prescribed posed a risk for long-term issues, if left unchecked.
"Nervous?" John asks.

"Why would I be?" Sherlock replies in a distracted tone. It sounds automatic, a drop down menu response, similar to what Sherlock had remarked to him while drugged up to the gills by Irene Adler: 'why would I need you?'.

"Lestrade knows the enormity of what you've been through. No one expects you to be right as rain yet. If you need help, please say so. Won't it be less embarrassing not to make a song and dance about it, than to wait until something happens that really could look a little silly? I know you. You'd rather die than admit defeat, but it's not defeat to know your limits and work around them."

"Practice that speech in front of the mirror much?" Sherlock asks, and returns to cataloguing passing cars, or whatever he'd been doing.

John finds he has no idea whether it is a good idea to get Sherlock back to work yet. When Sherlock says something dismissive, it's often deflection, which in the past has worked to keep John at a distance. John is beginning to realise that he needs to be more perceptive, and know when Sherlock is in actual need to talk about something, no matter what words might be coming out of his mouth. Of course, knowing how best to fulfil that need is something else. John is yet again struck by how little he really knows about what Sherlock wants from him.

After several wrong turns, and Sherlock arguing with the cabbie over directions, they arrive at a former sawmill on the banks of the River Roding. John has never been to this area of London - there are very few notable sights here. It's mostly a residential area, more stagnant than fashionable. Across the river a Tesco Superstore, and what Sherlock describes as a reasonably priced but bedbug-infested hotel, are visible. John wonders if the latter notion is a deduction or based on actual experience. In the opposite direction, there's a small islet in the middle of the river, connected by small bridges over which John can see cars going.

Sherlock sees the direction he's looking and sniffs. "Downstream the Roding will eventually join the Thames via the Barking Creek."

Once again, John is reminded that Sherlock’s mental map of Greater London is better than any sat nav or Google Map.

The surroundings of the sawmill have been cordoned off with police tape. No media present. All in all, nothing in the area would signal that a crime has been committed here, except for the familiar white van the forensic technicians have arrived in. The police officers on the scene must have parked somewhere further away.

John is secretly grateful that the cab had driven them all the way to what looks like the main mill building. The area is clearly large, and with a longer walk he would have had to worry about Sherlock getting tired before even reaching the crime scene. An officer John does not recognize is lounging by the yellow tape. His attention must have waned, once he realised not all that many passers-by cared what was going on.

John knows he shouldn't worry so much beforehand. It probably shows on his face, and its contagious nature will not help them achieve what they're here for - to help get Sherlock back to the Work. John feels like he needs a refresher course, too, in paying attention to other things besides the dark-haired wraith in a formidable coat that he's currently following towards the
"Holmes and Watson," Sherlock announces to the officer. "We're expected," he adds pointedly.

The officer knits his brows, but steps aside to let them in.

John gives the man a tight-lipped smile. "Where's the body?" he asks, wondering why Sherlock hadn't made that very enquiry.

The officer points his finger towards a crime scene technician in white plastic overalls who is walking into the building. "Just follow him."

Sherlock's already on his way. John hurries to catch up with him, which takes much less effort than it used to.

The main entrance is large - wide enough to accommodate trucks. Inside, the vast hall is mostly empty, since the mill hasn't been in business for decades, as Sherlock had managed to find out via a quick online search in the cab; the firm's bankruptcy had happened during the Thatcher years. The rafters and the wall in one corner looks as though there may have been a fire. There are pieces of dirty clothing near the area. John suspects the homeless may have spent nights here. The floor in the attic level is full of missing planks. A few pigeons take flight from the rafters, sending dust dancing in the light streaming through the windows upstairs.

Lestrade is standing off to the side of the main entrance with DS Sally Donovan and some lower ranking officers. Crime scene techs are arranging gear nearby, and a few firemen are stripping off their security harnesses. John recognizes many of the faces, although he remembers very few names.

Lestrade and Donovan notice them, and so do several others present. Then, as though having heard some imperceptible cue, most of them begin applauding.

Sherlock halts, looking deeply apprehensive. "John, what---"

"It's for you, you dolt," John says affectionately, and almost feels like joining in.

He knows Sherlock hates this sort of thing. He abhors birthdays, surprise parties and congratulatory speeches, pomp and circumstance. To Sherlock, the results of his work are enough of an award, and he seems very easily to interpret gestures such as these as mockery. It's odd, in a way, since mostly he doesn't seem to be very good at spotting sarcasm and derision. Or, he's just very good at hiding his dismay at such things being directed at him. John suspects he's had a lifetime to practice his mask of cold indifference.

Lestrade strides to Sherlock and grabs him into a bear hug that nearly causes him to lose his balance. His eyes go so wide with surprise and dismay that John can't help laughing.

"Come 'ere, you," Lestrade says and squeezes even tighter. "Damn good to have you back."

"I was merely on a brief sick leave, not outer space," he
complains. "What have we got?"

"Multiple gunshot wounds to the head and the back. No bleeding on site, so looks like he's been transported from someplace else. Haven't ID'd him yet."

John starts walking up to Lestrade and Sherlock, letting his gaze wander up the rafters. Due to this, he doesn't spot a crime scene tech until he bumps into the man from behind.

"Watch it, you----" the man begins grumbling and turns.

John instantly recognizes him, and alarm bells go off in his head. This might not be good.

Philip Anderson tugs down the hood of his overalls and regards him with a put-upon look. He looks past John, eyes roving around the area until he finds what he's looking for. Or, more accurately, who he's looking for. "Oh great. He's back. I thought we could wrap this up before dinnertime and actually go home. Now we have to wait for him to muck about first. Why would he even want to look at a gang shooting?" he asks rhetorically in that snooty, louder-than-necessary tone of his that John hates, and not just because he tends to be unable to keep from flinging barbs at Sherlock at every opportunity. The dislike is mutual, but right now it would probably be best if Sherlock got to do this without having to fend off the evil eye from those in NSY who really hate his guts.

Sherlock whips his head over to face the man. "Gang shooting? What makes you so convinced? This is hardly Brixton."

"It's not unheard of for gangs to dump bodies away from their own borough," Anderson says with a triumphant smile and crosses his arms. "Sometimes people are cleverer than you give them credit for."

"Maybe there's hope even for you, then," Sherlock replies coldly.

Anderson rolls his eyes and returns to his team.

Sherlock returns his attention to Lestrade. "Do you believe his theory?"

The DI sticks his hands in his pockets. "I wouldn't be surprised."

Sherlock's gaze narrows and he practically looms over Lestrade. "Then what, pray tell, am I doing here? If you're all convinced this is a clear-cut instance of gang rivalry, it hardly carries enough mystery to bring me along. Is this.... charity of some sort?" he asks venomously.

Anderson scoffs disbelievingly. "Well it's hardly charity, is it, if someone's dead!"

"Just have a look?" John suggests, "It's still a homicide."

"Et tu, Brute?" Sherlock says snidely, but makes no move to walk out.

"The Fire Brigade has checked the rafters area - it should be safe to walk around, as long as we mind the missing planks," Lestrade says.

"Who found the body?" Sherlock asks.

"Some teens who come here to skateboard - they've built a ramp outside the storage building on the riverside. They sometimes climb around the buildings, find a quiet nook to go to with a girlfriend; you know how teens are."
"I really don't," Sherlock says and clasps his hands behind his back.

A fire department officer gives Lestrade the all-clear, and Donovan leads them to an adjoining hall with a staircase rising up to the rafter level. The distance is at least the equivalent of three storeys, and the steps are narrow and high. The staircase is wider than usual, with several landings - it has probably doubled as the fire escape.

"Shit," John mutters under his breath when the realisation hits. How the hell are they supposed to get Sherlock up there? He'd already been worrying about the steps from their front door to their flat, but in comparison that's a walk up a hill, and this is the equivalent of the Himalayas. If looks could kill, Lestrade would probably turn to cinder. At first he's taken aback by John's expression, but then the problem seems to dawn on him, too.

Sherlock has made his way to the bottom of the staircase, fingers already gently resting on the handrail. His gaze meets John's, who hurries to his side.

"Send me up with a laptop. You've done that before," John suggests urgently.

"I'm already here," Sherlock points out bitterly.

"It's too much," John whispers.

"I'll be the judge of that." Sherlock grabs the handrail properly and starts up the first flight of steps.

A group of forensic techs, Anderson included, have crowded the doorway to the hall, waiting to follow them upstairs.

John curses. Just what they need, an even bigger bloody audience.

John decides that the one thing he can do is to give Sherlock some privacy. He hurries back to Lestrade. "Great choice," he says quietly, squeezing as much sarcasm as he can into that phrase. "If he gets half way up that thing and collapses, it will be your fault."

Lestrade looks distraught. "I'm sorry, John. I didn't think of the logistics." The DI turns to the assembled technicians.

"Right, you lot. Clear the area. He wants to see the scene without anyone else, so we're going to give him ten minutes."

Anderson snorts. "God, what a primadonna."

Lestrade cuts him off before he can complain further. "You too, Anderson. All out."

By the time John catches up, Sherlock has only managed one flight. His eyes are focused on the next step, hardly acknowledging John's presence. He's already desperately out of breath, hand shaking on the rail. John knows that Sherlock will not prolong this any more than he absolutely has to, and he'd probably rather faint up there from exhaustion than to rest sitting on the steps, risking the Yard's finest and foulest staring up at them.

"You're going to need to stop and get your breath back. Now." John says this quietly enough not to reach the DI's ears below. He knows he's slipping back into doctor mode, but right now it can't be helped. He grabs hold of a thin wrist and feels the thudding, rapid pulse. "Any tingling in your legs or hands?"

"No," comes the terse reply as Sherlock pulls his hand free from John's grasp. He clearly hesitates
to take the next step.

"Right," John says, "no way around it, then." He grits his teeth, and snakes his arm around
Sherlock's waist. Hesitantly but eventually, an arm slides across his shoulders.

Sherlock says not a word, nor does he glance down once as they make their way up the staircase.
The hall has gone so quiet one could hear a pin drop. John thinks he can practically feel Lestrade's
eyes on them. He feels embarrassed, but not for himself - it's mostly a reflection of the pure,
distilled mortification he imagines Sherlock is feeling right now. His weakness is at risk of being
seen by many who would like nothing better than to witness Sherlock's downfall, to see him
knocked down a few pegs.

Once they find themselves standing on the rafters, Sherlock doesn't head off straight away like he
usually would. He's heaving and pale, but John knows that suggesting they stop to have a longer
rest is not an option. John disentangles his grip and Sherlock staggers slightly, then leans his palms
on his knees and closes his eyes momentarily, gasping for breath. John's hand hovers over his
shoulder, unable to decide when to intervene, if at all. Finally, Sherlock straightens his back and
looks around. He's still short of breath, but the colour has returned to his cheeks.

“Let’s get to work.”

Chapter End Notes

Surprise Christmas double chapter post! Happy holidays!
The rafters are brightly lit by the sunlight streaming through the dusty, rain-streaked windows. A dark heap that must be the body lies in a corner on the opposite side of the area from the stairs.

The Sherlock of the old days would have already flounced there and descended onto one knee to start digging around in the deceased’s pockets. Instead, he's digging around in his own coat pocket, probably to find his phone. John hears footsteps coming up the stairs. Ten minutes must have already passed, most of it used up by their slow climb. Soon they're joined by Lestrade and Donovan, with the technical unit trailing behind.

Finally, Sherlock makes for the corpse. It's a thirty-something man dressed in a Nike tracksuit, barefoot. He's lying on his stomach, face turned towards the windows, revealing that he suffers from quite severe acne. The back of the tracksuit is dotted with bullet holes, but only a few centimetres around the holes are wet with blood. Even through the baggy tracksuit it's evident he's quite muscular.

"Obviously not a gang job," Sherlock mutters, loud enough for Anderson to hear. "He didn't die of the gunshot wounds. John, tell them why, I'm busy," Sherlock says superciliously.

Anderson is glaring daggers at them both while John explains: "there's only bleeding around the holes, no spatter patterns. If he'd been alive, the blood pressure would have spread the blood onto a much wider area, pooling under him."

"I could have told you that," Anderson scoffs.

Sherlock looks up. "You could have, indeed, but you still elected to spout out a theory relying largely on the opposite assumption, based on just the fact that someone shot at him."

"Of course I don't believe they shot him here," Anderson argues. "It's clearly a body dump. The bullet holes are not the only thing that points to organized crime - look at his clothing and that fake rolex!"

"This," Sherlock says and lifts up the corpses's right wrist and waves it around as though the victim is a marionette, "is most decidedly not fake. It's the new version of the Oyster Perpetual Cosmograph Daytona, not yet available in the UK, but already available in Switzerland and Germany. Your gang member is a friend of the high life, it seems."

"He could just be a very successful drug dealer," Anderson grumbles.

"I'm not going to dignify that with an answer," Sherlock states and sniffs the hand he's still holding. "L'OCCITANE Hand Cream, if I'm not mistaken."

There's something familiar about the name, but John can't for the life of him remember why.

"You can't possibly know that," Donovan says and John wonders if she hasn't been paying any attention to Sherlock during the past years, because this is hardly the most amazing thing he's ever picked up.

"Once we ID him, you are free to check the contents of his bathroom shelves. I don’t suspect your average drug kingpin would bother with that," Sherlock comments.

"Nor would any straight bloke," one of the younger crime techs points out while setting up a
Something shifts in Sherlock's expression, but only for a split second until he adopts his usual, nonchalant and steely working mask.

Suddenly John realises that the name had sounded familiar, because a container of it can be found on Sherlock's shelf in their bathroom cupboard at home.

The corpse's tracksuit top has ridden up as he'd ended up on the floor, so that a sliver of skin is visible on his lower back. John kneels down next to Sherlock.

There are stretch marks on his sides, making John wonder if the man been substantially heavier earlier in his life. The marks could have been created as he lost weight. The skin has a slightly yellowish colouring. "Jaundice?" John asks, and leans his palm on the floorboard to have a look at the man's eyes. The sclerae aren't white - there's a definite yellowish tint to them.

"Could be drugs," Anderson says.

Sherlock rolls his eyes conspiratorially at John, who chuckles. Lestrade has pulled on a pair of gloves and is rummaging around the man's pockets. They're empty. "No phone, keys or a wallet."

"Turn him," Sherlock commands and Lestrade and John drag the man onto his back after the photo tech has snapped a series of pictures.

The man's lower stomach is now visible. John grabs a pair of gloves and tries to pass Sherlock a pair, which he ignores.

Sherlock proceeds to run his fingers along the man's abdomen. There are tiny pinprick-like marks there. "Clearly not a---"

Anderson has leaned in closer to see better. "Diabetic," he announces. Then he realises Sherlock may have been referring to the same issue. "What? Why not?" he snarls incredulously.

"The skin is hardened due to regular injections of what is likely insulin, but his fingertips are pristine, and there isn't any evidence of a continuous blood sugar monitoring unit in use. What sort of an insulin-dependent diabetic would inject the medicine, but neglect the blood glucose measurements? If a diabetic worked out this meticulously, they would have likely encountered hypoglycemia problems at some point, prompting them to a meticulous monitoring routine."

"Why would someone use insulin if they weren't diabetic?" Donovan asks.

Sherlock slides his hand underneath the man's shirt and gropes around.

Donovan blinks, disbelief evident on her face. "He's not--- Jesus Christ, Lestrade, everytime you bring him he gets worse!" She points a hand at Sherlock, awestruck: "now he's molesting them!"


"Gynae what now?" the DI asks.

"Feminine breasts on an otherwise muscular, fit man. On top of that we have striae," he says and John diligently points at the stretch marks, "Acne, male pattern mild baldness on the back of his head, oily hair, evidence of insulin injections, slightly puffy ankles, jaundice and extremely well-defined musculature and remnants of a recent spray tan."
Thirteen pairs of eyes are fixed on Sherlock, every one of them looking completely lost.

John, however, is not surprised. Being a doctor has helped him put two and two together.

"Oh come on!" Sherlock exclaims. "Seriously? No bells ringing, no connections being made in any of your pedestrian brains?"

John wouldn't be surprised to hear the word 'obvious' next. He has a hunch where this is going, but then again he has the advantage of a medical degree to level the playing field in this case.

"Fitness fanatic using anabolic steroids, insulin and probably a sizable collection of other illicit substances," Sherlock announces in that impatient tone he can't seem to resist when he feels that others are being unbearably slow compared to him.

"Shouldn't he have injection sites for those steroids somewhere, then?" Anderson asks, and the arrogance has now evaporated from his voice.

"You are quite welcome to inspect his buttocks," Sherlock says with more than a hint of sarcasm on his tone, "but many steroids can also be ingested in tablet form. Insulin, however, degrades in the digestive tract so it must be injected. Granted, some of the track marks on his stomach could have been from injecting something else. Thin needles are not exclusive to insulin - they could be used to inject many medications in sufficiently small volumes."

Sherlock snaps a photo of the man's stomach on his phone, and then turns to address the group gathered around him again. Even when still kneeling behind the body, his old air of superiority is in fine form, and he certainly has everyone's attention. "You might be correct in that someone has wanted this to look like a drive-by shooting and a body dump, but when you find out who this is, you'll more likely be interviewing contacts in the City than some dealer in Brixton. We're looking for someone who's physically fit - it would require strength to haul an adult man up here. Besides, why on earth would a gang go to such trouble to conceal a body, but still leave him in plain sight?"

John glances down through a hole in the rafters. "Anyone could come up here."

"I suspect our killer transported the body here, because they knew of this place beforehand and no other location came to mind, even if this wasn't ideal. It's likely he had some personal connection to the place. Our culprit is likely to be someone not very experienced in hiding bodies. The whole setup is rather amateurish, if you ask me."

"What killed him, then?" Lestrade asks.

"I can't really say at this point. We'll know more after the post mortem," Sherlock says and leans his palms on his knees to push himself up, ignoring the hand John has extended.

They linger behind until most of the team has left. After Sherlock had gleaned all that he possibly can from the body, he'd wandered around the rafters, peering out through the windows, lost in thought and making no haste to leave the scene. John suspects it's mostly because he hadn't wanted an audience for his descent of the stairs.

When Sherlock is out of earshot, Lestrade leans close to John. "Do you need a hand getting him
down?"

John yawns. "No, down the stairs is easier." It's a bit of a gloss-over - John knows he'll have to be the one to handle it. Sherlock would likely be mortified and throw a strop if John tried to recruit Lestrade to assist.

"I can't believe I didn't realise---" Lestrade starts.

John lifts his hand to interrupt. "It's not like you can commission these things."

An hour and a half later, Lestrade deposits them at home. Sherlock had insisted on a cab, but none had materialized, even after thirty minutes of waiting. Sherlock never accepts a ride in a patrol car for some reason, whereas John wouldn't have been all that bothered. Thankfully, Lestrade had arrived in an unmarked car, which Sherlock had begrudgingly deemed an acceptable transport option.

Usually at this point, Sherlock is a bundle of exhilaration - pacing around the flat, walking around - and over - furniture, rummaging around his book collection for research purposes, walking around with John's laptop and firing off quick searches on it, ignoring cups of tea he has requested and talking, talking, talking incessantly and not even waiting for John's reply. John's role is to take over the sofa and watch whatever catches his fancy from the telly, while making occasional nonverbal sounds to acknowledge Sherlock's presence. He isn't expected to actually partake in the thinking - this show is all about Sherlock's brain, kicked into high gear, and the talking is just a sign of him processing things, not a proper conversation. Actual words directed at him would likely be met with a prompt order to shut up and stop being distracting. John has tried to leave the scene on such occasions, to go to the bedroom or the bathroom, but Sherlock has a tendency to follow him even to those places, and if he shouts at Sherlock to force him to acknowledge that he'd like to shower without spectators, Sherlock will snap out of his intellectual self-hypnosis and stare at him, blinking as though someone had just dropped him down to Earth from a flying saucer.

Tonight, however, none of that happens. Sherlock does pick up one of John's old pharmacology textbooks, but instead of restlessly pacing around, he turns on the light above the kitchen table and starts reading quietly.

John begins watching the evening news, stealing occasional glances at Sherlock, who soon begins to have trouble staying awake. His eyes keep drifting shut as he leans his chin on his palm.

After an hour, the kitchen light is turned off and darkness overtakes the flat. The only light comes from the horror film John has begun watching. The sofa presses down beside him, and Sherlock arranges his limbs so that he's sitting next to John with his knees folded. John leans back on his half of the sofa, and after a few minutes Sherlock's head descends on his shoulder, curls tickling John's cheek.

John watches the rest of the movie, while sparing half an ear to listening how Sherlock's breathing deepens and eventually turns to a slight snore. John turns his head slightly, careful not to alter the position of his shoulder, and places a kiss somewhere in the middle of the disheveled set of curls.

An idle thought comes by: *I can't believe I just did that*, but it's just a spectre of days past, an old habit of fearing that the secret he's harbored about his feelings would come to light and scare away this one person that he would do anything for. He's allowed to do these sorts of things, now, which
never ceases to amaze him, but the occasions offered are few and far between. Whatever expectations John may have had of understanding Sherlock better, if they ever took the step from not-exactly friendship to an actual relationship, have been proven naive. Sherlock is as much a mystery as he used to be, only now with a few extra puzzles. The doctor in John wonders if this is because Sherlock is not right in himself yet, if that disorientation is making all the physical stuff so hard for him. He could ask, but he's certain no answer would be offered.

John uses the remote to kill the TV broadcast, and then nudges Sherlock gently. "Hey?"

Sherlock mumbles something incoherent that may or may not have contained John's name.

"You might like to sleep here, but I don't," John whispers, and gently shoves Sherlock away. Sherlock slides bonelessly onto his side on the sofa, sliding his hand under his cheek, face now planted mostly against a throw pillow. 'Case', he mumbles, and 'ballistics', and possibly also 'mongoose', and since nothing coming from his mouth could probably surprise John any more - except for a few select phrases John only likes to think about when he's alone in the flat with his hand shoved down his pants - he ignores it all. "I'm not carrying you to the bedroom," he tells Sherlock's half-comatose form, grabs a throw and spreads it over him.

Now, standing beside the sofa looking down on Sherlock, John faces another dilemma. Should he go to bed without Sherlock, leaving him here to wake up alone in the dark?

Whatever he does, is going to feel wrong. Like so much else of today and of late. John sighs, grabs a cushion, and turns his usual armchair to face the sofa. Then he settles down into it, trying to stop second-guessing his every decision today.
The next morning, Sherlock can hardly move. He is so stiff from sleeping on the sofa, and the climbing up and down of stairs, that every muscle seems to be sending out a distress signal. Apparently John had pulled off his socks at some point without Sherlock even noticing. It's a small relief: the blanket still on top of him feels irritating, as do his clothes.

He tries to open his eyes, but the light stabs in like an icepick. He shuts them instantly, retreating into the safety of darkness. There are pyrotechnic flashes resembling lightning happening on the back of his closed eyelids. What should be dark beneath, is now undulating between a dark, waxy purple and complete blackness. This is what he imagines a migraine without pain would be like. His head feels like someone has stuffed it full of cotton wool, and his stomach feels both empty and nauseous simultaneously. He dares not move, lest it result in throwing up. This means that the only option is to wait for the horror to pass.

It's not the first time he's felt like this after the hospital. The moments of transition between sleep and wakefulness are the worst. It is as if he has to shed the memory of being enthralled to Guillain-Barré, before full consciousness kicks in - to suffer through a disconcerting realignment of his brain to reality from whatever nightmares had gripped him mere minutes before. For some reason, today is one of those days when that shift is very hard to make without side effects.

Judging by the sound of footsteps and a shift in the ambient light evident even through his closed lids, John is arriving beside the sofa with a cup of tea. Sherlock can smell it, but knows that whatever is screwing up his body is also affecting his senses, because for a moment he feels as though he has been squashed up in a tea chest, surrounded by leaves, the scent of which is so strong that it almost makes him choke. He can't breathe, for the fear of inhaling the dust and asphyxiating.

"You okay? You're wincing."

It takes a moment to parse together the message behind the sounds. Sherlock recognises John’s voice, but it is sounding like the smell of a rotten apple left in the corner of the fruit basket - the sour scent of corruption edging into fermentation. It thankfully pushes all thoughts of suffocating in tea from his mind, but his stomach clenches in disgust all the same. He tries to unglue his tongue from the roof of his mouth, but it doesn’t cooperate.

"Sherlock?"

Usually, his own name spoken in John's voice is something he values above all other auditory sensations. Now, Sherlock finds he wants to stuff a balled-up sock in John's mouth because he's talking way too loudly. It sounds like nails raked down the surface of a blackboard.

Has the electrical wiring in the flat always hummed this loudly?

Sherlock feels warmth around his left wrist and realises that John is checking his pulse - something he always starts with when he thinks something is wrong. The fingertips rasp as if they were sandpaper against his skin, and he can feel a flinch moving all the way up his arm like a wave of thermal plasma. When the initially tentative touch becomes firmer, it's a little easier to bear, but it still adds up to what is already too much information. He’d gladly take pain over feeling like this, because pain he can understand, and it doesn't break him into pieces, making him fear that in his
current state he might not be able to fit them back together.

"Hey, take it easy. What’s going on in there?"

John, words, messages, John, solve it, words, decode---- The neural tidal wave arrives and Sherlock's head explodes in a storm of colours and pressure and electricity, making him gasp.

"Sherlock, talk to me." Somehow, he hears and understands, even though everything else is in chaos and John's voice sounds muffled and distorted. There is an edge of anxiety in John, underneath the doctor's voice that comes as second nature to him. Sherlock would really like to explain, to find the words to describe what is going on, but the right sounds are somewhere in his head where he can't reach them. It's as though he has a massive set of keys that he'd have to test through in darkness in order to find one that will fit, and it feels like too much effort to even try. There is a dense weight sitting on his chest that makes him feel both hollow, and full to bursting point at the same time.

His body seems to want to do something with all this distress, and Sherlock wonders if he is going to cry again, of all things, like he had when he was trapped in the hospital bed, and John had gone home. Is this some sort of a messed-up autonomic response? There's something distantly familiar about this, something he has either deleted or forgotten about.

Is this the return of the Guillain-Barré?

At the thought of that, Sherlock panics and his limbs thrash, as if to convince his brain that he can still feel, can still control his muscles. His left hand connects with something soft and then the sharp, unmistakeable sound of ceramic breaking.

"Shit!"

Accompanied by the curse had been a gasp of pain from John, and the sound seems to cut right through Sherlock's neural storm, pushing him to open his eyes. Somehow, the notion of danger seems to reset his brain, and it registers to him that John is inspecting his left hand, now wet, then wiping it on the front of his bathrobe.

"Cold water." The words come to Sherlock and out of him without much conscious command, as he realises that he must have knocked the tea mug out of John’s hand and the hot liquid has scalded him. Sherlock's speech centre acts before the rest of his brain has caught up, having connected with some automatic pattern in his memory.

John holds his right hand out to stop Sherlock from getting to his feet. "Stay there - there's broken china on the floor, you'll cut yourself." He heads off to the kitchen, and Sherlock can hear the tap running. A few minutes later, John returns with a kitchen towel, dustpan and brush, mopping up the spilt tea and sweeping up the shards. All Sherlock can muster is a slightly garbled 'sorry'.

Why is he thinking about thirty minutes? What's important about thirty minutes?

He sees John shaking his burnt hand after seeing to the glass shards on the floor. Thirty minutes----that’s how long one is supposed to cool a burn wound, isn't it? John must know this, he's a doctor. Maybe the recommendation has changed and John knows better. Sherlock knows he should go and see how bad it is, to show concern, to do something, but the desire to flee is greater.

Embarrassed by the whole incident, and still feeling as though a tidal wave has washed over him, Sherlock drags himself into the bathroom and struggles through the routine of shave, shower,
bladder relief, then teeth. He turns his back on the mirror as much as he can until it is so fogged up by the steam he can't see himself. It's too much trying to connect what he sees there to what he thinks he should be seeing. He's quite certain he'd been there sometime during the night, staring at himself, but the nights have begun to blend into one another and it's hard to tell if he'd actually been awake, or simply dreamt so.

The morning routine should be getting easier by now, but some days - these sorts of days - he seems to regress badly. By the time he’s finished, he’s exhausted, and his hands are shaking.

John meets him at the kitchen door with a glass of water and three pills. "Get these down first." He then gestures to the table, where two places have been set. "Toast and jam. If you can keep them down, then in an hour, we’ll try something more substantial."

John is staying in doctor-mode, then. If it means that he'll talk less, Sherlock is willing to tolerate it for now.

Once they're seated by the table, Sherlock can get a better look at the red splotch on the back of John’s left hand. "I'm sorry," he mumbles around a mouthful of toast.

John shrugs. "Just a second-degree. You didn’t do it on purpose, no need to apologise." He puts his mug down and looks across the table. "Dexterity will come and go. Two steps forward and one back. Especially when you're chasing away every physical therapist who dares come up the stairs, then charging up three stories of fire-escape on the crime scene." There's accusation behind these words, likely to the effect that John thinks he has both overexerted himself, and neglected to do something important. Is that what John thinks this abysmal morning has been the result of?

More importantly: is this the price he now pays for just a moment of normality, for standing on a crime scene feeling like himself? It now seems rather like a cocaine hit, in how fleeting it had been in reward and how disheartening the aftermath turns out to be. They had surveyed a crime scene. Nothing else. No chasing of suspects, no daring escapes, nothing that would have registered as even mildly taxing before. Yet he's feeling like he wants to sleep for a week.

Defensively, Sherlock mutters into his own tea, "I'm walking fine. And I managed the stairs, despite the fact that you thought I couldn’t."

"I didn’t say you couldn't, just that you probably shouldn’t have. You need to get back to using your upper body muscles, too. The physical therapy would---"

"Can't I enjoy my breakfast in peace?"

"You don't look like you're enjoying it," John says.

Sherlock takes a cardboard-tasting bite out of his irritatingly raspy toast, hoping that the sight of him eating will make the nagging cease.

It doesn't. Instead, John delivers an even more devastating blow.

"Maybe it’s time to take up the violin again."

Sherlock slams his mug down on the table so hard a bit of tea spills over the top, and gets up. "Stop INTERFERING!" he shouts, glaring daggers at John before marching into the bedroom and slamming the door shut. The noise makes him flinch, but it's worth it.

He drops onto the bed, arms and legs spread across the whole of it. He's out of breath after storming out of the kitchen, which brings on unpleasant memories of being very short of breath
during the early days of the illness even when lying down on the bed. Thankfully, a consoling realization hits: when he is angry, he is more fluid in his movements because he is no longer self-consciously thinking about how to manage everything. What has taken a manual effort for the past six weeks is now, just occasionally, but still, an automatic one. That makes him feel just a little better than he would have thought possible under the circumstances.

He turns to his side to stare at the wall. Why did John have to suggest returning to the violin on a morning like this, when he's struggling with even the smallest things? He cannot bear the thought of even opening the violin case, because then he'd have to look at it and know that he will never, ever be able to see it without being instantly aware of his decrepitude. He closes his eyes, listening to John quietly moving around the kitchen, probably returning things to the fridge and piling up dishes in the sink. The sounds no longer seem distorted or difficult to identify. The anger seems to have dissipated most of the haze in his head, but his breathing still isn't completely back under control; he needs a distraction. The case will do nicely.

Lestrade hasn't texted, so the post mortem must be undone as of yet. Sherlock is certain he'd gleaned all he could from the corpse - further information will require the help of forensic science. Until the victim is identified, they can hardly start finding out why the man had ended up on the sawmill rafters.

Even though the body dump site has been processed as far as he is concerned, that doesn't mean that there's nothing he can do to advance the case. Sherlock fishes out his laptop from the floor, nearly dropping it when an arm muscle cramps. Once he has arranged the computer to lean on his stomach and knees, he picks up where he had left off last night in his research of illegal anabolic steroids. He plugs in his earphones and finds a piece of Mozart’s clarinet concerto, because listening to anything containing the violin is simply not possible.

For John, getting burnt by hot tea is only the start of a day that seems to keep getting exponentially worse. While trying to contain the disaster area that is the kitchen, he wonders how he is ever going to get through to Sherlock, if his every attempt at addressing a worry ends with the man stalking off and hiding in the bedroom.

John's conversation with the Harwich Manor chief physician had confirmed what he must have suspected even though he hadn't quite worked out how to describe it - Sherlock had not engaged at all with the psychological aspects of his recovery while he was at the clinic, and that trend certainly seems to be continuing. Even though he's back at work, it doesn't mean he's right as rain - on the contrary, this might serve as a rude awakening to how things are, and John fears he will have to be the one to weather the storm.

Mycroft certainly seems to be expecting him to do something - why else would he have put John on the trail of this issue by suggesting contacting Dr Platt? John quails at the thought of trying to take a counselling role himself. Of all the people, I'd be the last one… His own attitudes to his rehabilitation from the gunshot wound had been ambivalent at best, downright obstructionist at worst. To him, something about the whole "talking to a therapist" routine had sounded too awful that it had been very hard for him to even consider it when he had been invalided out of the service. A part of it may have stemmed from his own feelings of inadequacy regarding how much help he could offer others in the form of talk as a doctor. Some amount of reticence may have also been borne out of seeing his father seek help for his drinking when his mother had threatened divorce.
Nothing he had tried had ever worked, the hell he called home had stayed the same, and they'd divorced anyway.

In the end, it had been John's army medic friend Bill Murray who had convinced him to seek out professional help, arguing that it would be hypocritical of John to recommend such things to his patients in his new career as a GP, if John himself wouldn't give it a try. He'd tried to argue with Bill: 'practice what I preach, not what I do. Isn't that a codicil to the Hippocratic Oath?' He had still gone through with it, out of professional courtesy and because Bill wouldn't stop nagging. After Bill had left London for another tour of duty in Germany, John had struggled to get any value out of the therapy.

Mycroft is right; he isn't traumatised by the experience of war - he had missed it, especially the challenge of the surgical tasks under combat conditions. In his fledgling career as a GP, he misses the concrete nature of army medicine and surgery. Psychology and psychiatry had never been his forte, and he'd nearly flunked those courses at medical college because he didn't see much point in them, having already decided on surgical training. He used to say that the only patients he liked talking to were those already under general anaesthesia, because they didn’t talk back, argue, or demand things from him. An exaggeration, yes, but a grain of truth was buried in these somewhere. It wasn't that he didn't care about people's problems - he really did, and he wanted to help, but whenever they talked about them, expecting something from him he felt so very helpless. It was one of the reasons why he preferred being a GP locum instead of a permanent hire - no risk of building up a long term relationship with a patient, and thus no risk of facing his own inadequacy of solving problems that aren't in his power to erase. This mindset has worked well enough during his army days, the short training periods before it in different hospitals, and even when on call at busy emergency departments. He had wanted excitement, quick decisions and the chance to test the limits of his knowledge and his skills. Becoming a battle surgeon allowed him to easily sidestep many things, to focus on problems with clearer answers. He knows he could have done more for many of his patients in terms of offering consolation and not assuming someone else would address what being injured and seeing all the horror was doing to the minds of those soldiers, but he'd had plenty on his plate keeping his own together. At least that had been his excuse.

Sometimes John wonders if, in some things, he and Sherlock aren't very different at all.

In all honesty, he hadn't actually fired Ella because she'd been useless; he had simply stopped going, because he’d found life with the madman he’d moved in with to be a more effective solution in just one night than the months of visits to her had been. That didn't mean whatever had plunged him into depression had been solved, not by a long shot. It's just that the playing field had been changed.

But, this isn't about him. John knows he shouldn't equate his own experiences and shortcomings with someone else's. What had or hadn't worked for him, likely doesn't predict at all what would help Sherlock, or get him to even acknowledge that there's a lot of work to be done yet, if he's to try and regain the skills he has lost. John actually hopes that the case won't require them to get out of the house today, since it's obvious yesterday had completely drained Sherlock's energy. And the case hardly solves all the issues with Sherlock's recovery and his lack of initiative. It's clearly up to John to find something they could try, but where should he even start looking, and who could he consult?
"The answer walks up the stairs with a rather world-weary tread around tea-time."

"Good afternoon, John," Mycroft greets politely after opening the door with a key nobody has given him. He stands in the doorway, umbrella hooked over one arm, coat neatly folded over the other, clearly expecting an invitation to come in. He never usually waits for one.

"If you’re looking for Sherlock…" John starts.

Mycroft interrupts him. "I’m not. I expect he’s hiding from the world in his bedroom. Been beastly to you today, has he?"

John finds himself wanting to defend Sherlock. "Not really. It’s not easy, you know. Yesterday was the first time he agreed to go to a crime scene. I said no to a shift today, because I thought he might go to Bart’s to harass Molly into starting the autopsy early when he should be resting, and I’d need to stop him from going. Instead, he’s shut himself away and won’t talk."

"So, he has returned to case work?"

Something about the man’s superior tone of voice always manages to rub John up the wrong way. "Have you come to nag about the physical therapy? Because if you have, then you can turn around and leave now. He’s not going to listen. Yesterday was an important milestone in his recovery, and he did fine," he snaps. "Sometimes he just needs a time-out, and this is one of those times."

That provokes a cold smile. "Your protective instincts are admirable. However, they may be blinding you to the obvious. *The Work*, as he so poetically calls it, won’t be enough."

Mycroft hangs up his coat and umbrella before joining John in the sitting room. John pointedly does not ask him to sit down, but Mycroft does so anyway, moving to Sherlock’s chair and ensconcing himself there as if it were his own.

From his usual chair, John looks across and frowns. "I really don’t need this now, Mycroft. And I know for sure he doesn’t, either." He raises his hand and rubs the space between his eyebrows. He’s really too tired to deal with a verbal fencing match from the older Holmes, or even having to listen to one between the two brothers.

"Indeed, you do. And that is precisely why I am here. There will be no more physical therapists beating a path to the front door of Baker Street, only to be turned away."

Rather wearily, John snorts. "Yeah, well… I could have told you that it would all be a waste of time after the first three."

"On the contrary. It proves my point most admirably. You are my brother’s preferred medical professional, so no more of that ilk will darken your door. But, it does mean that you are the one who needs to convince him that he really ought to take up the offer of the next person who is coming to call on him."

"Who’s that?" John is intrigued. Is Mycroft hinting that there had been some method in the madness of subjecting the parade of PT specialists to the ritual rejection from Sherlock?

"A violin instructor."

John just closes his eyes. Then he opens them and leans forward, palms on his knees, angry. "Been there, done that, have the scars to prove it. Sherlock bit my bloody head off earlier because I dared to suggest that he should give the violin a go. He won’t even let me mention the damned thing! That’s why he’s sulking in his bedroom right now, because I dared to bring it up this morning."
A patrician eyebrow is raised. "Nevertheless, it is time he resumed. He must have recovered sufficient manual dexterity to put a bow on the strings; time to raise his game."

"Are you even listening to me? It's obvious he's absolutely terrified of the idea. He’s not even got it out of the case since he got home! I tried to hide it from him before he arrived, and he threw a fit, literally within five minutes of you leaving after bringing him here from Harwich. Now it sits there in the corner..." John points at the empty music stand and the case beside it, "...collecting dust. He eyes it ever so often as if it were a wild beast. I really don't think it's a good idea to stress him with it right now, when there's more important stuff to address first."

Mycroft leans forward in his seat, clearly unruffled by his outburst. "I’m curious. Why do you think Sherlock took up the violin in the first place?"

The question surprises John. He considers for a moment, tapping the armrest with his fingers. "Well, I suppose it was probably like for most kids? Some adult says learning music would be a sensible hobby, and the next thing you know you’re packed off to lessons. After a while, you realise that you actually like it and from then on, you want to continue practicing. Or you don't, and you give it up."

A rather condescending smile takes hold of Mycroft’s face. "Perhaps in your case, John. What was it? Recorder lessons in primary school? And then some other woodwind in the school band, perhaps."

"Get to the point, Mycroft. No need to be rude about me in the process."

"I wasn’t trying to be. It’s just that Sherlock’s reason for playing the violin was, and still is, rather different. You will know by now that my brother is not the usual sort of amateur musician. He was home-schooled until the age of ten, and learned music from a very young age, just as I did. At first, both of us played the piano."

John imagines two tiny Holmeses in front of a grand piano. Not much of a stretch of his imagination.

"When he was nine, Sherlock stopped talking."

John glances down the hall toward the bedroom. "Yeah, he still does that sometimes."

"He stopped talking for seven months."

That surprises John, and it probably shows on his face.

"He simply withdrew from everyone and everything. Mummy found it perplexing, to say the least. Nothing she did could coax him into speaking. Our father was more sanguine about it, but then he has always been more tolerant of Sherlock’s little peculiarities. We let him be, but then he stopped completing his lessons, and then stopped reading, or even being willing to get out of bed. That's when the parental unit presented him to a horde of specialists, none of whom could diagnose a single medical reason for it. Psychiatrists do find it hard to come to diagnostic conclusions when their patients won’t speak at all. Consensus settled on a major depressive episode, which is rare in children."

John remembers their first meeting: "Sometimes I don’t talk for days. Would that bother you?"

Initially it really hadn't bothered him, but what he has now heard certainly puts an ominous light on the whole thing. "Where does the violin figure in all this?" John asks.

"I was away at school, but apparently, a friend of our mother’s came to visit one afternoon and they
played a sonata together. He was a violinist, and our mother played the piano. Sherlock came in and listened, watching the visitor play. He’d only heard violins on recordings before. Then, as if he hadn’t spent the previous seven months totally mute, he asked him if he would teach him. He started right then and there. You’ve heard Sherlock and watched him play right here in this room. What do you think his violin means to him?"

John thinks of all the times when the flow of music had drifted up the stairs to his old bedroom to console him after he had woken up drenched in cold sweat after a nightmare. He remembers lazy afternoons when Sherlock would work on some obscure composition, a few bars at a time. He recalls coming home to find Sherlock playing a piece, oblivious to the world, completely lost in the music, looking as though he were completely surrendering to it. When Sherlock plays, his whole being seems to become a part of the violin. All of this could be summarized with one word, and that word is what John now offers to Mycroft. "It must mean everything to him. I can’t imagine how much he has missed it."

"The violin is more than just a musical instrument for Sherlock. Sometimes it is the only way he can really communicate what he is feeling. For that reason alone, he needs to resume playing, and it needs to happen now. I would have arranged all this during his time at Harwich, but his physical recovery hadn't advanced nearly far enough by then."

John shakes his head. "It’s going to be too hard for him. He won’t be able to play the way he used to, not for a long while. After GBS, muscle memory doesn’t just re-appear, like normal memory can return to someone waking up from a coma. He’s had to re-learn so much - even walking."

"Which is exactly why he needs to start now." Mycroft glances at the nest Sherlock has recently built on the sofa with decorative pillows and a throw. "Swaddling him in blankets and indulging his yearning to live in denial will fix nothing. Sherlock has to face the music, so to speak. For his sanity’s sake."

"That’s a little… melodramatic. Even by your standards."

"You don’t know Sherlock, or at least you don’t know what he was like before you met him. That fact is part of the reason why Sherlock likes you. You seem willing to suspend disbelief in a way that few others can. Don’t make assumptions of knowing what the past four months have been like for him. The truth is far worse than you suspect."

"Suspend my disbelief about what?"

"The fragility of his mental state, and the extent that his sanity requires expression. I am sure Sherlock has told you that he abhors emotion."

John gives a little laugh of recognition. "If you think that Sherlock doesn’t feel things, then you’re the one who doesn’t know him. I’ve heard the grit on the lens speech, and I know he doesn’t mean it."

"Precisely. But feeling and expressing those feelings are two different things. Sherlock has long refused to engage with any form of psychiatric intervention addressing them. Other forms of therapy he has engaged in, thankfully, but in intervening in his mental state the options are, regrettably, limited to early problem prevention and extreme damage control. We are well past the first option by now."

John sits up again. He's curious about many things contained in Mycroft's last comments, but he needs to address the more acute issues first. "You told me to talk to Doctor Platt at Harwich. She said that he wouldn’t talk about the emotional consequences of the illness. He flat-out refused.
He’s not going to agree to any of that now that he’s back home, and judging by what you’ve said, it’s a fool’s errand even trying."

"One might actually argue that despite his intelligence, Sherlock might not be a good candidate in the first place for benefiting from talk therapy, because communicating his emotions in such a manner is very alien to him. You see, now, what makes the music lessons imperative? You might pity him enough to spare him from the impact, but he cannot be allowed to perpetuate the myth that he’s not been damaged by this. He won’t pick up the violin, because he’s afraid of accepting what he’s lost."

"Do you really think a violin instructor is going to be able to get him to play again?" John makes no effort to conceal his incredulity.

"I think he is beginning to realise that he has no alternative. Before you came along, the violin was the only thing that seemed to raise his spirits when his work couldn’t. I think he will be willing to try it, if only because the scientist in him will want to know if it could repair what no one, not even you, John, have been able to mend since he came home - a connection to himself."

John leans back slowly in his chair, considering Mycroft’s words. "I hope to God you’re right."

"Good. I am glad you have come to that conclusion." He reaches into his jacket breast pocket and pulls out a business card. "These are the contact details of a physical therapist who is also a former professional violinist. She specializes in working with musicians. You need to be the one who gets in touch with her, and you need to be the one to convince Sherlock to take the first lesson. He won’t hear it from me, but I have faith that he will listen to you."

John looks down at the business card and wonders if that is still true. Will he be able to convince Sherlock to do this? The thought seems preposterous when taking into consideration his recent success in getting Sherlock to communicate about anything, or to continue with rehabilitation.

Still, as sceptical as he might be, he loves Sherlock too much not to give this a try.

"I’ll call her," John promises.
The doorbell rings and John hurries down to answer, leaving a restless Sherlock flitting about the kitchen, somehow appearing to do nothing and everything at the same time.

He opens the front door to the sight of a forty-something woman with dark brown hair parted in the middle that reaches to her shoulder. She has sharp facial features, a carefully composed smile and warm brown eyes. She looks a little tired, which probably makes her appear older than she actually is. She's dressed in a peacoat that has already been unbuttoned, a grey woollen skirt, a black jacket and low heels.

John thinks she looks like a music teacher. Sherlock would probably tell him that this might be more due to his assumptions than an actual visual analysis, if he weren't too busy trying to contain his obvious nervousness.

"Hello," John says, "Miss Ellicott?"

"Mrs Ellicott, and it's Helen, please. John Watson?"

John had called her two days earlier. Apparently Mycroft had explained the situation to her already, so John had only needed to talk to her briefly before shoving the phone into Sherlock's hands without explaining to him what the call was about. It had been amusing to watch Sherlock's expression change throughout the call. The first victory had been that he hadn't hung up after finding out who the caller was. The second victory had been that Sherlock hadn't completely exploded in rage once the call had been over. The third victory had been that he was willing to receive the teacher for a visit, to discuss further what sort of assistance she might be able to offer. John had been left wondering what on Earth she had said to Sherlock. Maybe she had left out the whole physical therapist thing. John hadn't heard most of the conversation, because he had politely retreated from the sitting room while Sherlock talked to her.

"I assume this is Mycroft's doing?" Sherlock had asked after ending the call, after John had been staring at him for several minutes, expecting whatever reaction was to come.

John had nodded. "Yeah. He thought you might like to look into this. I agree---" he hastens to add, wanting to steer Sherlock away from focusing on getting annoyed at the big brother, "--that having someone helping you practice might be a good idea."

"I'm not adverse to instruction," Sherlock had replied, passing John back his phone. "I did take violin lessons for a number of years when I was younger. It could be a chance to refine some techniques that have always been eluding me."

There it was again - complete erasure of the past months. Sherlock was talking about violin
instruction as though the purpose was to further his old skillset, not to regain it.

Mrs Ellicott - Helen - had requested that they both be present for this appointment. John hasn't been able to figure out why.

"Call me John. Come on in. Sherlock's upstairs in our flat. Our landlady lives down here."

"Right," Helen says and quickly combs through her hair with her fingers - the brisk wind outside had made a mess of it. She then follows John upstairs. John notices she isn't carrying a violin case, just a handbag. He had assumed a teacher would need her own instrument for lessons, since his clarinet teacher had always one along. John had taken lessons for two years until he'd finally been allowed to swap them for rugby.

Maybe the purpose of this visit is just to talk?

"Sorry about the mess," John says as Helen steps into the flat, "I try to clean it up but Sherlock keeps making more."

Sherlock, standing by the coatrack, waiting for them, rolls his eyes at John and then extends his hand. "How do you do, Mrs Ellicott," he says formally.

"It's Helen, please. Nice to meet you, Sherlock. Your brother spoke very highly of you," she adds.

Sherlock snorts incredulously. "He must've gone mad if he did that. Have you had tea? Would you care for some? Of course you would, this would all be very rude otherwise," he rambles hastily. "John!" he then commands in an unusually high-pitched voice, "Tea, please."

"I'm not your housekeeper, either," John jokes, but heads to the kitchen anyway.

"We can have a quick cuppa if you want. This is your time, and you have the right to decide how we use it," Helen says.

Sherlock busies himself by finding the sugar, putting it on the counter, getting a dish for it, forgetting the dish on the kitchen table, fetching the sugar again, and then abandoning the whole project in lieu of a trip to the bathroom.

When taking into consideration how little Sherlock had done to prepare for this visit, to John he does now appear disproportionately nervous and preoccupied with pointless things.

"You specialize in musicians, then? How'd that happen?" John asks. To get to the fridge he is forced to sidestep past Helen, who has taken a seat beside the kitchen table without being prompted. John decides he likes her - she doesn't appear timid, overly formal, or unsettled by Sherlock's contagiously restless energy.

"I used to be one. I never wanted to be a soloist; I hated all that competitiveness. I met my then-husband Andrew at Cardiff Conservatorium, and we were both hired for the Dresden Staatskapelle after graduation," she says with more than a hint of pride in her voice. John deduces that Helen thinks he ought to recognize the orchestra by its name. He doesn't, but he'll accept that it must a good one. "He played the viola. Then he had a stroke due to a rupture of an AVM. That's an---"

"Arterio-venous malformation," John completes her explanation. "I'm a doctor."

"I see. Andrew survived, but the damage was done. He couldn't play any more, not up to the level required for work. His contract expired, and there was no support network of any kind, no system in place in Dresden we could have fallen back on. I resigned, because my paycheck was hardly
enough to support the two of us, so we came back to London. We spent years trying to find someone within the NHS who could understand his needs. There were experts - neurologists and physical therapists specialized in the rehabilitation of musicians, but they were all in the private sector, which we couldn't really afford. I read up everything I could find, we tried everything that we could do on our own. Soon I realised I'd lost my taste for a profession that abandoned anyone no longer fitting its standards. Around that time, a foundation was started to aid musicians in such situations, but they lacked trained professionals. I talked to them, they helped me through physical therapist training and some advanced specialty training, and here we are. I work for the foundation now, have for years. There are thousands of musicians on our members' list now, and we have many notable donors, Mycroft Holmes among them."

Sherlock arrives back from the bathroom just in time to raise a brow at the mention of his brother, but says nothing. Once tea is poured, he stirs it without drinking a drop. To John it almost looks as if he's trying to hypnotize himself with the repetitive circular motion, staring down at the swirling liquid.

John and Helen sip their tea in silence for a moment. Sherlock gets up, pours his down the drain and retreats to standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the sitting room. He's picking at what looks like imaginary lint on his trousers.

Helen puts her now empty mug down on the table, and her eyes fix on the violin placed on the coffee table.

Sherlock hadn't put it there, John had. Sherlock had spent his morning by first listening to Verdi with the volume turned to maximum, and then arguing with Mrs Hudson over house etiquette. John had tidied the sitting room up and finally, when it became evident that Sherlock wasn't going to lift a finger to set things up for the tutoring session, he'd gone to the bedroom, pulled the violin case from underneath the bed where it had somehow ended up, put it on the bed atop tangled sheets, and opened it.

John didn't usually pay much mind to the instrument, but lately he'd begun to somehow feel sorry for it. During Mycroft's visit it had still been in the sitting room, but that had been the day when John had dared to raise the subject of playing it, and the next morning John had noticed it shoved under their bed. Before the illness he'd often found it in various places and positions in the living room, always bare without its case, ready to be picked up at a moment's notice when the mood hit. Now it had been packed away, abandoned in the dark.

John had lifted the violin carefully from the case close to eye level, and peered inside through the F-holes. He had barely able make out a label: 'Antonius Stradivarius Cremonensis Faciebat Anno 1714'. A genuine Stradivari violin is hardly the strangest thing Sherlock has ever kept in the flat.

"Is that it?" Helen asks, not even attempting to mask her curiosity and anticipation, nodding towards the table on top of which the instrument lays. "May I?" she enquires politely, rising from her chair already.

Sherlock spreads his arms in a mildly welcoming gesture. "Be my guest."

Helen picks the violin up with much less apprehension than John always feels when handling an instrument worth millions. She plucks the strings one by one, testing the tuning, slightly turns one of the pegs, plucks again and then nods slightly. She puts it back on the table and picks up the bow John had placed next to the violin. Sherlock has several, but this had been the only one in the violin case, so he assumes it's the one Sherlock had mostly been using before he'd fallen ill.
Sherlock watches the proceedings carefully, hands clamped together behind his ramrod-straight back, not making a single move to approach or introduce his prized possession. John assumes he trusts Helen to know how to handle it. Maybe this is a test of some sort.

Helen twists the small screw at the end of the bow. "Rosin, assuming you haven't just applied some?" she asks, and finally, Sherlock unfreezes. He goes to the bookcase, lifts the lid off a small, antique snuffbox and passes a small piece of dark amber-coloured rosin to Helen. John knows what it is and how it is used - he's watched Sherlock applying it to the hairs on the bow countless times. Helen does the same now, and then attaches the shoulder rest John is glad he had remembered to dig out of the violin case and place on the table. She then lifts the violin on her left collarbone with a fluid movement, picks up the bow and turns to Sherlock. "You haven't asked for my references."

"I assume I will be hearing them shortly," Sherlock replies, crossing his arms in almost defensive manner. He has retreated to lean slightly against the kitchen doorframe again.

Helen closes her eyes briefly, raises the bow, and then begins playing. John doesn't recognize the piece. All in all, he does not consider himself any sort of an expert in such things, but it's clear, even to him, that Helen plays well. Really well. Beautifully. Much like Sherlock when he's on a practice kick. When he had last been on a practice kick.

John decides to move to the other side of the table so he can see her playing. He notices that Sherlock doesn't look exactly happy but not disapproving, either.

When Helen stops playing she's still smiling like someone who has made a new friend.

"Bach Partita in D minor," Sherlock points out quietly.

Helen holds the violin at an arm's length and turns it to admire the back of its body. "Your brother told me it's the Le Maurien Strad?"

"Correct. Stolen in 2002 from the safe of a German cultural foundation, recovered in 2009." 

"Recovered how?"

"It's actually a funny story, one which I'm sure you'd like to hear right away ---" Sherlock starts.

John interrupts him by slamming closed the fridge door while putting the milk away. The hinge makes a small squeak that Sherlock hates - he insists it always interrupts his train of thought. "Shouldn't the two of you be getting started, assuming you're going to practice today?" John says amicably. "I could go upstairs, give you some space."

Helen crosses the sitting room floor to pass the violin to Sherlock, who hesitantly receives it along with the bow. He holds the violin by the neck, sticks his forefinger between the bow hairs and the wooden bar in it - whatever that's called - and lets it dangle from his finger. John can't recall him ever holding the bow like that. He looks distracted.

"Actually, John, I'd like you to keep us company," Helen says. "To be a neutral ear. This is something I always prefer for the first session. I'm sure you've heard him play before?"

Sherlock's eyebrows plunge down to frame a suspicious glare.

"All the time, yeah," John says, stealing a glance at Sherlock. It feels as though the temperature in the room has dropped considerably. He expects Sherlock to protest, to insist John is promptly removed from the picture, but he doesn't.
"Right, then," Helen says and turns to face Sherlock. She seems nonplussed at his dismissive expression. "I'd like you to think about a piece that is at the upper range of your skill level, one you have practiced a lot, one you think you can play very well."

Sherlock walks to his desk, rummages around in a drawer and produces a few sheets of music. He presents the stack to Helen. John steals a glance as he sits down in his usual armchair. 'Polonaise Brillante in D Major,' the headline says, attributing the composition to a H. Wieniawski. John has never heard of such a composer.

Sherlock looks slightly defiant as he watches Helen leaf through the sheets. For a moment, he looks the way John remembers him being before all this. It's like looking back in time, before the illness.

"I'm impressed," Helen says. How many years of instruction did you have when you were younger?"

"Fifteen."

"And you've never had a significant pause in practice?"

"There was a five-year gap, during which I did not own a violin," Sherlock says circumspectly. Helen does not ask for details, of which John is glad, since those years probably had something to do with drugs.

"Still, plenty of diligent practice. Go on, then," she prompts, and Sherlock's expression shifts. John decides his Sherlock radar must be malfunctioning, because he doesn't know how to interpret this deer-in-headlights look - he even has trouble believing what he's seeing. Sherlock looks as though he's missed a step - as though he'd momentarily forgot himself when they had been talking about the polonaise, and now he's been violently jerked back into reality.

Sherlock walks to the window, turns his back to them and puts the violin on the windowsill. With careful, controlled movements he uses his left hand to arrange the bow into his right. The position of it looks the way it always has - delicate and gentle, but there's a definite tremor in his fingers, and his little finger seems to be slipping from its perch atop the screw of the bow. He then lifts the violin onto his collarbone and gently presses down his chin to keep it in place. He turns partially towards his audience, and with a gentle raise of his elbow and a sharp intake of breath, he begins to play.

Nearly expiring from getting shot and being strapped into a bomb notwithstanding, the minutes that follow must be the longest in John's life. He wishes he could pour petrol on the memory of them and throw in a match, to delete it all, like Sherlock claims to be able to do to useless, painful things.

John had expected that there would be a clear difference to how well Sherlock had played before, but he had hardly anticipated things to be this bad. He had expected some scraping and screeching, some wrong notes, maybe for the dynamic to be a little off. Instead, he's forced to hear this.
It sounds like a very drunken person with only mediocre skill trying to scramble through a tune. The effort is there, but there's very little fine control. Even John, who would never pretend to know much about violin playing, can spot that Sherlock's bow doesn't stay neatly within the narrow area between the fingerboard and the soundboard, but keeps sliding sideways into strange angles instead. The worst thing is that there seems to be a vicious circle happening, where Sherlock seems to get more self-conscious about what's going on by the second as he plays, and that makes him perform even worse.

John silently berates himself for his naive optimism. What had he expected? Only this morning, Sherlock had used both his hands to stir sugar into his tea lest he knock the cup over.

Why the hell hadn't they waited until Sherlock was better, until it wasn't blindingly obvious that he hadn't yet really regained fine motor control of his fingers? It's too early, it's a nightmare, and John's chest feels suddenly constricted, because his body is already anticipating what his mind is only catching up to now: the aftermath of these agonizing minutes is going to be murder.

Sherlock finally interrupts his playing mid-phrase, and one of the lower strings echoes for a moment afterwards. It had been a decent note, a little raw but unwavering and recognizable. The violin is still held quite firmly between his clavicle and his chin, but he lets the arm supporting it drop, shaking it vigorously as though it's gone tingly. Perhaps it has. His right hand, still holding the bow, is shaking. When he lets his hand fall, his grip on the bow fails, sending it falling on the floor.

John is grateful for the carpet underneath - hearing the bow hit the wooden floor would have sounded like an explosion in the silence that has now overcome the room. He doesn't even want to swallow, lest he break this suspended horror, and unleash whatever disaster is bound to come of this. He doesn't want to be the one to make the sound that rips them away from this petrified quietude, because when that happens, they can't pretend anymore that none of it ever happened.

Sherlock bites his lip, and his eyes narrow for a fraction of a second. The thumb of his bow hand is nudging against the knuckle of his forefinger - John recognizes this as one of his more common nervous ticks. He doesn't make a move to retrieve the bow from the floor.

John throws a desperate glance at Helen, who doesn't turn to face him.

Sherlock looks expressionless, detached, as though he's not entirely present. John briefly wonders if he has retreated to the Mind Palace. This seems unlikely, because Sherlock's next movements are surprisingly precise as he steps away from the window and lays the violin on his desk. He then simply stands there for a moment, seemingly oblivious of the presence of John or Helen. He's breathing heavily as though he'd run a mile.

The silence is yet again as thick as molasses, heavy like concrete.

Helen shifts in her seat.

"I'm not feeling well," Sherlock suddenly says, articulating the words as though trying them out for taste. He continues to look bewildered, overwhelmed, lost in thought.

John desperately hopes Sherlock would look at him. He wants Helen to say something - to say it's fine, to say it's a good start, to say she can fix this - but instead she remains politely silent, simply watching Sherlock as though she's oblivious to the disaster that has just struck and left everyone else reeling. John finds himself somewhat glad for her calmness, but it doesn't overrule an overwhelming urge to remove Sherlock from the scene, to take him somewhere more private, to tell him to forget it, to say it doesn't matter, to tell him to delete it, to offer a distraction, to make
promises John has no business making because they're not things that are in anyone's power to promise.

"Please excuse me," Sherlock says politely, turns on his heel and walks to the bedroom - his bedroom, their bedroom - and closes the door behind him. He doesn't slam it, which somehow strikes John as alarming. He knows how to deal with the strops, the tantrums and the sulks. Somehow, this feels like unknown territory.

"I guess that's it for today, then," John says mostly to himself, still frowning at the closed bedroom door.

Helen rises from the sofa, still looking comfortable and calm in a way that irks John. He can't understand how this could be, when he himself feels like there's a magnet pulling him to that closed door, a frantic need to do some manner of damage control. He feels like he's preparing for battle, his pulse pounding in his ears.

"I'll be back the same time next week. We haven't set a formal appointment, so you'll let me know if he decides he's not going to continue with this? Mycroft and Sherlock both have my contact information," Helen says.

John finds it quite empathetic that she'd assume the client wouldn't want to contact her themselves, if they didn't want to start a tutoring relationship. He suspects that for many, this first session, gone badly enough, would be the end of it.

"I'll walk you out," John says and reaches his hand out to grab his coat, but then realises he won't really need it. God, he's so distracted. How could he not be? He has no idea what's going on behind that bedroom door, and part of him is downright scared of finding out.

Helen dons her peacoat, retrieves her handbag and they make their way down the stairs.

John briefly considers apologizing for Sherlock's impoliteness, but then realises that he doesn't actually have anything to apologize for - Sherlock had been unusually civil. Whatever explosion John had been expecting hadn't happened, but this does nothing to abate the sinking feeling in his stomach.

Mycroft's words pop into his head like an irritating melody. 'When you walk with Sherlock Holmes you see the battlefield'.

Right now the battlefield is clearly inside Sherlock's head.

At the door, Helen turns, hand on the doorknob. "John. I can see you're worried."

"He doesn't take well to being reminded of what he can't do. He's not like anybody else, he doesn't react the way people usually do."

Helen's features melt into an understanding smile, yet it is somehow one that holds no pity. "I work with musicians, John. Do you think he's the only gifted, moody, neuroatypical person I've had as a client? The world of classical music practically demands downright pathological attention to detail, competitiveness, a frightening level of single-mindedness and a need to get everything just right. Having the wherewithal to actually learn up to the level where he's been - not a lot of people can do that. You need to be a particular sort of committed to do it, the music needs to hold special significance for you."

John reasons that Mycroft must have spoken to Ellicott at length prior to giving John her contact information - how else would she be using words such as neuroatypical? "Do you think he could
relearn it up to his old level?" John asks, even though he dreads the answer. He knows he needs to hear it. Sherlock and he can't both bury their heads in the sand.

Helen looks thoughtful. "It depends. First he needs to accept that he's lost so much of it. Before that happens, I can't assess how far I'll be able to get with him."

"But you would--- I mean you'd take him as a client?"

"Gladly. It's clear he needs some sort of support. Whether I'll emphasize technical advice, or confidence issues, or both, I can't really determine at this point."

"What about the physical limitations? He's still really weak," John admits, and hates himself from saying such a thing out loud even though he knows it's true. Maybe they both need a bit of a rude awakening in this regard, to drop the embarrassment and the circumlocution manner in which everything related to the GBS is discussed.

"The violin is not a matter of strength - what it requires is dexterity. It won't take long for him to regain enough strength to be able to hold the violin and the bow for extended amounts of time. I doubt he's completely lost the muscle memory associated with playing, he just needs to reconnect it to the false signals he's getting from his nerves. It's hard to say how much the allodynia and the dysesthesia will affect the recovery, but I think they're going to give us a fair bit of trouble."

These are words John remembers seeing and hearing many times during Sherlock's hospitalization and his stay at Harwich, but now he has to admit he hasn't paid them too much mind. Sherlock doesn't really tell him anything, so it's hard to gauge what neurological issues are still giving him the most trouble. Those words point to harmless touch translating to pain, and neutral sensations translating into unpleasant ones. Both are signs of a nervous system out of whack, and both are potential repercussions of GBS.

"He told me on the phone that his fingertips feel oversensitized," Helen says, clearly assuming that John is already privy to such facts. "The bow should be fine, but pressing down the strings could be painful. That's just one example of something we need to work around," Helen explains.

John feels overwhelmed.

Helen's smile has disappeared now, replaced by a more solemn expression. "He's going to be upset tonight. Possibly for a while."

John glances towards the top of the stairs. "I know."

"Keep him company," Helen suggests.

"If he lets me," John scoffs.

"He probably won't, but you might want to try to do it anyway," Helen says with an encouraging smile.

"What exactly did Mycroft tell you about him?" John asks.

"He told me about the Guillain-Barré, of course, but also outlined his knowledge of the neuropsychiatric diagnoses Sherlock had received as a child and adolescent," Helen says.

John has once had a similar conversation with Mycroft. It had been brief, merely confirming the conclusions John had already drawn on his own after six months of sharing a flat with someone who clearly presented with many rather typical traits of being somewhere on the autism spectrum,
but who was also quite adept at hiding many of those traits outside the safety of home.

"He's had outstanding therapists," Mycroft had commented. He had not volunteered details, and John hadn't enquired further. To John the thought had felt rather sad - to hear Sherlock had put a lot of effort into learning to hide things which to John just seemed like part of what made him, well, Sherlock. Not that John wanted to downplay how hard it all must be, and how much easier Sherlock's life has probably been made by the skills to blend in more. Certainly many of these things, these issues, these difficulties, as Mycroft had called them, made it extremely challenging for him to deal with other humans in a world designed for neurotypical people.

"He also told me that Sherlock is extremely difficult to deal with, endlessly stubborn and utterly in denial, but that he's got someone who would walk to the ends of the Earth for him. Which means he's got a chance to move forward," Helen says pointedly.

John nods. "Thank you," he says, mostly on behalf of Sherlock, but also for himself. The reassurance feels very nice, because within moments he'll be alone with Sherlock, and the thought of that is daunting. Clearly they need a helping hand in this, one Helen is thankfully willing to lend, but John is still going to be the one to pick up the pieces tonight.

They exchange farewells and John closes the door behind her with a sigh. He returns upstairs with heavy steps.
The shower is running. A wave of relief washes over John - if Sherlock is tending to evening routines, then he may have already got over the worst. He does take setbacks during cases as challenges, as a reason to push himself further. Since Sherlock loves his music, surely he'll have the patience and the grit to retrain his skills? Helen's right, they probably needed to go through this in order to clear the air.

It'll be fine, John tells himself. They have help, now, really skilled help, and it's going to be fine. He can leave at least this one Sherlock-related issue to someone else to sort out. God knows he has enough of them on his plate even without the violin.

Relieved, John puts the teacups in the sink and is about to turn on the television, when his ears pick up something odd. He clicks the mute button on the remote, and he strains his hearing to focus. As far as he can make out, there's just the sound of the shower running now, but a moment earlier, there had seemed to be something else mixed into it, something almost inaudible.

John shakes his head. The sound must have come from a neighbouring flat. It's just not possible that he could have heard what he had thought he'd heard. His nerves are clearly shot after such an unsettling evening, and his weary brain is imagining things.

The evening news flickers on as he unmutes the television. A report is ending, and the weather will probably come next. He's about to drop his weight onto his usual chair, when suddenly, his heart leaps into his throat, primal instincts kicking in before his brain catches up with what he's heard.

There it is, again - a sound he's certain he's never heard before in this flat, but it's still instantly recognizable.

A choked-up sob, then another.

John tears himself up from his chair and hurries to the hallway, trying to avoid making any noise of his own in the process.

He leans on the wall next to the door, aware that standing behind it could potentially alert Sherlock to his presence.

The sound is absolutely unmistakable now: racking sobs that sound like there's hyperventilation going on in between, muffled by what is likely something held in front of the mouth to try and keep anyone from hearing it. Now that John is standing right outside the door, the shower is doing a lousy job hiding what's going on.

John has seen tears running down Sherlock's face before - he can easily turn on a very good impression of crying when he wants to, when it benefits a case through deceiving an eyewitness, or a victim's relative. What he has never witnessed is this. Even when at his most emotional, Sherlock Holmes does not actually cry. Mycroft had joked about it once, 'he stopped crying at the age of five, because he realised it would not get him what he wanted'. The entire idea feels preposterous to John, even now as the evidence is sounding in his ears.

Then, an errant memory floats in, and for a moment John wonders how he could have possibly forgot about it: Sherlock at the hospital, unable to speak, tears glistening at the edges of his eyes when John had returned unexpectedly to his room late in the evening after Sherlock had assumed him to have left for the night. John had chalked most of it up to pain, the drugs, being on a
respirator, the sum of the hell of physical discomfort he'd been in. Being able to blame all those things were why it hadn't rattled the foundations of John's world like this.

He still doesn't even want to believe his own ears.

'When you've eliminated the impossible, whatever remains must be the truth, John.'

John really doesn't want to hear the terrifying sounds coming from the other side of the door, but he can't ignore them, either. He hasn't felt this level of helplessness since the ITU. It tears at his heart to hear such pain, and to have so few ideas as to what he could possibly do right now to make it stop.

He understands physical pain, he understands many other kinds of discomfort, especially the sort that happens at the hospital, and he has the tools to help with those, but this is so very different. He'd been rubbish at handling his own sense of loss and pointlessness after his discharge from Afghanistan. How could he even begin to grasp what Sherlock, someone so terribly different from him in so many ways, is going through right now?

All he knows is that, at the moment, Sherlock is very much alone, when he really shouldn't be. Helen, too, had said as much.

The hot water must have run out a while ago, but the shower is still on. John hears Sherlock blow his nose, then the sobs seem to quieten down.

"Sherlock?" John asks, stepping in front of the door to announce his presence.

There's no reply. The shower continues running, but as much as John strains his hearing, no other sounds can now be heard from inside. He imagines Sherlock has frozen on the spot, mortified that John may have heard what he'd tried his best to conceal. He probably hadn't even needed or wanted a shower at all.

"Sherlock, I'd like a word." John tries not to sound too alarmed. He needs to try to not make this into the huge deal it so fucking well is.

No reply, except for the shower being turned off.

"Sherlock? I need to know you're all right." Perhaps not the choicest of words - even an idiot could tell he's not all right at all, but John knows he needs to preserve both their dignities right now.

No answer.

"Unless I hear from you soon, I'm going to assume you need help in there, and get the spare key for the door," John tells him, careful not to slip into making it sound like blackmail.

"Don't," Sherlock says. His voice, what little John can hear of it, is strained and a little hoarse. It doesn't sound much like Sherlock at all.

John waits for five minutes, ten minutes. He can hear Sherlock opening the cupboard above the sink, taking things out, moving around the bathroom. John expects to hear the sound of the hairdryer, or the tap, but nothing of the sort happens. It doesn't sound as though Sherlock is doing anything particular. John is quite certain he's trying to play for time, hoping John will grow tired of waiting, and stop manning the door.

So close, yet so far. John still doesn't know what to do, except to get angry.
The fury flashes into flame like wildfire. He isn't angry at Sherlock - he certainly hasn't done anything wrong. Instead, John now feels his suspicions and doubts about the way this violin issue is being handled hadn't been so unfounded, after all. He desperately needs someone to take responsibility, and to be reassured that irreparable damage hasn't been done.

As much as he doesn't want to leave Sherlock alone right now, the bathroom door is still closed, and John decides he needs answers. He runs to the kitchen, grabs his phone and runs with it downstairs so Sherlock won't hear the conversation even if he does decide to emerge from the bathroom.

John goes through the phone's call log, finds what he's certain to be Helen's number, and makes the call.

"Ellicott," she answers after a few rings, with the sound of traffic in the background.

"Hello, it's, um, John Watson." There's an edge to his voice he doesn't even try to conceal.

"Hello, John. I hope I didn't leave anything behind at your flat?"

"Oh no, it's not --- not that," he says between clenched teeth. He wants to strangle someone and it remains to be seen whether it'll be Helen Ellicott.

"Let me pull over. I dislike the handsfree."

John drums his knee with his fingers while he waits. He tries to listen to sounds from upstairs, but all he can hear is the television from Mrs Hudson's flat.

"What is it, John?"

"Why did I have to be present?" John asks, trying hard not to sound as confrontational as he feels. Sherlock has already spent a lifetime enduring ridicule from others, and inadvertently embarrassing himself in the presence of both strangers and those few he counts as friends. What had happened tonight with the violin was bad in itself, but the fact that John had been present to hear it, had likely made everything infinitely worse.

"You're his witness. Your presence ensures that he can't blame it all on me, or gloss over what happened. The second reason is that he's going to be upset, and unless you were actually there, he perhaps wouldn't think you'd understand why."

John is taken aback. "That was all deliberate? I mean, does this happen a lot, the first session ending in complete disaster?" he asks in a biting tone.

"It often needs to. My clients rarely try out their instruments or really test their abilities until the first lesson. They're too afraid. I used to be gentle, I really was, but I found that it slowed down the progress."

John doesn't reply, the embers of his anger still glowing.

"If you weren't present tonight, he'd spend precious time and energy trying to hide from you how things are, when he should be spending that energy in recovery," Helen says calmly.

John thinks she sounds a lot like Mycroft. "What if it was too early, what if he's he's too out of sorts, still, for something like this?"

"Do you think it's helping him to stay in denial and fear? The longer he waits, until finding out
what his current state is, the more daunting the whole prospect will become in his head. Those of my clients who have contacted me early after whatever happened to them, tend to do well. Those that delay longer are a different matter. His brother seemed to think this was urgent."

Of course Mycroft thinks it's urgent. Mycroft always knows best, doesn't he? John makes a mental note to punch him hard on the nose sometime. "It's just that it was, well, so embarrassing for him," John laments, still wanting to call Helen out on what had felt like quite brutal treatment.

"It's going to be embarrassing and upsetting, no matter when or how it happens - isn't it less cruel to get that phase over with cleanly and quickly? Before I started conducting the first session like this, I had several clients who never showed up for a second one. They continued pretending things weren't so bad, hiding said fact from everyone else, and as far as I know they never played again."

This does make a modicum of sense to John, but still. He can't seem to shake the second-hand mortification just yet. "Still, that was--- he's--- I think this is a huge deal for him, bigger than most of the other stuff he's been going through."

"I'm sure it is, John, but he needs to stop competing with his old self. If he wants to play, he'll need to try and stop focusing on what it was like before."

John doubts that's something Sherlock would be able to delete.

"He needs to learn how to enjoy it again - enjoy how playing feels, and he's never going to do that if he tries going back to the pieces he was doing before he fell ill, and stubbornly trying to pummel them into submission."

John realises this is exactly what he'd expect Sherlock to do on his own. The frustration would undoubtedly bring the entire Baker Street to the ground.

"I do realise the fragility of the situation, John, but we don't have a lot of options: this is something that's important to him, and that's why it needs to be addressed. He's in for a rude awakening sooner or later. And, until he's gone through it, there's no way we could start actually doing the work."

John swallows. "What happens to those who don't get the help they need or who don't continue after the first session? You never said what happened to your ex-husband."

Helen is quiet for a moment. "You have to keep in mind that I usually only work with professional musicians. Clearly Sherlock has other things in his life he enjoys besides the violin, things he might possibly enjoy even more, since he hasn't pursued music as a career. That's a very good thing. A very, very good thing." Her words are encouraging, but her tone is not. "Some of the people I try to help haven't had anything else in their lives for decades, and when they lose it all, it can be too much," she explains, and then pauses before continuing.

"Andrew killed himself. As I said, there wasn't a support system back then. This is why I got into doing this, John," Helen tells him pointedly, "letting it be won't help, it'll just make the whole issue bigger. For some, it becomes too much," she explains, and then pauses before continuing.

"I hope you know what you're doing," John says, but it's not a threat. Just a reminder.

Helen doesn't reply. Maybe she's been here before - addressing the fears of someone else, someone close to the person she's trying to help. Come to think of it, she's actually been in John's position, and that time there was no one like her around to say these things out loud.

They bid a polite goodnight and John sits down on the stairs. This is possibly the same stair he'd found Sherlock sitting on the night when this whole nightmare had begun, months and months ago.
When he even thinks about that moment, his insides twist with residual shock and worry. Sherlock, looking exhausted and haunted, leaning on the banister, looking up at him, then the terrifying sentence, the likes of which Sherlock never utters: 'there's something wrong with me'.

Sometimes John feels as though they're still sitting on that step, still trying to come to grips with the fact that something has gone terribly wrong.

Maybe Helen is right, that tonight needed to happen, so they can move on: 'get this phase over with'. Nothing John could do or say could possibly take away the pain and the loss, only delay it. He can't fix this, and it fucking hurts. But if Sherlock needs to go through this, then John perhaps might need to take a step back - to be there for him, but not sugarcoat the whole thing, or try to protect him from every new upset and disappointment. God knows John's empathy, and attempts at consolation and denial of how bad things actually still are in some respects, clearly haven't been helping at all. Has he just been enabling Sherlock's illusions, that once back at home, he could try to pretend none of it had happened? Helen had said something about Sherlock spending a lot of energy in trying to keep up appearances for John. The way he'd behaved during John's visits to Harwich had been theatrical, showoffish, and he'd appeared exhausted and miserable on those rare glimpses that John had had of him when Sherlock had thought John wasn't watching. Who has Sherlock been doing all of this for; John or himself?

He needs to go upstairs and pick up the pieces. The overwhelming urge to storm the bathroom and somehow magically fix everything, has now turned into apprehension and hesitation of his own motives, but he can't afford to be wrapped up in his own feelings right now.

Maybe he doesn't actually need to know what to do right now. Maybe he needs to just play it by intuition.

John returns upstairs.

The flat is quiet. The kitchen and sitting room lights have been turned off, and the bathroom door is ajar, the room dark and damp.

He hears footsteps from the direction of the bedroom. A lamp is lit, and judging by the soft light reflected onto the hallway floor, it's the one on Sherlock's bedside cabinet.

Sherlock couldn't possibly be headed to bed yet, is what John thinks first out of habit, until he remembers that this new version of Sherlock does, in fact, sleep. It's the so-called fatigue's fault, mostly. On several mornings John has left him in bed snoring so loudly that he could probably wake the dead. Many cups of morning tea had grown cold while Sherlock slept in. Sherlock had told him this had gone on since Harwich, and John wonders if his inner clock has now been permanently set to the sleep requirement of most other people, or if a case might flip the switch back to his old regime.

John kicks off his shoes in the foyer, and takes off his jumper, leaving it hanging on the back of a chair in the kitchen. From the living room he grabs something, on a whim, to take with him to the bedroom.

Sherlock is sitting on the bed, lost in thought. His curls are still damp.

He looks up when John arrives, but says nothing. In the soft light he looks younger than his years, skin even paler than usual, his eyes slightly bloodshot.

"Hey. Ready to turn in?" John asks.
"Might as well,” Sherlock replies resignedly and stands up with the intention of shedding his
dressing gown, but then he notices John is holding something behind his back.

John steps closer, not yet revealing what he's concealing. He's tempted to tell Sherlock to forget
tonight, that it doesn't matter, that it's all fine, but he holds his tongue. Instead, he gently grabs
Sherlock's hand in his, and unites it with the neck of the violin he swings out from behind his back.

Sherlock tries to tear away his hand as though scalded. "John-- what--"

John holds on tighter, and with his other arm tugs Sherlock closer so the violin and their adjoined
hands are trapped between them. "This belongs with you."

"I doubt it," Sherlock says and sidesteps, leaving John holding the instrument. He puts it down on
the bed and Sherlock sits down next to it, slightly turned away from it.

John takes a seat behind him so he can wrap his arms around Sherlock. Sherlock touches the back
of his hand with his palm before using it to lean on the duvet. "I had a dream back at the National
about selling it to someone more worthy of it," he says in a detached tone.

As far as John knows, Sherlock never puts any stock in dreams, 'just reorganizing and discarding
of data, no deductive value whatsoever', he had once said. Is this his way of telling John that he'd
feared this for a long time, all the way from the worst days of the illness? He must have - it's
logical that such a thing would have occurred to Sherlock very early on. John wants to kick himself
for not realizing such an obvious issue earlier. He tries not to think about Sherlock at the ITU,
alone, worrying about this, without being able to say anything. This is not the time for John to
wallow in his own guilt - it's not about him.

"Over my dead body," John says, and leans his chin on Sherlock's shoulder.

Sherlock flinches. "Please don't, it's sharp," he hisses.

John removes his chin and straightens his back. "Sorry. Oversensitized?"

They haven't discussed this, the way in which the sense of touch might still be getting its messages
mixed. Helen mentioning it had been a rude awakening indeed. This could have consequences for a
great many things, and John knows should have realized the risk of something like this lingering of
the GBS earlier.

Sherlock mumbles something vaguely affirmative, and glances at the violin next to him. He gently
runs his forefinger along a string, which elicits a raspy whisper from the instrument.

"I've seen how much you love your music, and how much you adore that thing. If that doesn't
make you worthy of it, then I don't know what does. I know it's valuable, but I doubt the guy who
built it only meant it for posh people at the Royal Albert Hall. And even if he did, nobody cares,
because he's long dead by now," John says determinedly.

Sherlock's lip quirks up just the tiniest bit.
"Come on!" Sherlock exclaims in frustration, "the day is wasting and Anderson has probably ruined the whole thing already!" He has just managed to get his coat buttoned up satisfyingly fast - the large buttons and the slightly-larger than necessary buttonholes help. During his more paranoid moments Sherlock has actually wondered if Mycroft had had them enlarged when he'd been hospitalized. The topmost one keeps opening, which might be evidence of tampering. John's theory is that it could simply have something to do with his altered weight - the fabric could be now hanging differently.

They've been invited by Lestrade to join in a sweep of the victim's flat, and Sherlock really does worry that once the idiots of the technical unit have combed through the place, there will be little left to deduce from the mess they usually leave behind. They should already be out of the door, but even though John has already put on his coat, he's still rummaging around the cabinet above the sink in the bathroom. "Victim's still dead, Sherlock, he can wait a bit," he hollers, voice slightly muffled through the door.

"Nevermind that there's a killer on the loose, let's just spend half the day in the loo!" Sherlock quips back.

Finally, John emerges from the bathroom, two medicine bottles and a small white cardboard packet in his hands. He presents them to Sherlock, his face a question mark.

Irritation hits. Is this why John is delaying their departure?

"There's half a bottle left of everything, except for the tramadol, the packet of which is almost empty. Not surprised," John says in an accusing tone.

"If you're insinuating I have some sort of a fondness for that rubbish, then you've obviously never ingested it yourself. It's the only one that does anything to the pain, but its effects are marginal, and I'm sure oxycodone or morphine would have been much better."

"No one's prescribing either of them for you. Besides, tramadol has proven efficacy in neuropathic and some other types of long-term pain."

"Its potency is equal to a larger dose of paracetamol," Sherlock counters, attempting to stare John down. They need to leave, not have this pointless conversation.

John opens both the bottles, picking out a tablet from each. "Did you take a tramadol this morning? Honesty, please."

"No, I didn't. What are you doing with those?" Sherlock asks indignantly. John could easily have waited until after the Work to whine about this.
John punches out a tablet from the remaining blister sheet in the tramadol package. "You're having the morning doses you missed right now, and the next ones in four hours, wherever we are then."

"No."

John pinches the bridge of his nose. He must be feeling as toasty in his winter coat as Sherlock already does, but clearly he isn't about to stand down. Out of all professions, why did John have to be a doctor? It's useful on occasion, but it means that he pointlessly fixates on exactly these sorts of things.

"We've gone through this God knows how many times already. They didn't prescribe these just for the heck of it. You're supposed to take them, so you can function better and regain your strength. Being sore and doing nothing and taking a risk to develop more permanent pain issues isn't on, Sherlock."

"None of those medications have been studied in this precise patient population," Sherlock says, shifting his weight. He's been standing by the coatrack for what feels like ages, and he's getting both tired and agitated. They need to get going, and he's already longing for the backseat of a cab so he can relax. He could, of course, have a seat right now, but that might fuel John's perception that he isn't well enough for work yet.

"We know what happens in Guillain-Barré, and it really isn't too far-fetched to think that due to what we know about the effect of these medications in other illnesses, they might well be useful."

"I'll have the Naproxen, but not the pregabalin. Not that the naproxen does much; it's often prescribed for menstrual cramps, so clearly not a very selective medication for neurological issues."

"The pregabalin is supposed to be your best bet to prevent chronic pain."

Sherlock hates that word, 'chronic'. It reeks of old age, deterioration, illness and uselessness. He draws a deep breath. "Reported side effects of pregabalin include: nasopharyngitis, neutropenia, increased appetite, disorientation, insomnia, hallucinations, panic attacks, agitation, aphasia, altered dreams, vertigo, drowsiness, headache, ataxia, coordination difficulties, tremor, amnesia, sedation, lethargy, paresthesias, myoclonic seizures, dysgraphy, hyporeflexia, double vision, mydriasis, dryness of eyes, tachycardias, congestive cardiac dysfunction, hypertension, pulmonary oedema, nausea, constipation, gastroesophageal reflux, swelling of the tongue, Stevens-Johnson syndrome, muscle cramps, incontinence, erectile dysfunction and chest pain. Am I forgetting something, doctor? The Stevens-Johnson sounds particularly enticing. I'm sure I'll still appreciate a lowered risk of chronic pain, even when my skin melts and peels off."

John slams his palm on the kitchen table while still holding the tablets. One of them escapes his clutch and rolls to next to a crumb-covered plate. "I told you not to read the bloody package insert. Even aspirin has a list that sounds exactly as bad. If you read the note on the tramadol you would have found a similar list, but since it's an opiate, you didn't bother, did you, because those are all fine in your books, aren't they?"

"You do realise the side effects list for the pregabalin includes almost all the symptoms that GBS can cause at a late stage of recovery?"

"Not all of those are common enough for it to be reasonable on any level for you to worry about them."

John runs a glass of water and offers it to Sherlock, along with the three tablets. "Your choice. But
if you don't think you need the pregabalin then you hardly need the tramadol, either."

Sherlock *has* read the package insert for tramadol. As drugs go, it's a mildly interesting one. Plenty of interactions. It has effects on the opioid receptors, as one would assume, but it also affects serotonin uptake and noradrenaline reuptake. It also does things to the NMDA receptors, like ketamine. Still, the effects of ingesting it have been uninteresting. Not much of an effect on anything but the pain, and in that it hardly rivals over-the-counter painkillers. He worries about it much less than he worries about the pregabalin, which had originally been invented to pass for an epilepsy medication - in other words, designed to alter brain function. John may not see that distinction as important, but Sherlock certainly would, especially since he has previous experience of having to take it.

Opiates are a beast he knows. As for the pregabalin - last night's events have strengthened his resolve to not touch the stuff ever again. He rolls his eyes, holds out his hand so that John can flip his own. The tablets fall onto his palm, and he pretends to down them with half the water.

In the cab, John seems to be still moody from their argument. That suits Sherlock, who really needs to start concentrating on the case. It's harder than usual, trying to reorient himself, because his thoughts keep drifting to last night.

John had seemed surprised at his willingness to meet Helen Ellicott. It was obvious he'd expected Sherlock to dismiss it outright, based on the fact that she was yet another physical therapist candidate, and the whole concept reeked to high heaven of Big Brother Meddling Again.

He knew he was at a crossroads with the violin - face the truth, or get rid of the instrument. He would never be able to put up with having it in the flat, if he has to abandon playing. Even considering never being able to enjoy his music again is a thought that fills him with a more limitless sadness than anything else pertaining to the GBS. Ellicott's approach on the phone had impressed him to some extent: blunt, honest, not the slightest conspiratorial. "John has contacted me at your brother's behest. If there's a chance you might recover your violin skills, do you want to try?" she had asked right after telling him her name, and the fact that she was a violin instructor as well as a PT professional.

The question had been cleverly constructed: it contained no sentimental appeal, no base assumption that she would be involved, no unfounded promises of success. She was actually giving him a choice, as opposed to telling him all the reasons why he had to do what he was being told to do. *Do you want to try?* As simple as that. Only an idiot would really have said no.

After Sherlock had hummed affirmatively, Helen had said that she could be useful to help him in that, if she could fit him into her schedule. She had not explained her credentials, not beyond briefly mentioning her profession. All this pointed to Mycroft having perhaps given her pointers on how to get him to comply. He'd likely have reasoned that Sherlock would know he doesn't not employ amateurs or beginners in any field, meaning that if this woman had been handpicked by him, she'd be the absolute best. Mentioning the problem of availability was a subtle way of saying she was in high demand, adding a layer of guilt Mycroft loved to play with - he wanted Sherlock to
know he'd pulled strings and likely used a sizable sum of money to free her of other clients. Guilt naturally never worked in turning Sherlock's head, but begrudgingly he had to admit it was, perhaps, _thoughtful_ of Mycroft to come up with this. At least he couldn't come up with any way in which returning to his music would benefit the man directly, whereas getting back into shape might mean he was available to be Big Brother's errand boy again. Hence the parade of all the other physical therapists.

Going through John to suggest this in the first place had been unsurprising, since Sherlock had dismissed all previous professionals sent by his brother. John had seemed downright desperate for him to accept Helen's proposal, before either of them had even met the woman. He had even cleaned the flat, which had been highly conspicuous. Sherlock could understand John's keenness even less than Mycroft's. Certainly John had enjoyed hearing Sherlock play, but only if he was doing it at what John felt was a decent hour, and if he was playing something pleasant. For stress relief, Sherlock had mostly played during nighttime, or chosen more modern, aggressive pieces, both of which John had actively disliked. John's encouragement to return to The Work was easier to understand, since it was something they did together. He doubts John understands to any extent how great a part the violin has played in his life.

Helen's offer had left Sherlock with two possible outcomes: either she might be of use, or he would send her packing like all the others he had dismissed. By the end of her mortifying visit, Sherlock was still unconvinced of her usefulness, since no instruction had actually taken place. He hadn't lashed out, but had not dismissed her, either, partly because the whole session had left him rather shellshocked. It mattered a lot that Helen's reaction to his appalling playing had been very matter-of-fact, and because she had not been as condescending like all her PT candidate predecessors, had not attempted to offer infuriating encouragement or downplay what had just happened. When Sherlock could no longer bear to listen to his own playing, he had felt downright grateful for Helen's presence; somehow, her calmness had kept John from saying something utterly stupid to end the admittedly oppressive silence - blurt out some naive placation or offering unfounded consolation. Had John opened his mouth after he'd dropped the bow, Sherlock isn't sure he could have kept from smashing the violin against the nearest wall.

Perversely, there was one benefit from the whole horrible session. John's obvious shock meant that _finally_, the man was faced with the truth. No matter how much John stubbornly held onto foolish hope that it was all over, that it was all _fine_, that everything would be promptly and easily fixed if Sherlock would only stop being difficult for difficulty's sake and put his nose to the grindstone, the fact remained that Sherlock was less than he had once been. Finally John may have understood, at least a little, what Sherlock has been feeling since the day he had left the hospital.

John had probably heard the sounds of Sherlock's unfortunate loss of self-control in the bathroom, where he'd retreated after realizing such a thing was going to happen. Still, embarrassment over that hardly rivals the memory of letting others hear what had come of his music.

By the time John had joined him in the bedroom, Sherlock had managed to calm down - the four nicotine patches he'd recovered from his last stash behind a loose tile in the bathroom and slapped onto his thigh had certainly helped. John telling him that he was accountable to no one, that the Le Maurien was his and his only, had been most welcome, especially because it showed that John was no longer pretending this was just something to bounce quickly back from. Sherlock had appreciated the sentiment in the message: do what you want to do, and everyone who tries to stand in the way can fuck off.

He's going to try it out, to see what Helen Ellicott could possibly offer. It can't get worse. It could
get better. He has no faith in regaining all his skills, and might end up abandoning the pursuit for good, but his curiosity has been piqued: would it even be possible to recover enough of what he has lost to enjoy playing again? He’s willing to experiment, willing to give it a try. Part of the project will entail quitting the medications, because some of their side effects certainly sound as though they might also be affecting his dexterity.

This experimental approach is also at the back of his mind regarding this case that Lestrade is throwing at him as though it were some consolation prize. Will he be able to solve it, given that his deductive skills seem to have been damaged in some way? It’s worth a try.

The sawmill murder victim's address in Shoreditch is one of those thoroughly colonised by City professionals with more money than sense - spending a fortune on a flat they rarely have time to enjoy due to working all hours of the night and day. Sherlock is grateful for the lift that deposits them on the third floor; at least he'll arrive on site with more energy to spare than after taking on that blasted staircase.

As they sweep into the room, Sherlock notices Lestrade eyeing him, warily. "Who is the victim, then?" he asks tersely, letting his eyes roam around.

"Mark Watford. You were right - we got the name off the Rolex; he had bought with an Amex in Hong Kong a month ago. It's a rare, numbered model and luckily the victim had registered it with the manufacturer to gain their loyalty club benefits."

John is already wandering around the apartment, not looking like he's listening. Sherlock would prefer to drop onto the soft-looking leather sofa, but he forces himself to stand, even though his back aches and there's a crick in his neck already.

Watford's large, remodelled loft speaks of a successful career: decorated in faux-industrial style, exposed Victorian brick clashes with glass and chrome. In the living room, Bang & Olufsen audio equipment and other such yuppie trophies are visible everywhere.

Sherlock pokes his head into the kitchen and registers the full panoply of gleaming stainless steel appliances and large stone tabletops. John joins him shortly.

"That coffee machine probably cost twice a doctor's monthly wage," John muses. "A banker?"

Before Lestrade can answer, Sherlock intercepts the question. "Broker."

Lestrade smiles, "Yes. Worked at..." he consults his notebook, "...Maress & Thornton."

Sherlock nods. "Interesting."


"Too small to be a proper investment bank. Think more of a capital development company, or a rapacious hedge fund with delusions of grandeur. Extremely high pressure work environment."

The apartment is spotless – most likely the result of hired help. It doesn't feel very lived in, more of a place to crash after an all-nighter at the office. The open very modern metal staircase against a wall leads up to a mezzanine bedroom area over the kitchen. The hallway is lined with framed photos of Watford, looking tanned and fit on tropical sand, lounging in the roof terraces of hotels,
wind-surfing in the Caribbean, mingling in Cannes. As Sherlock takes the stairs slowly, he hopes that anyone watching will assume he is examining the photographs carefully, rather than masking the cramp that has seized his left calf.

Watford had clearly lived alone. There's only one toothbrush, and all the clothes and shoes are of the same size. Sherlock examines a jacket label. "King & Allen, Liverpool Street. He's making money, but doesn't want to look too flash. It would put off the clients if he is seen as trying to be more than middle-class."

All in all, the bedroom is spartan, the bed linens very modern and expensive, looking new. It is conspicuously empty of smaller items, so they retreat back down. At least the steps down bother him less these days than they had at Harwich. Climbing up, however, is still agonizingly slow. After returning the Baker Street from the body dump site it had taken him five minutes to make his way back up to the flat while John waited for him up on the landing, frowning with apprehension when he finally emerged. Sherlock had declined his help. It had been annoying enough to have had to fall back on John's assistance at the sawmill.

By the time the Forensic team is finished in the bathroom off the living room, Sherlock is getting more than a little impatient. At one point, he sits down on the edge of the tempered glass coffee table, and allows himself to fidget. He doesn't know what to look for - nothing seems to stand out, and he feels as though he's being expected to make some sort of a breakthrough here. He feels nearly paralyzed with indecision on where to even start, incapable of conjuring up the confidence he needs to believe in his own deductions. He's quite certain that Lestrade and John are exchanging glances behind his back. They must be. He's being slow, isn't he?

"Just tell forensics to hurry up. We haven't got all day," Sherlock finally snaps, mostly just to abate the notion that he has nothing to offer to the investigation. Waiting for idiots to thoroughly trample the evidence has never been his strong point, and today it just adds insult to injury. The longer he sits idle, the less time he will have for the brain work, there's already a headache is looming just on the edge of his awareness, threatening to thoroughly decimate his remaining concentration. He can feel it coming, like the rumble of distant thunder. He drums his fingers on the glass table, anxiety building.

"No laptop here, or in the bedroom either," John points out. "If he was a broker, wouldn't he need one?"

"Taken by the killer?" Lestrade offers.

Sherlock shakes his head. "More likely at the office. There's nothing here that relates to his work. Compliance rules make it hard to take stuff home to be left lying about; he may have just been stopping by here when he was killed, preparing to head back to work later."

Once the Crime Scene Examiners vacate the bathroom, Sherlock drags himself off the table and into the dark, marble-walled room. The examiners have sprayed luminol around, and in the darkness the tile floor is lit up like by a luridly fluorescent lake.

He bends to take a closer look after flicking on the ceiling light. Lestrade and John have followed him, as they always do, expecting for him to see what others have missed. His fingers nearly miss the switch even though he's looking right at it, and he silently curses his malfunctioning coordination. Nowadays it's usually much better than this, but he's tired, which always makes everything worse. "Hardly any blood spatters. The body was already on the floor when Watford was shot." He points down on the floor, unwilling to kneel down because getting up will entail an undignified scramble. "This was obviously once a pool of blood, before the body was bundled up in something - possibly a sheet." He points to three marks in rapid succession. "See the smudges
where the fabric soaked up some of the blood, and then the drag marks? This proves the theory that the gunshot wounds were created post mortem. "Not very clever, is it? Any blood spatter analyst worth their salt could have come to those conclusions.

Lestrade looks interested, at least.

John starts going through the bathroom cabinets, and then shows Sherlock a plastic medication bottle. The Forensic techs have likely already photographed everything in the cabinet. Sherlock had heard Lestrade instructing them not to bag anything before Sherlock has had a look. "Ritalin," John says, even though Sherlock can very well see the label for himself. "For those all-nighters, eh?" John quips and drops the bottle into a small evidence bag Lestrade holds open for him.

Sherlock tightens his lips into a joyless smile in a 'why not' sort of fashion. "Anything else?"

"Recent prescription bottle of Roaccutane. Highly regulated prescription drug for acne."

"Steroid acne?" Sherlock suggests.

John nods, dropping the bottle into the evidence bag alongside the Ritalin. "Probably. Didn't look like he was suffering long from it as an adult, at least not in the photos in the hall. Must have been a new thing. The prescription's from last month."

"Watford would have wanted the most effective treatment available, since his job likely has as much to do with his looks and charm as it does with his trading skills; he was promoted to head of business development last year," Sherlock explains without enthusiasm.

Lestrade looks puzzled. "How do you know that?"

Sherlock whips out from his jacket pocket a business card that had been used as a bookmark in the trashy spy novel beside the bed and passes it to Lestrade. He continues, "Less sitting around in the office, more PR and client liaison," Sherlock explains, watching John seal the evidence bag with his gloved fingers. "He needed to look good."

"There's also sleeping pills and an asthma inhaler the CSEs found from the bathroom upstairs - I asked them not to take them out of the flat until you'd seen the stuff," Lestrade adds. "Better get everything tested, in case he was poisoned, since you are so sure the bullets didn't kill him." He points to another evidence bag on the counter that contains said medications.

"Has he actually used that inhaler recently?" Sherlock asks.

John checks the date. "Years old. Probably not. Besides, it's empty, I think." He returns to rummaging around the cabinet. "There's Viagra here, but it's hardly uncommon with even younger men these days. Performance anxiety and all, but could also be a result of steroid use," John rambles on. "That's all, basically. Nothing of interest there, really, I guess, unless toxicology finds something in those meds that shouldn't be there."

Sherlock catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror. The light in the bathroom is yellow, which makes him look even worse than he feels. Before he becomes tempted to continue staring, he quickly takes a step back to make his reflection disappear.

John removes his gloves and shoves them in his coat pocket. The blister pack that must still be in there makes a rustling noise, and Sherlock also hears the distinctive clatter of tablets rolling around in bottles. For a moment, he's distracted by the sound, and then worries - John isn't actually going to make him take the next dose here, is he? In front of Lestrade? He wouldn't put it past the man. Judging by John's past behaviour, when he's been hell-bent on trying to teach Sherlock a lesson,
that is *exactly* what he'd do.

John looks up and their gazes lock. Sherlock breaks the spell by averting his eyes before John gets a chance to get suspicious of what has caught his attention. He never usually retreats from a staring match and they both know it. He turns his back on John and addresses Lestrade instead. "What interests me the most is what *isn't* there," he says pointedly.

"Go on, then," Lestrade prompts, taking the bait.

"We know Watford must've been into some sort of performance enhancement when it came to sports. The acne treatment and the Viagra are likely further evidence of how advanced a level this hobby of his had become. What isn't here are the steroids and possible other doping substances themselves, that he's been taking to build those biceps. Judging by the clothes he was found in, clothes that he would not have worn into the office, he may have been headed for a gym session before he died - an opportune time for a top-up of whatever he was using. The building isn’t concierged, and the only CCTV is in the car parking area, so we can't know for sure."

John turns off the bathroom light and they return to the living room, where Lestrade starts sorting through mail. "Looks like he last picked these up three days ago. Before you got here, the tech team found his wallet, and his unlocked phone on the table here. There's voicemail from his boss, wondering why he didn't show up for work two days ago, and another one today from the HR manager asking the same, then two from unidentified callers saying he'd missed a dental appointment and that his car needs further spare parts before it can be fixed."

"Two days probably fit the state of the body," John says, taking a seat on the immense white leather sofa that to Sherlock now looks even more tempting than before. John gives him a pointed look as if suggesting that he join him there. Sherlock would like nothing more than to do just that, but his legs are aching so badly, and his head is now pounding so incessantly, that if he sits down he'll be tempted to lean back and close his eyes, and God forbid he be found snoring on a murder victim's couch in full view of the NSY Murder Investigation Team. He opts for standing stiffly next to the coffee table.

"When do we get the autopsy results?" John asks.

"Molly said she'd rush them through as soon as she could," Sherlock says and Lestrade looks pleased.

"The drugs aren't here," John says, "the steroids, I mean, and the meds he's got all look legitimately prescribed. I guess we have to wait for the post mortem to find out what he was using?"

"Or maybe the killer took them?" Lestrade suggests.

Sherlock looks utterly nonplussed at this suggestion. "I doubt it - at least that's hardly motive enough to kill the man. We do need to find whoever was supplying him."

"Co-worker?" Lestrade suggests. "He can't be the only City boy to use such stuff." He passes the victim's wallet to Sherlock.

A quick scan through its contents proves at least mildly fruitful. "There's a business card here to something called The Vault."

"I think I've heard of it," John says. "It's a posh health club, isn't it?"

Lestrade has his phone out already, tapping away at it. "Looks like it, yeah - an exclusive sports club chain here in the City."
"I'd say that's likely where he got the idea for the steroids, unless it was from a friend with similar interests. We'll need to check out the gym," Sherlock announces. Not a suggestion, a necessity.

" Relatives and co-workers first," Lestrade says. He's still wandering around the flat, which makes Sherlock smile.

"You're missing something obvious, in fact several somethings, but you can't quite put your finger on it, can you?" Sherlock asks, deadpan.

"What?"

"Look around you. This was obviously a fitness fanatic, yet there isn’t a single piece of sports equipment here. So, he’s got to have a permanent locker at his gym, which is where he spends a lot of time. So, what we are looking for might well be there."

Lestrade still looks sceptical.

Sherlock stretches his back a bit, but not too much to arouse suspicion. "The second thing you're missing is not going to be at the gym, however, because it would be too risky. A man who clearly travels overseas on business and pleasure as those photos show must have a passport. Where is it? A person who handles confidential client information would certainly need a safe place to put it. Oh, and it might also be a handy place to store one’s illegal drug supply," Sherlock says.

Lestrade and John are looking at him expectantly, realisation of anything worthwhile not dawning on either of their faces.

Sherlock decides not to despair at the intellectual state of NSY or John yet again. "I suggest you dig around the bedroom some more. Likely there's a wall safe hidden somewhere. I'd say he likely also keeps his gun in there."

John and Lestrade's brows shoot up. "The victim's gun? Who said he had a gun?" Lestrade asks.

Sherlock snorts. "Any killer who would bring a gun to a planned victim's apartment is likely to use it, instead of employing something much more subtle to kill them. In this case the gun was used after the death. Since it's perfectly obvious that this wasn't a planned thing done by an experienced henchman, I doubt the killer brought the gun with them. There's a photo of Watford traveling in Cambodia, trying out an assault rifle frequently used by Vietcong; it's easy to find such opportunities with a few green notes in the country. There's another shot of him in the bedroom, firing a Desert Eagle on what is likely an outside shooting range in the US. He likely moves in circles where it's possibly to buy practically anything, including a firearm to play around with at home."

"Right," Lestrade says and leaves the room, likely to instruct the tech team to start knocking on and down walls.

Once they're alone in the living room, Sherlock, feeling as though his energy level is dwindling by the minute, finally lets himself slump onto the sofa next to John.

"How are you holding up?" John asks quietly.

"Fine," Sherlock fires off a quick reply, not looking at John. In actuality, his head is killing him, and he feels weak and tired. Why the hell does he still get these tension headaches? They had started when his neck had been too weak to hold up his head, and they had seemed to lessen once he'd got rid of the neck support he'd been forced to use at the hospital, but after he'd come home they had returned with a vengeance. Whenever he stands for too long, his calves threaten to cramp
and his fingers regularly turn into pins and needles, today being no exception. Those symptoms seem to come and go as they please, regardless of what he does during the day. He'd been told at the hospital that sometimes the parts of the body that had been affected first by the GBS might take longest to return to normal. Knowing such a thing doesn't really help, and he even suspects they may have been telling him a white lie, simply trying to put him at ease. Maybe this will go on forever. The thought makes him want to curl up on the sofa and tune out the rest of the world, which is not an option right now. He isn't sure he has energy to even drag himself off the sofa, unless he gets up soon.

John rummages around his pockets and shoves the tramadol sheet and the medication bottles he'd taken along into Sherlock's coat pocket. "It's time," he reminds sternly.

"Yes, mother," Sherlock snarls, but he is almost grateful for an excuse to get up. He might actually swallow two of the damned tablets this time, since he does need something to be able to get through however long the rest of this sweep is going to take. It's not a pleasant thing to have to admit, but he at least wants the tramadol and the naproxen. The pregabalin he is definitely going to continue ignoring.

The walk to the kitchen, where he's likeliest to find a clean glass to borrow, feels long. He yawns as he takes in the room. There's a box of Fortnum & Mason tea bags on the counter; Sherlock recognises it as one of the varieties most often sold in their airport outlets. He could do with some tea, even if it's from a bag rather than loose leaf. There's a kettle full of steaming hot water nearby, and Sherlock realises he'd spotted a crime scene technician sipping a portion minutes earlier.

He fumbles around with the tablet bottle, fingers shaking from exhaustion, and their numbness gives him little feedback when trying to do something requiring dexterity. It takes him several tries to pry out each of the tablets. Thankfully, the blister packet is easier. He downs the tablets with the water, abandons the glass in the sink and turns towards the door.

He's startled to realise Sally Donovan is leaning on the fridge, likely having stood there for some time.

"I really hope you've got a prescription for what you just took," she says.

Sherlock straightens his posture, trying to appear more menacing. It makes his lower back explode in stabbing pain. He fights a grimace as a bout of nausea hits. He really shouldn't have take any tablets on an empty stomach.

"Ask John, he'll confirm. Not that it's any of your business," Sherlock replies in a challenging tone, looking her straight in the eye. Cold sweat is breaking out with the pain and the nausea, making him shiver.

Donovan pours herself a mug of hot water, adding a teabag. After a moment she replicates the movements and offers the second mug to Sherlock. She nods towards the sink. "That's a Quooker tap, gives you boiling water. Always wanted one but they're way too expensive on a Met officer salary. Boils water faster than a kettle, and cheaper, too. Forensics have cleared the kitchen, by the way. This won't contaminate anything."

Sherlock grabs the mug in his both hands, hesitantly. He nearly drops it, having to correct the position of his fingers, which results on some of the scalding hot liquid ending up on the back of his hand.

He slams the mug on a sidetable, rubbing the burnt area.
"Jesus," Donovan curses, "Stop that and put some cold on it. Hanging out with a doctor hasn't taught you anything?"

Sherlock doesn't make a move. He mostly contemplates making a hasty escape back to the living room, ignoring the searing pain in his hand.

Donovan puts down her own mug next to the tea tray, grabs his sleeve and pulls him to the sink. She turns on the tap and Sherlock reaches out his hand under the lukewarm spray. The adrenaline brought on by the pain has made the tingling in his fingers disappear, at least, and his hands feel quite normal now, except for the dull ache of the burn.

"You're not in any fucking state to be working, are you?" Donovan asks. "And don't you dare say it's none of my business. My work damned well is my business, especially when the Boss is more concerned about giving you work than he is about the case. This isn't a competition, you know, not some thing for you to test whether you can run yourself to the ground like you used to. Go home, and come back when you aren't a bloody liability." Despite their harsh honesty, the words are not spoken in her usual scathing tone.

Sherlock would have preferred the cruelty, the sarcasm, the usual attempt to take him down with her acerbic tongue. Donovan clearly thinks he's unfit for this, on the side of her old notion that he's a freak with questionable motives for wanting to insert himself into police investigations. Rumours of what had happened at the sawmill must have circulated, even though Lestrade had done his best to clear the area. Plenty of people had seen his weakened state. Before this, it had never occurred to Sherlock that there could be a state worse than being a freak. Clearly, there is one: a decrepit freak.

No one is seeing past his physical form. They look at it, watch his flailing, and likely equate it with his mental state. Exactly like Mycroft always thinks. Precisely like John had done at the hospital, when he'd assumed that Sherlock wasn't lucid enough to make any decisions regarding his life or his illness. Judging by his earlier enquiry into how Sherlock was feeling, he is likely having doubts about Sherlock ending his sick leave.

Sherlock ignores Donovan, dries his hands on a piece of kitchen paper and goes back to the living room, shoving his hands into his coat pockets. At least he'd remembered to pocket the medications right after taking them. Being forced to go back to the kitchen to retrieve them under Donovan's scrutiny would have been infuriating.

John has disappeared off somewhere - likely to help look for the gun. It's probably for the best - Sherlock would prefer for him not to have heard the conversation in the kitchen. He leans his shoulder on a bookcase, and tries to find consolation in the fact that this case still has the potential to be at least a Five. He should be thrilled, but a paralyzing exhaustion is setting in. All he can think of is home, and that he really would have liked that tea.
An assembly is called at Barts for Molly's report on the findings from Watford's autopsy.

To John, Sherlock seems visibly annoyed to find Donovan in attendance. After taking a position at the farthest end of the group from her, Sherlock keeps stealing disapproving glances at the policewoman. He doesn't say anything to her, or to Lestrade.

Once Donovan begins talking to one of her fellow officers and turns her back to the rest of the group, Sherlock's attention seems drawn to something on the lab bench running along the wall of the post mortem room. Hands in his coat pockets, he looks almost timid now.

John yawns, feeling cold in the draughty, tiled hall. He hasn't slept well. Sherlock had gone to bed early, and John hadn't joined him right away, hoping that a bit of quiet time alone might do something for Sherlock's mood, and allow John to actually sleep. He had got hooked on a late night spy thriller. It was just a case of getting lost in something mindlessly escapist, but he felt he deserved it. He needed some down time, too. As guilty as the thought made him feel, it was a relief to get a moment's peace from walking on eggshells, from constantly being on high alert concerning Sherlock's moods and whims.

The way Sherlock had said that he was tired, and that it was 'allowed', the implied criticism had stung a little. That remark had made John worry that maybe they were all pushing Sherlock rather hard these days. John could not really fault his physical recovery, when taking into consideration that he'd been effectively in a wheelchair upon discharge from the National. All in all, he had put up a brave front, done well at Harwich, managed to take on a case, and he now even seemed to want to follow through with the violin lessons. Apart from last night’s petulance about Mrs Hudson’s casserole, Sherlock was eating somewhat better than he had before the Guillain-Barré. Still, John continues to second-guess his decision to prompt Lestrade to engage Sherlock in the Work again this soon. When it comes to chasing criminals, Sherlock is unlikely to respect the limitations that his current fitness level puts on what he could, or couldn't manage. John just doesn't want him to get hurt, or lose even more confidence.

When John had finally slipped into bed at 1 am, he'd been relieved to see that Sherlock was asleep. Unfortunately, that didn’t last long. Sherlock got up at four o’clock, and this time he didn't even bother to try to do it stealthily. He spent the crack of dawn practicing on the violin, banging about in the kitchen, walking restlessly around the flat, even climbing up to John's old room for some reason. John had been too tired and too frustrated to want to get up and confront him about all the racket, so he'd just buried his head under a pillow and endured. In a way, it was like the old days of Sherlockian insomnia. It's blatantly obvious something is bothering Sherlock beyond still being on the mend, and John curses his own inability to address it. What else could he possibly do, than to try and be supportive, to provide opportunities to talk? John wonders if he's getting used to the tension already, and that it no longer worries him as much as it should. Certainly he hadn't deemed it reason enough to get up in the middle of the night and try to instigate some sort of a dialogue with the restless ghost moving furniture around.

Now, watching Sherlock studiously avoiding eye contact with anyone in the room but the corpse, John is beginning to wonder if Sherlock is paying the price for forgoing rest.

Molly calls them to order.
"Right. Well... Good morning." She looks down at the nude body, with its Y-incision freshly stitched. "Mark Alexander Watford is a white, anglo-saxon male, age thirty-seven. No known long-term illnesses. Broken clavicle from childhood. Height one point nine three meters, weight just under ninety kilos. A lot of that is muscle, by the way."

Lestrade and Donovan are at the left side of the table, Molly on the right, with John beside her. Sherlock is pacing rather aimlessly near the head of the table, gaze no longer fixed on the body. His eyes now seem to be focused more on the organs placed in kidney-shaped metal basins out on the lab bench.

Molly points to one of similar metal dishes that has been placed on the post mortem table right beside the body. "Five bullets were extracted, but all the evidence shows he was shot when he was already dead." Lestrade digs out a wad of evidence bags from his pocket, and Molly dons a glove and drops the bullets in individually.

"You were right, Sherlock," Lestrade says, "we eventually found the safe - it was between the floorboards, welded to the joist. There were some work papers and some bottles of tablets there that are being analysed as we speak, and an empty Glock pistol holster. No gun anywhere. The interesting bit is that the safe door only had Watford’s fingerprints on it."

Sherlock stops pacing, but his hands remained steepled in front of his chest. "Judging by his all-around shoddy conduct, I doubt the killer had the sense to use gloves. He did likely remove the gun from the premises. I wouldn't be surprised if it ended up on the bottom of the Thames. Even an idiot could come up with that."

"We found fifteen different prints in the apartment, still processing them," Lestrade says.

Sherlock nods. "Either the gun was already lying around somewhere in the apartment, or Watford took it out of the safe and then went to the bathroom, where he died. The killer used the man’s own gun on him, but only after he's dead," he recounts thoughtfully.

"But what killed him?" Lestrade presses.

Molly answers. "Well, it wasn’t the insulin injections. You were right about those, Sherlock. He was probably using just the right amount to increase muscle build, but not enough to disrupt the health of his pancreas. The tox screens will be ready in a day or two, but we already found elevated levels of certain hormones and plenty of classic physical signs that point to recreational steroid use. And he must have been a long term doping user, judging by how advanced the organ damage is. The liver shows the symptoms most clearly," Molly explains, grabbing a metal basin from the end of the row, and showing everyone the organ lying there.

John is not a pathologist, but he can easily discern that it doesn't look very healthy. It looks full of round nodules, and the colour is lighter and much more uneven than he'd expect to see in a healthy man with no alcoholism.

"The heart is affected, too - signs of myocardiopathy are usually hard to find, but they are there in this case, and there aren't really many other explanations for its advanced state than steroids, since he seems to have been fit as a fiddle before. His kidneys have been affected by whatever has wrecked his liver and his heart, but neither those or the liver are in a bad enough condition that it would have killed him. Brain normal. The cause of death is, in all likelihood, related to the heart. Rhythm disturbance, I'd say. Sudden exacerbation of cardiac dysfunction could also be it, but we found no evidence of pulmonary oedema."

Donovan interjects, "So, he wasn’t murdered at all? Just a heart attack? What a bloody waste of
police time." She crosses her arms.

Sherlock stops at the foot of the autopsy table, letting his gaze roam around the group gathered around it. "How many heart attack victims get shot after they die, their bodies dragged off and then deposited on the top floor of an abandoned mill? I would hardly call this a natural occurrence. I do hope for the sake of keeping peace in the commonwealth, that using dead people as stationary target practice isn't legal."

Donovan bristles, hands on hips. "Disposing of a body illegally is not something the Homicide & Serious Crimes Command investigate. We didn't turf the case, this because you insisted it was murder."

"...which it clearly is." Sherlock snaps with real venom in his voice, whirling about and coming to lean over her to use his height to intimidate the Detective Sergeant.

Lestrade gestures as if a referee stopping a boxing match. "Oi - Stop bickering, you two. Let's just look at the facts, shall we?"

Sherlock focused his attention on the DI. "Facts? I'll give you facts. Fact One - he is an abuser of what must be illegal steroids, and he's getting all those drugs from somewhere - for instance, insulin is a drug that no ordinary doctor would prescribe legally for him. But neither insulin nor steroids would have caused a heart attack, am I right, Molly? Or was the heart damage severe enough?"

"Lots of things can trigger a rhythm disturbance. He doesn't have to be in terminal cardiac dysfunction for that to happen," Molly says.

"Yet, this happened at his apartment, not at the gym, where he was exposing his heart to the most extreme duress!" Sherlock exclaims.

"Rhythm disturbances can happen in the cooldown period, too, after exercise," John points out and gets awarded with a murderous glare for what Sherlock probably would view as lack of support.

"Whatever triggered it internally, probably still didn't shoot him repeatedly in the back!" Sherlock declares, and no one can really argue against that.

John looks across the table at Molly, who gives a little shake of her head. "Um, Sherlock, that still leaves us with just desecration of the body, if there's nothing to point to the heart attack being triggered deliberately. His heart shows signs of HCM, and steroids would have aggravated that."

"You called it: he wasn't in overt cardiac dysfunction. Whatever caused his heart to stop, was must have been introduced into his body from the outside. The liver and kidney damage could have been caused by steroids and whatever stopped his heart, which gives us reason to suspect whoever shot him may have had something to do with the drugs. If someone suddenly drops dead, people might flee the scene in panic, but they don't start shooting the corpse. This invariable means that the shooter must've intended harm to come to Watford in the first place," Sherlock muses, eyes on the ceiling as he starts pacing again.

"There were no signs of a break-in," John points out, "Watford must've let the killer into the flat."

"So you're saying he was poisoned? And that it could have been put in what he was using?" Donovan asks.

"Very likely. There were no signs of a struggle in the flat, and no signs of a break-in. He knew his killer. Or should I say: his dealer."
John huffs. He'd just pointed out basically the same thing about Watford's home not containing signs of burglary. Does he ever get listened to by Sherlock? No.

"What's HCM?" Lestrade asks.

Molly answers, "Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. It's a sneaky disease to suspect before it gets severe. Left ventricle gets thick and stiff and eventually even its cavity size can be compromised."

Sherlock tears off his scarf and shoves it in his pocket. "Exactly. Often misdiagnosed, because in many cases the condition is actually AHS - athlete’s heart syndrome - athletic bradycardia with benign hypertrophy of the ventricle. It’s an exercise-induced, non-pathological condition common amongst sports people, particularly those who train more than an hour a day. Lestrade, you remember that case you called me in on in 2008? The Olympic athlete who collapsed on the track; you were sure he must have been poisoned, and the idiot pathologist - not you, Molly - diagnosed a heart condition and thus completely missed the real cause of death – a bee sting and anaphylactic shock, the symptoms of which were atypical because of the AHS."

Lestrade nods.

Sherlock straightens his spine and claps his hands behind his back. "It must be a common medical mistake, so I am assuming, Molly, that we won’t be repeating it here. Given the state of this body’s musculature, even with steroids, he would have spent a lot of time in a gym. We can’t test a dead body for the other tell-tale symptom of AHS - a lower resting heart rate than normal, since he likely has physiologic bradycardia anyway due to his fitness level. We have to assume it's HCM."

Molly nods, "You're right. We can’t check for a systolic murmur or extra heart sounds, or for ECG abnormalities. The only way you can really tell is with echocardiography on a live patient together with symptoms. But, Sherlock, it is possible that steroid abuse could push even AHS into outright heart disease, even rather fast." She looks down at her clipboard. "The facts are: he had an increased left ventricular muscle mass, the septal wall thickness was 14 millimetres, and the chamber was enlarged, which are consistent with the diagnostic criteria of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy."

"You’re all still missing the point here," Sherlock remarks. "If the heart condition had killed him, then it would have likely resulted in the symptoms - shortness of breath, palpitations, dizziness. Most people with chest pains and all that would have stopped exercising and gone to see a doctor. But, we found no signs of any heart medication in his flat. So, not likely that his heart condition had advanced so far as to cause a significant risk of arrhythmia."

Donovan shook her head. "But Molly just said that it’s still possible. Or does the other doctor present feel differently?"

John raises his arms in dismissal. "I have to defer to Molly. I'm not a pathologist or a cardiologist."

Donovan snorts. "Nor is he," she says, pointing her thumb at Sherlock, briefly. "Maybe Watford did feel sick, but he was just too stubborn to do anything about it."

Sherlock raises his eyes to the ceiling in frustration. "Fact two, which I was trying to explain, before you lot started piping in your imbecillic theories - neither HCM nor AHS are precursors of massive heart attacks. No one even treats AHS in any way. If there's visible damage in the heart, which isn't consistent with either, then we really do need to look at other potential immediate causes of death." He turns away from the dissection table and walks to the lab bench. Stopping at the third organ bowl, the one containing the heart, he pokes at it, not bothering to reach for the glove box. "Any blockages in the coronaries?" he asks, turning to Molly.
"No occluding plaques, but there was widespread atherosclerosis which shouldn't be there at his age. Steroids can cause that."

"He looks cyanotic," Sherlock points out.

Molly frowns. "Livor mortis makes assessment of skin and mucous membrane colour unreliable. Curiously enough, there actually were signs in the heart muscle of an ischaemic event that would have happened right before death. An infarction, in the right ventricle. Infarctions can, of course, lead to rhythm abnormalities."

John was surprised. "Atherosclerotic infarctions more commonly happen in the left ventricle, and that's the side that was suffering more from the cardiomyopathy. You said none of the coronary vessels were occluded?"

Molly nods. "Something else fried that muscle. The right coronary artery was relatively clean. As I said, a heart attack of some kind, but we can't prove the precise cause."

Sherlock stops poking at the cut-up heart, and returns to the group. "What you just heard is the third fact adding to the conclusion that it wasn't the steroid-induced HCM that killed him." He turns to Donovan with a villainous smile. "So, Sergeant Donovan, this is still a case of murder, after all."

Donovan shoves her hands in her jacket pockets. "You sound like a broken record."

Lestrade gives Sherlock a perplexed look. "So, we're looking for... what? If it isn't the steroids and the insulin that killed him, then the supplier probably didn't have anything to do with it, so what are we looking for?"

Sherlock’s frustration erupts on his expression, and yet again he restarts his restless pacing. John thinks it's almost hypnotic to watch, because of how sharp his turns are and how precise. His walking speed is almost back to his pre-GBS maximum, at least indoors, and at least when he's this worked up. "I didn't say that we should stop looking for the supplier, just that the steroids or the insulin aren't what killed him. We need more data. Something induced a heart attack in rather spectacular fashion, maybe it was a bad batch of steroids, perhaps cut with something that may not show up on the tox analysis. Or, Watford could have been taking something entirely new - a designer drug that isn't going to show up on a standard blood assay. He must've had the funds to get whatever he fancied. Whatever it was, the person who supplied it wanted to hide the fact that it had killed his buyer, whether intentionally or not, which is why he went through that charade of shooting a dead man and stashing him in the mill attic. But why the mill--- why a mill? Or should we be trying to find out why that mill?"

Sherlock locks eyes with Lestrade. "We need that missing ingredient.... We'll need to talk to his colleagues at work, friends, family. We need to understand more about what drove his need to build his body up like this, and the lengths he would be willing to go to." He went over to the fridge near the entrance, and pulls out three of the half dozen tubes of blood. "I'm going upstairs to the lab to see if I can pinpoint the murder weapon."

Sally objects. "Holmes, that's evidence! You can't just take it."

"Evidence of what? According to you, he died of a perfectly innocent heart attack. The pathology report is admissible in court - I'm sure some idiot coroner will turn it into a natural causes ruling, if you're so keen on letting a killer off the leash. I know Molly's thoroughness - she always takes twice the number of samples that are needed. So, my work on these will not compromise the existing evidence chain."
"The tox screen and other tubes have already gone to the forensic chemistry department. These are just the contingency tubes," Molly hurries to assure Donovan.

Without a word, or even a backward glance at John or the others, Sherlock turns with a swirl of his coat, and makes a rather theatrical departure through the double doors.

Sally Donovan looks annoyed. "You know, life was simpler when he was on sick leave. I swear he’s even worse now than he was before."

"Stow it, Sergeant. We have work to do. You heard him - friends, family, co-workers. Anyone who can tell us more about Mark Watford, and why he got into body building. And, more importantly, who was he buying his drugs from?"

John lingers behind when the Met officers leave, but he isn’t keen to follow Sherlock into the upstairs laboratory. Sherlock will invariably be in his mad scientist mode, likely planning on spending hours with the chemistry equipment there. John always feels surplus to requirements at times like these, and hovering over Sherlock's shoulder would make him feel even more awkward. "I guess I'll go get a coffee."

"Can I come with you?" Molly has appeared beside him.

"Yes, of course. I’d be glad of the company."

"Is everything alright?" she asks John quietly as they head down the main corridor towards the elevators. "Did you two have a fight? Why is he giving you the silent treatment?"

John snorts hollowly. "Welcome to post-rehab Sherlock Holmes." He means to sound casual, but the worry lines don't disappear from Molly's features.

"You look wrung out," she says. "Want to talk?"

He shouldn't. Sherlock hates others discussing his issues behind his back, but come to think of it, John does feel rather exhausted and frankly, he'd love a brain to pick that belongs to someone who also understands Sherlock. At least once, mere months ago, Molly had been the one to realize how upset Sherlock had been over the fact that John had a date.

They grab seats in the mostly empty hospital cafeteria. "What’s new?" Molly asks him.

John tells her about the violin instructor, including Ellicott's background.

"I've been wondering how he was doing with the violin. That sounds great, John," Molly says with a smile. "I'm glad you found someone like that for him."

John lets out a hollow laugh. "Not me. Mycroft, naturally. I was surprised Sherlock was even willing to consider it, since he knew who made the initial suggestion. His muscle memory is returning, his dexterity is recovering, but he's lost his confidence. I think even I could hear it in his playing, now that Helen - his tutor - has mentioned that it's something she might have to focus on."

John looks out the cafeteria window. "I don't know. I have no idea what's helping him, or what's just making everything worse."

"He looks fine, I guess, when you look at him," Molly says over her steaming mug of tea.

John had opted for a sludgy cappuccino from a vending machine. At least it contains caffeine. "Fine is pretty relative. He tires easily, and stairs are difficult, but otherwise he's doing better. It's getting easier and easier for him to pretend none of it ever happened, but on the other hand he's
been doing exactly that right from the discharge."

"He wants to move on, get back to what he loves doing; that’s understandable," Molly says, nodding.

"It's like he's wiped it all away, everything that's happened lately, even the good things," John says, shaking his head in disbelief, "and every reminder he gets, he looks like he's about to blow a gasket."

Molly frowns. "I didn't realize there were good things about what's been going on."

John realizes they haven't exactly told people about the two of them. He's been mulling it over in his head so much, that maybe part of him has forgotten that it's still something that isn't obvious, something that only the two of them and Mycroft - annoyingly enough - are privy to. People have always assumed that they are an item, but actually confirming that is not a small thing. John has somehow assumed that this moment was going to be far away still, that they'd work it out together how to make an announcement, before being confronted by a need to clarify their current relationship to someone. Things have been so fragile at home that John could hardly have taken such a subject matter up with Sherlock. Would Sherlock even condone him saying it out loud? On the other hand, Sherlock doesn't care about labels, and he has never been the one to protest loudly the assumption that they're involved beyond friendship.

Molly has always seemed to be one step ahead in these matters. Maybe she won't even be surprised.

John realises he wants to talk. He needs to, lest he get a heart attack at some point, too, from all the stress and the loneliness he hasn't wanted to admit feeling lately. "We're--- together, I guess," he says, gauging Molly's face carefully for a reaction.

"You guess?" Molly asks, both delight and confusion playing on her features.

"It sort of happened at the hospital, but we agreed to put in on a back burner until he's better. He did make his intentions quite clear. So did I."

"And now that he's home it's not all roses, is it?"

"I don't think Sherlock cares much about roses," John says, which elicits a laugh from Molly.

"We've not told a lot of people yet," John adds. "Well, Mrs Hudson knows. Mycroft knows, naturally, because he knows bloody everything all the bloody time, but not anyone else."

Molly beams, probably feeling honoured. All remnants of the torch she'd once carried for Sherlock seem to have gone out; there's no bitterness in her expression that John can find.

"I don't know if I should even be telling anyone," John says regretfully. "I think he may have changed his mind," John says and then hides behind his coffee, grimacing since it's still too hot when he tries to take a sip.

There it is. He's said it, given power to the doubt: had it just been the sad ghost of Florence Nightingale syndrome talking, when Sherlock had told him in the winter garden that he wanted more, that he was in love, that John was what he wanted? Had it just been a misguided yearning for comfort during illness, a distraction?

"Or maybe he thinks you have changed your mind, and this is his way of asking," Molly suggests.

John is awestruck. "Why on Earth would he think that?"
"He reads people's behaviour. What do you think he's read in yours lately?"

"All I've done is try to help him!" John defends himself, "I've been working with Mycroft in getting him the professional help he needs, which he mostly rejects, and helping him myself as much as I can. The only thing he's not thrown out the window is the violin tutor." He leans back on his chair and rubs his forehead with the heel of his palm. "I don't know how to do any of this. I'm not a bloody neurologist, nor am I a psychiatrist."

"Judging by what you've just said, and what you told me when he was at the MITU, he doesn't want either of those. If that's what you've been trying to do, then maybe that's all he's seen."

"What do you mean?"

"Behaving like his doctor isn't exactly like behaving like a--- boyfriend, is it?" Molly articulates his last three words carefully, watching for John's reaction.

"I don't think he'd ever call me that. He'd laugh, probably. Not that he laughs all that much nowadays."

Molly looks even sadder now, but a little frustrated, too.

"He did tell me at the hospital to stop being his doctor," John admits, "but that was then."

"And did you?"

"How can I? I am who and what I am. It's like asking Sherlock to stop being Sherlock."

"But trying to act like a doctor isn't helping?" Molly asks.

"Not in the slightest," John is forced to admit. Their recent argument over the medications comes to mind. The more he tries to put his foot down, the more Sherlock fights him.

"Look, I know why you're doing all that, it probably is a bit automatic for us, but if he's told you that's not what he wants--"

"It was still the early days. I assumed it would not be smart to draw any long-term conclusions from it."

"You've got something else, you know. Something that really could help, not as a doctor, but as a person who’s been through a long recovery yourself."

John looks dismissive.

"You've been through a lot. You were perfectly healthy, and then you got shot. You've never said much about it to me, nor has Sherlock, and what you put in your blog wasn't very extensive, either, but it seems clear things weren't good for you after the army. I remember the first time I saw you - you looked so much more like a veteran invalided home, than you do now."

John doesn't like to think about those days in that bedsit, gun under his pillow, curtains drawn. He does his damnedest to avoid thinking about it, because it was nothing short of hell.

But, does Molly have a point? And would John have arrived at that point himself sooner, if he weren't so hell bent on trying to forget those times?

Is that what it's like for Sherlock, now? Sad, yes, of course; frustrated - hell yes. But, that depressed? Could that even be to the point John had reached - of suicidal thoughts? The idea
terrifies him. None of the signs of clinical depression are there in Sherlock - he isn’t sleeping excessively, or lacking in energy. He appears driven when it comes to the case; tightly wound. Of course when he gets home he’s tired; who wouldn’t be after what he’s been through? The frustration and the anger and the vacillation between defeat and hope are logical, aren't they? As a doctor John knows depression takes different forms, especially in someone as peculiar as Sherlock, but anxious is a much better description of Sherlock's behaviour than just depressed, but they could both be parts of a larger issue. Has he been overestimating the man, who has always seemed invincible, indestructible and physically more fit than he'd ever dream of being? Has he been guilty of assuming that Sherlock would simply bounce back from all that once enough time had passed, when for Sherlock the loss might be much more devastating than for anyone else, even if merely temporary? Could he hide that much from John, or has John simply been unwilling to see what was in front of him?

Could John's reticence to accept what's going partly due to desire to prove to Mycroft that his brother is much more capable than Mycroft gives him credit for? Is he, really, or does John just desperately want to believe so? 'Do not underestimate Sherlock's ability to fool even those closest to him.' Mycroft had told him. Still, has Sherlock even tried to hide anything? Hasn't he worn his mercurial mood on his sleeve? He's never been one to curb his enthusiasm or his annoyance – the smiley face on the wall of the flat is a testament to it. He has witnessed some odd behaviour from Sherlock recently - nothing overtly alarming, just bits and pieces, but those things have hinted to John that Sherlock's issues may indeed be very different from those John had had during his recovery from the gunshot wound. Maybe some of them could even be things wholly unrelated to the GBS. Sherlock doesn't talk about his past much, and John doubts he'd be willing to discuss such issues. Or anything else. They don't talk about these sorts of things. They never have. It's why it took them so long - too long - to get to the moment in the hospital's winter garden.

"I'm not him, though - nobody is," John says. "How the hell should I know what's going through his head? It's not like he tells me things!" John says, frustrated to the point of wanting to bury the whole conversation.

"There must've been something that happened with you that helped, something that turned the tide. What was it?" Molly prompts encouragingly.

"I met Sherlock, who dragged me back into the battlefield, cane and limp and bad shoulder and all, and showed me that I could make it."

Molly smiles. "Not exactly the same battlefield - crime scenes gave you a different sort of thrill, one that didn't remind you too much of what had happened before. It wasn't your old life. Maybe that's what you should do for Sherlock, then."

"What do you mean?"

"Find something new, something that neither of you have ever done before. That way neither of you will get worked up comparing it to how things were before."

John stares at her, slightly amazed.

They enjoy the rest of their drinks in silence.

John finds himself downright fascinated by what Molly has just suggested.

It could work, couldn't it, finding something new? Maybe it's time for less talk, since they're both so rubbish at it, and more action. Something they could share.
John starts thinking of all the things that neither Sherlock nor he had ever done before. Something physical, something that requires mental agility, but also would be challenging enough to satisfy Sherlock.

If only he could work out what the hell this hypothetical thing could be.
After leaving the postmortem hall for the forensic chemistry laboratory, Sherlock is now trying to concentrate his attention on the monitor screen shared by the gas chromatograph and the mass spectrometer.

This is the first time since coming home from Harwich that he's actually working on an experiment.

It's not going well.

To start with, he can’t seem to get comfortable. One irritating symptom of the GBS which still very much prevails, is discomfort when sitting still for any length of time. Squirming his bottom around on the lab stool, he starts to jiggle his left leg to try to calm the nerves down, to hopefully stop the faint electric shocks traveling down his sciatic nerve. Must his body be so annoyingly distracting in so many ways, especially today? Clothes irritate his oversensitized skin, his muscles get stiff and achy easily, and his nerves keep interpreting the most normal of sensations as something completely different: cold, burning, itching. Gentle touch is worst of all in this respect. To add insult to injury, he also doesn't desensitise to the touch of fabric, smells or background noises the way he used to. Some of this might just be due to a heightened stress level, since the Guillain-Barré should not have affected his ability to process sounds or visual information, but it's somehow all part of the mess his brain feels like these days.

He needs to keep an eye on the screen, because three minutes into each run, a series of smaller sub-windows on the chromatogram pop up. The machinery isn't the newest version available by far, so nothing is automated. As the separate graphs of the compounds start to peak, he needs to take a snapshot in the enhanced data analysis window at three different times by clicking and dragging the cursor over the area to be enlarged and captured, and then double-clicking to bring up the mass spectrum in another sub-window. To get as accurate a reading as possible, he has to take one as close to the end as possible in every one of the screens during the last minute of the analysis. This would be demanding for anyone, in terms of the timing, since it requires trying to hit a moving target. He has already had to re-do the test run twice, because he had missed the crucial moment.

Even loading samples into the GC/MS machine in the first place had been a challenge, since it required a level of fine motor control he hasn't regained. Almost a fifth of one blood sample managed to escape the vial after his hand had given an unexpected tremor at the worst possible time. He doesn’t know if the shaking of his hands is purely physical, a leftover symptom from the GBS, or whether it’s due to an unconscious worry that he's is going to mess things up. His dexterity seems to have bad days and worse days and sometimes, but only sometimes, borderline promising days.

The door to the corridor opens, and John saunters into the lab. Soon he's peering over Sherlock's shoulder. "What’re you doing?"

"GC/MS test," Sherlock replies curtly, assuming John knows what the letters stand for. Surely this sort of elementary knowledge is required from medical school graduates? His curt explanation makes John look inquisitive but not confused, so clearly he's expecting a further information. "Molly’s ordered the standard set of forensic analyses, which will only test for common, known
toxins. Not her fault; it’s just the protocol - the path labs are designed for mass standardisation, which means that they run against knowns."

"And this doesn’t?"

Sherlock shakes his head. "I can’t do this and talk." If he snaps this a little brusquely, he can’t help it, because it embarrasses him to have to admit his anxiety. He doesn’t want this run to fail, too.

John barely stifles a sigh. He walks over to a chair against the side of the room, eyeing the quietly whirring GC/MS machine as if it were competition. Sherlock sees that look through his peripheral vision, and it introduces yet another distraction. He could ask John for help, but to do so would be to admit his own incapacity. This is supposed to be what he does, what he spent years training for. His skills as a chemist are crucial to what he is, the image he has of himself. Although he doesn't get to flex these proverbial muscles as often as he'd like by doing practical experiments, The Work does often depend on the associated knowledge base. To fail now, to ask for help, would be an admission of defeat he can’t afford right now.

As John drags the chair out, the sound of the legs scraping across the floor spikes into Sherlock’s ear like fingernails on a blackboard and he flinches, almost missing the moment to double-click because of the involuntary shudder. He carries on tagging each of the open mass spectrometry sub-windows with the link to the library files, and watches as the data graphs approximate and then synch with a database for comparison with known compounds. It's akin to a chemistry-themed game of matching pairs.

Usually Sherlock likes having John around in the lab when he works. Much of what laboratory work requires is purely mechanical, and he could do it on autopilot, allowing him and John to joke around and enjoy spending time together. There's also always a chance that John’s innocent questions start a chain of deductions that will break a case wide open. The problem with advanced expertise in a scientific field is what his first chemistry tutor at school once described as the 'seeing the forest from the trees' -sort of problem. 'It's easy to mistake a study of one plant cell in one part of one tree as the truth not only about the tree as a whole, but the whole forest, as well as an entire ecosystem," the man had told his students repeatedly. Sherlock had named it MacGarry’s Law after the tutor. He recognizes this as a potential weakness in his thought processes, and tries to guard against it. John is a great example of someone who never loses sight of that big picture, quite possibly because he lacks focus for the details. Rather than being a handicap, it means that John has a useful habit of asking the right stupid questions at the perfect time, forcing Sherlock to take a step back, and to re-think things from an entirely new perspective.

Today, he's having a hard time staying focused while John wanders around the same space. Reaching a state in which he could enjoy his time in the lab would require for some things to be easy and automatic, which naturally requires muscle memory. That seems to be mostly gone, meaning that yet another thing he has enjoyed has been taken away.

John has been asking about his experiments - or lack thereof - at home. The truth is that he doesn't feel like experimenting, since his mistakes would be too obvious to both him and John. He knows that John likes to think of him as the ‘mad scientist’ but right now he doesn’t think he has enough dexterity to even make it to the role of Frankenstein’s lab assistant, Igor. That thought sets him off on a tangent - he decides he has more in common with the poor monster, than either of the borderline normal humans in the story.

He’s a rag-bag of collected body parts, some of which function much worse than others. The thought forces him to stifle the urge to grab an Erlenmeyer flask, and hurl it through the glass door of a storage cupboard.
Finally, he manages to finish the last of the three snapshots in every subroutine, and breathes a sigh of relief. As this run enters into the last minute of analysis, he waits, watching the screen to see if the same result comes up as it did for the last three: an unknown compound.

There it is, again! The results in one sub-window is, again, left without a match from the database. The murder weapon? Both of the previous successful test runs had also revealed a similar substance. They don't really match each other, because the snapshots were inevitably taken at different points along the process, but that doesn't mean it isn't the same compound.

Sherlock knows that he's going to need at least a half dozen runs more, before he has enough data to try fractioning out the precise structure of it. That thought ratchets up the stress. Not only will he need to do more of these tests, but the fractioning process will involve a lot of fiddly fussing with titrates and distillation equipment. His hands feel like he is wearing boxing gloves; so clumsy. He shakes his left wrist to increase circulation but it's pointless - it's the nerves that are at fault, not the blood vessels. His fingertips are tingling.

He'll have to ask someone else to do the fractioning. The process so far has been child's play compared to what comes next, and for everything to be admissible in court, there's no room for mistakes.

There's no room for him, given his current decrepitude.

The realisation tears a hole in his composure almost as gaping as the first violin lesson, but he can't let any of his apprehension show. To acknowledge it in some way would just undermine John’s belief in him even more. There are already plenty enough suspicious glances directed at him, infuriatingly hovering hands ready to steady him when John thinks he's about to fall, condescendingly frequent offers for rest, medications and food. How could John possibly take him seriously, to think of him as an equal partner in a relationship, if John feels the need to mother him like that?

Couldn't John just go, return downstairs, head back home, and leave him be, until he stops feeling like a trapdoor is about to be sprung from underneath him?

Sherlock fixes his eyes on the computer screen as if it were a lifeline. If he were to seek out John’s eyes, he knows that would shatter his composure completely. He needs to finish this and then document his findings. There's a murder to be solved. Focus.

"Find anything?" John asks.

Biting his lip, Sherlock sits back from the screen and crosses his arms. "I'm now done with this part. It will take the machine a few minutes to return to 40 degrees and allow the process to start on another sample."

"Well, I'm so glad you can fit me into your busy schedule."

Sherlock rips his eyes away from the screen to look at John. He thinks that this might be sarcasm, but he isn’t sure, so he asks, "what do you mean?"

John slips his phone back in his pocket and gets up from the chair to come closer. "If I'm a nuisance, I might as well go home, or join the others and go talk to people who might have something to say on the case. It's kind of clear that I'd be more useful elsewhere, since talking is something that I'm better at these days than you are."

That stings a bit. Actually, more than a bit. Sherlock knows he hadn't said a word to John in the mortuary, but John usually isn't this touchy about being ignored. There's something going on here,
but Sherlock really doesn’t have the energy or confidence right now to try and parse why John's mood has changed. Couldn't John have aired his grievances at home, when he's is not trying to concentrate on working?

He shrinks his shoulders down and shifts his gaze back to the keyboard, hoping that his face hasn’t revealed his reaction. He feels John’s eyes on him, and suddenly an image of being stuck on the wrong end of a microscope comes into mind. He is being examined, observed and analysed, and he knows he isn’t going to match the expectations. It feels rather inevitable now that he's going to say the wrong thing, or not say the right thing, and there's going to be an argument. A suffocating, nauseating wave of fear, shame and embarrassment wells up from nowhere and he has to take a quick breath to keep bile from rising into his throat.

He tries to come up with some acerbic comment that will disguise how he feels, but nothing comes to mind. John’s words had hit a sore spot and opened up a wound of doubt - why would he want to be in Sherlock’s company? He is proving to be as far from what he used to do in the lab as he is with playing the violin, as he is with everything nowadays. There will be no more eureka moments for John to enjoy. God, he misses the days when things like 'amazing' and 'extraordinary' were the sorts of things that came out of John’s mouth instead of 'are you alright?' and 'what's wrong?'

The silence in the lab is broken only by the sound of the whirring of the machinery, and the whispering of the fan cooling the computer processor. Somehow, these noises take on the volume of a roar in Sherlock's ears, and the walls seem to move in on him. He knows that John is waiting for some sort of reply, but it is hard to find words amidst the whirlpool of rising panic, fear and desperation.

Finally, Sherlock manages a quiet "You do that. I’m not..." His words grind to a halt. He frowns, having already forgotten what it was he had intended to say.

"You’re not what?"

"I’m not... good company. At the moment." He spits out the admission, angry at himself, his incompetence, and at John, too. If he's lucky, it might pass for an apology.

John is half-way to the door but stops. He doesn’t turn around, but just asks, "What’s wrong, Sherlock?" He sounds world-weary.

Everything is wrong, from the test procedure all the way to how he’s thinking, or not thinking about the case. And now he has even managed to make John angry and fed up with him. They all keep staring at him, because they see him, and in their minds they see the other him, and the two of them are never going to be the one and the same again.

'You can’t be allowed to continue; you just can’t', sings the voice of Jim Moriarty suddenly in his head, and that’s the final straw.

It's all crashing in now, all at once. Sounds appear distant, light distorted, heart pounding in his chest, the barrage of sensation crashing over like a tidal wave.

This shouldn't happen. It doesn't, not anymore, not for a long time, not for years, not unless he loses doubt in his ability to control it. Has he done that without realizing?

It has happened only once, just the early stages of it, in John's presence. In Dartmoor Sherlock had been able to stave off the worst of it until John had strode off. That time he had simply doubted his senses, and it hadn't really got that bad. A few hours sitting in the dark of their joined hotel room had done the trick.
This time, he does doubt his each and every ability, which means that this is a rigged game. Panic is a familiar enemy, one he can beat, but when it starts merging with other things, when the whole thing detonates like this-----

Without thinking, Sherlock blurts out, "everything. Me. I’ve just screwed up the first two tests because I’m..." He hears his own voice at too loud a volume and too high a pitch, nearly hysterical. The panic is now swallowing him whole, because he realises what’s coming. Everything sounds like the wrong things taste, and all colours are bleeding together. He isn't even sure where he is anymore. His breathing tightens, and he feels the tide of anxiety coming up his chest to claw at his throat. He wants to not feel, to stop hearing himself in his head, wants it all to just stop.

John turns around at his words, looking downright shocked, likely because of the naked distress he must have heard in them.

Sherlock gasps for breath, tries but fails to hold onto the edge of the lab counter before sliding right off the stool and collapsing onto his knees on the floor.

"Sherlock!" John shouts in alarm, circling around the end of the lab bench in a flash, and when he gets Sherlock back into his line of sight. John sees him cringing away from the noise. Sherlock is scrambling backwards to lean against the table he’d been sitting by, drawing his knees up to his chest. He tucks his head in tight so that all John can see is the dark hair. Sherlock clamps his forearms against his ears, and John can tell he's hyperventilating.

John pulls the upended lab stool away and kneels beside him, clapping his right hand on Sherlock’s shoulder to try to steady him, his other hand reaching for a wrist to check the pulse. "What happened? Did you faint? Hit your head on the way down? Talk to me, Sherlock!"

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" Sherlock roars, his voice thick with rage and alarm, flinging his arm out blindly. John lurches backwards, raising both of his hands away from Sherlock, to avoid the flailing fists.

Unfettered, Sherlock burrows his head deeper in between his knees and chest, wrapping his arms tight around his legs, and then starts to rock. There's a peculiar sort of hum emerging - John can't make out any sort of a melody within. Somehow, it reminds John of noise-cancelling headphones.

The scene is so alarming and strange, that John finds himself completely at a loss what to do.

In a softer voice, he tries again. "What’s going on, Sherlock? What’s happened?"

"SHUT UP!"

It's not a request but a demand shouted by someone right on the edge, fighting for control, and that’s when John realises what it is he’s witnessing, and it shocks him to silence.

As a doctor who has done his time manning A&E departments and looked after shellshocked soldiers, so he knows what a garden-variety panic attack looks like.

This isn't it.

This is.... It's what they call a meltdown, isn't it?
All John knows about such events comes from a thick stack of articles and educational leaflets Mycroft had supplied him with after their one and only discussion about a certain diagnosis Sherlock had been given at an early age. Ever since that conversation, which had happened about four months after he'd moved to Baker Street, John has known that Sherlock is somewhere on the Autism Spectrum. He had not pressed Mycroft for further details on Sherlock's particular case, and had declined an offer to receive a copy of pertinent medical notes from when Sherlock had been a minor.

Until now, John has never wanted to pay the matter much mind; Sherlock seems to manage so well that John has felt he has no right to call attention to such a matter. There is the habitual rudeness and social awkwardness, of course, and the incapability of understanding sarcasm and reading between the lines and other such things, but clearly Sherlock is capable of compensating for most of them by being the brilliant genius he is. None of what might make him untypical neurologically has ever made a blind bit of difference to John. Many of the things John had read about in those articles and leaflets he had mostly forgotten about, because they didn't seem to apply to Sherlock. He had even found himself questioning the very diagnosis, when talking to Mycroft.

'He manages, because he's been taught how to do so. He has been educated in typical social scenarios and the pertinent responses to them, has received extensive therapy to be able to control the sensory processing issues, and his intelligence helps mask what he wants to conceal', Mycroft had told him.

John now realises he should have listened more carefully, but since he hadn't really been confronted with all the evidence, why should he have prepared for something like this? It had all seemed rather irrelevant to their daily life - until now.

How little does he actually know about what goes on in Sherlock's head? Is it any wonder that Sherlock avoids sharing certain things, if he assumes John is utterly incapable of understanding them?

It's likely Sherlock will be deeply embarrassed of someone having witnessed this. The thought brings on an intense, desperate desire in John to prove to Sherlock that he shouldn't have to be. It's almost physically painful to not go to him, to keep a distance and helplessly watch someone in such obvious distress.

Suddenly, a terrifying memory comes to mind. One John had managed to chalk up to as a somewhat innocent event.

Dartmoor.

As they sat in front of the fire in the dining hall, Sherlock had acted so very oddly, looking both angry and fearful as he fixed his gaze on the glass of whisky, hands shaking, film of sweat on his forehead. He usually never drank - there was the occasional glass of champagne at parties, but he hardly ate during cases, and drinking anything containing alcohol was clearly out of the question at such times. John now realises he should have recognized the Scotch as a desperate attempt at self-medication.

The bellowed 'THERE’S NOTHING WRONG WITH ME' should have rung the alarm bells, too, because he'd heard a very similar command mere moments ago. Nothing John had said that evening in Dartmoor had made a blind bit of difference to Sherlock’s temper. John had walked out, stubbornly chalking everything up to the ghost dog, to the nicotine withdrawal and later on, the hallucinogen, but seeing what he's seeing right now, is a rude awakening in its striking similarity. What had happened to Sherlock, after John had walked out of that dining hall? He hadn't really realised what Sherlock may have been going through that night at the Cross Keys Inn. He'd simply
assumed Sherlock was being even more obnoxious than usual, having been *worked up* by a jaunt to the woods. John had stalked off into the night to try to cool his own temper, not realising the mess he’d left behind.

Had what's going on here now, happened to Sherlock in Dartmoor?

John realises that, according to the reading materials Mycroft had provided him with, he may have unintentionally done the right thing by giving Sherlock some space. Still, in hindsight, John can hardly congratulate himself on how he had handled that whole episode. He'd actually felt a little bit of schadenfreude for seeing Sherlock drop his mask of invincibility.

Maybe that mask is more important than he has ever realised.

Maybe navigating through life may not be as easy for Sherlock as John has thought.

John has always accepted the 'high-functioning' aspects, and has come to not only tolerate, but actually appreciate many of the other characteristics of Sherlock’s neuroatypicality. Somewhere along the way, that acceptance has turned into one aspect of what he now recognizes as love.

This time he's not going to let Sherlock down.

John tries to drag out of his memory anything and everything he can remember from what he'd read about handling a meltdown. He really should have paid more attention to those parts of what Mycroft had given to him for reading.

One thing immediately comes to mind which he had been able to glean from it all: Sherlock’s behaviour is supposed to tell him what to do.

What else had he manages to retain from the reading materials supplied by Mycroft?

*Give space.* As cruel as the act now feels to him, by leaving Sherlock alone in Dartmoor he’d probably done the right thing, because it had removed one cause of the stress he'd been under - namely, himself. Those timeouts on the Baker Street sofa must be an important clue; they probably give Sherlock a chance to calm himself down. John had learned early on when to let a sleeping a Sherlock lie, even if he wasn’t actually asleep.

As desperately as John now wants to step closer, to examine, to touch, to console, he fights the impulse and keeps his distance. He remembers that at the height of his hospitalisation, Sherlock’s worst moments had come when the damaged nerves over-reacted with everything - from the sound of a catering trolley rattling down the corridor, to a bright light or scratchy sheets. Maybe that applies now. John goes over to the door of the lab and turns off the lights. This favourite lab room of Sherlock’s has no natural light, and the fluorescent lighting blinks off, irritating even John.

He then goes over to the computer. He has no idea what the hell he is doing, but he follows the screen menu instructions and saves the data, knowing that if he just shut down the machine, Sherlock would be royally pissed off about having to re-do the tests. Once the menu shows the file has been saved, John logs Sherlock out of the system and powers down. Then he turns off the GC/MS machine, which clicks and pops a bit as it cools down.

He then checks on Sherlock again, still keeping his distance. It’s more difficult now, because the only light in the room is now confined to what is coming though the glass window on the lab door. He can hear that Sherlock’s breathing is slowing down, but he’s still scrunched down tight, coiled into himself. He’s still rocking, arms over his ears, but at least the humming has stopped.

John remembers reading that this might take a while. He continues to resist the urge to ask
questions, to diagnose, to take some kind of action. And it’s hard. Time seems to practically crawl. John counts it off in five minute intervals, using the fluorescent dial of his watch.

Ten minutes in, the rocking stops. At fifteen, Sherlock’s breathing seems almost normal. After that there is a sort of plateau, and John doesn’t know whether he should do something - whether it's safe to approach Sherlock at this point.

John stays away, because he desperately wants to avoid making things worse. His hands curl into fists, when he realises that the anxiety he's feeling now is familiar: he's feeling like he had in the hospital, watching Sherlock deteriorating while there was nothing he could do. That same helplessness has now thoroughly poisoned the joy of Sherlock returning home.

There’s a comparison to be made here to how things have been going in general. John can't be sure that anything he does is helping or hindering Sherlock’s recovery. Should he have pushed harder, like Mycroft seems to think, or left Sherlock completely to his own devices? He's been trying to strike a precarious compromise between these two things, and it clearly isn't working. John curses his own stupidity - 'you see but you do not observe', Sherlock mocks him in his head. It now seems rather obvious that he has been so fixated on the aftermath of the Guillain-Barré, that he’s not given any thought to how recovering nerves might affect other underlying conditions.

Eventually, at twenty five minutes, John sits on the floor himself, his back up against the bookshelves at the edge of the room. Might as well get comfortable. As he counts Sherlock’s breathing rate, mostly to calm himself down and to have something to do, John comes to the realisation that maybe his whole approach has, indeed, been wrong-headed from the beginning. Expecting Sherlock to ‘recover’ may be just another form of denial. He might be just as guilty as Sherlock of wanting to pretend that the illness had never happened. He's been behaving as though it's something that could be forgotten when Sherlock gets better - gets back to the way he was. That is not going to happen. Neither of them can make the memories of what has happened disappear, any more than John can forget the war. Experiences like that change people. God, even he may not be exactly the same himself after watching Sherlock go through such hell. He doesn't even want to go back to the way things had been, and the biggest reason for that had been articulated in the winter garden of the hospital, when Sherlock had told him he wanted John to be with him forever, to share a closeness that they had never before allowed themselves to consider. John suspects neither of them had known exactly what shape that would take. Instead of being so fixated on the gap between then and now, John now realises he should have been helping Sherlock explore new and different things, including the us the two of them have supposedly turned into. Truth be told, John knows that he may be hiding behind the smokescreen of Sherlock’s illness, too, using the recovery period as an excuse to postpone seeing what that promised future holds for them. His awkwardness and trepidation over his own identity issues may have helped drive Sherlock into retreating to the comfort of old habits, because they are safer for both of them. He isn't good at this sort of thing, but it can't really be delegated to someone else.

John closes his eyes in the darkness, aware of the sudden prickle of frustrated tears. He can't help thinking that he may have hurt Sherlock in ways he's only beginning to realise, and he's so alone in all this.

He can't fall to pieces right now. It's not going to help either of them. He presses his palms on his knees, forcing himself to calm down.

It's been thirty minutes already. It's obvious he's useless. He should probably admit defeat, swallow his pride and call Mycroft for advice. That'd go down splendidly with Sherlock, of course. But, what else is there to do?
Just as he's about to dig out his phone, the sound of something shifting on the floor makes John snap open his eyes. In the darkness, he can make out Sherlock lifting his head slowly and then stretching his legs out in front of him. A deep breath sounds, slightly ragged but still much more reassuring than the earlier shallow panting.

John waits.

"Well... that was embarrassing." If Sherlock's baritone is a bit huskier than normal, John doesn’t care. What does alarm him is that Sherlock's voice is so quiet and subdued.

John decides to play it straight, going for the practical and honest. "In the interests of science and for future reference, was that a meltdown? Or a panic attack? Understanding the difference might keep me from making matters worse."

Sherlock flexes his shoulders and stretches his neck first to the left and then the right. "It’s hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. Those things don't really happen to me anymore," he says, sounding detached and dismissive.

John thinks that something happening twice within six months doesn't exactly constitute 'not anymore', but he doesn't point this out. Instead, he wants to rush in to examine, to get close for a hug perhaps, to attempt something to reassure Sherlock, to point out that Sherlock had every right to be anxious and to show him that John understands.

It's just that he doesn't really understand, does he? Nothing like this has ever happened to him. His nightmares and his own panic attacks had certainly not looked like this.

Not wanting to sound false, John holds back, and just asks "What do you need now?"

"To forget this ever happened. And for you to do me the courtesy of following suit."

John wants to argue, but he's pretty damned sure now is not the time. "Shall we go home? Do you need to rest?"

Sherlock gets to his feet, while John again stifles his instinct to check a pulse, look for other physical symptoms, help him up or render some other kind of assistance.

Once upright, Sherlock looks around at the dark computer screen and frowns. "I saved the data. You'll find it on the desktop under the file name 'sawmillamateur'," John tells him.

Sherlock snorts, but it is a sound that John recognises as one of amusement. "Can you put the blood samples back in the fridge over there? They're already labelled. I'll try to finish this later." His voice is a bit subdued.

John does as he has been told, busying himself with the tasks. Sherlock doesn't do much of anything, simply leans on a side table after turning on the lights, lost in thought, until the sound of his phone's text alert fills the room. John wonders if what has just happened has somehow reset him, vented out the anxiety. Sherlock looks so deceivingly fine, now.

Sherlock pulls it out of his pocket and reads the text. "It’s Lestrade. He wants us to meet him at the Maress&Thornton offices on Chilcott Street in an hour. He’s assembling Watford’s colleagues there to take statements."

"Is that... wise? At the moment?"
Sherlock walks over to the door, collecting his coat from the hook. He doesn't look all that anxious anymore, but there isn't any sort of enthusiasm evident on his face, either. "I could use a distraction. Coming?"

John wants to point out he doesn't really have a choice - that he never really did after 'Afghanistan or Iraq?' - but he refrains. He certainly thinks it's a bad idea for Sherlock to extend what has clearly already been an extremely stressful day, but John's best hope is that whatever has just happened has at least released some pent-up stress.

John wants to talk, to ask about a great many things, but he's certain his curiosity will not be welcomed for the time being. What he's just witnessed is clearly not a new thing, judging by what he'd read and by Sherlock's admission about it not happening lately. It could well be that this is something that Sherlock has been able to control for most of his adult life. It's obvious that this control had slipped today and probably at Dartmoor, too, aided by the hallucinogen. John still can't tell if this is more likely an expected event at this point in recovery, or whether it's a distress beacon that things are really getting bad.

Maybe the rest of the day will provide an answer.

John quickly retrieves his own coat and hurries after Sherlock.
Looking for Clues

When they arrive at the offices of Maress & Thornton, just off Fenchurch Street, John realises how well they fulfill the prognostic description Sherlock had given during their cab ride. The headquarters are too small to warrant a building of its own, but it does occupy an entire seventh floor of an inner City highrise, with a reception area designed to convince clients that the company punches above its weight. The furniture shines in chrome and glass.

John wonders yet again how well Sherlock could deduce a place he’d never seen just by looking at a dead body and knowing where the deceased had worked. Whatever else he might be struggling with at present, it seems clear that his deductive powers haven't taken a beating during his illness, at least as far as John could tell. And why would they have?

Besides giving his usual case-related speculative monologue, Sherlock had also used the taxi ride to re-assemble his usual posture and air of self-possession. By the time they've made their way to the corridor outside the boardroom, Lestrade and his team would have never guessed, that less than an hour prior, Sherlock had been curled up on the floor in total shutdown. John finds himself both in awe of Sherlock’s resilience and, at the same time, worries about him pushing himself too hard, too soon. The incident has left him wondering how frequent these sorts of episodes have been in Sherlock's life, and how he might have learned - or been taught - to control them. 'He's had outstanding therapists,' Mycroft had said; John finds it difficult to imagine the notion of Sherlock actually co-operating with such a thing. Maybe, if he saw it as a means to make his life easier, he might have. During cases, John has made note of Sherlock's blatant disdain for anyone working within the field of mental health. It doesn't fit with the notion that he may have had successful working relationships with such professionals in the past. Has something happened in his life that has changed his opinion and made him adamantly resistant to anything resembling a psychological intervention?

The recent months have, in many ways, revealed a new side to Sherlock. John had imagined him being able to keep his composure effortlessly, sailing through life admittedly with some difficulties, but with a liberating attitude of not giving a toss what others think of him. All that may have come at a price much steeper than John has previously imagined, and the day's events have left him wondering if it could actually be the opposite of what he has thought; that Sherlock has to actually work punishingly hard to manage the minutiae of everyday life that others need to pay very little attention to. Or maybe it's only been that way recently - they've both been left so raw by Sherlock's hospitalisation. John suspects that him spending months so finely and desperately attuned to all hints as to what could possibly be going through Sherlock's head, has probably permanently altered the way in which they react to one another. The intimacy of this connection is downright frightening, but also the deepest John has ever shared with anyone. If only Sherlock weren't trying his damnedest to keep him at bay. This was supposed to be what they fought for - coming home, being home, working together.

As they approach the Met team standing in the corridor, Sherlock pulls off his scarf and fiddles with the buttons of his coat. They're large enough that he manages them well. At Harwich, John had had to do them for him.

They've come a long way from that day - but only in some ways.

"What did you find out from the relatives?" Sherlock asks Lestrade, ignoring Sally Donovan who's standing next to the DI. He sounds commanding, business-like, perfectly in control.

"Not much," Lestrade admits. "Watford wasn’t the sort to keep in touch. Only child; father died
years ago, mum’s in a dementia wing of a posh care home. The only relatives I could track down –
a couple of cousins and an aunt - had no idea he was into body building. They knew very little
about his life. His aunt was actually kind of surprised, said he was never the sporty type as a boy.
More the bookish type.”

Sherlock’s lips tighten with disapproval. "I don’t understand why you won’t let me talk to victim’s
relatives; I could get so much more out of them than you ever seem to."

Sally Donovan actually cringes. "Letting you loose with the loved ones of murder victims? --- No.
Just no. I bet the boss has had enough of writing those apology letters, too."

As much as John hates the notion, for once, he has begrudgingly to half-agree with Donovan.
Sherlock’s directness can be, and often is, gravely misunderstood. It does result in people revealing
things they otherwise wouldn't, since in their agitation they become hell bent on correcting his
assumptions, but John is aware that the resulting PR shitstorm has landed Lestrade in hot water
with his supervisors more than once.

In a way, it’s all very ironic - as much as Sherlock values the truth when it comes to cases, he's
awfully economical with it when it comes to his emotions. He’s not dishonest, but John has
wondered about his reasons for his being so unwilling to even try and discuss how he feels about
all that has happened. Or maybe he would talk, if he knew how. When John had read up on autism
and Asperger's, he'd learned of an inability for such individuals on the spectrum to recognize
emotions in others. It also seemed to applied to themselves. A promising word had popped up more
than once - alexithymia - but it had been defined as an inability to express emotions verbally and by
an impoverished imagination. Certainly, the latter did not apply to someone with Sherlock's
capabilities of deduction and imagining a crime in progress long after it had been committed, or
someone capable of composing music? In the articles John had read, it had been stated that
individuals so affected might also have difficulties in distinguishing emotional states from bodily
sensations. Extreme anxiety and being overwhelmed spilling over to panic, even meltdowns? Or is
that just the autism, Asperger or whatnot? Are they all just different sides of the same coin? To
John it all seems just semantics, an attempt at making generalizations.

Still, there are worse words to describe Sherlock. Even though Donovan might be right in
protecting murder victims' relatives from Sherlock's particular brand of straightforwardness, it
nnettles John that she never lets up on Sherlock. Even when she doesn’t say it out loud, the word
freak hangs heavy in the air.

"Who have you amassed in there?" Sherlock is trying to see through the slatted blinds on the other
side of the boardroom window.

Lestrade digs out a notepad from his coat pocket and flips the front page. "Watford's boss, a couple
of his work colleagues, one of whom claims to have been friends with the guy for a long time. They
are a little shell-shocked about the news, so just go easy, will you?"

Sherlock doesn’t even answer, already striding straight to the door and entering the board room.

Lestrade and John hurry in after him. The DI introduces them all, explaining that Sherlock and
John are civilian consultants to the Met.

The oldest one of the bankers, wearing what looks to be the most expensive suit in the room, eyes
Sherlock in an unimpressed manner. "I’m Kit Thornton. I’ve heard of you; you're that private
detective who’s been in the papers. What’s Mark’s death got to do with you?" There is a tinge of
irritation in his tone.
"The Metropolitan Police call me in on cases that are beyond their usual level of competence. This is one of them."

Lestrade huffs. John has been present several times when the DI has explained to Sherlock why it's not beneficial to the investigative work to undermine the authority of the police, but naturally Sherlock always does what he bloody well pleases. It's not like there are genius consulting detectives lining up to assist the police for free, so he's got the upper hand and he clearly knows it.

This time, however, what Sherlock has just explained to the group of Watford's colleagues, is probably not true. This case might well have sailed past Sherlock's radar, if it hadn't been for John's request to Lestrade to get Sherlock in on something suitably low-key. As much as John had been hoping for something they could sort out before teatime, no one could possibly know beforehand, which cases turn out to be partridges-in-a-pear-tree when it comes to maintaining Sherlock's interest, and which ones will be elevated to the status of Christmas come early.

"What's so complicated about it? The detective said that Mark was found shot. London’s crime rate has been soaring; as sad as it is to lose a colleague, Watford’s probably just another victim of armed burglary."

Sherlock fixes the grey haired man with a rather challenging gaze. "You might jump to that conclusion, but luckily I am more interested in actual, solid evidence. Your employee was still wearing a Rolex Oyster watch, one of the latest models to be precise, one worth about 75,000 pounds. Either your burglars were monumentally stupid, or totally blind to the bling. Watford's death is not as easily explained as you or the police might hope, which is why I'm here."

The men seated by the conference table now look a little startled and undeniably curious. Sherlock has clearly managed to justify their presence. Now they can get to work.

"One of the questions we're hoping you could answer, is whether his death might have anything to do with the bank, or the deals he was working on," Donovan addresses the group, taking a seat near the door close to the chair John has grabbed. Lestrade stands by the doorway. Sherlock, unsurprisingly, has taken up a standing position in the middle of the room, beside the conference table, where he can easily see everyone.

Thornton looks sceptical. "Of course not! He had a knack for getting on with people. He did a bit of client liaison with our long-term accounts, but most of his work was scouting for new clients - business development stuff, networking and all that. All the real hard work on deals is done here by other people. Mark definitely wasn't a rain-maker; he didn't have access to anything valuable enough that anyone would go to much trouble to try and wrench it out of him." His tone is rather dismissive.

One of the younger men at the table leans forward. He's in his shirtsleeves, dark shadows under his eyes as a sign of a late night out, or possibly working excessive hours. "The lady Sergeant-- " he glances at Donovan, who doesn't look very fond of the description," --asked if we knew whether Mark was involved in drugs. Is that what you think got him killed?"

"No outward dismissal of the notion that he may have been using something illicit. Interesting. However, it's likely not that simple: Watford was already dead when someone put those bullets into him. That’s a big part of what makes his death not easily explainable, hence my presence. As DI Lestrade just stated, we need to ascertain if any of you can make a useful contribution to the investigation. Can any of you say whether Watford might have been being blackmailed? Could he have been, for instance, about to be a whistleblower for insider trading? Or maybe he might have been taking a back-hander to keep the competition up to date on your deals here?"
"Like I just told you, he didn't have access--" Thornton starts, but Sherlock completely ignores him, focusing instead on a man sitting nearest the window. John notices that this one wears his hair just that little too long to conform to the usual banker image.

"Who are you?" Sherlock asks him brusquely.

"Alex Reid. Mark is... was a friend of mine. We went to school together, and uni, too. I helped recruit him to Maress. I know him better than anyone here, and there is no way that he could have been involved in anything like that."

John is quite certain he recognises a public school accent in Reid's warm tenor.

"Do you have a reason for your loyalty, apart from that school tie you still wear, even though it clashes terribly with your shirt?" There is just a tinge of contempt under Sherlock’s terse words.

That makes Reid a bit annoyed. "You don’t... didn’t... know Mark. He’s a nice guy; genuine. A real mate. People like him. That’s why he’s so damned good with clients and prospects."

The grey-haired director butts in. "Watford is, what is known in the business, as clubbable. That’s why we took him off the trading floor - lacked the killer instinct. He manages - managed - the corporate hospitality budget, a sizable sum of money, and we never had to intervene with what he did with it. Everything always checked out. He stuck to the PR side of things and seemed happy in doing so - no one in the industry would think of trying to get insider information out of him."

Sherlock nods, "Chinese walls."

John doesn’t understand the reference, and neither does Lestrade, judging by his expression.

It is Sally who gets the question in first. "What does that mean?"

The second younger man - whose appearance is a much better match to what John would expect a cookie-cutter City boy to look like - speaks up for the first time. "Regulations. It means he can’t have access to confidential information about deals, in case it raises conflicts of interest with the new business he’s trying to attract." He pauses, then ventures on, "I’m Stuart Clarke, Chief Compliance Officer at Maress & Thornton."

He twirls a pencil around in his fingers. "I’d know if there was a problem with Mark, and I’m telling you there wasn’t. I’m always watching the corporate hospitality side of things; we have to, now, with the new UK Bribery Act. He wasn’t one of those who sail too close to the wind. Always careful, meticulous even. Unlike some of his colleagues who take a slightly more relaxed view of things, and give me a bloody headache on a regular basis." This elicits a half-hearted laugh from his colleagues.

For a moment, John sees Sherlock hesitate, as if he isn’t sure what else to say or ask next. It’s uncharacteristic for him to run out of steam like this, and John leans forward in his seat to try to attract the attention of the people in the room. "Watford was a diabetic, wasn’t he?" he asks, letting his glance sweep around, trying to gauge as many people’s reactions to the question as he can.

Sherlock shoots him a sideways glance which John silences with his own stern one. John knows Sherlock doesn’t appreciate his limelight being stolen, but he does like to think he can actually contribute sometimes when it comes to case work.

The room seems to echo Sherlock’s theory that Watford didn't have the disease - they all look dismissive, baffled, even.

"No," Reid says, "not that I know of." He glances over to Stuart, "do you know?" and gets a firm shake of the head in reply.
John isn’t prepared to accept that answer at face value; perhaps the victim had just kept his illness well concealed. "You never noticed him going to the men's room right after or before meals, carrying any sugary foods in his pockets, or behaving oddly when he hadn't eaten for more than a few hours?"

"No, I think I would have noticed if he had a habit of eating sweets or got weird like that. Given his health kick, that’s just not Mark. He used to always go to lunch with us, but he stopped when he got into that fitness fad about a year ago. Recently, if he wasn’t out with clients, then it was just protein shakes at his desk, and early morning gym sessions. He started getting really into it, building up the muscle, you know?

"Would you have suspected steroid use?" Sherlock asks. "Was he the sort to take short cuts?"

Alex shook his head. "Not our Mark, definitely not - that's why your diabetes question's a bit ridiculous, too, if it meant he would have had to inject insulin. He was dead scared of needles. We had a team-building jungle retreat in Vietnam last year and had to get some yellow fever shots for it. At first he said he wasn't going to go, but after the higher-ups made it clear that opting out would have not been a good career move, he went through with it. Fainted, the story says. Plus Stuart here actually is diabetic, and Mark wouldn't even sit with him at the same table. He said it was the smell of insulin that did it, but after the vaccination thing, it wasn't a big intuitive leap, really, to know what actually bothered him."

"Clearly he got over that squeamishness, then?" John asks, turning to face Sherlock. There had been injection marks on Watford, and the hardened subcutaneous tissue in typical sites for self-administered injections spoke of long-term use.

Sherlock purses his lips. "Unlikely, if he was truly phobic. Tell us more about his bodybuilding," he orders the group.

The director drums his fingers on the boardroom table, probably anxious to get back to work.

Reid is the one who continues. "That training, whatever thing he got into, it was pretty intense. Started about fifteen months ago. He didn't talk about anything else, wouldn't go out for a drink with us, brought his own foods, chucked down these disgusting things he made in the break room blender. And the speed which he was racking up those muscle pounds was amazing. Wouldn't surprise me if he had used something extra, to be honest."

Sherlock turned his gaze on the director again. "If he was taking clients to lunch, how does that stack up with a strict diet?"

Reid looks a bit uncomfortable. Finally, he says, "Mark used to do the lunches, come back here and then disappear into the gents about an hour later; I caught him once throwing up to get rid of it." He looks over at the Director. "I never thought Mark would let those training interests damage his career prospects, but I wonder when he could have had time to sleep. He went to the gym after work, and before work. But he wasn’t injecting anything. No way."

John isn't going to drop the subject just yet. He remembers standing in the living room at 221b, fervently defending Sherlock to Lestrade until Sherlock had pulled him aside and admitted that he was, in fact, a recovering addict. Granted, they had just met, but John had been thrown by the reveal. Addicts are splendid at hiding such things, and fitness could well have been the poison Watford had picked. "So, we've established he was a fitness enthusiast with bulimic behaviour. Does he have any prior history of drug use or mental problems? Other drugs than doping, I mean? You said you went to school with him."
"Not really, just the usual Ritalin for exams. He did law at first, then swapped to economics, I think it was because he wasn’t doing so well on some of his law courses. There might have been some pot once or twice - I'm not sure, really. He wasn’t the sort to get into that crowd. He didn't even drink all that much, not even at uni - and here? Well, just enough to keep the clients happy. He was just really into being healthy."

Sherlock looks as though he's lost all interest in Reid's defence of his friend. He turns his back on the man, but John notices the young man isn't quite done yet, nearly raising himself off his chair to regain Sherlock's attention. "There's one thing - I noticed him getting really out of breath coming up the stairs last week, but he said he thought he had the flu, and he was going to ease up on the training for a while until he felt better. I don't know if it's of any relevance, but that stuck in my mind."

Lestrade interjects, "Were any of you aware of his interest in weaponry? We have evidence of an unlicensed gun. Can any of you shed any light on that?"

Thornton and Clarke look a little askance, but Reid nods. Sherlock seems reluctant to turn to face the man again. "Yeah, he’s always had a thing about guns. Loved James Bond as a kid, watched all those American reality cop shows. I think his dad hunted. When we were out in Nam on that corporate trip, I think he bought something and got it delivered back to the UK somehow, wouldn't tell us how. But, it was more like a souvenir; I don’t think he was ever the sort to use it; he wasn’t in any gun clubs or anything. He liked them like some people like artsy vases or something. More of a collector's mentality."

Sherlock strides out of the room, without a word. In a rush, John gives his thanks to the three businessmen and leaves Lestrade and Sally to finish up.

He finds Sherlock rummaging around the victim's work desk.

"You okay?" John can't help asking. It had been challenging to gauge Sherlock's mood in the boardroom. He had seemed fine, but John can't shake the unease that had fallen on him because of what had happened at the lab.

The desk is conspicuously clean, the laptop docking station empty. Sherlock sighs. "They must've already collected his computer to be passed to forensics. It will take ages."

The desk drawers open to a set of file folders, which Sherlock dumps unceremoniously on the desk to quickly rifle through them.

"Do you think he might have been keen enough about this fitness project to be willing to actually inject himself?" John suggests.

Sherlock sighs again, and slams the last folder closed. "Nothing. Just what his whiny friend said, nice. Boring." He picks up and scrutinizes a lucite block, inside which the Houses of Parliament have been cut into with a laser. "Needle phobics don't tend to cure themselves. I'd say it's more likely that he had someone else do the injections for him, maybe after a shot of whisky or using a numbing cream on the skin. Perhaps the person who did it for him was our amateurish mystery man. He could well have been the one to also sell and deliver the drugs to him."

"So the dealer killed him? Sounds a bit like an organised crime thing, after all."

Sherlock awards this with a disapproving glance. "Organised' is hardly a word I'd use to describe our offender. As Lestrade said, no apparent motive from anyone else. Watford had very few relatives he kept in touch with, his finances were in order, no major events during his career that
would have left someone angry at him, unless there's something his colleagues aren't telling us. Judging by the keenness of that one idiot to spill all the beans about Watford, up to the point of incriminating his dear friend in weapons smuggling, I think he would have ratted out Watford if he had any significant enemies."

John thinks back to what Sherlock has just reiterated about the victim: an agreeable, surprisingly quiet guy who did his job and was a good friend. Liked guns and gyms and expensive things but didn't really make a show of them - until he'd begun to bulk up. Maybe the steroids had altered his personality, made him less agreeable. If Watford weren't in financial dire straits and thus likely to have failed to make payments, then what reason would a dealer have had to kill him? Maybe he ought to stick to the medical side of this and leave the rest to Sherlock. "Getting breathless on the stairs could have been a sign of a cardiac problem," John points out. "For a young, fit guy, his heart function would have dipped pretty low before it began to produce symptoms."

"Molly did say that his case seemed advanced," Sherlock says and shoves The Houses of Parliament into a desk drawer. He slides down into the adjacent chair, runs his fingers along the bottom edge of the desk, and then checks the space between the radiator and the desk by running his fingers along the edges of the opening. His hand comes out surprisingly clean - not even dust coats his fingers.

John wonders which cleaning firm handles the offices and if they could be persuaded to try and curb the chaos at 221B. Mrs Hudson does try, but after Sherlock, things usually look as though a bomb has gone off. Not lately, though, since the experiments have been practically non-existent, and this is the first case in a long while, which means that he hasn't had reason to spread around tons of research materials. "If Watford was so concerned about his health, why wouldn't he have consulted a doctor if he wasn't feeling well?" John muses out loud.

Sherlock doesn't even need to say it - the word is practically etched into his face. Idiot. "He could have chalked it up to overtraining - that he'd overexerted himself and just needed a bit of a breather, so to speak. And he wouldn't have been keen to tell a doctor about the steroids."

"Even if he told the doctor the name of the person he got them from, they wouldn't have contacted the police." John feels it is his role to defend the medical professionals.

A pejorative half-smile plays on Sherlock's lips as he leans back on the chair. "Not everyone trusts the old adage about doctor-patient confidentiality. I've tried to invoke it on several occasions, only to have my NHS records, up to the last comma, divulged to Mycroft."

"It doesn't usually work like that," John feels obliged to point out. It's rather unfair to hold Mr British Government up as any kind of a standard of access to restricted information. John does, however, understand why, due to Mycroft's concerned antics, Sherlock might not have much faith for the concept of confidentiality.

"I guess we need to find the dealer, then," John concludes.

"Judging by the amusement his new hobby has garnered among his colleagues, and the fact that this lot hardly looks like they are into bodybuilding, Watford must've got the idea from somewhere other than work. Most likely he was introduced to the concept at the fitness centre he frequented. Our dealer may well be a fellow customer or even someone working there."

Sherlock stands up, slams a drawer shut and heads towards the reception, John trailing behind.

Before they get to the lifts, Donovan intercepts them. "Where are you two going?"
John wonders whether it is just a copper’s inherent inquisitive curiosity, or that she is always suspicious of Sherlock. In either case, it comes across as aggressive.

"You can tell Lestrade we’re headed for the gym Watford frequented," Sherlock practically commands her.

She crosses her arms. "Not until the team is done here. Unlike you, we’re not jumping to any conclusions. Proper police procedure means we’re getting his work diary and tracking his appointments - you know, who he saw, which meetings he went to, tracking down people who might be suspects."

"Great idea. Maybe Watford was thoughtful enough to jot down 'get murdered' in that diary," Sherlock counters with a sunless smile. "Feel free to waste police time, Sergeant. You do it so well. Come on, John."
"The west end of Finsbury Market, off Clifton Street," Sherlock tells their cabbie, having just gleaned the address from a business card that had been in Watford's apartment. The card is black, with the name "The Vault" printed on the opposite side from the address. There are no other details - no website address, no phone number.

According to Sherlock, despite the name, The Vault has nothing to do with banking or storage. It's a gym. The address is not far - a twenty minute walk, at most, from Maress&Thornton. The fact fits with what Watford's colleagues had told them about the man running from the gym to the offices in the mornings.

Before, when a destination had been less than five kilometres from where John and Sherlock were, they had often walked. Now, John is guessing that Sherlock’s enthusiasm is running faster than his still slower-than-normal walking gait would get them there. Given what had happened at the lab, John decides it is best not to raise the issue. He's happy to take a cab, even if he ends up paying for it. As usual.

Halfway through the car journey, Sherlock has his phone out and is swiping the screen ardently. "Interesting. The Vault is certainly not your ordinary gym."

"In what way?" John asks, staring out of the window, but there isn't much to see, since the cab is waiting to get through the long queues of traffic caught at the junction of London Wall and Moorgate.

"It’s very private. Almost no internet presence. Five locations - but no addresses given online. The card that we got at Watford’s flat is for the latest one, opened just a few months ago."

When the taxi stops at the end of what looks like a pedestrian area, John is surprised. The area is surrounded by tall gleaming glass and chrome buildings. "This doesn’t look much like a market."

Sherlock snorts. "Nothing in Finsbury looks like what it used to, John." He doesn’t hesitate, but walks straight to the only older building on the passage - a square, rather squat building that looks like a relic from the 1970s. It has a sign on it saying 'UK Power Networks', but that doesn’t deter Sherlock from opening it and walking straight in.

The hallway has a rather... industrial air, John decides, and clearly it's been deliberately styled that way, since it looks brand new.

"This is a disused electricity substation," Sherlock supplies. "They built a new one right next door to serve all the new business developments." He then points to a new metal door to the left in the larger foyer they have arrived at. Next to the door there's a keypad and an intercom. Sherlock goes over and pokes the intercom and then turns to give one of his fake smiles to the CCTV camera over the front door that John had not noticed when they walked in.

A voice immediately answers, "What can I do for you?"

"Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson to see the Vault manager. Police business."

The statement is delivered in a tone that John thinks sounds more Mycroft than Sherlock, but it certainly does the trick, as there is the sound of an electric door release.
Sherlock pulls the door open. Beyond is a set of iron steps going down, with stripped brick walls and modern, indirect LED light fittings.

John sees Sherlock drop his shoulders at the sight of the stairs in resignation. Without so much as a glance at John, he starts the descent. Thankfully it's only two flights down.

John resists the urge to linger behind to watch Sherlock to see how he is coping. He refrains from commenting when Sherlock's pace slows considerably towards the end. He waits a moment to let Sherlock catch his breath before they both go through a set of double doors into a reception area that wouldn’t look out of place in a five star London hotel. There is a well muscled man in a business suit waiting, in front of a wide desk carved out of striped, tropical-looking wood.

The man extends his hand. "Matthew Dryden. Manager of The Vault At Finsbury. What can I do for you two gentlemen?" The question is not delivered with a welcoming smile, and the tone is equally cold.

John suspects the word 'police' may have done the trick.

Sherlock straightens his posture. "We need to ask you some questions about a member of yours. Mark Watford."

"Why do you think this person is someone we would be familiar with?"

Sherlock hands him the card.

Dryden shakes his head. "This is just a marketing card with the new site address on it. We've given out plenty. In any case, we don’t have members in the way an ordinary gym does. This person you seek may or may not use these facilities or other locations of The Vault; we won’t have his name on record. Clients get a random number generated by a computer, because they are not members, and they don’t pay us anything directly."

John is confused, but Sherlock gets in there first. "So, if the client is never a member, who is?"

"Our services are only available to personal trainers. They bring their clients to one of our facilities. We don’t cater to the mass market. No group classes, no frivolities; no January stampede because many annual memberships tend to get signed up in January when people feel guilty about their Christmas excesses, only to let their memberships lapse in a couple of months because they are too lazy. I used to run a gym like that, so I know how it works - or doesn’t, so that's why The Vault has a completely different business model. It’s for the serious trainers of serious sportsmen - for those who aspire to improve their fitness through personal training by qualified professionals whom we vet very carefully."

Sherlock considers this. "How do you control entry?"

Dryden points to the small box fitted by the side of the door. "First, the access code at the ground level entry changes weekly - and it’s given out by the personal trainer to their clients. In addition to giving the correct code, the person also has to swipe their card against that box to track the entry of their number to the trainer, who gets charged for the use of the facility. A client can’t get in through those doors, " he points to the left of the desk, "unless their trainer is on site. They can train here, or they might prefer some of our other locations, depending on what sort of a regime the trainer has created for their client. We don't even assign clients lockers, instead they simply pick one themselves and set up a number code of their choosing in the lock."

John’s curiosity is piqued. "What’s the difference between the different gyms?"
There is a look of distaste on Dryden’s face. "We aren’t what people usually think a gym is like." He sniffs. "Whatever image you have in your mind, it’s likely you’re thinking of the Holiday Inn Express version of one. This is a five star facility, the Claridges of gyms, if you will."

John tries to hide a smile; there is something of the marketing patter coming and he knows it.

Dryden continues, "We offer a range of equipment, of course, body building being just part of the experience. The Vault in Shoreditch has a golf driving range with video simulation and image capture playback to help improve technique, and the location employs some of the finest golf instructors in the country. The Vault At Tower Hill has a pool with a wave machine to improve swimming and surfing technique. The Cannon Street Vault specialises in professional cycling training facilities - they can even arrange private after-hours access to the Lee Valley VeloPark. Our new Vault right here has a fifteen meter climbing wall. If a Londoner with the means wants to train for a trek up Mount Everest, this is the place. Our overall strategy is driven by what our trainers, and by extension, their clients, want."

Sherlock picks up a tangerine from a bowl on the desk, peers at it and then puts it back. "And what exactly would that be?"

"A place to do their business. And more. In addition to sports facilities and gear, we offer a full range of supportive services - sports physio, medical and nutrition advice, equipment rental, specialist work if one of their clients wants something extra that they don’t do, even training and professional development for the trainers themselves. Personal trainers at this level have to be fully accredited and qualified in the latest technology and sports science. If they so wish, we can take over their CPD. We train the trainers."

John still can’t get his head around why a place like this didn’t keep records of the people coming and going. "So, if the police want to know the last time someone named Mark Watford used the facility here, you’re telling me there is no way to know?"

Dryden thought about it. "We can’t tell you because we don’t have that information. With a warrant we could give you a list of our trainers who would, of course, know when their clients had had their sessions. But even then you’d have to ask them directly."

As Dryden is speaking, the door to the left opens and a young man in a suit comes out, carrying a sports kit bag on one shoulder. He has wide shoulders, and looks almost top heavy with the thick neck John always associates with weight lifters or rugby pros. The guy takes one look at the three of them, and then looks quickly away, skirting around them and out the door before anyone has a chance to even extend a polite greeting to him.

"We could always ask the people like him who are using the facility here if they'd recognise a photograph of Watford," John suggests.

Dryden shakes his head. "No one will admit to seeing him. Everyone here minds their own business, that's all. As part of the arrangement, the trainer’s clients have to sign a confidentiality agreement, not to talk about anyone they may have seen on the premises. This is an environment of complete discretion. There are no communal changing areas; no surnames to be used on premises. There are no catering areas, no socialising on site. Food and drinks will be delivered directly to clients, according to pre-placed orders."

John’s getting more and more confused. "Doesn’t sound very friendly or social."

Dryden snorts. "The vault isn’t a club. It's a place that helps you focus."
Sherlock’s eyes are roving over the walls, and then fix on the double doors at the side of the room where the man they’d just seen leaving had come through. "Chinese walls."

That earns him a nod from the manager. "Exactly. Our rules allow people the opportunity to train privately, in total confidence, without worrying about who they might bump into. They are here for their personal trainers, not for contact with other people - any one of whom might be a competitor or on the opposite side of a deal that is going on up there. Or a celebrity." He places his palm on the desk, fingers drumming the surface. "No conflicts of interest."

"I’d imagine it’s not just the corporate sector who would appreciate such rules."

"As you can probably imagine, some of our locations are frequented by high-profile political figures."

Sherlock turns to John. "Wouldn’t be surprised to find Mycroft here, still trying to melt away those ghastly Christmas pounds," he says in a low voice and John grins.

Dryden shrugs, nary a smile on his face. "It works. The trainers we hire work with some of the wealthiest and most influential people in the City. They charge premium rates and so do we."

"And there’s no liability to you, because there are no surnames involved in your record keeping," John reasons.

"You are beginning to understand."

"Deniability is all rather convenient, isn’t it?" is Sherlock’s acerbic reply. "The only difficulty is that one of the people who uses your facilities has turned up dead, under highly suspicious circumstances." He moves towards the double doors. "Right. Time for the guided tour. Lead on," he prompts in a slightly impatient manner.

"Do you have a warrant?"

Sherlock stops mid-stride and turns his head to look back at Dryden. "You really don’t want me to get New Scotland Yard men to turn up here in force. Wouldn’t do, given your trainers’ clientele. Do it this way, now, with discretion, or see how you like the consequences."

There is something in Sherlock’s tone that makes John wonder what he has up his sleeve. He reminds John of a bloodhound on a scent. It’s good to see Sherlock like this: driven, confident, relentless - just as long as he doesn’t drive himself into the ground.

Sherlock’s challenge clearly makes Dryden backtrack. For a moment, the man seems to hesitate, but then he purses his lips before shrugging. "I have a meeting in ten minutes, so I’ll need to find someone to show you around. Once inside, you can go anywhere you want, but you’ll have to be escorted at all times. Follow me."

He walks past Sherlock to the keypad and punches in a code.

Once they are through, John realises that Dryden’s characterization of this as a five-star facility might well be warranted. The floors are marble; tasteful downlighters make the place feel more like a spa than a mass-market gym. The scents that John had been expecting - sweat and disinfectant - are absent, as is the throbbing pop music that seems to run as the soundtrack to most gyms.

The quiet serenity of the place is a relief. John had been worried about Sherlock reacting to the usual cacophony of noises and people in a typical gym. He needn’t have worried.
The short corridor opens into another lobby area. There is a tall, young man with blonde hair behind the counter, standing with his back to the door, working at a large computer screen. There are numbers on it, with names, and then other numbers - John can't make head nor tails of what it means.

Sherlock's gaze lingers on the screen as well. He'll likely see it all as an irresistible puzzle. Could the names be the trainers and the numbers their clients? John suspects Sherlock may have already cracked it, judging by his usual speed.

The receptionist is wearing a tank top with a Y-shaped back that shows off every sculpted bulge of a body that would not look out of place in a fitness magazine. The man turns and flashes them a composed and well-rehearsed smile. His eyes fix on Sherlock, and the look of open appreciation that dawns on his face makes John's stomach tighten. Places such as this are capable of making him uncomfortably aware of his own physical shortcomings.

When taking into account the sort of physique the man at the counter is clearly enthusiastic about, John doubts the man would be so appreciative if he saw Sherlock without the cover of the Belstaff. Sherlock is still so gorgeous it hurts, but having known him before the GBS, John finds he rather prefers a Sherlock who had at least some meat on his delicate bones, because John knows how much of it the illness has made him lose, and how little of it he has regained.

He could never say any of this out loud, even if his worries are medically well-founded. He remembers how rotten it had felt after his own discharge when people had drawn attention to his changed body.

After being sent home from Afghanistan, John had been supposed to continue his own rehabilitation by joining a gym. He had done no such thing, even though he was no stranger to exercise: he'd done some boxing during high school, played rugby at university, and done weight training on the side of both. He could have easily taken it all up again, but after coming home, his body and his motivation to do anything had both felt completely wrecked. Mostly he'd just sulked in that horrid little bedsit. He doubts he'll ever go shirtless on a beach again. The gunshot wound is unsightly. A few of his bedpartners had told him he ought to be proud of it because it's a war wound, but John doesn't really see the difference. To him it doesn't symbolize valor or survival or victory – it's simply tortured scar tissue.

Dryden leads them to the counter and begins studying the screen John had been trying to decipher. "Jason, it looks like none of the trainers on site are idle?" he asks the blonde man at the counter.

The young man tears his eyes off Sherlock long enough to shake his head. "I'm afraid so, Sir. Full house at the moment."

Sherlock's eyes are scanning the screen. "The equipment rooms are private. Just the trainer and his client. You manage it in fifteen minute blocks, and then they can move to a new piece," he announces.

Dryden nods. "Takes a sophisticated programme to manage it. No one can get access to another person’s room, unless the trainer gives them the right code. Jason here is the star of our IT show - makes it work so trainers and clients don’t have to wait for anything."

The blond flutters his lashes as though he were about to hide a blush, flicking his wrist in a manner that's bordering on flamboyant. "Well, you know how it is, Gentlemen. Time is money. I do my best to keep things running to schedule."

Sherlock directs his attention to the receptionist, giving him a once over. "Impressive," he flatters.
The driven, downright hungry edge has returned to his expression.

Dryden looks at his watch, and mutters, "I’m going to be so late."

Sherlock raises an eyebrow. "Perhaps Jason here would be so good as to show us around?" and gives the blond a smile which to John looks downright suggestive.

Only John seems able to see the acting that is going on here. He knows Sherlock’s ability to manipulate people to get information out of them, but this is the first time he’s seen him try to downright charm someone since, well... since the winter garden.

And it hadn't been exactly like this, had it? None of this blatant innuendo had been going on - Sherlock had began his speech to John almost business-like. He'd pushed on with the conversation neither of them had ever imagined having, even though something hinting at apprehension and shyness had tried to creep in. There had been none of this predatory ease, this theatrical seduction now evident in the way he is behaving. Jason looks all too ready to respond, and it makes a flare of jealousy erupt in John, even though he knows it's an act. He tries to hold on to the thought that he's the one who's seen Sherlock when he's really serious about these sorts of things.

It's useless. He doesn't want Sherlock batting his eyelashes at Jason. Not even when it's obviously For A Case.

Maybe he'd like to see some of those eyelash acrobatics directed at him, someday, and not just as an act, but it's now becoming quite clear that this sort of thing comes easy to Sherlock when, and only when he's putting up an act. Why does everything have to be so bloody awkward between the two of them, now?

Someone comes through a set of doors behind and to the left of them.

Dryden’s eyes light up.

"Hey, Matt," the new arrival greets from behind the huge stack of towels he's carrying, which mostly obscures his face.

"Just the man! You won’t mind showing these two men around the facility, would you? If they’re in your company, others will just think of them as prospective clients being shown around. It won’t raise any suspicions that way. Perfect."

The man puts down the towels and glances up. "Dr Watson? Fancy seeing you here!"

John takes a long look at the man Dryden had just recruited to be their escort, and realises who he is.

So does Sherlock, who John sees visibly tense up.

"You two know each other?" Dryden asks.

"Sure we do. I didn't know you worked here as well?" John asks Jonathan Baxter, a nurse he'd last seen at the ITU of the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery.

Sherlock's nurse, at least for a few night shifts at the start of his stay at the ITU.

They shake hands. Jonathan's grip is strong and his smile every bit as disarming as John remembers. He doesn't remember too many of the staff that had rotated through the ITU during those early, terrifying days, but Sherlock had somehow taken to Jonathan. Or, at least tolerated
him, which is a huge thing, considering Sherlock usually seems to dislike all healthcare professionals in equal measure, John notwithstanding.

"You looking to join, then----" Jonathan asks, turns slightly and finally comes face to face with Sherlock. He hadn't probably spotted him before, those towels having obscured most of his visual field.

Sherlock is staring at Jonathan in silence, looking downright frozen in place.
"Hey, Sherlock… it’s great to see you up and about," Jonathan says, sounding genuinely pleased.

Sherlock is certain he knows this man, but for one split second, he cannot place him.

*What’s wrong with me?*

Sherlock is not used to having his eidetic memory fail him in this manner, unless he has consciously deleted something. When recognition finally dawns, Sherlock realises that this is precisely the problem. He’d shoved every memory of the hospital so far under the floorboards of the Mind Palace that it had taken this person with it.

It's not that he had disliked the nurse, quite the opposite. On the evening when the illness had hit, Jonathan Baxter had been the only person who had felt as though they were not keeping secrets from him or treating him as though he was about to break into pieces. That night, the man's business-like attitude and willingness to bear his deductions had been... helpful. But now, his presence feels nothing short of unsettling.

This is not what they're here for. The Work is not supposed to mix with things that he needs to forget, promptly. He worries that this might open some Pandora's box in the basement, bringing forth other things he prefers not ever to think about again.

He suddenly realises he's blinking nervously, and that he’s has been doing it for longer than might be considered normal. It's obvious from the way the warmth of Jonathan's greeting has faded into concern.

Sherlock knows, by sneaking a quick sideways glance at John, that he’s let the silence extend for far too long. It's incriminating as to his state of mind. He forces himself to find his tongue again and allows the face to connect to a name he'd rather not say out loud, lest it trigger something more destructive in his memory, but he's sure he is now expected to do just that. "Jonathan."

Matthew Dryden chooses this moment to interject. "Right. Good. Introductions done, so I’m off. You’re in capable hands. I’m sure if you need any information, Baxter here can tell you what you need. Goodbye, Mister Holmes, Doctor Watson." Dryden then heads quickly out of the lobby, leaving behind an awkward silence broken only by the echo of his leather shoes on the marble floor retreating down the corridor.

Jonathan turns to John and smiles. "Are you looking to join? This place is *perfect!* You've not got a trainer with you? Or were you looking for me? How did you even know I was working here?"

Sherlock's hackles are raised. "I didn’t. This isn’t a *social* call, and we're not prospective clients. We’re here on police business."

Jonathan could be useful, if he is malleable to talking more openly about what goes on here than the manager had been. He could be an *asset*, but Sherlock can't shake the feeling that he would simply prefer that the man disappear from the face of the earth, preferably within the next few seconds. He likes to think he had compartmentalised everything about the hospital, and Jonathan
standing right there is messing up that neat arrangement. He'd managed to scrape his nerves back to working condition after what had happened at the lab, but he's had enough experience of such episodes to know that while a meltdown does act as something akin to a reset button, it might take a while for him to regain complete control over his lately unruly emotions.

There's an urge to flee, to leave the scene, which he ignores. That would simply ramp up John's worries, which must already be substantial after what had happened at Barts. He expects John to ask him about it at some point. As mortifying as that conversation will be, it might answer a question Sherlock himself has been wondering about: how much does John know about his----

A dissonant chime rings out somewhere close by, shoving Sherlock out of his own thoughts.

Jason, still behind the counter, straightens up, and says, "Sorry, boys, but you'll have to take this elsewhere. We're a minute away from changeover and this area needs to be cleared, or the sequence of switching will be mucked about."

Jonathan gathers up the pile of towels he'd been carrying earlier and says, "Follow me. I know just where we can talk without causing any problems. Do me a favour, Jason, release the lock; I can’t swipe because my hands are full." He backs into one of the doors, this one to the far left of the lobby.

The room they enter is cold and dark, and has a strange echoing character to it.

"Hang on. Let me get the lights on," Jonathan says. He drops the towels on the slatted bench by the door and disappears into the dark.

John moves further into the room but stops suddenly, and Sherlock walks straight into his back because he’s trying to use the echo of footsteps to estimate the room’s size. The unexpected contact sends an electric jolt of pain down his spine that nearly makes him double over. A disconcerting sense of losing his bearings follows behind, and somehow leaves his chest feeling as though there's a weight on it. He barely manages to stifle a grunt of pain and sees John turn to face him. The dim light cast by the small window into the lobby area shows his concern before Sherlock abruptly steps aside to avoid his outstretched arm, offered no doubt to stop him from falling. The door swings shut behind them with a bang that seems to leave his eardrums vibrating, and Sherlock realises he's in trouble. The case had been keeping him focused on the work, and he could ignore the rest. The presence of the nurse has thrown him off balance, in more ways than one - too soon after the meltdown. He really doesn’t need this right now.

Everything feels wrong, distorted somehow. He shakes his head in a futile attempt to concentrate, but the smell of dust and something mineral-like which he can't place is overwhelming. The fact that he can't recognize the scent is terrifying - he knows it, but can't place it, just like he knows who Jonathan is but couldn't recognise him. In the near-darkness, he feels like he's about to walk off the edge of a cliff. His control is slipping. He needs air. He needs to get out.

There is a flickering of overhead lamps, and suddenly the area is awash with bright light. Sherlock cringes and closes his eyes to give himself a moment to adjust to the sudden sensory assault.

Inside his head, a voice commands him to focus, but it's like yelling alone in a basement - no one, especially not his unruly, overdriven brain, is listening.

He tries to control the urge to flee and calls out in a voice that even he can hear is too loud. "What are you doing here?" Sherlock demands. "This is hardly the place for an ITU nurse."

Focus. Deduce. Work it out. Solve the bloody case. Do not let----
"Open your eyes and you’ll see why, Sherlock." John’s voice is gentle.

Against all his instincts, he painstakingly cracks an eyelid open and sees a strange sight - the nurse is standing with his back to them in front of a wall studded with odd shaped objects all the way up to a ceiling that was two stories taller than the lobby they’d just left. It feels like it's curving above him, threatening to fall. The light is so bright it hurts, and he shuts his eye again, almost instantly. The room spins and he lurches to the left, unbalanced by the visual disorientation.

As if down in a barrel, he hears Jonathan speaking. "Gentlemen, meet the Finsbury Vault climbing pitch, just opened!"

Sherlock can tell from the voice and the echo that Jonathan is standing about ten feet in front of him, but somehow drawing that mental map makes him stagger violently to the left, as if the floor had tilted and dropped. Then a moment later, he feels first one and then two hands grab his arms. Different hands; one is warm and he recognises the touch as John’s - firm and steady. The second one is higher up on his arm, and feels different. Sherlock wants to shout a command for them to release him at once, because the touch is making his skin crawl and the desire to lash out and escape even stronger, but he's is convinced that if he opens his mouth he is going to be sick.

Too late. He gags and then struggles free to bend over and retch. Everything is sharp and bright and too much.

"Turn off the lights, now!" John’s army command tone is in evidence, and then the doctor appears right beside Sherlock as he falls to his knees, fingers getting scraped bloody as he tries to grab onto the coarse brick wall to stop his descent. Hands seize hold of him again, and then he knows the lights have been turned off, because even with his eyes closed, he can tell the difference through his eyelids.

Sherlock takes three deep breaths and opens his eyes again, grateful that in the dim light he can still see the floor, and it stabilises him to some extent, but he is suddenly shivering with cold sweat, his abdominal muscles clenched tight as he battles another bout of nausea.

Jonathan kneels beside him. "What can I do to help?" He hands Sherlock a towel from the pile on the bench nearby to wipe his mouth.

It takes a second for Sherlock to decipher his words. His thoughts feel sluggish, treacly slow like molasses, and sounds still appear muted. At least the floor has stopped tilting. Jonathan's words float around his head like a screensaver on a computer screen, and he can't figure out why he'd picked those particular ones. They don't make any sense at all.

"Can we move to somewhere warmer? Where we can control the light and he could sit down?" John asks, and somehow, because of who's speaking them, they feel slightly more understandable.

Jonathan opens the door to the lobby again. "Jason, need a consult room right now."

Somehow, Sherlock finds his balance again and gets to his feet. He waves off John’s offer of a hand. "I’m all right. Don’t fuss," he parses together, only half-certain what had come out of his mouth is actually what he'd meant to say. He drops the towel onto the patch of bile on the floor and uses his shoe to rub it up, imagining John's watchful gaze burning a hole through the back of his head. Then he strides away, using the rage he feels about his body’s utter betrayal, to propel him out of the climbing hall and into the lobby.

Jason points down the corridor. "Third one on the left; Jonathan’s already there and swiped in, so you can go straight in."
Getting in is a relief, escorted by John whose hand is hovering near the small of his back all the way through to their destination - not touching, but not withdrawing, either. The room is cosy, and the carpet underfoot is lush, absorbing noise. Down-lighters keep the room softly lit, which eases Sherlock's eyes. The colours on the wallpaper are calming, warm tones of leaf green. There are four comfortable chairs around a low circular wooden table.

He takes over a chrome and leather armchair, uncomfortable in its sleek shapes. Blinking distractedly, he leans over his knees in an attempt to stop the room from feeling like he's on a ship. John leans down on his haunches next to him, emanating concern, which brings on an almost overwhelming desire to evade such scrutiny. John takes his pulse, places a cool palm on his forehead which he's half-tempted to lean into because the difference in temperature somehow feels grounding when every other bit of sensory information feels irritating. John tries to peer into his pupils, which he evades.

"Was that a----" John starts.

Sherlock locks his gaze with John's. "Not. Now," he snarls with a low voice. Not ever, he's tempted to add. What good would talking about it do?

"Are you sure you shouldn't get looked over at A&E?" Jonathan asks, looking puzzled.

Sherlock straightens his shoulders. "You - back off," he warns Jonathan, but there isn't much venom in his tone. He feels lethargic and frustrated and wants nothing more than to stop everyone fussing.

Jonathan has poured a glass of water and there is a fruit bowl in the centre. John picks a banana out of it, breaks the peel and offers it to Sherlock.

"Eat this."

"I am not hungry." But he does drink, using the water to evict the foul taste from his mouth.

John peels the banana further, breaking off a piece and holding it out to him. "Take it. You've got to be hypoglycaemic, because you insisted on coming here, rather than going home. You need the sugar. And the potassium. Get something down. Now."

There is something in his tone that makes Sherlock look closer at him. John's angry. "Bananas contain potassium and fibre, but their sugar content hardly makes them ideal food for fitness enthusiasts," Sherlock points out.

"They have plenty of antioxidants, their sugars aren't all that fast-acting, they might reduce the risk for kidney cancer, and they've got magnesium which is good against cramps," Jonathan says mildly, intruding in the non-verbal discussion going on between John and Sherlock. It's a good thing - a bone-weary tiredness is setting in, which means Sherlock would be the underdog in any conversation John is clearly wanting to have, and he just might put off insisting on having one as long as they're in the presence of others.

Sherlock rolls his eyes, takes the snack from John and has a bite, chews and swallows, thinking fast. He needs to distract John from insisting that they go home. And, he needs to re-establish focus on the case. That means he needs to get some facts out of the man sitting across the table from him.

"Why doesn't the nursing agency give you enough shifts?" Sherlock asks Jonathan. It seems rather obvious - Jonathan had told him he always tried to get a lot of shifts when he was in the UK to fund living abroad for a large part of the year, and clearly he was a competent ITU nurse, so there must
be a reason why he had thought necessary to supplement his income with work outside his profession. Or at least it seems like that only likely option here. If it isn't, then it's going to be further proof that Sherlock's current performance level leaves a lot to be desired. Not that he doesn't know it already. "There is a shortage of nurses in larger cities, so why aren't you getting the hours?"

John looks mildly disapproving. "Sherlock, that's a bit... personal, not to mention downright rude." It's a relief that there is an undercurrent of amusement in John’s chide as well. It means that John's overt concern is now on a backburner, and that Sherlock can safely ignore him for a moment. He is feeling decidedly on edge in the aftermath of this borderline meltdown, because that's usually when his limited social skills are at their worst. He’s been able to mask that so far because of the case, but the longer he has to divide his attention between John, Jonathan and trying to process the Work here, the more he will have to strain to keep up and keep himself together.

Jonathan seems to be amused too, and isn’t taking offence. "It's fine, Dr Watson. I like teaching people to climb. Even more than I enjoy nursing. The pay here is great, and I can negotiate my hours around what the bank gives me at The National. I train the trainers who want to learn, and help them with the clients who want a proper climbing coach, even though people mostly just use the walls for a quick and brutal warm up. You said, Sherlock, that you were here on police business? You’re working, then, again, which is great, but why here?" The nurse smiles as if the idea is somehow unbelievable.

"John, the photo on your phone. Mark Watford died in mysterious circumstances, an illegal steroid user, someone trained him. If you know who, it would help." Sherlock knows his words are hurried and his sentences shoddily constructed, but it's the best he can do right now. His brain feels as fragmented as a puzzle box upended on a table.

John fumbles for his phone and then shows Jonathan a photo he'd taken of a page on an album in Watford's home.

Jonathan shakes his head. "Not seen him myself, but that doesn't rule anything out. I train the trainers more than their clients, and you've seen our system - not even many of the staff will have seen most of the clients."

"Can you get us a list of the trainers?"

Jonathan looks uncomfortable. "That would need Dryden’s okay. I'm sure one exists, though, since we have to be able to charge them."

"We don’t want to put you on the spot." John is placating, which just irritates Sherlock more.

This conversation is rapidly becoming pointless. He needs information, and impatience makes him snap. "Can you tell us anything useful? Any of the trainers the sort of people who would supply illegal steroids?"

Jonathan thinks about it. "Hard to say. I really don’t often see them interacting with their clients."

"Insulin and steroids are prescription stuff," John says. "Have you got a doctor on the payroll?"

Jonathan’s eyes widen a bit. "You suspect a doctor? Well, we do have someone we use - right around the corner on Clifton Street. He’s a GP who works mornings in the NHS and then comes to a rented office to do private work in the afternoons and evenings. It’s convenient. But no one has ever suggested he’s bent. Dryden seems to vet people really carefully."
Sherlock sniffs. "As we've seen in the tabloids, with the right sort of incentive, medical professionals can be persuaded to do all sorts of things. When doctors go bad, they can be fine criminals. They have nerve and knowledge."

"We're going to interview him?" John asks, always a glutton for stating the obvious, even when what might seem obvious, is wrong.

"No. He's hardly going to be willing to disclose doing anything illegal, unless he thinks one of us is a premium-paying customer. That customer would be you. We're going to make an appointment," Sherlock announces.

"What, you think you can get him to prescribe something illegal, the first time he lays eyes on us? Not all doctors can be manipulated, and most are certainly not idiots, Sherlock," John argues.

Sensing the impending conflict, Jonathan says, "Let me get you his contact info; won’t take me a minute," and leaves the room.

As soon as the door shuts, John erupts. "Me?! Why? Surely it would be more credible if it were you?"

Sherlock narrows his gaze. "Why would that be?" he asks venomously, challenging John with his gaze to say it out loud, to start a fight. He feels volatile, wanting to lash out at something. He still can't decide if this case really merits his interest. The events of the past twelve hours have really made him question if it's worthy of all this embarrassment piling up. The pharmacology involved is, admittedly, somewhat interesting, but John's disapproval over every aspect of both the case and Sherlock's behaviour are getting tiresome, fast.

"Maybe, just maybe, because you’re the one who’s recovering from a serious illness. Or perhaps you might actually benefit from a professional opinion as to what happened at Barts today, and then the near repeat in the climbing room not ten minutes ago! Because clearly you're not willing to hear anything from me, especially concerning the fact that you're obviously running yourself into the ground right now."

Sherlock leans back in his chair. "I wasn't saying we need to do this right now, and I’d prefer it if you didn't involve yourself with things that countless professionals before you have tried to assess and fix, to no avail." Sherlock attempts to stare John down, but they seem to have arrived at an impasse. "While he is examining you, I will be free to dig around elsewhere in the office. You wouldn't spot all possible clues. That's a better use of my time, and your medical background will come in handy in trying to wring out information about his prescribing practices," Sherlock reasons. Maybe this compliment will make John back off?

John shakes his head wordlessly, looking like he's not about to cave anytime soon.

Before their staring contest has time to blow up into something more, Jonathan returns, a handwritten note in his hand. "I’ve booked you an appointment, Sherlock. Told him you are a prospective client of mine, but I want his opinion about whether you’re recovered enough to start serious exercise. He’s agreed to see you, in half an hour."

Sherlock stands up, too quickly, and ignores the ensuing dizziness. "It was supposed to be him, not me."

Jonathan moves his gaze from Sherlock to John and back. "Sorry. I thought it was obvious to be this way around. Besides, the news about your illness is out there in the public domain, so he could already be aware of it and wonder why it's him and not you showing up."
"What do you mean?" Sherlock asks, brows shooting up until he manages to get his expression under control. What on Earth is Jonathan talking about?

"It’s on the blog."

"I'm absolutely certain I haven't made a single mention of it," Sherlock says dismissively.

"His blog," Jonathan says, nodding at John.

John looks, oddly enough, not very concerned. Why wouldn't John have asked his permission? Sherlock glares at John, who has the utter gall to distract him by asking, "how can a GP see us on such short notice?"

The nurse nods. "That’s why we use him. He does research in his afternoons, so we can usually get him on short notice, before the evening appointments he offers to the City fat cats. Our clients don’t want to wait; they see time as precious and that’s what we help them spare. Immediate consultation, totally confidential. There’s no nosey receptionist, no billing, no fees. The Vault pays him per visit and it’s charged to the client’s trainer, so can’t be traced. This one’s on me, by the way."

As infuriating as the situation is, Sherlock realises that at least there will be no further delay. He bangs the empty glass down on the table and turns to leave.

John isn't making a move to argue, to tell him they need to head home instead of continuing this inquiry, that it's been a long day. It's most unexpected, unless.... John actually wants them to go, like he'd said?

Already out in the corridor, Sherlock hears John thanking the nurse. This fans the flames of Sherlock's suspicion - just like two medical professionals to gang up on him and send him off to yet another one of the cabal. With one notable exception, Sherlock is beginning to hate all doctors.

Sherlock's mood is no better twenty minutes later, when he is sitting on an exam table clad in his underwear and another one of those horrid backless gowns. They're in one of the City's skyscrapers, in a nondescript office. They'd been told by Jonathan to use a keypad code he gave them, so they could by-pass security and come up in a separate lift from the parking garage - perfect for incognito celebrities and City hotshots who want a doctor’s services with discretion.

En route, Sherlock had meant to check John's blog, but somehow doing so while John was right there beside him didn't seem like a good time. Besides, he needed to prepare, not distract himself with John's pathetic attempts at biography.

John is present in the appointment room, and he had helped with the buttons on Sherlock's dress shirt and his shoe laces. Sherlock had managed to endure this humiliation for the sake of their ruse. Now, standing beside the exam table, John is browsing through some leaflets he'd snagged from the tiny waiting room. He reads out the title of one: "The benefits of vitamin C supplementation," and snorts, "at least to the vitamin industry. Here’s another one. Tired and motivationless? Should you be tested for testosterone deficiency?" Not exactly much evidence-based medicine behind that, is it, if you're otherwise healthy?"
Sherlock wishes he would just shut up.

The door opens, and a forty-something man in unframed spectacles, straight woolen trousers and an expensive dress shirt enters, carrying a thin folder. He looks wiry like a marathoner, with coarse, unruly red hair.

The doctor looks up from the file, and places it on the desk in the corner of the room. Sherlock can make out his name on the sticker on the file. It must be empty, since this impromptu consultation will not have allowed time to request delivery of copies of his NHS records. Sherlock lets his legs swing a little from the unusually high trolley bed, trying to appear calm.

"I'm Doctor Goffe. Good afternoon, Mr Holmes," the doctor says, and then glances at John. "Doctor Watson? I think I recognise you from the blog?"

Sherlock curses in his head. Does everyone read that wretched thing of John's? He really does need to know what's in the latest posts. He should have checked before coming here, he really should have.

John flashes a smile. "Yes. Pleased to meet you," he says and shakes the hand offered.

"John is my---- partner," Sherlock says pointedly, even though the doctor clearly already knows who John is. Why had he gone and said that? There might be assumptions, now. Not that those assumptions are false, but he doesn't know how John feels about him saying it out loud. They haven't discussed disclosure of the altered state of their relationship.

"Right. Call me George, please, both of you," the doctor says.

Sherlock doesn't extend his hand. They're here to gather information, not to network. Doctors should stop shaking hands with people at any rate, it spreads infections. "His blog has no new cases on it; the reason for that hiatus being why we're here," he says curtly.

"How so?" Doctor Goffe asks.

"I was recently hospitalized for over a month. Rehabilitation afterwards. I find myself... disappointed at the pace and level of physical recovery at this point," Sherlock explains while John nods at suitable turns. "So, I want to know if the Vault, and you, by extension, could help accelerate matters." He loads the word with as heavy a conspiratorial air as he possibly can.

"You're going to have to be a little more specific," Dr Goffe says and sits on the edge of his desk.

Sherlock narrows his eyes. "The whole point of this service you provide is to avoid having to share NHS medical records. I've been told this is confidential, private."

"I was told The Vault wants to know if you are fit enough to be able to benefit from working with one of their trainers. It's a sensible precaution, because there is no point in starting a relationship if it isn't likely to work. In order to make such an assessment, I do need to know what the illness was."

"It was Guillain-Barré. Very severe," John explains, yet again wrenching control over the conversation with this revelation.

Sherlock suddenly regrets not coming up with some sort of a fake story. He really doesn't like discussing this with anyone, and a surge of anxiety rises, making it hard for him to concentrate on his deductions.
"You said you attended some kind of rehabilitation. How did that go?"

"It was an in-patient unit. Harwich Manor," John adds, again, without being asked to join in the conversation. Sherlock is reminded of how John had behaved at the University College Hospital's A&E department on the night of the GBS diagnosis, taking over Sherlock's case in a way that had made him feel distant and uncaring.

_Bloody fantastic._ Another of _those_ memories seeping out uninvited.

Dr Goffe blows out a breath. "Those guys know what they're doing. Any specific concerns you feel they didn't address, or...?"

Sherlock snaps, "I found their methods overly conservative and their schedules wasteful of my time. What I'm looking for is something faster," he says with a hint of condescension in his voice - just enough to hint that what he is looking for isn't available through conventional channels. "I need something more… cutting edge. Something to accelerate progress. I was told you'd be the person to see."

Goffe looks surprised. "By whom?"

Sherlock beams him a knowing smile. "Word on the street. You know how it goes."

"I'm not sure I do. Let me make this clear: are you talking about performance-enhancing substances here?"

"If you must be so direct about it, then yes."

Goffe suddenly glances at John, and so does Sherlock, to see what could have possibly piqued the doctor's interest. John is leaning on a side table, arms crossed, looking mildly disinterested.

"Before we discuss any kinds of treatment options, I'd like to go over some basics," Goffe says after a pregnant pause, returning his attention to Sherlock.

The doctor then interviews him about the usual nonsense: allergies, regular medications, previous surgeries and significant illnesses, past medical diagnoses. Sherlock tries to downplay the list of injuries he's had, and makes no mention of drugs or the labels slapped on him in his teens. John, however, more than helpfully fills in the gaps in regards to the things he knows about. Sherlock curbs his anger at this, even though his awareness that John might well have ulterior motives for providing all the information, such as thinking Sherlock might benefit from this appointment for some other reason than the case. _Condescending._

Dr Goffe hasn't said anything left or right about what he thinks of the performance enhancement issue that has just been raised. Sherlock finds it hard to read whether this could be their dealer or not. It irritates him that he can't decide if Goffe is just very good at concealing things, or that it's his own fault for being off his game.

Next he endures a run-of-the-mill physical. Before the GBS, he would have evicted John for the duration of the proceedings, but now having his lung listened to or his stomach kneaded in John's presence hardly feels like a grave intrusion of privacy. At the hospital John had been privy to practically all details of his bodily functions.

"You're underweight for your height and age," Dr Goffe says bluntly.

"You don't know my weight," Sherlock says. There's a scale in the corner of the room, but at no point has the doctor suggested he get on it. Sherlock wouldn't have agreed to do so, anyway.
"I have eyes," the doctor says in a neutral, sympathetic tone. He stands, watching Sherlock for a moment with a look in his eyes bordering on suspicion. "Dr Watson, could I please talk to Sherlock in private for a moment?" he asks.

John looks taken aback. "What? Why?"

Sherlock is confused at John's reaction. He clearly doesn't want to leave the room. What does he think could possibly happen? Does he think he'll miss some vital piece of information? Or does he wish to gather ammunition for arguing with Sherlock about sufficient food and rest? Whatever Sherlock is about to find out in regards to the case, he's naturally going to share with John. As to whatever commentary Goffe might want to give on his health, it's all highly irrelevant. Sherlock decides that the likeliest option for Goffe to be requesting this is that the doctor may be reluctant to talk to him about performance enhancing drugs with another physician in the room, or simply just detests having a witness.

For the sake of the case, Sherlock needs John to leave, whether the man wants to or not. "Do you mind?" he asks John pointedly.

John glares, but leaves the room without a word.

Sherlock should be relieved, but suddenly he feels rather exposed without John, practically half-naked in the flimsy backless gown. He had spent months like this, being stared at by medical professionals. He blinks nervously. He doesn't like this, but there's business to attend to, things to find out. He tries shoving all thoughts of John to the back of his mind, succeeding only partly.

Goffe drags the chair from behind his desk to in front of Sherlock, and sits down. His head is now slightly below Sherlock's. Why? Does he wish to appear harmless? "Is everything alright at home?"

This the last thing Sherlock had expected to hear. "Excuse me?" he blurts out. What the hell is going on?

"If he's pressuring you into doing this, you can tell me. It's all in strictest confidence."

"Who's pressuring me into what?"

"When people fall ill, sometimes their partners have trouble accepting how slow it can be to recover. You're not the first person to come to me with this. You're a man of science, so I think you'd be familiar with the potential risks and side effects of steroids and other drugs used for these purposes."

"Wouldn't John be, too? He is a doctor, after all," Sherlock points out in an accusing tone.

Dr Goffe is wearing a sad smile. "Doctors are just as capable of unrealistic expectations of their loved ones as any normal mortal. You'd be surprised at how many doctors themselves turn to drugs, even illegal ones, when they get caught up in bodybuilding and fitness, or suffer an injury themselves."

"Does that include you?" There. He’s asked it. Now give me the answer I need so I can quit this stupid charade.

"Certainly not. I'm a sports physician - I'm interested in the incredible things the human body can do on its own, without chemical assistance."

Sherlock wonders if maybe this saccharine wholesomeness is just a test. If pressed, will Goffe
admit to being the dealer? "What about when that body has become unbalanced? If you condone the use of antidepressants for an unbalanced mood, then surely steroids are analogous to those, just for the body?" he argues.

"Antidepressants are used to fix chemical imbalances, not to cause new ones. But we're getting side-tracked here. Can I be frank with you?"

"Be my guest," Sherlock says and crosses his arms defensively to signal the complete opposite. Somehow the conversation has veered completely off the path he'd intended.

"When patients are coerced into using these drugs, sadly enough, there are often also other forms of abuse present. I may well be jumping to the wrong conclusions, but the tone in which John writes of you in his latest post and the fact that you have some fresh bruising coming out on your---"

The rest of what the doctor is saying is drowned out by the shock reverberating around in Sherlock's head.

What has he missed? He should have read those damned posts before walking into this room. Yet another mistake he'd made lately, along with taking this damned case.

He follows the doctor's line of sight down to a set of small, round bruises on his forearm. That had been from three days ago, when he'd tripped over a book on the floor and John had stopped him from crashing into the lamp in the sitting room. "My balance has suffered as a result of the illness. I assure you, these bruises have very benign explanations," he announces. It sounds like a defensive excuse, even though it's very much the truth.

Dr Goffe - George, Sherlock thinks sarcastically, doesn't look convinced.

Sherlock knows he bruises more easily these days, since there's much less muscle and fat to protect his bones. He remembers another set of fading bruises on his back; he'd spotted those only this morning in the bathroom mirror. He thought they must have come from sitting on the floor for hours on end, leaning on the hard surface of the bathtub and falling asleep there. Due to the backless gown, Goffe must've seen those as well.

"Why the hell would you think John would do something like this?" Sherlock challenges the man, eyes blazing, as he slides off the exam table. He has a few centimetres on the man's height, which helps with the looming appearance he's aiming for. The stupid gown is somewhat diminishing the intimidating effect, but it will have to do. He can't risk this quack going to the press about this sort of conjecture - they just might, if their idiocy and hunger for money got too great and triumphed over confidentiality. Wouldn't be the first time a member of the medical establishment has sold a story to the press for a quick buck and fifteen minutes of fame. There have been a disturbing amount of reports about him in the press lately, but thankfully those had only been case-related things. As far as Sherlock had been aware, Mycroft had done well in keeping his illness out of the newspapers. Has John now somehow nullified all such attempts at damage control?

What the hell is that blog saying?

The doctor seems nonplussed by his anger. Perhaps he's used to steroid-crazed bodybuilders trying to blackmail him for prescriptions? "Dr Watson is a former army man, and clearly the two of you make a formidable team. He wrote some pretty honest things in the early days about his troubles adjusting to civilian life and his own injury on the blog. He may have trouble adjusting to this crisis of yours, if it affects the work you do together."
John having trouble adjusting?!

Has John had the utter gall to post something about Sherlock not being able to work? Fury erupts in Sherlock's head; poor old army doctor, publicly lamenting how taxing is for him to look after a *has-been detective*!

Sherlock wastes no time in getting to the corner of the room, where a changing area with a stool is curtained off. He yanks the curtain along its track ferociously to shut the doctor out of his sight. "This appointment is over," he retorts in a tone that invites no arguments. He struggles with the shirt buttons, his fingers even more fumbling as usual even despite the huge surge of adrenaline now coursing through him - or maybe because of it. He leaves the last few buttons on his shirt open. He tries and fails to tie his laces and just pulls them tight and stuffs them under the tongue of the shoe. Dr Goffe has picked up his coat from the hanger by the door, and passes it to him. Before letting go of it, he places a palm on Sherlock's shoulder. "There's lots of help available. All you need to do is say the word--"

"Take your hand off of me right now," Sherlock snarls, tears his coat from the man's grip and marches out the door, slamming it shut behind him.

In his ire he barely even registers the fact that John is standing in the waiting area looking startled at his sudden arrival until they nearly bump into each other.

"Sherlock?" John is looking concerned.

"Shut up!" Sherlock commands, and halts by the reception desk to dig out his phone from his pocket. He seeks out the recent post he finds on that wretched blog of John's:

'We're back! As many of you have noticed and helpfully pointed out, I have not posted much recently. The reason is simple: Sherlock, like all people, can and will, on occasion, get sick. Well-wishes will probably be ignored or ridiculed so don't bother. As for those who have heard the details, I have one thing to say: keep your mouth shut. Anyone who gives Sherlock grief about what has happened or pries about details that are none of their business, will have to deal with me or his brother, and neither of us are to be trifled with.'

What the hell? John warning people off on his behalf? Since when has he needed rescuing or protecting like this? Mycroft he would understand and expect to act this way, but John, too, now? What is more, the message implies John sees himself as having somehow *teamed* up with the overbearing ponce to keep him in check?

Is this what John really thinks, that Sherlock needs someone to tell people they shouldn't joke about him because he'll be upset? What *has* John been telling people about him behind his back, in hushed tones? 'Be gentle, he's a little broken'?

John takes in the sight of Sherlock’s anger building like a thundercloud. "What’s going on?"

"We’re leaving!" Sherlock snaps back. He grabs John's coat sleeve and violently tugs him to follow towards the office door.

"Oi!" John protests, and Sherlock lets him go, striding towards the lifts without a backward glance.

"That wasn't our guy," Sherlock says coldly when John catches up with him by the elevators.

"How do you know?" John asks while Sherlock pockets his phone.

"That psycho-babbling charlatan most certainly doesn't dabble in steroids," Sherlock says coldly.
"Ookay," John says as they both stare at the floor indicator waiting for the elevator.

"Stop smiling, you idiot," Sherlock snarls to John from behind clenched teeth. "You’ve got your way. We’re going home."

The elevator marks its arrival with a melodic ding that sounds horribly cheery. Sherlock wastes no time in getting in and mashes first the basement level and then the door closing buttons so vigorously that John barely manages to get in before the door shuts.

Chapter End Notes

"When doctors go bad, they can be fine criminals. They have nerve and knowledge."

This is a rephrasing drawn from ACD’s The Speckled Band.
Once they get home, John watches Sherlock scribble a wad of post-it notes full of case details, and then tack them high on the wall while standing on the sofa. His balance is still off a bit, and from time to time, he wobbles. These days he seems to be careful and calculated in his movements, but when he forgets himself he does get into accidents. John had had to play catch when a carpet had bested him a few days earlier. tonight he doesn’t fall.

John watches from his chair, wondering just how long Sherlock is going to avoid the subject that needs to be raised: what the hell had happened in the doctor’s office? His professional curiosity aside, John can only wonder at the seething anger that seems to be driving Sherlock into hiding in full-on consulting detective mode.

Three times John tries to interrupt, and each time a terse reply "later" is all the attention he receives. He knows that the case always takes precedence, but this time, he is sure that this is also an avoidance strategy - one he is getting thoroughly fed up with. After the third attempt, he just stomps down the stairs, telling Sherlock he needs some air.

After he’s walked off a bit of the heat in his temper on the paths of Regent's park, John returns to find Sherlock doing research on his laptop.

"Break in the case?" John asks, peering over the man’s shoulder.

Sherlock slams the lid closed when he notices John, but it's too late. The words 'myelin sheath regeneration acceleration experimental treatment' in the Google search field have already been spotted by John, whose heart sinks. That's what the GBS is ultimately about: the protein sheaths surrounding Sherlock’s nerve cells have been cannibalized by his immune system, slowing down or downright decimating the ability of the nerves to carry impulses to his central nervous system.

John knows that they have a lot to talk about, and maybe this could be an angle into the conversation. Making it case-related might just coax some engagement. He decides to do it circumspectly. "I don't get it," he starts, parking himself in his usual chair, "shouldn't sports be about health? People who take illegal drugs are risking their careers and their lives in order to look the way they want, to go over the limits of what the human body can do. How could they think it's worth it?"

Sherlock brings the lid of his laptop back up, probably because the screen is no longer in John's line of sight.

"People risk all sorts of things to get what they want. Success in sports can be addictive; you know the impact of endorphin release due to exercise and danger just as well as I do, John. People who think they need to be musclebound can also be extraordinarily vain. They fool themselves into thinking that it’s something they need in order to attract the right marriage partner or to further their career or their social standing. In that equation, safety doesn’t matter.”

"But why do they think they can get away with it without permanent damage? I really don’t get it."

This makes Sherlock lift his eyes from the screen and stare at John. "I suspect some people might
actually find exhilaration in the risk involved - they're trying to best nature, to rise above the usual limitations of the human body. They get hooked on getting away with it like base jumpers and other extreme sports enthusiasts. People taunt death and decay in different ways - some even risk their lives by volunteering to go to war,” he points out, glancing at John pointedly at the end of his statement, "I don't see why the people at the Vault wouldn't use what they had at their disposal to get a head start. I agree that taking large doses and using these substances for a long time are counterintuitive, since it will lead to problems that will ultimately destroy what these users have tried so hard to achieve, but short term, after careful research and under the supervision of an expert I don't see why not---"

"So you think doping is okay, too, then, if it helps a skier to be faster, or a weightlifter to win?"

"Of course not," Sherlock retorts. "If the rules say it's not allowed, then those using such means gain an unfair advantage, and that’s why anti-doping tests are all over professional sport. Who I was referring to are people whose motivations come from personally witnessing the results rather than some medal being hung around their necks."

"There is no miracle cure, you know," John says softly. "Even if there were some cutting-edge, phase 1 trial going on for Guillain-Barré, I think Mycroft would have had you enrolled by now."

"I know. He looked into it months ago," Sherlock says in an emotionless tone.

Of course he had. And of course the brothers would have gone right ahead with such a risky move without consulting John. He feels like someone has just turned up the bunsen burner under his temper a notch higher again. He glares at Sherlock, knowing that his deductive skills will tell him more than John can actually put into words at the moment about his opinion on the matter.

"I’m just keeping up to date with the latest research. Things can change," Sherlock points out with a shrug. He's trying to sound nonchalant, but John can sense a hint of defensiveness in his voice. He isn't even looking at John, which means that he's probably not convinced he can win this argument.

Even through the veil of his anger, the undercurrent hidden in what Sherlock was trying to research saddens John - that he is so disheartened by the state of things that part of him is still waiting for some miracle cure. Not for the first time today, John wonders if the meltdowns and mood swings are, in part, a collision between the recovery from GBS and old patterns re-awakened by a nervous system that is re-booting. What else could possibly explain the events of the past few days? Why have the meltdowns come back? The last time anything similar had happened, Sherlock had been dosed with a hallucinogen, but John is quite certain he hasn't been using anything illicit recently. Could it just be the stress, or some residual effect of something his discharge papers had mentioned: high risk of post-intensive care syndrome. John isn't very familiar with it, but he knows it's a blanket term for a cluster of health problems that linger after prolonged stays in intensive treatment units. It can even include something akin to a subtype of PTSD, signs of cognitive dysfunction and depression. Sherlock had been recovering so swiftly at Harwich, when taking into consideration the severity of his case, that John realises that maybe he hadn't appreciated this possibility enough back then.

It's probably time to admit depression is definitely on the table. As for PTSD-like symptoms, John isn't sure. No signs of nightmares as far as he can tell, and Sherlock is avoiding talking about everything and anything important, not just his time at the National. As for cognitive dysfunction - the thought seems a bit ridiculous to John. He's doing fine, work-wise, isn't he?

John decides that he's had enough dancing around the topic. It's time to talk. He gets up and then sits next to Sherlock on the sofa. Sherlock shifts a bit to put some space between them, but John is
encouraged that he doesn't retreat to the opposite end.

To prevent a repeat of every other occasion he's tried to breach the walls Sherlock puts up at the merest mention that something might be wrong, he needs to phrase this just right. He's about to jump right in, to ask if Sherlock himself thinks he needs a bit of help mood-wise, but at the last minute, his nerve fails him. He's terrible at this, exactly like he'd told Molly, but even Mycroft has hoisted all the responsibility onto him, now.

"You were amazing, you know", he tells Sherlock. John knows he should have interrogated Sherlock about what's going on right now instead, and he wants to kick himself.

At first, Sherlock's eyes widen until he seems to catch himself, settling then on a wary and disappointed gaze.

John realises he may have just been severely misinterpreted. "At the hospital, I mean," he specifies hastily. "I told you I'd probably have bricked it during the first days if it was me who got the GBS. I'd have wanted the sedation, to pass the time more quickly. You fought that fucking thing, tooth and nail. And you didn't lose."

A tenseness settles on Sherlock's shoulders, and he starts running his thumb along the side of the laptop that's still on his knees, clearly a nervous tic. "That might be an apt comparison. Particularly the counting of losses afterwards, no matter what the initial thought is about the general outcome. You can win a battle but lose the war."

"What happened at the surgery?" John asks, and encloses the restless fingers of Sherlock's hand in his own. He would prefer to talk more about the hospital days, and what Sherlock has just remarked, but the anxiety emanating from him is discouraging. The past few days must've been hell for Sherlock, and John certainly doesn't want to add to that, but he is puzzled by how irate Sherlock had been upon leaving Dr Goffe's office. Whatever had happened, it must've hit home in a very personal way.

Sherlock slides the laptop onto the coffee table. "Goffe has a tendency for conjecture. You'd not enjoy hearing the details."

"Was it... personal?"

"It was a doctor's appointment, which, by definition, is a personal undertaking," he corrects in a superior manner.

John sighs. Arguing semantics, correcting people and pretending he's misunderstood are common tactics for Sherlock to avoid discussions he doesn't want to have. To get at something important, this is the hurdle he'll always have to cross, isn't it, when he tries to talk to Sherlock about something important?

"We've ruled him out, so we can forget about it," Sherlock announces with what must be an attempt at relief, but ends up sounding more haunted than anything else.

"Assuming there's something you'd want to forget."

"I'd prefer it if you kept private matters out of your blog," Sherlock changes the subject, or at least John thinks so at first until it occurs to him to wonder if that was what Sherlock had urgently browsed on his phone at the surgery, after storming out of the appointment room. It's nothing new that he would disagree with how John recounted their cases, but the only thing he'd posted lately was a short note explaining why there hadn't been much going on with The Work lately. He'd tried
to make it sound as though it was nothing to worry about, even reminding everyone that yes, anyone can get sick, even Sherlock bloody Holmes. The Holmes in question would do well to accept that notion himself.

"Readers like it when you sound more human," John says. "I thought it would be easier for you this way, not having to explain why it's been so quiet." In John's own ears this sounds like an excuse. He remembers writing posts before that had mentioned injuries he or Sherlock had received. He has often shown his drafts to Sherlock before putting them on the blog, but mentioning illness or injury have never felt like something that has made him more prone to letting Sherlock proofread. For a man who drags other people's secrets out in the open, it's a little hypocritical of Sherlock to protest such things, but of course he has the right to dictate how much of his own life he wants to reveal to others. Maybe Goffe merely mentioning such a post had made Sherlock feel too exposed. No, it's not the first time Sherlock has taken offence at something he's written, but the GBS must be a subject matter more sensitive than average.

"I don't need a protector," Sherlock remarks and stretches his neck. He looks disinterested and tired. He slides his hand out from under John's, glancing at it with a frown.

John opens his mouth to say something, but then stops. All the possible answers he could give to Sherlock's non-sequitur-like statement seem problematic. 'Yes, you do at the moment?' 'No, but I still want to be one?'. Hasn't he always been exactly that to Sherlock? Wouldn't anyone have that impulse, when it came to the most important person in their life? John had long ago realised Sherlock was rather protective of him. Why was that allowed, but not the other way around? This all leads John to wonder if he actually believes Sherlock can look after himself at the moment.

"You don’t want to talk about what happened today, then," he finally says, and it's a rhetorical question.

"Good. Your deductive skills are improving."

John leans back on the sofa. "Is this how it's always going to go? You don't talk to me, you don't give in a fucking inch, and it's my job to just smile and take all the bloody abuse hurled at me and try to weed out some vague hints from it about what it is that's bothering you? Just another thing in your life - our life - that you can't be bothered with, and you leave it all to me to sort out?"

Sherlock leans slightly away from his anger, dismayed. "It's you who operates on some naive idea that talking about everything, dissecting things and spreading them open in that manner for everyone to see, leads to anything good. The notion that it magically fixes things belongs in a saccharine fantasy world."

"Would it kill you to try? To test your own hypothesis that it's pointless? I'm not going to leave, I'm not going to get angry by anything you'd say, just--- I wish you'd try."

Sherlock's fingers next to John's leg on the sofa curl into a fist. "Can't," he says quietly. "It doesn't work."

"Can't, or won't?" John asks, but doesn't really expect an answer. Sherlock isn't looking at him, instead his eyes seem fixed on something in the bookcase. John feels like he's being zoned out, faded into the background. Something that is obviously more worthwhile and fascinating than their relationship, must have already gripped Sherlock's brain.

After five minutes of strained silence, John gives up and goes to bed, and lies awake for some time. Gradually, anger dissolves into resigned sadness and guilt. It seems that he just pushes and pushes and pushes and somehow, Sherlock takes it as a cue to back off even further, until it all goes to hell. All this leads to nothing but second-guessing everything he has done or hasn't done. Maybe he
shouldn't have gone back to the locum work, but what would the alternative been? Maybe they should have left London instead of Sherlock coming home, spent some time someplace else, taken a timeout? Harwich was exactly that, for Sherlock at least, but the two of them being apart during that time hadn't been a good thing. As protective as Mycroft always seems of Sherlock, John does wonder if his influence is always constructive. He has no idea what Mycroft now thinks about their altered relationship status, and whether he'd actually try to sabotage it if he didn't approve. Along with Molly and Mrs Hudson, he's the only one who is aware of it. No one else knows - well, apart from that Doctor Goffe, now. John had wondered why on earth Sherlock had blurted the word partner out to someone they'd only just met. John hadn't minded, really, since the doctor was a stranger they were unlikely to meet again, but in the grander scheme of things there are many reasons he feels reluctant at this stage to be open about it to others. Things are so new, so raw, so unsure, and he has no idea how private Sherlock wants to keep it at this point. This is yet another thing on the list that they need to talk about.

The biggest reason for his hesitation is that he has no idea where they stand. When push comes to shove, Sherlock has been very clear about his intentions and willing to take steps further such as sharing a bedroom, but when it comes to the details that actually make up the daily fabric of a relationship, there's nothing there. He tries to connect, but Sherlock keeps dancing just out of reach. His affection is like a shadow - ephemeral and something John can only make out at the edge of his senses, but it is there, of that he's certain. It's just that John isn't certain how long he will be able to hold onto it, until he becomes too discouraged, too sceptical to even try anymore?

He gives up on sleep, at least for now. The bedroom feels lonely, and instead of the warmth of another body the other side of the bed, the sheets are uninvitingly cold when John pats around with his hand. He doesn't even know why he does it - he knows Sherlock isn't there, but something in him needed that confirmation to push him into action.

He makes up his mind, drags himself out of bed and shivers for a moment in the draft coming in through the open doorway. He makes his way to the living room, and finds Sherlock asleep on the sofa, two nicotine patches on his forearm. He'd quit them some time after Dartmoor, and John isn't glad to see them, but if they've given Sherlock at least a tiny respite from his worries tonight, then fine. John scrunches up their empty packages which Sherlock had left on the coffee table and takes them to the kitchen bin.

John grabs a pillow, places it next to the sofa and sits down on it, landing unceremoniously on his left hip. He can hear the faint sound of Mrs Hudson's television and the fridge making a quiet whirr. He knows it's basically empty save for some pickles and condiments and probably the leftover of a pizza from last week. No experiments. He needs to pay the gas bill. He needs to sort out rent. He needs to go grocery shopping, because Sherlock isn't going to do any of those things. It's fine. This is how it's always been.

He leans against the sofa and cards his fingers through the unruly curls spilling over the worn cushion that's against the handrest. Sherlock mutters something and turns to face the wall, but he’s clearly still asleep. When they'd first moved in together, Sherlock had jumped at even the tiniest noises in the flat at nighttime, assuming assassins or vermin or worse - his brother. Gradually, John's presence - or so he likes to think - had become a reassurance that he didn't need to be on such high alert all the time. The fact that he hasn't tackled John to the floor for touching him in the middle of sleep must mean something.

He'd always liked Sherlock's hair. Even utterly disheveled and coated with dust after hours of being trapped in a former coal mine during a case, it always manages to look… beguiling. He presses his forehead on the side of the cushion next to Sherlock's head for a moment, relishing the closeness he's allowed, even if it's mostly for himself. The bedroom feels even less inviting.
He lets his thoughts wander, closing his eyes for a moment, until Sherlock seems to stir, or so John thinks. He touches Sherlock's shoulder gently, already half-regretting what he's doing, in case it leads to Sherlock waking up completely and not being able to fall asleep again. "Want to come to bed?" he whispers.

He receives no answer so he lets a sleeping detective lie and goes upstairs to his old room. It is no less cold and lonely, but tonight he doesn't want to go back to the bed they both belong in, because being there would be a constant reminder of his own failures. Failure to accept what he had wanted all along - Sherlock, instead of an occasional casual affair with girlfriend-of-the-week. His failure to act on his feelings even after he'd realised they existed. His failure to stand up to Mycroft on the Harwich issue. His failure to address Sherlock's issues much earlier. His failure to tear down the walls Sherlock is constantly constructing between the two of them.

John realises he had no idea it is possible to miss someone this much, even though they are right there.

The following morning, the atmosphere hangs heavy, which seems to have become the default state of things. It leads John to wonder if he's becoming alarmingly accustomed to it already.

Sherlock looks tired but he does get dressed, chews a few pieces of toast and reads the newspaper. John had slept, in the end, but he'd had nightmares the details of which now elude him, and he's way too tired to be at the top of his game. Trying to open some sort of discussion feels futile, and there's an undercurrent of bitterness in his mood still.

Sherlock seems to be watching him carefully - expecting what, John has no idea.

The locum agency calls John about a work shift, but at the same time Sherlock gets a text and unceremoniously tosses John's coat to its owner - the case demands their attention. John bids a hasty apologetic farewell to the agency secretary before following Sherlock out the door.

"Coffee, John?" Lestrade asks an ungodly number of hours later, rubbing his forehead with his fingers. It's been a long day for all involved in the Watford case.

"God, yes," John answers, stealing yet another look at Sherlock, who is all fury in shirtsleeves, exhibiting no signs of tiredness. The heavier John's lids seem to get, the more impatient, more venomous and more frustrated Sherlock seems to be getting. The tiredness isn't gone - it has simply been pushed aside by a rather aggressive sort of impatience. John is almost reminded of a toddler throwing a tantrum because they're tired but they certainly don't want to go to bed.

So much for easing back into The Work gradually after a long sick leave. Today they've barely taken breaks long enough to visit the men's room. It seems that every setback is whipping Sherlock into a more desperately manic frenzy to solve the case. John half hopes he had those sorts of reserves at his disposal - maybe he would have figured out already how to fix the mess that their life has become.

It's doubtful they're going to crack this tonight. They're at the technical division of the Yard, wading through the financial, car and real estate records of The Vault’s personal trainers. After
Sherlock and John had managed to convince him George Goffe ought not be on the suspect list, Lestrade had managed to push his bosses into getting the warrants they needed. The downside is that they don't extend to client lists yet for some arbitrary judicial reason that the trainers' barristers are certainly exploiting to their full advantage. They're looking to see if any of them have had unaccounted-for influxes of money that would have shown in their purchases of new cars, or other such things. One trainer had recently bought a boat, but the money going into it could be explained by regular savings account deposits over seven years.

John could easily agree with Sherlock's logic that it must've been someone working for the club who was doling out the drugs, since it would be much easier for them to do so than a random client, and to do so without being noticed. Besides, the clients didn't encounter each other much on the premises, and they had very little interaction with the staff apart from their personal trainer. Training sessions would also offer a good opportunity to sniff the air as to which clients would be approachable with such an offer. All that was needed was for a client to be frustrated enough with their slow progress, uncaring enough of their health, or driven enough to do whatever it took to get where they wanted to be...

John realises that sadly, all those attributes could also be used currently to describe Sherlock. He knows he should put a stop to this marathon of a workday by dragging Sherlock home, but he's getting tired of having to remind the man of how things work in the real work and that his current fitness level can't take this sort of a strain. He can anticipate Sherlock’s reaction to such a lecture, and he's not in the mood to deal with it.

He follows Lestrade to a bleak break room with an ancient coffee maker. Its jug is half full of what turns out to be over-stewed, bitter sludge. There's no milk, but it hardly matters at this hour.

"How's he doing?" Lestrade asks. "I should've picked a different case, maybe, but it's hard to tell which ones are going to turn hairy instead of something he can solve in less than ten minutes.

"You mean regarding work or in general?" John suggests, "Not that the case is solved yet, but I haven't seen anything that would make me think he can't do it as well as he used to."

"You do realise you're going about it from the negative?"

"What do you mean?" John asks, stealing a stale-looking biscuit from a tray. It does little to curb his hunger.

"You just said that you haven't seen anything that would make you doubt his abilities. Does he doubt them, then?"

John frowns. "I don't know. Why would he? The GBS didn't affect his head, it was mostly just the ITU. Anyone would go nuts in there. It's good to see him back at work, even if he is pushing himself too hard."

"Maybe. It's just that he doesn't really look like he's having any fun," Lestrade points out.

John's hand halts as he's about to bring the mug to his lips.

Somehow, this hits the nail on the head.

Sherlock has been going about the case not with his usual exhilaration, but with an almost manic drive, as though he's making himself do it like he used to. He's acting every bit the lean, mean deduction machine that he used to be, but the playfullness, exuberance and the showing off are gone. He seems to keep pausing to observe the reactions of others to his actions, half-expecting a
negative judgment.

John finds himself fearing a repeat of what had happened at Barts and at the Vault. Those times, it had come seemingly out of the blue. Is it something that's easier to keep at bay when Sherlock is actively doing things, or could the added stress levels and the storm he's cooking up right now at the IT department bring it on again?

"The frustration just gets to him at times," John says and shrugs.

"He’s getting pretty worked up about it. Must be hell at home." Lestrade’s sitting on the edge of the table, too tired to even flop into one of the beat up plastic chairs. "I’ll bet he’s taking it out on the violin. Whenever he’s pissed off, he seems to take it out on that poor instrument."

"I think the problems he’s having with the violin have been making things worse," John reveals, slightly regretting the way he's discussing Sherlock behind the man's back. But, on the other hand, this is Lestrade, who has seen Sherlock in dire straits before John had even met him. Despite probably seeing Sherlock during the worst times of his life, the DI is still willing to see him as a great man. "The violin is sort of part of the problem, rather than a solution."

"He can't play?" Lestrade asks, alarmed.

His unease puts chills down John's spine. "Oh he can, after a fashion, but not anywhere near to his old skill level. Not yet, at least. He's had to start over with a violin tutor."

Lestrade shakes his head. "Oh, Christ. That’s so horrible. Even when he didn't even have a flat, he still carried that thing around after he got it during a case. Never could understand why on earth someone would just give him a Strad. He left it with me for safekeeping once, when he'd been kicked out of a halfway house his brother had parked him in. Said he didn’t want it on the streets - wouldn't risk the below-zero temperatures harming it. He wouldn't accept my offer to him to sleep on my sofa - he cared more about that violin than himself. He showed up every evening to play."

Lestrade's phone begins ringing with the theme to The Godfather. John smirks.

The DI answers. It's a short conversation, ending with a sigh and the words "we'll be right there".

John quickly swallows the last of his coffee. If it were a break in the case, Lestrade would have sounded relieved instead of exasperated. There's only explanation that seems likely: Sherlock is causing trouble.

They arrive back in the corridor leading to the large open office space reserved for the Digital Policing Unit, also knows as 'the computer guys', according to Lestrade. Just as they're about to round the last corner to where John had last seen Sherlock, they nearly bump into a pair of uniformed officers escorting someone.

When their detainee looks up, John does a double take. The man handcuffed and being lead towards the lifts is none other than Sherlock.

Lestrade comes to the same realisation and tells the officers to stop. "What the hell is going on?" the DI demands.
"Harrigan from Digital called us to escort a visitor out because he was harassing employees."

"It's hardly harassment, if I was directing them to get on with their bloody tasks!" Sherlock snaps and tries to tug his arms away from the grip of the officers. "Unhand me."

"The policy's clear; if an employee requests a visitor be removed on reasonable grounds, it will be done promptly."

"I know the policy," Lestrade says, "but he's not a visitor---"

"I'm a consultant!" Sherlock interjects.

Lestrade gestures to the two men. "Let him go."

Reluctantly, the officers release Sherlock's arms but make no move to remove the handcuffs.

"Are those really necessary?" John asks, glancing at the cuffs which he can now see, since Sherlock is stretching his arms to his right side, craning his neck to see them, presumably to deduce how to get rid of them without a key. He probably could - or not, since that would require his old dexterity.

"He resisted ejection," one of the uniformed officers explains defensively.

Sherlock rolls his eyes. "Lestrade, sort this out. I need to get back to work." He sounds like he's just about to start shouting.

John steps between the DI and Sherlock, whose icy glare locks onto him now instead. "Look," John says, lowering his voice even though its pointless - the three NSY officers are still standing right next to them. "You're not going to get any answers quicker if you keep breathing down those guys' necks. They're probably shit scared of you by now."

The handcuffs are removed. Sherlock rubs his right wrist with his left hand, grimacing. "Bloody brutes," he snarls at the officers, who make no move to retreat. "Those IT idiots insist on checking credit card statements first. What sort of a moron would pay off Visa bills using drug money?" He is irate, temper barely under control. "They're wasting time, making a breakthrough even less likely."

In all the similar cases they've worked, some signs of excessive influx of money usually shows up if nothing else gives - withdrawals and Tesco visits on the bank statements disappear when the culprit begins to use the cash earned illegitimately to purchase daily necessities, but John cares about none of that right now. He has had enough. He's tired, hungry and not in the mood to be a stand-in to weather what must be Sherlock's frustration about not cracking the case yet. "Not everyone is a genius," he says, "and even geniuses need a bit of rest. I'll stay, if you want someone to be here to see what they find."

"That must be a new record level of patronising condescension, even from you, John. Ever thought of writing an educational children's book?" the sarcasm is so dripping with venom that John realises Sherlock is nothing short of livid.

John doesn't retreat.

Whatever Sherlock sees in John's expression makes him huff with indignation. His eyes dart around the area as though he'd heard something, and suddenly he yells "SHUT UP!" to no one in particular, pressing the heels of his palm onto his temples and closing his eyes momentarily. Then he seems to calm down, dropping his shoulders and straigthening his spine as though preparing for
something.

There's muttering from the officers behind him. John realises he's staring at Sherlock, too, and tries to shake himself out of a stunned reaction to what he's just seen. Sherlock does regularly talk to himself, or to the skull, or to some alternate version of John he has in his head, but those imaginary presences usually only start irritating him when he's getting so tired he's ready to drop. At that point, the clever deductions usually stop in lieu of tirades towards the incompetence of everyone else. John has seen this before, during long and taxing cases, especially ones the emotional impact of which has been great enough to deeply affect Sherlock. It had been the worst during a serial killer case involving kidnapped children which had dragged on for two months. The media pressure had been immense, and the mother of one of the victims had called Sherlock a monster. After that, all the grandiosity and the flair had been gone for a while.

John remembers once telling Lestrade that anyone who thinks that Sherlock isn't affected by what people think of him are idiots. After that, the DI had been a little more diligent in addressing the insulting remarks his subordinates directed at Sherlock, but especially Donovan and Anderson had proven very resilient and resourceful in still getting those barbs in.

'I'm not a performing monkey', Sherlock had told John once when discussing his abilities, 'it's not a parlour trick'. Still, the way Sherlock tries so hard to prove his worth and to flaunt his talents has made John wonder if it's all an attempt to find acceptance when he thinks that he could never achieve it by just being himself.

John opens his mouth to ask Sherlock if he's alright, but the glare directed his way strips him of any notion that such an inquiry would lead to anything constructive. Questioning Sherlock's state of mind or his abilities while in the presence of others will never work; what had happened at the Vault had been a stern reminder of this. That leaves John with very few options what to do. He knows Sherlock is not going to give up, until he drops from exhaustion or really gets evicted from the premises, so it's down to him now to put his foot down. Even if he can't get to the bottom of some more complicated things, at least he can make sure Sherlock's wellbeing isn't compromised even further.

He straightens his shoulders into a military attention, conveying silently as best he can that yes, you bloody berk, you do need a protector sometimes. He knows that Sherlock will both detest and pick apart what's going to be said next, so he widens his stance, leaning forward to meet the challenge. "Right. You're going to go back to Baker Street and to bed. I don't care if you lie wide awake or fall asleep, as long as I find you under the covers when I get home. And eat something, for fuck's sake, you're running on nothing but fumes. Your body can't take this sort of thing right now, which should be blindingly obvious even to you. Since you'd rather jump off a cliff than take any advice from either of them, this is not your friend or your colleague speaking, it's your doctor."

Sherlock's gaze narrows, lips part slightly as though he's trying to decide whether to go on the warpath. Then, without a word, he turns on his heel, and stalks off towards the lifts.

"You do realise he's probably not going to go home," Lestrade says, watching Sherlock stride into the lift and slam his hand onto the buttons.

John closes his eyes and shakes his head.
Special kudos to BakerKeen, who really wanted a chapter today of all days to cheer her up :)

Sherlock pounds on the door with his fists, relishing the noise. The doorbell had not produced any results within the four minutes that it could, at most, take for someone to reach the front door from even the further corners of his brother’s spacious home on South Eaton Place in Kensington. Even at his most slothful, Mycroft should have answered by now. Sherlock glares at the CCTV camera at the corner of the porch over the door.

Finally, the door opens. Anthea meets his gaze, looking calm as always. "Yes?"

"You're here, which means Mycroft is, too." Sherlock concludes.

"He's working. There's a lengthy conference call," she tells him, making no move to step aside from blocking the doorway.

Sherlock limbos under her arm into the foyer all the same. "Good for you that he's working. Otherwise I would have been forced to assume you're here for *recreational* purposes," he quips and eyes the door to the library where he can hear a conversation is occurring.

When he reaches for the door handle, she shifts to block him again. "Don't even think about it. Whatever you are here for can wait a few minutes," Anthea points out, leaning on the doorframe.

Sherlock sniffs. "Swapping the season's fashion tips with the Foreign Secretary, I'm sure. They do both look so ravishing in sombre and tedious." He shifts on his heel and marches downstairs into the spotless kitchen to pour himself a glass of water. To his relief, Anthea does not follow him. She has probably gone to inform Mycroft of Sherlock's arrival.

He downs the water in one go and sheds his coat. He'd prefer to rip off all his clothes, were it socially acceptable - his skin feels sensitive, irritated, as though he were in heroin withdrawal. This is how it gets when he overexerts himself these days, but how can he ever do The Work, if he can't take even this amount of strain? Falling asleep last night had been an unfortunate mistake. If he indulges by sleeping during case, he's never able to maintain a energy level high enough to be on his best game - even to solve a case as boring and mundane as this one. He is so frustrated that his skin is just crawling, making him want to slice pieces of it off with a cheese grater.

The day has been long. The embarrassment of being handcuffed was topped by the shame of having John telling him to leave, like he was some child having a tantrum. He’d been tempted to let his anger loose properly, but then decided that there was no bloody point in staying. Nothing he could have said or done would have affected the opinions of those around him for the better, and lashing out would have made things much worse. He'd grown tired of watching those Met clowns trying to fumble around with their research, but every time he tried to direct their attention toward what they really needed to be doing, they’d just looked at him, staring as if there was something wrong with him, rather than them. The worse the feeling got, the angrier he became. It should have been a relief to get out of there, but calling it a night only means that everything he'd left behind tonight would still be there in the morning, none the better.
Sherlock stops the pacing that had been taking him round and round the kitchen table, forcing himself to stop lest his brother suspect the worst. He needs to keep the meltdowns at Barts and the Vault private. While he can bulldoze John into ignoring the symptoms, Mycroft is harder to fool, and he can’t afford Mycroft suspecting he’s barely in control. He stills the thumb that is rubbing against his left hand’s index finger and leans on the wall next to a large bay window overlooking the small courtyard between the townhouse and the mews. His attention is caught by the sight of moths bashing themselves against the security light. He wonders if this case is a bit like that – is he a moth drawn to the light in hope that it is the sun? What if this case actually is unsolvable even if he was at the top of his game? Those are rare, but not unheard of.

He considers the Vault’s clients - vain people drawn into a world of bodybuilding, mesmerized by the pursuit of an ideal of their bodies that is as dangerous as it is illusory. Is his own addiction to getting back to fitness just as much of a self-delusion?

After storming out of the Yard headquarters, he'd hailed a cab. Several text messages from John arrived during the ride, none of which he replied to. Why bother? Invariably John is going to keep nagging, a thought confirmed when the fourth message threatens to get Mrs Hudson to look in on him to make sure that he is complying with doctor’s orders. It seems that John has reverted back to the only tactic he thinks might even marginally work on him. Predictable. Dull. Condescending.

Sherlock would gladly push for a more constructive solution, if he only had one to offer. John means well, but his attempts to help keep stripping Sherlock of what little sense of self-worth he has left. This is how it's been right from the start of the GBS - instead of being at the helm he's being shoved around, grabbed by an undertow that is sucking him inevitably out to the sea of despair.

One more text had arrived just as his cab had been slowing down in front of 221B:

21:56: Whatever you do, be safe. Please.

Sherlock could easily imagine John typing the words, looking resigned, tired, disappointed. Sherlock had felt a pang of guilt, but had no idea what to reply. When he'd got out of the cab in front of 221B, he had glanced up at the dark windows and become gripped by revulsion. He couldn't go up there because he knew exactly what would happen. This damaged body of his would keep betraying him even further, sending odd nerve signals to keep him pacing, in the vain hope of stilling the neural noise that is quietly, but very thoroughly, driving him quite mad. If Mrs Hudson showed up, he’d end up shouting at her until she ran away. Too tired to work efficiently, but way too worked up to sleep - his brain would go around in circles and circles and circles and it would feel like it was gnawing itself out through his eye sockets.

He had half hoped that a long day immersed in The Work would push him past these barriers, would tire him out enough to not care about the memories bouncing about in his head or the difficult-to-pinpoint ache that pulses dully in his back. This case has been nothing like ones before the illness. There are no moments of sudden insight, no impressive deductive connections. It’s just one weary slog after another. He wouldn’t have even bothered to look at this case before - it's now a three, at best. And yet here he is, totally incapable of solving it.

Standing before the front door, he just couldn't face the fact that when John comes home, he’s going to tell Sherlock that the Met has found nothing that will help them find the killer. Not tonight. He just couldn’t drag himself up the seventeen steps to his own home to confront his total failure. There is no solace on offer up there - he can’t even play the violin, can’t lose himself in an experiment. He's been sent home from the Yard, because he is useless, even though John and everyone else can still keep going. There's John, of course, but he when he comes home it will be
with expectations and demands and talking and nagging and poking into things John doesn't understand. He'll be forced to endure Doctor Watson, or possibly Captain Watson, even - instead of the version of him Sherlock would much prefer right now, which is a quiet, calming presence and a pair of arms around him.

His failure had risen up in his throat like bile, so he'd turned away from 221b and just walked. After about ten minutes, he realised that his mindless meander was taking him towards Mycroft's place, even though the journey ought to be way beyond his current endurance. That made him angry. He couldn't even take a walk, for Christ's sake?!

Thirty minutes later, when he had been standing before Mycroft’s front door, waiting for someone to open it, his legs had been shaking so badly from exhaustion that he'd begun to worry they might give in under him. That's why he'd urgently banged the door with his fists, besides the fact that it felt glorious to hit something and to hurt in return; to hurt in a way that's logical, a way he can understand. The fifth knuckle in his right hand is still throbbing, and he hopes he hasn't broken it - John would have kittens. He can't really remember how hard he'd been hitting the door. There's no swelling, and he can move his fingers easily without it causing more pain, so a fracture seems unlikely. It will make violin practice even more painful, if that was even possible. After every session, he feels like he's been through a boxing match and lost.

The kitchen is quiet, so his head starts filling the silence. The first notes of Scarborough Fair drift back onto the surface of his consciousness, mocking and dissonant. It has plagued him all evening as though it was coming from a haunted music box. He physically shakes his head, trying to focus on something else.

This isn't new - earworms driving him crazy when he's been working on a case for days on end. It's some sort of an energy overload mode for his brain. At least that's his current theory.

This one is particularly vicious. Maybe, if he was tired enough, his brain would stop playing the damned song on an endless loop. That song is like a catalyst now, one that yanks him right back from a place he desperately wants to escape. That hospital room, those early days and doubt and fright, a place that reeked of death and decay and which was capable of making him doubt himself and his own sanity even worse than a hallucinogen. He'd heard the song only once during his stay, sung by an elderly, dying woman at night. He's not even sure why that had affected him so much at the hospital.

He carries that place within himself now, like he carries Moriarty - forever reminding him how flimsy his sense of safety and control is. If he can’t solve this case, how on earth is he going to protect himself and John from a man who had declared that of course he was going to kill him eventually.

It’s the third verse that seems to stick the most. That elderly soprano echoing down the hospital corridor - 'Between the salt water and the sea strand (A soldier cleans and polishes a gun). It had made him think of John so much during those long nights when he was alone.

“Stop this!” Sherlock knows he has said the command out loud, but doesn’t care. He’s alone, and he can get away with it. He starts aggressively humming the opening notes of Handel's violin sonata in A major to counter the tune in his head.

He’s nearly through the opening movement that is the Andante, already concentrating on the brief bit of adagio at the end before he realises that it has done the trick. His mind quiets down, refocuses. It would be quicker, more effective, if he could play it, his motor cortex lighting up as more blood would be directed there instead of episodic memory centres. But at least he has conquered that horrible folk ballad.
He doesn't know how long he's been standing beside the window when Mycroft walks in, wearing a suit with a slightly crumpled white shirt, telling of a long work day. "To what do I owe this surprise visit?"

"Doesn't matter," Sherlock says, although he knows that Mycroft is not going to drop the subject. He always seems at least marginally pleased when Sherlock goes to the trouble of coming to his house, but he's hardly so naive as to assume this is just an innocent whim to socialize. "Is she still here?"

"I've sent her home, since we're done for the day."

Sherlock is glad that Mycroft's PA is no longer present - when he's feeling this antsy, pointless people being present tends to irritate him worse than a chafing washing instruction label - and that's saying something. Mycroft employs a housekeeper as well, but she only comes in during the day, cooks meals ready and leaves them in the fridge. So they are alone.

Mycroft goes to the fridge, and produces a ready-arranged portion of chicken salad. Not Mycroft's usual fare - he tends to go for fuller, hearty meals. Sherlock raises his brows sarcastically. Mycroft gives him a look that warns him off from commenting.

"I know better than to offer you any of it or anything else. You seem to have reverted to your usual bad dietary habits. " Mycroft removes his jacket and carefully arranges it on the back of a chair before rolling up his shirtsleeves. He sits down in the chair beside the one he'd hung his jacket on, of course, to spare the fabric. "How's the work going?"

"The case is stupid," Sherlock finds himself grumbling. He knows how childish this sounds, but he's not in the mood to be sensible and nobody apparently expects it of him anyway.

The case is stupid, the imbeciles employed by the Yard allegedly as technical investigators are stupid, Lestrade is stupid, John is stupid, everything is irritating and he can't sit still and he can't think and he doesn't know why. He should have solved this already, it should be simple, there's bound to be something obvious he has completely missed, and when some Yarder whose IQ is lower than their shoe size points it out that'll be the end of his consultant career.

"The case is stupid," Mycroft repeats in a collected tone, "which is why I find you in my kitchen staring out into space whilst humming, and your doctor Watson has messaged me five times in the past twenty-two minutes to enquire where you might be. Your usual approach to the stupidity of cases has entailed not accepting them, rather than running away from home. Trouble in paradise?" he asks and sticks a forkful of romaine salad, capers and pine nuts into his mouth.

Sherlock snorts. "None of your business."

"Indeed, if only you hadn't dragged it into my house tonight."

Sherlock wonders yet again why he had come here. "Sorry to interrupt your gamesmanship with boring officialdom. I'll be off then." He moves to collect his Belstaff.

"Don't be absurd. You've made the effort, so stay. You are most welcome, of course, and invariably John Watson will join us at some point, once he's checked with everyone else you associate with, and possibly scouted out those few boltholes of yours he already knows about. Were he a man of greater intellect and less optimistic loyalty, he'd be investigating the very recent business transactions of Marylebone's drug dealers." He subjects Sherlock to a forensic scrutiny before asking, "Perhaps that is wise, given your current state of agitation. Are you using?"

Something in his tone makes Sherlock downright surprised he hadn't added the word 'already' at
"No, although if you keep being such a prat you might drive me to it."

Mycroft loads more salad onto his fork. "Pray tell, brother mine, what I can do for you."

"Explain something. Why do people do things with great inbuilt risks, if they seem to get nothing out of it? No financial gain, no career advancement. Surely it couldn't be just for the sake of contentment of helping someone. People are not selfless to that extent." As much as he hates to admit it, over the years, Sherlock has come to realise that Mycroft is better at deducing human motives than he is. If he can be bothered, that is, instead of just calling everyone a goldfish.

"Some might be, even though the resolve behind that selflessness might be strengthened by more sinister motives. Is this about the case?"

Sherlock slumps down into the chair opposite his brother. "We haven't been able to find a motive for the murder. The victim didn't seem to be planning to rat out his dealer, didn't have any enemies that we can find, no bitter spouse, no angry exes, no business associations with grudges. We also don't know what the dealer selling these designer drugs is getting out of his business, because we can't find any financial evidence. The money trail goes nowhere – none of the personal trainers who are the most likely suspects are using illicit proceeds, and there are no clues in the victim’s apartment."

"Maybe someone else needs the money earned by this person, or he's using it for something unusual, perhaps a larger purchase he's not able to make just yet. Or he might owe a debt that needs to be paid, one without a paper trail."

Sherlock shakes his head. "None of the trainers’ bank accounts show the signs of a gambler, and none of the trainers seem to have any drug connections that would explain an extortionate debt. Why would someone risk their lives, their freedom and their careers with murder just to hide the fact that they were earning money from selling steroids? Even a conviction would earn a slap on the wrist at worst for a first offender."

"Sometimes we feel duty-bound to do something for someone who's connected to our lives. Perhaps he’s paying care home fees for an elderly relative and fears what a sudden end to the influx of money would lead to. Who knows what loyalty will drive an otherwise sane person to do?"

"The Met did an inventory on the trainers' car registrations and address changes - nothing there that would point to a sudden movement in and out of money. The last time I looked, care homes don’t take their fees in used fivers thrust into a brown envelope. Could they be laundering the money somehow?"

"Possibly. Quite a conundrum," Mycroft says, and Sherlock tries to read in his expression and his ironic tone whether he's cracked it and only wants to humiliate Sherlock, or if this genuinely leaves him short of an answer, too. It seems to be the latter.

"Speaking of loyal and duty-bound," Mycroft says when his phone begins to ring in his jacket pocket. Leaning sideways, he fishes it out and shows Sherlock the caller ID: Watson, John.

Is that what Mycroft thinks about the two of them? That John is his dutiful, long-suffering minder? A live-in carer? Is that how it looks to everyone else - the ex-consulting detective trying to relive his glory days with the help of his trusty assistant? A sudden, odd mixture of anger and apprehension takes over Sherlock. He still doesn't know what to do about all the things John has
been harping on about.

Mycroft answers the call. "Yes, he's here." There is a momentary gap which John must have filled. "What a strange endearment," Mycroft has the utter gall to quip as he glances at Sherlock half-amused, "Pray tell, doctor, is that what passes for a polite request in the Army these days? Nevermind. He would insist on saying he’s fine." Another brief pause, then "Yes. I'll tell him. Good evening."

Mycroft ends the call and places the phone on the table beside his plate.

"Is he----" Sherlock starts until he realises he doesn't want Mycroft privy to any details of their relationship, especially how he feels about things right now. On the other hand, he's probably shown his hand right the minute he showed up here. He shouldn't have come. Why does he keep giving Mycroft this sort of ammunition?

Mycroft regards him carefully. "---angry?" he suggests.

Sherlock crosses his arms, trying to pretend he doesn't care.

"He appeared relieved that you had come here instead of disappearing off the grid." Mycroft pushes his plate aside, offering Sherlock a piece of bread which gets declined. "Go home, Sherlock. The case will still be there in the morning."

True enough, but John will be there, at the flat, this very evening, likely expecting things from him. Co-operation, at least. An apology even, possibly, for something that Sherlock has done wrong, yet again? A difficult conversation he has no idea how to handle?

"I don't know what to say to him," Sherlock admits, unsure why he's admitting such a thing to Mycroft of all people. His nerves are so frayed at the edges these days.

"Have you told him that?"

"Why would I?" The thought appals him. Why would John want to hear such a thing, such a deeply un-reassuring statement? What could either of them benefit from stating the obvious? It would be as much as admitting out loud that he was never cut out for any of this, GBS or no GBS, and that the events of recent months have stripped away what little hope he may have had for making up for all the time they'd lost hiding behind the assumption that certain feelings could never be reciprocated. If only he had known what a wreckage would emerge from the GBS, he might never had said those things. If he admits his failings now, it would be all over. The end of hope. And that would leave him with very little incentive to battle Mycroft when he would inevitably interfere with the aftermath.

There is the tiniest sigh of impatience from his brother. "You are a verbally skilled person with formidable prowess in analysis. He may assume your particular talents extend further into your own psyche than they actually do, so you might put some practice in on the matter. There is no fault in admitting that your communication skills on matters of sentiment are rather rusty. I suggest you head home, because your doctor is waiting and he is likely still worried, despite my reassurances. It appears that he doesn't entirely trust either of us when it comes to your wellbeing, and would prefer to have a watchful eye on you presently."

"He's not my doctor."

"I don't presume to be familiar with all the precise aspects of your relationship, but it is abundantly clear that he is, in fact, most obviously yours. Have you money for a cab?"
Thank you, dearest readers, for the enthusiasm, the comments, the kudos and the all-round support. We love you.

There's a fresh tumblr post done by J. Baillier that relates to this chapter: during season four we saw bits of Mycroft’s house from the inside, but for the purposes of this story, we went to London to (among other things) scout out a suitable location for casa Mycroft. [Here is the picture post.](#)
It's not terribly late when Sherlock gets home, so it's not surprising that John is still awake. He would probably have stayed up even if Sherlock had been gone much later, since they have not spent much time apart after he'd come home from Harwich, and what had happened earlier in the day was likely troubling both of them. Sherlock is not certain he'd call it an argument - more of a telling-off. His anger over it has now subsided - not thanks to anything Mycroft had said, but because the whole exercise of going to the Yard had been pointless, and staying wouldn't have made the evening any better.

He wanders to the kitchen, where John is doing the dishes. Neither of them devote much time to chores, but admittedly the mountain of used cutlery, cups, glasses and plates is threatening to lead to no longer having any clean mugs when a craving for tea would hit. John to the rescue, as usual, when Mrs Hudson is unavailable.

"How's Mycroft, then?" John asks. His inflection sounds light in a way that does not appear carefully constructed. That, combined with the fact that he's asking about Mycroft instead of berating Sherlock points to him both being relieved and accepting of Sherlock taking a detour to Belgravia instead of going home. Mycroft's assessment had been correct, then. He always did read people better than Sherlock.

"Annoying," Sherlock replies, and receives a quirked-up lip as a reply. That confirms even further that John's anger has evaporated as well. Taking a quiet moment to himself seems to be the best way for John to get over the pointless disapproval that Sherlock's devotion to cases sometimes brings on. Sherlock still doesn't quite understand how his altercation with the staff at NSY should have upset John that much. The likely explanation is that John had been tired, possibly also frustrated by their - Sherlock's, to be accurate - slow progress in the case, and who could blame him? Perhaps he felt that putting his foot down had cleared the air somehow. John's improved mood will likely keep him from continuing that loathsome tirade about bed and food. Sherlock hardly believes that things are now fine, but he'll happily take an uneasy truce over being bossed around by Doctor Watson.

He picks up a somewhat fresh-looking bread roll from a plate on the table, scrutinizes it and puts it back. The table is empty save for the plate and a newspaper. John had moved his microscope to a corner on the floor at some point when Sherlock had been away. It still sits there, gathering dust, as has lately been the state of his brain as well. John has also stopped asking about his experiments - does he now assume there will no longer be any? John ought to be happy. He has always hated at least eight out of ten of them.

Sherlock is not sure if he's hungry, and can't be bothered to ruminate further on such an unimportant subject, so he wanders to where the kitchen meets the sitting room. The television is on, and what's showing catches his attention. It's a sex scene, and what's unusual about it is that it's between two men. It's not terribly racy, but still leaves little to the imagination. Sherlock's eye is drawn to the men's well defined musculature. Why is it that the current fetish seems to be for a six pack of abdominal bulges? He sighs at the thought of what he would look like stripped naked, in a similar sort of clinch to the one the two actors are enjoying. John is much closer to the current male aesthetic ideals in his compact frame, even if his life post-army service has somewhat softened the contours.

Is John watching this? Why? It seems unlikely, because where he's standing by the sink puts him
sideways to the television.

Sherlock leans on the door frame between the sitting room and the kitchen, gaze narrowing. He's not an avid consumer of pornography, preferring the contents of his own head to some overacted and oddly detached grinding and grunting. John has a collection of such material on the hard drive of his laptop, but it's not very extensive. Said selection contains scenes between men and women, and between women. Nothing like this, not male with male. 'I'm not gay.' That resounding comment John had made to Irene when he didn't know Sherlock was listening, echoes about his head now, mocking him.

John stops rattling plates around in the half-filled sink. Sherlock turns his head to face him, brows slightly raised.

"That's just some movie - I was waiting for the news to come on. You can change the channel if you like", John comments hastily, as though he needs to make excuses for his entertainment choices.

Sherlock crosses his arms, making no move to fetch the remote. There's something odd about the atmosphere in the flat right now. He could be imagining this, of course, since he wouldn't put it past his frayed nerves to misfire in their deductions, but still.

John fishes a glass out of the sink. "Unless you want to watch that, of course", he adds hesitantly. Although it's not exactly phrased as such, it seems to be a question.

Their eyes meet again and the distinct feeling that something strange is going on is now too strong to dismiss. Sherlock steals a glance at the television screen. So does John.

John draws a deep breath and puts the glass he's holding on the counter. He strips off his thick yellow plastic gloves even though he clearly hasn't finished doing the dishes. The gloves must have holes, since his hands are dripping with soapy water. Sherlock has a faint memory of using them in some sort of an experiment before he got ill. It feels as though it had happened years ago.

"Sherlock? Can I ask you something?" John inquires tentatively.

Somehow giving full attention to John right now feels awkward. Sherlock is still facing the television instead of the kitchen, which is convenient. The scene changes to the two men, assumed to be the main characters, having coffee, but John doesn't return to the undoubtedly fascinating task of scraping leftovers off plates. "Go ahead", Sherlock says circumspectly.

"Is that---" John actually licks his lips and blinks, obvious tells of preoccupation with something distracting, "I mean, would you---- if it's something that you'd---- yeah." All this comes, oddly enough, in a very specific hesitant tone John always adopts when he's suggesting Mexican food for dinner even though he knows Sherlock doesn't like it. If this is the level of eloquence that John reaches with his female conquests, then Sherlock has to wonder if 'Three Continents Watson' is a joke and not an honorific.

He knows what John is asking, of course. This could have been covered in a text message. You. Me. Sex? Tick yes/no. No need whatsoever for John be standing there, looking like he fears being eaten by a bear in the next few seconds.

Sherlock wonders what would happen if he simply answered no. Would that nullify everything, throw them back in time, into an uneasy truce of stolen glances, assumed hetero-normativity, and John trying to get a leg over whatever XX-chromosomed floozy he could find? Somehow Sherlock doesn't think so. At least he hopes not.
In his head, the gist of the thing between them has always been about something else than what's still happening on the TV screen. On the other hand, John is a man still relatively close to his sexual prime, and having it is clearly something he values and enjoys and seeks out on a regular basis. The big question is whether he'd be able to move past the gender issue. Could this be where their compatibility ends? The hugs and the kisses and the bed-sharing are clearly fine, but how will John react when confronted with the concept of having actual sexual intercourse - whatever that would entail - with a man? The signs that he'd been pleased with Sherlock's looks had always been there, of course: 'you... being all mysterious with your... cheekbones'. Sherlock is painfully aware that he no longer looks the way he did before. Would that matter? John had seemed to appreciate women of all shapes and sizes and personality types when it came to having sex with them, but what of a man? None of the women John had dated had been this skinny, this concave, this narrow-waisted, this pale or this---- whatever the word is that Sherlock just can't find to sum up the entire way in which he feels out of sorts.

A commercial break has now come on, and the ridiculous chocolate ad now showing shifts the atmosphere at least a little, or so Sherlock would like to think. John is clearly still expecting an answer, even though none of his ramblings so far have contained anything that could be construed as a proper question. "I can hardly dictate the inclinations of the Transport," Sherlock finally says. "There are--- inclinations, then?" John asks, sounding as though he's discovered something he thinks is important, but has no idea what it actually is. He often sounds like this during cases. Usually it's Sherlock's fault for not having the patience to explain obvious things to the duller minds around him. In this subject matter, however, he would have to admit John is probably more the expert, at least when it comes to having sex in a relationship context.

What if Sherlock were to say yes, in a completely blatant manner? What if he told John all the things he'd been thinking about since approximately the second week they'd been living together, things he'd buried deep in the Mind Palace, assuming the nature of them would make John run for the hills? Now that he actually could say those things out loud with a possibility that they might turn to reality, he doesn't feel as excited or hopeful or turned on as he probably should - what he feels is fearful.

His previous experiences of what could be described as sexual encounters have clearly been different to John's. A scientist's curiosity had lead to some experimentation in his youth, but it had been both disconcerting and deeply unsatisfying, so he'd had no desire to advance very far with any one partner. Some of the sensations had been downright unpleasant, and he'd been left wondering what all the fuss was about. Later, when he'd learned that cocaine was expensive, certain sexual practices had been a simple currency he could provide. It had meant nothing, and was carefully limited to the sorts of one-sided things his sensory issues would allow. Initially, sex had seemed to have little to do with how he'd felt about John, but gradually, a connection had began to develop between those two things. Sex is, after all, what separates a friendship and a romantic entanglement, isn't it? That is the step he'd taken in the winter garden, taking an already intense relationship and saying that he was willing to add this new aspect into it. That scares him, now.

He worries about wasting this chance to find out if sexual intimacy could actually be better than he has experienced before, because he can't trust his own body at the moment. Given his current physical state, what happens if he can't experience the pleasure everyone seems to think sex involves, can't deliver what John expects? What if his body betrays him again at the worst possible moment? What if it was all so overwhelming that he goes into a meltdown? Much less intense things are currently capable of flinging him off that proverbial cliff. If it all goes horribly wrong, would this drive such a deep wedge of embarrassment and disappointment between them that it could never be bridged again? He imagines what would likely happen after a disastrous attempt at intimacy: a rapid retreat, and the disappearance of any chance to make it right later. Suddenly, his
breath hitches with anxiety.

Trying to explain this is just impossible, since John seems very confident in himself and thus could likely not relate at all to such issues. How could that conversation sound like anything other than an iteration of 'it's not you, it's me'? Could John possibly interpret it any other way than Sherlock doubting it would ever work between them? Also, John might consider it rather insulting, the notion that the nature of their connection wouldn't be enough for Sherlock to get over such worries, because he might think that reflects on his dedication and his skills as a lover?

They're stuck in limbo. Sherlock wonders how long he will be like this, not daring to try so many things, for fear of failing? Right now he would very much like to seek reassurance in physical proximity - it's one of the rare things he has found grounding lately, but he’s holding back from that, because he worries that it might lead to John expecting more out of the moment.

He needs time. He still needs time, even after all the time they've waited and wasted and hesitated, and there's no way to tell how much. All he knows for sure is that he can't function like this, and he doesn't even know where to begin to fix it. He draws in another shaky breath and tries to calm himself.

In order to distract himself from the building anxiety, he tries to dissect John's words in his head, looking for hidden meanings, hoping for a chance for a deduction there. Perhaps John’s fumbling words had actually been more artful than he'd given John credit for, since they'd sidestepped the inevitable counter-question: what does John himself want? Could John actually be relieved, if they never engaged in anything beyond their current level of physical intimacy?

It's just that----

Despite the fear, despite the doubt, Sherlock knows he wants it, wants more, wants all of it, with John. Of that he's absolutely certain. There's an entire basement level in the Palace devoted to scenarios he's imagined over the years involving John. And the things happening in those fantasies are not the sorts of things he's taken part in the past. He wants more than those meaningless encounters that had left him feeling more lonely than before them. Before John, he'd never felt like this, had never wanted like this. This treacherous body is all that's standing in his way. If he somehow start imagining things happening to it and within it with pleasure, then maybe, just maybe----

John clears his throat, cutting Sherlock off mid-thought. Right. Conversation. Say something!

"I'm sure it will be quite pleasant, once I--" Sherlock parses together. Hell, he hadn't intended to say that out loud. If talking about sex with John is this disturbing, what would having it be like?

John looks like he's been slapped. "Sherlock, no. That's not how it works. How do you know you want it if you don't... want it?"

How on earth is he going to answer that? A surge of panicked adrenaline hits his blood like an electrical current, and he knows that whatever he says is going to be wrong, wrong, wrong, but it slips out anyway. "I have a somewhat functional male body, John, I know how these things work."

"Judging by what you just said, and the way you made it sound like going to the dentist, I really, really doubt that."

Sherlock knows this would be the time to share the fact that he does want it, all of it, but that would only lead to John raising the issue of why he doesn't feel like going for it, then. For John it has always seemed simple - find a willing partner, engage.
Sherlock has no idea how to say any of what is going on in his head in a way that John can understand. He knows his capacity to use words is slipping away, driven into hiding by the anxiety that is reaching flood levels now. How on earth could he possibly begin to explain things to John confident, comfortable-in-his-own-skin John?

Finally, he manages to blurt out, "Maybe I just don't see what it has to do with this", Sherlock says and waves his hand between them as though demonstrating the invisible tether he imagines there. This is absolute rubbish, of course, but maybe it'll be enough to make John drop the ball in this conversation without discouraging his interest completely. Sherlock is perfectly aware that sex is supposed to fulfil an emotional function in a relationship, and that's the gist of the problem. John will inevitably use sex - or lack thereof - as a gauge of the state of their relationship, because sex is clearly important to him. Sherlock knows that; John is normal.

And the man immediately confirms Sherlock’s assessment with his response. "It's got everything to do with this. Contrary to what you seem to be assuming, it's not just about getting off."

Defensively, Sherlock mutters, "You've sought women out for that purpose."

"Not even a one-night stand is only about that. If it were, then I could have just---"

"--Masturbated," Sherlock suggests.

John shoots him a dirty glance. "Thank you," he quips. "Do you?"

*Do I what?* Sherlock struggles to grasp what John has said, and then realises the meaning. "Oh, as I just said, a functioning---"

"Right, yeah, of course, very scientific. I bet you do it once a year with a pair of nitrile gloves on."

Sherlock hears the sarcasm, and it hits home. On those occasions when he's participated in sexual practices, he would have rather preferred to have such protection available. The unpleasantness of the associated memories push him into corner. He decides to try to shut down the conversation, before his head has an opportunity to make things even worse. "I have to admit I never assumed you would broach this subject until much later, considering your formerly staunchly heterosexual proclivities."

"Yeah, well, turns out that my adequately functioning male body has made note of yours, so I figured we might want or need to take it up."

"Take what up? Discussing it or partaking?"

"God almighty, you and your choice of words..."

"'Sex', as a word, seems like an awfully generic description," Sherlock complains. "What would you actually mean by it?"

John pinches the bridge of his nose, but then snaps up his head looking as though he's gathering up the courage to say something important. Sherlock had meant for the question to make him back off, but it appears that John has given this some thought, and those thoughts are about to be verbalized.

Sherlock shifts so that they are finally properly facing one another. Fight or flight; he knows that this conversation has reached a tipping point. He'd like nothing more than to retreat, but he fears even that might terminally discourage John.
John steps closer and reaches up to tuck an errant curl behind Sherlock's ear, letting his hand linger on his cheek. John's blue eyes look fathomless, pupils dilated. Arousal? Even if they're not exactly doing anything titillating? Sherlock doesn't know what to do, so he runs for cover by mirroring John's actions, sliding his fingers onto the coarse five-o'clock-shadow on John's cheek. In his sensitive fingertips, he imagines he feels every individual hair, every tiny mark left by life on John's features. He'll never grow tired of seeing them, of touching them, but right now his every nerve cell seems to be screaming for him to not do this, to escape, to save himself from whatever waits at the opposite side of the chasm John is about to cross.

"I want to take you apart and be the one to make you beg for mercy," John half-whispers, perching his fingertips on Sherlock's collarbone on top of his shirt. "Not Irene Adler, not anyone else. Me," John says quietly. He sounds very, very serious. This is not a tease, not a threat, not a come-on - that much is obvious to even Sherlock who doesn't consider himself very good at deciphering such things. No, John is serious, and this is an determined admission of intent, every bit as much as their conversation in the winter garden had been.

Momentarily, he relishes idea of John's possessive tone, but quickly the panic wipes all remains of delight away. The idea of a deconstructive process inherent in the explanation he's just been given is, frankly, frightening. Sherlock does not want to be taken apart. He's in pieces enough as is. What he wants is for John to put him back together, because it's becoming evident that Sherlock himself doesn't know how. Then again, no one would claim that he's been much good at being well and whole even before this illness. He hates the grey veil that being ill has pulled down on everything, and the way it rips open an abyss between what he wants and what he's capable of. He doesn't want the loss of control that the scenario John has just described entails. What he's been through has only made him more determined to cling onto a sense of being at the helm of himself. All in all, he's lost faith in this body to give him anything but pain and embarrassment. Why would he want to rescind control over his very being to such a fickle entity?

His body will betray him, and ruin everything. He can't face that loss. Not right now.

If he knows for sure that John is repulsed by his inadequacies, if he can't deliver what the man needs, then what hope does Sherlock have of keeping him?

John is looking at him expectantly, waiting for confirmation, permission, affirmation, anything. Sherlock lets out a lungful of breath slowly. He's convinced that John is expecting something right now, at least a kiss. It's infuriating that he can't read John's intentions beyond that. He'd very much like to kiss John right now, he realises, be it that it's less due to desire than wanting to escape his own head, but if he does, will that lead to John assuming the endgame of this conversation lies between the sheets? What John has just done and said doesn't feel like a seduction, but Sherlock needs more data, so he steps closer, wraps his arms around John's neck and presses their torsos together. He breathes in the familiar scent, heart still pounding like it's about to burst out of its bony prison. John holds him without saying a word for a moment, but then he lets out a sharp breath and Sherlock realizes his hold is quite tight. He drops his arms lower, and ascertains from a bit of pelvic shifting that John is not, at current, hard. The deduction is complete: this is intended as just a conversation, not foreplay. Sherlock allows himself a moment more of this calming stillness, of the way John's arms around him seem to banish some of the whirling chaos in his head. When he finally withdraws, John pats his arm, a mixture of amusement and confusion playing on his features. He then plants a kiss on Sherlock's cheek. Sherlock feels too self-conscious to lose himself in what they're doing, but he does reciprocate with a proper kiss on the mouth, keeping his tongue to himself lest John change his mind about what they're doing right now being merely the addendum to a conversation.

Had this discussion happened a year earlier, Sherlock's answer would have been a resounding yes,
followed by dragging John Hamish Watson to the bedroom for a magical mystery tour of each other's underwear. He may lack the experience in the relationship side of sex, but he has some technical skills he could make use of, for sure. When it comes to the physiology and biochemistry of sex - the hormones, the endorphins, the functional cardiovascular changes, he already has the theory down pat, so how difficult could it possibly be? He doesn't want what he's just said to be his final answer, but he also doesn't want to encourage John to think he could do any of it right now.

Misunderstanding his silence, John has now obviously lost his nerve, and asks "Is that something you'd----?" he lets the question fizzle out like a deflated balloon.

"You're the one always harping on about timing, so since you insisted on this conversation, the answer is yes and no," Sherlock announces, and steps back. Withdrawing from the proximity they had just shared feels both necessary but surprisingly painful.

John's expression looks as though Sherlock isn't speaking English at all.

"Is that enough for now?" Sherlock asks, but it's a rhetorical question.

"Judging by your tone, I guess it'll have to be," John says. His tone is less disappointed than Sherlock had feared. John snatches the remote, changes the channel and sits down in his chair.

Sherlock takes over the sofa. He's terribly tempted to steal an occasional glance at John, but he doesn't, since that could prompt for a continuation in the conversation. Sherlock is quite certain it had not gone the way John had hoped or intended.

It's three in the morning. It's all going round and round in Sherlock's head - the case and John and everything else, merging into a whirlpool of confusion and frustration. During the rest of the evening, he had somehow managed to distract himself with a documentary on the Higgs particle John had begrudgingly agreed to watch with him.

The air feels stale up to the point of suffocating, and he can't lie still any longer. Sherlock drags himself out of it, feeling claustrophobic and desperately in need of a cigarette, or something worse to stop his brain from consuming itself in ever-decreasing circles. John has eliminated all of his stashes, and leaving the flat to buy something isn't an option. He's too tired to manage the stairs, even if he could get dressed without waking John.

Exhaustion wars with naked need, and wins. The thought makes him want to bang his head against the bathroom sink he's now sitting next to. Pain and oblivion would be so much better than this. Self-doubt is snapping at his heels like a terrier. The case, sex, facing tomorrow - all of it just seems too difficult, too much right now.

This case was supposed to be a nice, easy warm-up, nothing too taxing. It hardly competes with trying to take down Moriarty. Yet, his failure to solve it is draining his energy. It never used to be like this with John, either. Back when they had not known where they stood with each other, it had actually meant that the lines were clear, that there was an expected code of conduct to follow. There was certainty. He no longer knows who the Sherlock that John somehow wants even is. The old one? Or the new one John expects him to be turning into? Who is that person, and what would he be doing at this point?
Suddenly, the bathroom light is switched on. Sherlock flinches at the brightness and scrambles to his feet, startled.

John steps in, arms in goosebumps as he just has a T-shirt and pants on. Sherlock is flabbergasted that John could have snuck up on him like this - he had even left the bathroom door ajar in order to be able to hear immediately if the floorboards in the bedroom creaked. He must've been dangerously lost in thought.

"I've come to bust you," John says, yawning and yanking the hem of his old T-shirt downwards. "So this is where you go, for hours on end?"

Sherlock is half-tempted to cook up some convenient excuse - perhaps a lingering bladder issue related to the autonomic dysfunction in GBS? John would hardly buy that one - at least not without promptly marching Sherlock off to be poked and prodded at some urology unit. Shudder the thought.

Sherlock could also use the old classic 'none of your business', but he has actually made all his business John's business by extension, hasn't he?

John presses the heels of his palms onto his closed eyelids and yawns again. "Shall I get you a blanket, or are you coming back to bed?"

No lecture? No interrogation about hanging around in the bathroom at night? What is this?

"I'm too bloody tired to talk", John says. "You look dead on your feet, too, so let's just not."

John extends his hand, and Sherlock allows himself to be gently dragged back to the bedroom. The bed does feel more enticingly soft and warm than the cold, tiled bathroom floor had been.

He slips beneath the covers, facing away from John who sits on the bed and inspects the sole of his right, likely checking if he'd stepped on something while walking around barefoot. He then kills the light and takes over his side of the bed. Sherlock expects distance, quite certain John wants nothing more than to quickly get back to sleep. Whenever John's girlfriends have stayed over, Sherlock has never found them and John sleeping anything but apart in bed when Sherlock has deliberately barged into John's old bedroom in the morning under some ridiculous pretense. He still doesn't know why he'd elected to torture himself by witnessing those moments. In a way, seeing John like that, sleeping in the same bed with someone, had hurt more than having heard the banging of the bedpost against the wall. He shouldn't have trespassed, shouldn't have risked seeing such things which always threatened to crack his already brittle heart in half, but he couldn't help himself. He had to know, had to see.

Remembering those occasions makes him yet again feel guilty for not seeking out much earlier what he'd wanted for himself. Had he wasted his chance by waiting until the illness came, and wrecked everything? John is in his bed, now, but he might as well not be.

How will things ever get better, if he doesn't at least try to meet John halfway? Sherlock turns under the duvet, his back protesting the change of position. His toes feel numb and cold. He feels alone, more than when he'd sat in the bathroom.

John has turned away to face the wall on the opposite side. Sherlock shuffles over, making his way closer to the point where he can press his forehead against John's spine.

This could work. This isn't too much. He doesn't have to face John's scrutiny, but he's still right there. The scent and warmth of John somehow grounds him again.
A hand John had likely kept tucked under his chin and his pillow reaches around, absent-mindedly raking through Sherlock’s hair before retreating back.

"Night, my nutter," John says.
Lessons Learned

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning, Lestrade texts to let them know that they haven't been able to find anything definitive in the trainers' finances, and that it might be best if Sherlock kept a low profile at NSY for a few days. Watford's laptop has already been processed, and nothing pertaining to his fitness interests has been discovered there. Sherlock had not seemed surprised, and John had to agree - why would someone take the risk of dealing with illegal stuff on their work computer? A cleaner at the Vault had happened to recognize Watford from a photo, helping the NSY Forensic techs to find his locker. The only things they had found there had been Watford's sweaty exercise gear.

The rest of the day has been a bit off; after the conversation yesterday evening and then their middle of the night exchanges, both men have been consciously avoiding going too close to that topic again. It’s like a little truce has been declared, to let them both process exactly what had been said.

John is glad Helen is due for a visit - at least it'll give Sherlock something to do instead of mulling over the case and fuming over his temporary banishment all day.

Even though there haven't been many teaching sessions yet, it's obvious that Helen is good at what she does, and that somehow Sherlock is willing to listen to her, at least to some extent. When he disagrees, he doesn't really argue, just does everything the way he wants, but Helen's patience seems to be infinite.

The overall situation isn't as bad as the first evening had pointed to. When tackling compositions in what Helen calls the intermediate range in difficulty, Sherlock is picking up his old skills at an admirable pace, at least to John's ears anyway. The faces that Sherlock makes while playing suggest he is less pleased. In fact, there seems to be little pleasure being taken at all. But at least he is continuing, and after the first session had ended so badly, John can only be glad that Sherlock hasn't given up.

Helen calls the session to an end when Sherlock begins getting so tired he can't manage a full sheet of music without having a stop and stretch or dig his fingers into a muscle knot in his neck.

"Oh, and one more thing," Helen says before stepping out of the door, "I'd like you to teach John how to play."

"What?" John's head snaps up in the kitchen, where he's trying to open a very stubborn tin of basil-flavoured tuna for a salad.

"Excuse me?" Sherlock asks, bow still in hand, eyes narrowed.

"Teach him the basics," Helen says cheerfully, "it'll be fun."

John isn't sure that's the first word that would have come to mind, and Sherlock's current
expression mirrors his surprise and scepticism. Sherlock teaching anyone anything would probably end in tears. A good teacher needs patience and faith in the abilities of others, neither of which Sherlock possesses in any measurable quantities.

"I doubt it," Sherlock says.

That does not freeze Helen's smile. "Let's make it part of the deal. I instruct you, you teach him."

"I wouldn't mind, really," John says sunnily once he’s over the surprise that Helen seems to be serious about this. He steals a glance at Sherlock, who no longer looks as startled and dismissive as he had a moment ago. He's now wearing an expression familiar to John - it's one he slaps on when being chided for something, waiting for the lecture to be over so he can instantly delete the whole thing.

"Good. I'll see you on Friday, then," Helen says and disappears down the stairwell.

"Well, that was weird," John says. He isn’t sure he wants to do this if Sherlock is not keen.

"Best get on with it, then, if that's what she demands," Sherlocksays, putting down his violin.

"What?" John blurts out without thinking. He had expected Sherlock to consider the whole suggestion preposterous and refuse to have anything to do with it. He turns to stare at Sherlock, who looks expectant and determined and also already a little frustrated, probably because John hasn't yet moved from the kitchen. "You mean like, right now?"

"Good point. You hardly need time to prepare, but I should probably take a few moments to plan this. Meet me here in the sitting room in a a half hour," Sherlock commands, and heads towards the bedroom, violin and bow in hand.

John, brows raised, is left wondering what sort of black magic Helen Ellicott could possibly be employing to get Sherlock bloody Holmes to obey her. John certainly hasn't got any of it.

He uses his thirty minutes for a walk. When he’s out with Sherlock nowadays, he spends so much time keeping a doctor’s eye on the man’s gait and wondering whether he is coping with the exercise, that he scarcely has the energy to notice anything else. So, a few nights prior, he’d started a habit of walking the perimeter of Regent’s Park - alone.

He likes this time of the evening; twilight gives a whole different feel to the place, and he doesn’t have to dodge as many joggers or mums with their kids strapped into push chairs. At a quick march pace, he can do the circuit from door to door in half an hour.

The walk usually clears his head, but today he cuts the circuit short, so he can use the rest of the time sitting on a park bench, looking at his phone to bone up on music and the parts of the violin, so he wouldn't feel quite the ignoramus. He's not sure he's in the mood to take a substantial dose of Sherlock bossing him around tonight without snapping back, but he should probably try not to be utterly hopeless. Hence the research. John can read music, and he did play the clarinet in school, but getting into rugby and then later on, attending medical college, put paid to any such hobbies. In Afghanistan, he’d have a go on the mess hall piano every now and then, just to do something different. Not that he could play anything more complicated on it, than a one-hand rendition of 'Go Tell It On The Mountain'.
The other thing that has been playing on his mind throughout the whole walk, besides wanting not to appear completely uneducated in string instruments, is how much he enjoys watching Sherlock play the violin again. The whole thing must still be distressing Sherlock, who probably sees each lesson as yet another depressing reminder of how far he is from what he had been, but still... there is something appealing to John to see him with the instrument. Sherlock’s posture changes, he becomes a part of the music. John has always loved the sight of it, especially because it has always given him a perfect excuse to look at Sherlock for extended periods of time, without a risk of it appearing awkward or suspicious. He no longer needs an excuse like that, but his fascination with the spectacle hasn't waned.

Maybe teaching John a bit of violin would put Sherlock in the driving seat again, give him a bit of confidence back. As far as John can tell, it's probably Helen's very reason for initiating such a thing.

When John makes his way back upstairs, he finds the sitting room somewhat different than how he'd left it. The music stand is now in the middle of the room, and all the lights have been turned on. A full length mirror that John vaguely recognises as belonging in Sherlock's - their - bedroom - is leaning against the fireplace.

Sherlock has put on a jacket. He looks immaculate and business-like.

"You didn't have to dress up for me," John says warily. "You look like a music teacher," he admits, properly taking in Sherlock's buttoned-up burgundy shirt and black corduroy jacket.

"That," Sherlock says cordially, "is the point."

Sherlock has managed to shove a light side table next to the music stand. On it rests his violin, and a bow. John knows Sherlock owns several of them - most of them made from beautiful, aged-looking wood. This one looks thinner, lighter and darker.

"I picked a bow more suited for a beginner, and didn't tighten it very much, making it easier for you to handle. The violin is already tuned. Teaching you to do that would be too much for lesson one. Some people never really master doing it by ear."

John can't help smiling.

"What are you so stupidly happy about?" Sherlock asks, disapprovingly.

"I wonder how many beginners get to start their careers on a Stradivarius," John points out.

"Not many, which is why you should show both it, and me, some respect, by shutting up and stopping grinning like a maniac."

Bossy.

Sherlock picks up the violin by its neck and passes it to John. He then puts his hands on John's hips to shift him to in front of the mirror. He encloses John in the circle of his arms, and arranges the violin so that the shoulder support rests on John's collarbone, changing the angle until the belly of the violin is almost horizontal.

John bends his neck so that his lower left cheek rests on the black ebony chin rest.
"No," Sherlock says and uses his forefinger to lift John's chin up. "Turn your head so that you're looking straight down the middle of the violin, and then just lower your chin onto the rest."

John does as he's told, which he decides clearly is the best survival strategy here.

"I'm going to let go of the neck. You should be able to keep the violin from falling without grabbing hold of it with your hand," Sherlock says.

John swallows, deeply tempted to grab the neck. He's not going to drop this instrument worth Lord-knows-how-many-millions-of-pounds. Sherlock clearly shares his worry, since he pries off his fingers slowly, one by one, letting his hand hover over the neck for a moment until removing it and taking a step back so that he's not pressed up against John anymore.

This leaves behind a hollow feeling - John had quite enjoyed the proximity. Sherlock hasn't sought that sort of contact very much recently, not after they'd taken the case. And even now, it's probably more of a necessity than a preference.

"Then the bow," Sherlock says, picking it up from the table. "This, I'm told, is the tricky part."

"Not for you, though? You could already do this in the womb, I suppose, written in your DNA, like how to be a brilliant lovable dick?" John jokes.

"Shut up," Sherlock glowers, "and concentrate."

Sherlock lifts up the bow, his thumb tucked into the nook between the part where the strings are enclosed in a pincher mechanism and the stick. John remembers from the googling he'd done on his phone that the square pincher part is called a frog. He arranges his forefinger so that it's slightly curved around the pad of the bow - at least he thinks that's what it was called - the jargon was a little complicated. The rest of his fingers end up delicately resting on the opposite side of the frog, except for the little finger, which is placed on top of it. "Try and replicate this," Sherlock tells him, and grabs the bow halfway across the stick so John can grab hold of it.

John tries to remember where everything goes. The position is delicate, and he worries about dropping the bow if he doesn't pinch it tightly between his thumb and forefinger.

After watching him struggle for a moment, Sherlock removes the violin from his shoulder so he can focus on the bow. "Your knuckles need to be rounded, not lazy and flat like that," he chides.

"Sorry," John says although he probably shouldn't need to.

Sherlock's gaze narrows, and he leans closer to John's hand holding the bow. He begins to rearrange the fingers until the position is more to his liking. To John it feels, if possible, even more precarious and unsteady. He tries to move his hand up and down, and grips the bow harder to keep it from falling.

"It'll be easier once the bow is on the strings," Sherlock tells him. "Try not to squeeze the life out of it, it'll be impossible to handle quicker and more delicate passages if you're grabbing it like you're trying to strangle someone."

"You think I'm going to be doing 'quick and delicate passages' anytime soon?" John asks, smirking and shaking his head slightly.

"If you develop bad habits now, you'll never get very far."

"Fair enough."
Sherlock returns the violin to his shoulder. "Don't worry about your left hand fingers just yet. Gently hold the neck between your thumb and forefinger and focus your attention on the bow." He circles around John to check the position of the violin once again. "Passable," he concludes. "The hard part is remembering to keep that position when you have so many other things to concentrate on."

John lifts up the bow, unsure of what to do next.

"You know which notes the free strings are, I presume?" Sherlock asks.

"E, A, D and G," John replies, proud of this knowledge that he had amassed less than twenty minutes ago.

"Try the A. It should be the easiest to start with," Sherlock prompts, looking like he's preparing himself for something wholly unpleasant.

"Says who?"

"Some online sources I consulted," Sherlock admits.

John positions the bow to lie on the string somewhere between the sound post and where the fingerboard begins. It makes a quiet scraping sound. He steals a quick glance towards Sherlock, who looks nonplussed.

"Proceed," Sherlock says and turns his palm inwards to emphasize his words.

Calling to mind all the hundreds of times he has seen Sherlock draw his bow across the violin, John does his best to slide it across the A-string, and to his surprise he manages to produce a wavering but clear note. He does another, this time pushing the bow back the way it came. He can't help smiling - there's something oddly satisfying about it. Add friction between a string and horse hairs, and music comes out. Or, right now in John's case, at least some sort of noise. When he's about to start a third note, Sherlock quickly moves to stand behind him again and places his hand atop John's on the bow. If he weren't that much taller than John, this would be an uncomfortable position, but somehow they fit together perfectly. John starts removing his fingers but Sherlock strengthens his grip to prevent it. "Continue. I'm just going to try and correct the trajectory."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Your bow is turning in an arc instead of going in a straight line. Let your wrist bend when the frog gets closer to the string, and again when you're closer to the tip. It's a bit like you'd use a brush when painting. I'll show you."

With Sherlock's help, the notes become slightly steadier, and gain a more singing quality. They practice on the A, before moving to the lower strings. After several frustrating attempts to wrench a bearable note out of them, John realizes that what Sherlock is trying to demonstrate is that they require a slightly firmer and more swinging touch from the bow. Eventually, Sherlock lets go of his hand and steps away from their half-embrace, letting John continue on his own. The sound quality still wavers hugely with each draw of the bow, but it gets better.

Sherlock's expression changes as often as the sound does. John stops playing. "You making faces is distracting."

Sherlock sniffs, but nods. "It takes time to learn to apply the right amount of pressure. It's about angles, speed and pressure. Don't worry about it at this stage."
After some more practice on the lower ones, Sherlock lets him try the E-string on his own, too. John saws the bow on it, cringing at the dissonant, screechy sound he's making. Clearly the E string isn't easy to master, either - not that he had assumed any of this to be simple. He half expects Sherlock to cover his hand with his own again, but Sherlock stays to the side, letting him get the hang of it on his own.

In all honesty, as much as John had enjoyed Sherlock's proximity minutes earlier, it had begun to distract him. He had found himself much less interested in the lesson, than he was in Sherlock's warm breath caressing his ear and his torso pressed against his back and backside. It's irritating, not knowing if Sherlock is as acutely aware of it as he is. Last night's conversation hadn't exactly clarified things. 'Yes and no' - how is he supposed to interpret that? Will there ever be a straight answer, or will he end up feeling like he's pressuring Sherlock into something he doesn't even want to discuss, not to mention experience?

Relationships - at least successful ones - require honesty, don't they? And openness? Sherlock is certainly honest, but is he in tune enough with how he's feeling, to discuss anything like that properly? John has wondered if this is related to the same behaviour that had worried Sherlock's doctor at Harwich - his non-engagement in discussions about his condition and his determination to hide all signs of weakness.

"Snap out of it," Sherlock commands sharply, startling John.

"Sorry, lost in thought," John replies sheepishly.

"And what a sad sight it is when you attempt such endeavours. You stopped listening to the sound, idiot," Sherlock says, but there's a hint of a smile on his lips. From the mouth of Sherlock Holmes, 'idiot' is an endearment - if he truly abhors someone, they get ignored or verbally abused to proverbial pulp, not merely called names.

"Let's put your fingers on the strings, then. You can put the bow down for a minute," Sherlock suggests.

John abandons the bow on his usual armchair. Sherlock moves to stand right in front of him, and starts arranging the fingers of his left hand onto the G string. He lifts John's elbow, twisting it so that he can reach around the fingerboard. John achieves this, but only barely. Getting his little finger onto the string, and actually pressing it down causes his bad shoulder to complain with a sudden and painful twinge. He lets his hand drop, supporting the violin between his chin and collarbone, and shakes his hand vigorously. His shoulder blade is still aching, and he can't help grimacing. "That position is ridiculous," he complains.

"This is why people usually start learning this at the age of four to six," Sherlock says. "More flexible joints."

"And no war injuries," John reminds him.

Sherlock's brows shoot up. "Oh...., sorry, I----"

"Don't." John hates drawing attention to his own infirmities. A thought suddenly occurs: is this how Sherlock feels all the time, now? "Let me just try the other strings if they don't require as much arm twisting. I have no idea how someone could possibly reach that pinkie position on the G."

"I can."
"Of course you can, you've got alien fingers on your huge hands," John quips.

Something in Sherlock's expression changes. It's as though a curtain of steel abruptly descends on his expression. Gone are the soft, borderline amused lines, and the relaxed shoulders. He now looks as though preparing for battle. "I'm not the only adult to master the position of the fourth finger in the first G string position," Sherlock snaps back.

"Of course you aren't," John says, hoping to sound disarming. He tries to place his fingers on the D string. It's marginally easier, but his shoulder really isn't enjoying this. Then he tries on the A-string.

Sherlock watches him, wordlessly.

Not entirely sure what he's expected to do here, John lines his fingers up on the E string next. "Can I try with the bow?"

"If you must," Sherlock says, crossing his arms defensively.

John plays through the five notes he can now produce on the A string, and the five horridly screechy ones he can find on the E string.

"You should practice that for a while. Preferably when you are on your own," Sherlock tells him.

"No Bach yet, then?"

"More like Baa Baa Black Sheep," Sherlock says, and confiscates the violin from him, abandoning it on the table which doubles as his desk.

John is left standing in the sitting room as Sherlock goes to the kitchen, grabs his laptop, sits down and begins typing. He says nary a word for the rest of the evening, leaving John wondering what he's done this time to warrant the silent treatment.

After watching some television, John grows tired of the heavy atmosphere in the living room. His shoulder is twinging in sympathy, so he decides to take a hot bath in the hope that he can stop the muscles from complaining too much. An hour later, Mrs Hudson brings them up a casserole, and John is relieved to be eating something home-cooked, instead of the ubiquitous take-aways. Mrs Hudson bustling about the kitchen also gives John some company - Sherlock is now lying on the sofa, buried in his headphones and laptop, about as approachable as a hibernating bear.

Mrs Hudson dishes up a plate for John, who is happy to let someone else do the honours for a change. She then does a plate for Sherlock, who is ignoring her as studiously as he is John. After tutting at him, she picks up the plate from the kitchen table and takes it to the table beside Sherlock.

"I'm not room service, you know," she comments with a smile.

In a voice that is slightly louder because he can’t hear himself over whatever he is listening to on the headphones, Sherlock answers. "I didn’t ask you to do this. I’m not hungry." He doesn't even bother to look up from the laptop.

Mrs Hudson shakes her head and returns the plate to the kitchen. "In a mood, is he?" she asks John conspiratorially.

"Yeah, you could say that." John is too busy enjoying the chicken casserole to care if he is joined at the table or not. Mrs Hudson has probably eaten already. "I'll freeze the rest and we can have it
for supper tomorrow. It’s delicious, and I’m certainly grateful, even if his Lordship isn’t."

She leaves him in peace to finish. After sorting out the dishes, John turns his chair to face the television. There is a medical documentary on tonight -‘Twenty Four Hours at A&E’- which he’s been planning on watching.

At ten o’clock, Sherlock takes off the headphones, gets out of his chair and heads for the bedroom.

John realises that this is his last chance to heed the nagging suspicion in his head that something is amiss tonight. Is it something he’d said, or done, or not done, or not said...?

Just as the man is about to disappear down the hallway, John calls out after him: "Sherlock. Talk to me. Please."

Perhaps it is the please that stops him. Sherlock still doesn’t turn around, just says in an oddly flat tone, "About what?"

"Anything... and everything. What’s going on?"

"I’m tired, John. It’s allowed. " And with that, he carries on down the hall.

Hours later, when John’s breaths even out and take on the rhythm of someone in the deep sleep cycle, Sherlock opens his eyes. He’s been awake all night, to which John seems completely oblivious.

Sherlock knows he's skilled in the art of appearing to be asleep. His observations over the years watching people succumb to it means that he can mimic the state perfectly, right down to the rapid eye movements required for emulating the REM phase. John’s never been very observant when it comes to these sorts of issues, so he had clearly believed Sherlock had already been asleep when he came to bed, sparing Sherlock another attempt at interrogation.

In the dim light cast by moonlight from the window, Sherlock can just make out the outline of the periodic table on the wall. Instinctively, his eye finds the first column from the right, second down from the top, just under Hydrogen, the first of the Alkali metals.

Number 3. Lithium.

It’s not surprising that his eye has been caught by that element; it suits his mood.

Or really doesn’t, more accurately.

Back in 2007, the doctors hadn't quite known what to do with him. They had started with an initial course of heavy-dose antipsychotics, which had offered only the blessing of plunging Sherlock into such a living dead -like state that the heroin and cocaine withdrawal had passed him by almost unnoticed. Once the doses of the antipsychotics had been tapered off, he'd made his dissatisfaction known, and refused to co-operate in any way. They'd been convinced he was severely depressed, but the tricyclics they tried on him did very little to improve the situation, apart from making him drowsy. He was deemed unsuitable for most newer antidepressants, because the anxiety and the frustration remained, leading then to a false, temporary assumption that he was suffering from a
mixed episode of bipolar disorder.

If they'd only listened to him, respected his opinion at least a little, he might have been inclined to co-operate, but it never happened. Perhaps they felt Mycroft was able to provide all the necessary background information?

Who wouldn't be depressed, stuck in a psychiatric institution against their will?

Mycroft had actually been sceptical of that initial diagnosis, arguing that while Sherlock's impulsivity was a well-established fact, and his interests tended to be obsessive and all-consuming, he had never suffered an episode of downright manic psychosis. This had been countered by Sherlock's assigned psychiatrist explaining to the both of them that not all patients exhibit typical cycles of depression or mania. Rather, many of them suffer from mixed episodes, which contain the painful anxiety of mania coupled with a low mood.

After the conversation, he was put on lithium. It never acts quickly, since it takes a few weeks to build up in the system.

What had happened next is the reason why he can not and will not talk to John about what is going on in his head - not John, not a psychiatrist, not any kind of a therapist, and certainly not his brother, lest he risk landing himself in a similar predicament again, judged unfit, unwell, unsound, incapable of making decisions for himself. John certainly gives him the benefit of the doubt when it comes to his moods and his peculiarities, but he's a doctor, and thus prone to siding with others of his ilk, especially if Mycroft manages to convince him that it was for the best. It certainly won't take much for Mycroft to come to that conclusion.

It didn’t matter how much he protested at the time - he did not have the option of declining treatment. The worst thing of all was that almost everything they forced down his throat that spring, fogged his brain, slowed everything down to a dull ache. Sherlock could recite the side effects of lithium ingestion by heart as though reading from the box insert, since he'd experienced each and every one of them: nausea, stomach cramps, diarrhoea, dizziness, muscle weakness, frequent urination, right down to the metallic taste in his mouth.

He could have - would have - weathered all of it, if the damned drug would only have helped. He lost what little appetite he had, he forgot things. That was a new experience, one highly alarming for someone with an eidetic memory. Even in the height of his drug-taking, the black-outs that occurred were still more or less under his control. At least he knew when he was taking something just to temper the storm in his head for a while. He felt like he was chasing his still-functional brain cells around his skull, trying to get them to co-operate, but it didn't work, and every day there were less of them.

The added horror of lithium was that it didn’t stop a thing, didn't blunt any of the pain or wind down the anxiety. Time simply slowed down under its influence, leaving him as anxious as he’d been before, but totally disinclined to say or do anything about it. He stopped talking about anything important - what was the point? No one was listening to him. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered. If he could have found the means to say something significant, Sherlock would have told the doctors and his brother that the medicine they thought was working was, in fact, perpetuating almost all the symptoms that he had slowly come to recognise as his own version of depression.

After release from involuntary treatment, and subsequent discharge, they'd put him on the pregabalin he's supposed to take now, combined with some more of the wretched antipsychotics. He's convinced none of it helped. Time did, and, admittedly, abstinence had, too. After the withdrawal had ended, he'd quickly stopped seeing and feelings things that weren't there. In hindsight, he blamed it mostly on the amphetamine. Cocaine was much more suited to his needs,
but its availability, and his funds, had drained away in 2007 so he had diversified.

It had been the same ill-informed, cookie-cutter approach that everyone is trying with him now, assuming his brain will react to medications the way everyone else’s does, or thinking that a bit of childish praise and a pat on the head will suffice to make him to settle for less than what he had been. Even John insists that he ought to be scarfing down pills that might well do to his brain what the lithium had done, just because those medications might decrease his risk of developing some sort of a chronic pain syndrome.

Other people don't understand, so they attempt cheap tricks to keep him happy and docile. Sherlock knows exactly why the violin tutor wants him to teach John. It’s her attempt to show him how much he knows compared to a beginner, how much he has recovered, of what he once had. Cheap pop psychology. Every time he draws his bow across the violin, it resonates with his failure. His muscle memory is slowly being rebuilt, but there is no connection to the music, no poetry in it. He feels akin to a machine when playing, and not in a good way. The total immersion in the experience that had once been his principal form of release is just... gone. It’s just sound now, nothing else, produced according to a recipe jotted down in notes on a piece of paper.

In the eyes of Helen and the others, compliance equals success. They praise his improving technique, talk at him and say that he is ‘making progress and getting better'. Of course, in their eyes, he is, since he doesn’t argue, just goes through the motions of doing what they asked. It had been pathetically easy to fool the Harwich staff into contentment, and the same seems to work with everyone else around him, too, possibly with the exception of Mycroft. He makes a mental note to try and avoid the big brother even more determinedly than before.

Because it's all he knows how to do to get everyone off his back, he's been in compliance mode ever since he had left the hospital. Much help has been offered - or forced on him - but none of it has addressed the hole that is eating away at him. When John asked Sherlock to talk to him earlier tonight, he wasn’t able to say anything. Not only because he wouldn’t, but because he couldn’t. He doesn't know how. Even if he did have an incentive to open up about all this, even if that didn't mean risking his freedom and his autonomy, turning feelings into words has never been something that he has known how to manage.

'Alien hands'.

John's expression had downright shocked him in its aptness.

Does John understand more than Sherlock gives him credit for? Has he actually realized the way in which Sherlock’s connection with his own body has been lost?

A fine sucker punch it had been, one that had made Sherlock feel exposed, pitiful and off-kilter. Nothing looks right, nothing feels right.

It is also puzzling to think that John might have instinctively caught wind of what is driving Sherlock’s moods these days, yet he still hasn't left. The discussion on sex he had initiated had probably been an attempt to gauge the overall situation, not just hear his views on the act itself. Sherlock knows he can't possibly be much fun to be around, now. He's too wrapped up in himself to manage to reciprocate anything - not friendship, and least of all anything romantic.

He had meant every word he'd said to John that day, even though they had been glazed with a desperate wish that John could fix this, that they could fix this, that if he got what he had wanted for years, it could make up for what is missing from his life.

It isn't that simple.
People have always been disappointed in him in various ways. This will be no different. He wonders if it will be painful, watching John realise that he will never be able to live up to the man’s romantic expectations, no matter how much he wants to. In some ways, feeling that pain would be a welcome sign that he isn’t completely dead to feeling, stuck in this endless black void of loss.

He feels removed from what's happening when he's with John, like an actor on a stage. He can’t even feel angry about it anymore. He’s hollow, vacant.

He turns onto his side and gazes, unfocused, into the darkness. The abyss is gaping in front of him, and he wonders how long he will be able to resist its gravitational pull.

Chapter End Notes

_Surprise!_ Two chapters on the same day, and there's also a new "On location" photo post up. You're welcome and we adore you all.
The next morning, John is banished to sitting alone in the bedroom during Sherlock's violin practice. It seems that Sherlock has decided to ignore Helen's suggestion of allowing John to be there when he practices. John wonders if this might have something to do with Helen's suggestion of Sherlock teaching him - maybe he really wants to embrace the role of a teacher, and doesn't think it fits with the pupil witnessing him rehearse.

Who knows what goes around in that brain of his at any time, really? When it comes to their relationship John has got the general impression that he's reacting instead of initiating, and that anything unexpected confuses and shuts him down instead of his natural curiosity taking over like it does in most other things.

Maybe they are both guilty of overthinking everything? Should John draw confidence from the fact that Sherlock had, in no uncertain terms, invited him to share this bed? He hadn't doubted Sherlock's conviction at the hospital, nor had he doubted it on that first night back at home. Before Sherlock left for Harwich, they'd both been acting as though once they got back home, things would really change, that hesitation would be a thing of the past. Last night had showed that when they were too tired to think straight, things could actually happen quite naturally.

Over breakfast, John had decided that it was time to do a little exploring of recent nightly events. "Could you tell me about the midnight retreats to the bathroom?" he had asked Sherlock, careful to keep all traces of disapproval out of his voice.

In reply, Sherlock had explained away his nocturnal absences by blaming the medications. "It says 'insomnia'," he had pointed out, waving one of the medication package inserts around in front of John like a white flag.

Back to denial, then? Or was John being unfair, not giving Sherlock the space he needed, always demanding an explanation for everything? This ought to be normal, Sherlock sulking in the living room, violin in hand, yet John knows the man, and the high-strung anxiety he's emanating is not the old, somewhat benign restlessness of Sherlockian boredom. It seems to be intensifying. After a significant period of living together, and the intimacy of Sherlock's hospitalization, John feels fine-tuned enough to Sherlock's moods to tell the difference. Something is gathering, like a coming storm pressing on both their temples and making them antsy. This is how it tends to go with Sherlock - one step forward, three steps back, then a screeching halt, and sulk and then another tentative step forward.

John picks up a forlorn sock from the floor and drops it in the laundry basket; he might do a wash later. The bedroom is clearly in dire need to a good hoovering and airing, so he opens a window as first aid.

He then decides to check the wardrobe to see if Sherlock has left anything on its floor that should go into the laundry. The door is ajar, and the reason turns out to be a bag full of Sherlock's things that John had taken for him to the hospital. It’s been pushed sideways until it has finally blocked the magnetic catch. The contents are mostly clothes - pyjamas, the draw-string waist joggers and
the hoodie that Sherlock had worn to the National’s first PT sessions, and his beloved blue dressing gown. Usually Sherlock asks about the dressing gown the minute it has been deposited in the wash, and John used to tease him about it. 'No, Sherlock, you can't have it. It takes at least ninety minutes for the complete cycle, which you would know, if you could ever be bothered to do it yourself.'

It's obvious that the garment has lain here, scrunched up and abandoned, for months. Is there a deduction to be made here, John wonders. Doesn't Sherlock want any of these things anymore? Why? Are they tainted to him now, in some way?

It had taken John a long time to be able to look at his army gear after his own discharge. The gun had been the only thing he'd kept within sight. He doesn't look at photos from Afghanistan or the preceding training at Sandhurst, not ever. Something about them makes him uncomfortable, makes him prefer not to be reminded.

He upends the canvas bag on the bed. He had packed it on the day of Sherlock's discharge since for Sherlock, such a task would have been physically impossible at that stage. Since he hadn't asked after any of these things at Harwich, or after coming home, even John had forgotten about them.

He puts the dirty clothes into the laundry basket.

At the bottom of the bag, he finds the white marker board that had served as a means of communication during the worst period of the illness.

Why had he kept it, packed it in this bag, instead of throwing it away?

Suddenly, he remembers his train of thought. It had been something Sherlock had said, 'I might need it again'. John, distracted with other things and simply happy at finally being able to leave the National behind, had simply thrown it into the bag. How much does Sherlock fear that the GBS might return? It's a relatively rare disease, and a relapse, not to mention one as severe as Sherlock's initial case had been, is probably a one-in-ten-million thing. It doesn't seem very typical of Sherlock to worry about such statistical glitches.

John sits down on the unmade bed, reading through the phrases written on the board.

Most of them had been pre-printed, practical suggestions from the speech therapist assigned to the MITU, but some had been suggested by John himself. Of the most intimate, most emotionally precarious phrases Sherlock had never used a single one, but the fact that both of them had been aware of their availability must have counted for something. Or so John had hoped. The two of them have never been very good at talking about how they feel or what they really want. They've usually just known where they stand. In a twisted sort of way, Sherlock had been at his most open and honest during those days, since his verbal prowess had been stripped away. It's harder to make excuses, harder to lie, when you only have a very limited selection of things to communicate.

God, this is hard. The realisation hits like a punch to the gut. John has never had too much trouble communicating with former partners what he wants in bed, or out of it. With Sherlock, there's no roadmap as to what to expect. When he stands under the armour-piercing scrutiny of those oddly coloured irises, John seems to lose half his confidence and a good chunk of his coherence. He worries what Sherlock thinks of him, now. It's obvious their old roles have been altered. He has always been the sidekick, the supporting act, the one nobody notices when standing next to someone like Sherlock. He used to know his place in this partnership, and it was fine. Sherlock shone with the rays of a thousand suns, and it was plenty enough for the both of them to bask under.
Now, John feels as though he's the one deciding the course of action. Maybe he ought to accept that fact, at least for a while, and not expect Sherlock to take over anytime soon. If he hadn't got up the nerve to go roust Sherlock out of the bathroom, neither of them would have crossed the divide of the bed and sought contact. Maybe, just maybe, Sherlock had simply been waiting for him to make a move.

John is allowed out of the bedroom after Sherlock’s finished, but the look on the man’s face tells John all he needs to know about how dismally Sherlock has decided this practice session has gone. While tidying up the rest of the bedroom, John had made note how much he'd repeated certain musical passages, over and over - sometimes stopping right in the middle only to begin again. When things go well, Sherlock makes it through entire pieces. Clearly that hasn't been the case today, so John decides not to ask about it, lest he get his head bitten off.

John heads downstairs to the cafe to get a couple of toasted cheese sandwiches for their lunch. Half an hour later, his phone rings just after he fails to talk Sherlock into eating an apple for dessert.

John had been offered a short-notice shift by his locum agency only that morning, which he'd declined, and he thinks it likely that the agency is now calling him again to offer something else. As he fumbles his phone out of his pocket, he’s tempted to accept. He could do with some downtime from Sherlock’s rather passive aggressive form of silence.

"Hello?"

"Is this John Watson?"

"Yeah? Sorry, I don't recognise--"

"It's Jonathan Baxter."

John frowns in surprise. "Oh. How did you get my number?"

"You gave it to me at the hospital. Don’t you remember? When you went down from the ward to the cafeteria to get something to eat, you asked me to call you if he needed you."

"Yes, of course." John had given his contact information to practically all the nurses looking after Sherlock. His number must've been recorded in Sherlock's file, but he just wanted to be sure they could get hold of him as quickly as possible.

"I’m calling, because I thought you might like to know the aftermath of your visit to Doctor Goffe."

John is curious. Sherlock had left the doctor’s office in such a temper that he’d refused to say anything other than the fact that Goffe was not a suspect. Somehow, he’d suddenly seemed irate at even John, not just his fellow doctor. "Sure," John answers politely.

"Is it convenient? Can you talk freely?"

John realises that Jonathan is asking whether their conversation could be overheard. He eyes Sherlock across the room and wonders if he’d even heard the phone ringing, since his ears are
covered by headphones and he's facing away from John. A faint operatic chorus is sounding from the headphones.

Since the hospital, Sherlock has been using the phones to tune John out. Before, he'd always preferred the CD player turned to an uncomfortably loud volume - enough to irritate Mrs Hudson who would tut about the neighbours. The headphones had originally been John's, brought by him to the hospital for Sherlock to use. John is hardly allowed to touch them now, something that Sherlock ensures by hanging them up on the bison skull, which are just out of John’s reach unless he stands on a chair.

"He’s not listening, if that is what you are asking."

"Has he forgiven me yet for pushing him into that appointment? It seemed a sensible idea at the time. He looked like he needed a once-over after what happened. I got the feeling that pursuing your investigation would make him willing to endure an examination," Jonathan muses. "He did make it quite clear he hates everything about hospitals and doctors, even before the MITU. Can't blame him sometimes," Jonathan muses. "I didn't mean to meddle or insinuate you weren't looking after him," Jonathan hastily adds. "I know it's hard to help when it's someone you know."

John hums in agreement. He'd been half-tempted to insist Sherlock get checked out at some A&E, but Sherlock would've fought tooth and nail against such a suggestion. He had wondered if Doctor Goffe would have spotted just how on edge Sherlock was during the appointment. Could Goffe possibly have come to realise why?

Perhaps he was being unfair and overtly suspicious. After all, Sherlock had already been on edge, and any attention drawn to his well-being would likely have lead to a confrontation at that point. John had thought that he'd appeared to have been feeling somewhat better at the Vault, composure rebuilt, but clearly it hadn't taken much for the castle to crumble.

Before Sherlock, John hadn't had much experience with people who could be described as neurologically atypical. Even though talking to Mycroft, and the reading John had done after their conversation had filled in some gaps in his knowledge, he had initially misread the start of Sherlock’s meltdown at Barts, thinking it was a garden-variety panic attack or something new. It was obvious what had happened at Barts and later at the Vault had taken a lot out of Sherlock.

"It was good to see him up and about, but clearly there are still some issues there.,” Jonathan says, and John is grateful that the man isn't berating him for allowing Sherlock to drive himself to that state. Jonathan had only been Sherlock's nurse for a few shifts, but he must've realized that there's no turning the head of Sherlock Holmes once he decides something, or talking him round when he says no. Which he does, a lot.

"I understood he went to the general neuro ward from the MITU? What happened next?" Jonathan asks.

John glances at Sherlock, who still seems utterly oblivious to the conversation John is having, or even that he's having one. John feels a bit awkward discussing Sherlock’s recovery, despite the fact that Jonathan is a healthcare professional, too. He does want to know what had happened in that doctor’s office, and Jonathan might well tell him where he knows Sherlock won’t. So... "Yeah. After that, Harwich Manor for a month."

Jonathan whistles. "Fancy. And now he's continuing rehab at home, then?"

John bites his lip. "Not really. They did recommend an exercise regime, but as far as I can tell he hasn't done any of it. And he’s chased away every PT therapist paraded in front of him. The only
things he's accepted is a violin tutor, but I don't know if it's making things better of worse."

"Well, he needs to find something. These things take time. The work's only beginning when the
inpatient rehabilitation period ends."

John knows this. Mycroft knows this. Sherlock knows this, since he was told this repeatedly at the
hospital and Harwich. He knows, but since Sherlock obviously can't ever, not once in his life, heed
good advice and do what he's told, he ignores it all.

"Sherlock must have bitten Goffe's head off, because the doc was pretty put out about the exam,"
Jonathan reveals, "he told me in no uncertain terms that he was not going to prescribe illegal drugs
for anyone, and if I had sent him to ask such a thing, he’d get me fired."

Shit. This is not acceptable collateral damage for a case. "Sorry. He can... um, rub people up the
wrong way when he’s on a case. I hope there’s no blowback to you."

Jonathan laughs. "Relax. I played dumb, and he seemed to buy it. In any case, I’m not a trainer
here the way others are, so I doubt I will have to ever refer anyone to him again."

The nurse then draws a thoughtful breath. "One thing Goffe did tell me is something I need to pass
onto you. Since I referred Sherlock, Goffe felt it necessary to share his assessment with me. He
thinks Sherlock needs rehabilitation that will take into account where he is mentally, and that the
usual mind-set of trainers who frequent the Vault certainly isn't suitable. It’s a shame really,
because he might have been convinced to try some PT here, if he thought it was all a disguise for
this case of yours."

"Yeah, well, now that we've got the warrant and have the personal trainers’ names, I don’t see
much point in him trying to go undercover with any of them."
John says, laughing. "He may have already sort of blown his cover on that one. But, the police are now working their way through the
list, contacting each of them and wrestling out of them the names of their clients. That’s a whole lot
of interviews and leg work and further warrants. In the meantime, Sherlock and I have been
practically banished from New Scotland Yard, until they identify the victim’s trainer. It’s been a
while, and it looks as though Sherlock's about to go from stir crazy to totally comatose."

"Is he into any sports? It doesn't have to be a gym, there's tons of things you can do to build
strength in a less dramatic way than pressing iron."

"I think he did fencing and martial arts at some point at school and university, but since he's not
practiced for years, I doubt he'd take either up now. He's still grousing when it comes to walking,
let alone anything more athletic. He calls it the curse of the eidetic memory - he knows exactly
how badly he is doing compared to how it used to be. He doesn't tell me much, but that all seems
rather obvious now. He's avoiding all of it."

"What did he like at Harwich?"

"He did some riding there, but that isn't really the sort of thing you mean, or is it?"

"Probably doesn't do a lot for the upper body, no. For balance, it's really good, but he's past that
point, isn't he?"

"I suppose it would have to be something he hasn't done before, to keep him from comparing,"
John says in a resigned tone, "but then I can’t imagine him wanting to try something he’s not done,
because he’d probably have a reason why he hadn’t wanted to try it before. Plus, being a beginner
at anything right now--- just no." He's pretty damned sure an attempt at getting Sherlock to do
something new and weird would end in spectacular failure.

"What about climbing?" Jonathan suggests.

John is tempted to dismiss it for the aforementioned reasons. What is more, his impression is that climbers, surfers, sky divers and bungee jumpers and the rest of the extreme sports crew all try to convert everyone to their chosen sport. There had been a few of these guys in the army, and they had seemed incapable of understanding why everyone doesn't want to live like nomads, traipsing around the globe in search for the biggest tube waves or the riskiest walls of ice to traverse. Fanatics. Sherlock certainly doesn't need a new source of such single-mindedness in his life. "What about it?"

"It's great for upper body strength, and in the beginning it's possible for the belayer to compensate for the climber's lack of strength when using a so-called top-rope. Routes can be tailored for beginners without looking too easy - or too daunting. And even when you’re in the middle of it, if it gets too much, you can stop a climb at anytime, and the belayer will lower you down. All that aside, there's a clear goal, which I am guessing might be something he likes. Plus there's a lot of brainwork involved, which he's clearly good at."

John ignores the strange vocabulary, and latches on to the words clear goal and brain. "He does need something he can actually win at right now. His confidence has taken quite a knock." John still isn't quite convinced of the idea. "Do you really think he’s fit enough for it?"

"Yes, almost anyone is. And it can be tailored so you can win, no matter what, because if one way doesn’t work, you try a different one, and as I said, the belayer can help. It’s like taking the scenic route instead of a vertical climb. You can’t really fail, you just learn to try a different approach, since it would be an indoor wall with plenty of routes. Or, you can try again later when you've built up strength and technique. Once you’ve got one route up to the top conquered, you can then learn to do it with fewer moves, or to do it faster. Later on, those who fancy a wilder experience can change to leading the route instead of top-roping."

John wonders if Sherlock could ever be persuaded to return to the Vault’s climbing wall, given that he’d had a near meltdown there. "I don’t think the manager would be keen to see him again, given the uproar that he caused with the warrant."

Jonathan answers quickly, "I could take you to a place more private than the Vault. I work out on a climbing wall in the Docklands. If you’d prefer to go out-of-hours, I’ve got a set of keys. It'll be quiet and peaceful. Darren - my mate who owns the place – lets me use it whenever, because ITU shift schedules can be awkward. We've got a lot of routes, some even with auto-belay devices, so I can make do with training even when I don't have a partner with me."

John eyes Sherlock's stationary form on the sofa. "Do you really think he’s up to it?"

He hears a sigh from Jonathan. "Climbing is an intellectual challenge as much as it is a physical one. I’ve taught people with far more severe physical limitations than Sherlock, people with permanent disabilities. It’s all about whether you can think of the best way up to suit your own physical strengths and weaknesses. And it has one BIG advantage: he’ll have nothing to compare it with, because he’s never done it before. Neither will you, assuming you haven't tried it, either. You should do it together."

An idea dawns in John's head. "I wonder if there is any way to make him think it’s case-related. It’s the only thing that gets him motivated to leave the house at the moment. Your approach with Goffe certainly worked to get him in front of a doctor - even if it ended badly."
Jonathan chuckles at the other end. "So, he's not much more of a bundle of joy at home than he was at the National, then?"

"Nope," John says, and inadvertently pops the p the way Sherlock tends to do.

At the hospital, Sherlock had seemed to get along with the man, and Sherlock doesn't get along with anyone. John finds Jonathan's bold way of talking about patients - former or not - both unsettling and strangely liberating. Perhaps it had been Jonathan's honest, no-nonsense attitude that had lead to Sherlock tolerating him. It seems that Jonathan had been genuinely worried about Sherlock at the Vault, and isn't afraid of speaking up about what he thinks would help. Part of John wants to pounce on the suggestion, because it feels so reassuring to have people on his side, and Lord knows he's had very few good ideas himself on what they could try. It's good that this is coming from someone else, and that the someone else isn't Mycroft - any attempts to involve the big brother further would invariably lead to World War Three. John is still amazed that Sherlock hadn't thrown a tantrum over finding out Helen had been referred to them by Mycroft.

"I’ve got to start a shift soon," Jonathan says apologetically. "I'll call you back tomorrow so we can talk schedules and I can tell you how to find the place. All you have to do now is figure out how to talk him into it."

"Have you got any sports gear in your undercover stuff cupboard?" John asks, trying to sound casual. Of course, he already knows that there is a neatly folded pile of clean clothes that will suit perfectly - because he had dug them out and laundered them yesterday after Jonathan had called.

Sherlock stops poking tea leaves on the bottom of John's mug with his finger. "Of course I do. A jogger’s kit is a perfect disguise for surveillance purposes. No one gets suspicious of seeing a jogger go around the same block three times."

"If that stuff is in decent shape, could you go find it?"

Sherlock's head snaps up. Suspicion has now clearly set in.

Sherlock had been vocally annoyed at the fact that it's Sunday, and Lestrade had gone to see his children. It means that the case won't advance today, and not even the toxicology reports are available yet. The warrants to get the trainers to release their client details are grinding through the courts - it will be at least another couple of days before they were are likely to discover any leads there. It's obvious that the trainers are worried about losing high-profile clients due to the risk of publicity with the warrants. Sherlock has not yet raised the idea of going back to work in the lab on his samples, and John had decided against reminding him about them. Thankfully, the case still hadn't ground to a complete halt - Molly had, at least, sent a text yesterday, confirming a substance called methasteroid as the steroid component in what Watford had been using.

Still, as far as Sherlock is concerned, today means a day wasted, lounging around at home.

"I assume this has to do with the case?" he asks.

"No, I just want to see you in a leotard," John replies deadpan.

"Then poor you, because I don’t own one." Sherlock snorts snobbishly. Still, he is clearly so bored witless that something needs to be done, before new bullet holes appear in the walls.
Maybe this boredom could work to John's advantage. He’s spent too many of the past twenty four hours trying to cook up some loosely case-related excuse to drag Sherlock out of the house. Every attempt he’s rehearsed sounds so lame that he’s just decided to brazen it out.

Sherlock levers himself up from the kitchen chair where he'd been sitting, still staring angrily into John's empty mug and ignoring his own undrunk tea. He heads down the hallway, dressing gown lapels trailing behind since he hadn't bothered to tie the sash.

Soon a bundle of clothes is flung in front of John's feet.

"They're not for me; you need to hold onto them," John says.

Sherlock throws himself onto the sofa. "Explain."

"It's a surprise," John admits.

"My old sports gear is a surprise, devised by you? I have to admit, John, that in gift-giving, that trumps even Mycroft’s most pestilent efforts."

John picks the clothes up and chucks them back at Sherlock. "Put them in a bag, and put some proper clothes on so we can go somewhere."

"John, I hate surprises. What is this about?"

"I promise it will be worth it." John finds a plastic bag in the kitchen, into which he drops the T-shirt and tracksuit bottoms he'd dug out from the bottom of a drawer in his former bedroom. The tracksuit had been given to him by Harry for his own stint in rehab after the shoulder injury. How fitting.

Since Sherlock isn't making a move from the sofa, John collects the clothes he had just thrown at the man and shoves them into the same bag.

"What about shoes?" Sherlock asks.

"Shoes?"

"You have not mentioned them, so I assume we don't need to bring a pair, which is curious. Sports gear is hardly ever paired with regular men’s walking shoes. That points to specialty footwear non-hobbyists would not own. Where are we going? Ice skating? Ten pin bowling? Golf?" The sneer drips, but he does ascend from the sofa.

At least Sherlock is trying to deduce John's plan, instead of refusing, or simply demanding to know where he is being dragged off to. John wonders if he should be alarmed that Sherlock is downright malleably agreeing to this mystery tour, despite his token protestations. Clearly, Sherlock's curiosity has been piqued. Maybe it's enough.

"None of the above. Where we're going is a mystery, so get ready to go," John says.

"Why should I?"

"Because solving mysteries is what you do."

Sherlock considers this, and then shrugs. "Fine, I will come with you, if only to see what this strange scheme is, but if it is too boring, I make no promises whatsoever to participate."

"Good enough for me. Now go put your trousers on."
The cab stops on the edge of a quiet roundabout. On the west side, the view is a solid wall of glass and steel - the usual buildings associated with West Silvertown, ever since the Docklands began to be more extensively re-developed.

To the east, however, is a high metal wall, graffitti covered and topped by razor-wire, featuring a steel gate. In the distance, the dilapidated hulk of the Spillers Millennial Mills is already visible. John remembers the papers describing it as an eyesore that has plagued London’s development companies for years, but according to Jonathan, a part of it has been re-purposed.

John pays the cabbie while Sherlock circles the entrance. He hasn’t said much during the ride, and John suspects he'd been racking his brain trying to deduce where they were going.

"Have you got it yet?" John asks and slams the cab door closed behind him.

A sign lit with tiny blue LED lights above the gated entrance says "First Ascent". To John the place looks more like the wreckage of a bomb explosion, than somewhere he wants to taking Sherlock in his current state. John briefly worries about whether listening to Jonathan had been a good idea, after all.

Sherlock’s gaze narrows as he looks up the grain silo. "I must admit that I don't. 'First Ascent'?" He pushes the only button in the intercom under the blue light, and the gate lock is released.

To John, the word 'gym' begins to seem very misguided after he pulls open the heavy-duty door and they walk inside. The ceiling of the grain silo reaches some thirty metres above the ground. All around the circular tower, trails of artificial climbing holds snake up towards the roof. There's a lower, cavern-like area off the side, where the floor is covered with thick mattresses.

"Oh," Sherlock says quietly when realization dawns. John can't decide if the syllable had sounded disappointed or not. Maybe the jury's still out.

"Hey," Jonathan says as he walks out from what looks like a small office off to the side, and joins them in the main hall. "You made it," he adds, shaking John's hand. He's wearing knee-length, baggy, dark green trousers that look dusty and worn. He has paired them with a T-shirt that reveals a formidable set of sculptured arm muscles. To John he certainly looks more like an athlete than a bodybuilder. His short, straight, brown hair looks tousled and there are rings of sweat framing his armpits - he must've already done some climbing while waiting for the two of them to arrive.

"As in, he made me come here, yes," Sherlock says suspiciously, ignoring Jonathan's offer of a handshake. He's eyeing John as though he hasn't decided whether to give this venture the benefit of the doubt, or to get properly stroppy. "Why are we here?"

The question is directed at John. He glances at Jonathan for reinforcement, and gets a smile. "To do something different than lying around on a couch waiting for something to happen."

"Namely, that," Jonathan adds, and points over Sherlock's shoulder at the nearest wall.

"Why would I want to climb the walls of a derelict grain silo?" there's already a hint of Sherlock starting to unload with sarcasm there.

John needs to salvage this before Sherlock gets a chance to properly reject the idea. "Because this is more fun than climbing the walls at the flat."
Jonathan laughs, even if Sherlock doesn’t. "A famous climber once answered a similar question by saying that he did it, because *it was there*. What he was scaling was Mount Everest, but you gotta start somewhere, right?"

Sherlock blinks, looking unimpressed at what he's hearing.

Jonathan points over to the corner of the room. "You can get changed over there. Just grab a pair of shoes from the shelf next to the office, one you think will fit, and take them with you. The size numbers are on the bottom. They need to be really tight. So tight it's uncomfortable."

"I doubt it's the only uncomfortable thing about this endeavour."


Sherlock rolls his eyes.

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Chapter End Notes

The climber quote is (allegedly) by English mountaineer George Herbert Lee Mallory. He died trying to climb Everest, and his body wasn't discovered until decades and decades later.
The First Ascent

The changing area is rather basic - a couple of beaten up chairs and a series of hooks in a room off to the side of the grain silo tower. Sherlock assumes that it must have been the access point for the chutes for the grain to drop into lorries, but all the pipe work is long gone.

It isn’t heated, and as they undress Sherlock shivers a bit.

John must have noticed, because he comments, "It'll be warmer once we get climbing."

Thankfully there are no buttons or zips involved, so Sherlock is quick at getting his calf-length running trousers on. He turns, hands on hips, to watch John struggle with an old pair of tracksuit bottoms, trying to find the other end of the drawstring.

Sherlock is finding the whole thing a bit bizarre. Why would he ever want to climb a wall for sport? Jonathan’s quote of 'because it was there' seems highly irrational.

"Why are we here?" Sherlock inquires, when John finally looks up.

"Because we both needed to get out of the flat. Waiting for something to happen with the case is tedious, as you always say."

"You could have signed up for a locum shift if you were that bored."

"And leave you, for instance, to shoot up the walls with my gun? No, I don’t think so." John turns his back to Sherlock as he pulls first a T-shirt and then a sweatshirt on over his bare chest. An answer muffled by cloth emerges, "I don’t want to get away from you, you great clot." His head then emerges, hair now messy. "This is something we can do together, Sherlock. Something different for both of us."

"We do plenty of things together", Sherlock argues, "The Work, for starters."

He cannot shake the sense of suspicion. Ever since they'd encountered Jonathan Baxter at the Vault, he's felt like being on the back foot, worrying about the two medical professionals plotting against him. First, he’d been bulldozed into that ridiculous appointment with Doctor Goffe, and now, here he is, sitting on an ancient chair pulling on a pair of rubber shoes that look utterly ridiculous. He can’t even get his foot into one of these blue, silver and black contraptions with velcro straps and not one but two heel loops, because it is way too small for his heel to plausibly fit into. His initial willingness to go along with this little adventure of John’s is rapidly waning. Is this what someone is supposed to do, when they are in a relationship - put up with the whims of the other? The thought irritates him.

He wonders how long it would take for a cab to show up if he ordered one now. He reaches over to his jacket and starts searching the pocket for his phone. Behind him, he can hear the sounds of John taking a seat on another creaky chair, and the uniquely irritating scratch noise of a velcro strap being fastened on a climbing shoe. Clearly, John is managing to get his pair on without much trouble.

Sherlock's phone lights up the dim room, and John turns, startled. "Got a call?"

"No." Sherlock glares at the phone. There are no bars on the network indicator. "It appears that we
are in a reception black hole." He shoves it back into his jacket, annoyance at being trapped into this pointless exercise escalating even further. John is still looking at him, and he feels rather self-conscious. Right now he'd have preferred to be wearing his normal clothes at home, instead of being forced so far out of his comfort zone.

Before John gets a chance to ask him why he had dug his phone out, Jonathan walks into the room and asks how the two of them are getting on.

Sherlock glares at the shoes John had handed him from the selection. "Wrong size."

"Nope. They have to be so tight that you will feel the wall right through it. I’ll take the loops, you just stand up," he says, kneeling down at Sherlock’s feet.

He follows the instructions and there is a flash of pain as his heel is constricted for a moment, but soon it is gone. Sherlock looks down as Jonathan tightens the velcro straps across his instep. "This is a form of torture device, then?" Sherlock asks dryly.

Jonathan snorts. "No, that’s reserved for the harness. Now that really is uncomfortable." He stands up and leads the way back into the silo, stopping in an open, sunlit area near near what had looked like an office.

"You have to warm up your muscles first. Climbing without a preliminary stretch is the fastest way to pull one. A lot of experienced climbers just throw themselves at a wall as a form of warm-up, but beginners need to do a bit of prep. You’ll be using muscles that you didn’t even know you had," Jonathan promises ominously.

*Or ones that have stopped taking orders,* Sherlock thinks bitterly.

Jonathan leads the three of them through a series of exercises. "The hands take a lot of stress. So, extend your arms forward with the palms facing the floor. Keep them extended completely throughout the sequence, with the shoulders and shoulder blades down, away from the ears. Now, roll your hands five times to the left, five times to the right. Make sure you try to make perfect circles."

Sherlock remembers something similar from the warmups of his fencing days. A rather satisfying pop emerges from his right shoulder joint, followed by similar but quieter cracks from a couple of chest-level vertebrae, when he extends his back and retracts his shoulders. The noise is noticeable in the echoing silo.

Next, Jonathan introduces a few twists. "Spread your fingers and roll the hands five times to the left and five times to the right. Then make claws with the fingers and roll the hands five times to the left and five times to the right."

"Now raise your arms overhead and squeeze and open your fingers 10 to 20 times." This time it’s John’s shoulder that complains with an audible crunching crack of cartilage. He catches Sherlock's concerned glance and smiles. "It's fine."

"Last bit for the upper body," Jonathan announces, "lower the arms and swing them across your chest - alternating the left arm over the right arm, the right over the left for ten reps."

They comply in silence.

"Okay, take a moment to shake and gently massage your forearms," Jonathan directs them next. The suggestion is welcome, since Sherlock can feel a ghost of a cramp threatening to break out in his left forearm.
While roughly shaking his hands, which are hanging by his sides, Sherlock stares up the wall towards the ceiling. There is a jury rigged ring of lights at the top just below the windows, which illuminate the walls below. "Why here? This isn’t a commercial climbing facility, is it?"

"No, you’re right. Some urban explorers found this site years ago. The Mills have been used in lots of films and TV shows ever since - a sort of an icon of decaying Britain. Because we’re across the river from the Olympic site, there was an attempt to convert this into a sports facility - got as far as installing the two walls here, but then the Silvertown authorities cut back on subsidies and the whole idea of making this a community area was ditched. My mate Darren rents it from the council for peanuts."

Jonathan resumes the warm-up with a set of varied leg stretches. By the time Sherlock finishes these, he is no longer as cold. John had been quicker to finish the set than him, because Sherlock had been forced to move to the side of the area and grab onto a concrete pillar to avoid falling. His balance still leaves a lot to be desired.

"The last one is a bit like ballet dancing." Jonathan lifts his right foot and points the toe, then rolls the ankle in a circle in one direction, before reversing it. "Ten each direction, both feet."

As if to distract them from the absurdity of what they are doing, Jonathan continues answering Sherlock's questions; "this place is still maintained and used by climbing groups. Darren takes the bookings, but no one owns the place. We just collect enough to keep it ticking over."

Sherlock looks sceptical. "Waterfront property is too valuable for this to last."

"Right again. Plans to develop the site have been screwed over twice, but it looks like third time lucky. The facade of one of the two mill buildings will be preserved, the other will be knocked down, along with this grain silo - all to make upscale housing for Canary Wharf types. But they’re in no hurry at the moment, so we keep going."


Jonathan shrugs. "It’s just not worth their while, the politicians, I mean, creating a fuss." He picks up a cradle of webbing and odd metal bits from the floor near the office. "Now stop stalling and get yourself into this."

As he guides Sherlock into the climbing harness and tightens various straps, Sherlock wiggles to try to find some way of making the contraption comfortable. "This must’ve been designed by a woman, since it clearly isn't able to safely accommodate male genitalia."

"You'll live," Jonathan says, "Some climbers have even managed to have kids, you know."

"I think I’d have preferred a thumbscrew," Sherlock comments.

After repeating the preparations with John and himself, Jonathan shows John and Sherlock how to use a belaying device with an automatic brake.

"The pulley system seems rather inefficient when it comes to friction," Sherlock points out.

Jonathan raises his brows. "You're right. Most who really go in for this sort of thing prefer an ATC - that's short for air traffic controller, like this one I’m wearing. The grigri, which is what you’ve got here, is way too cumbersome for more skilled climbers to enjoy. It’s good for beginners, though," Jonathan adds with a grin.

Sherlock glowers.
"Has anyone accidentally lifted the brake so that someone has fallen?" John asks.

"Thankfully, no; people tend to be really careful when they belay someone the first few times until they get the hang of it, and the grigri has an anti-panic handle." Jonathan unclips a pouch from his own harness and offers it around. "You'll need a bit of this for your hands," he says.

John sticks his hand in, and it comes out coated with white powder that to Sherlock looks remarkably like cocaine.

Sherlock grabs John's hand, pulls it to his nose and sniffs the fingers, frowning. "Magnesium carbonate. Di-, tri- or pentahydrate?" he asks.

"Who cares?" John says as he offers Sherlock the pouch.

Sherlock slowly sticks just the tips of his fingers in, and brings his hand out. He stares at it, rubs his fingers together and cringes. The feeling of it makes his skin crawl, and the desire to get the stuff off his fingers is almost overwhelming.

"It's meant to give you traction," Jonathan says, "so your grip won't slip."

The texture seems to grate on Sherlock's skin even when his fingers aren't touching anything. He can't resist wiping his fingertips on his slim black running trousers, but the irritating feeling remains. It's probably mostly in his head, but that doesn't mean he can stop being bothered by it. It takes effort to ignore, energy he really needs for other things right now. He wants to leave, go home, bury himself under a blanket. The only thing keeping him here is the fact that John had arranged all this for him, and Sherlock doesn't want to face the inevitable disappointment on his face. Disappointment he would have, yet again, caused.

Jonathan leads them to a wall. "We've got slab, such as this, then there's vertical walls, and even overhang. As a beginner, you should stick to slab and vertical. Overhang requires quite a bit of technique and upper body strength."

Sherlock can't decide if he should ignore what Jonathan has said - calling him a beginner is hardly patronising - or to be offended by the potentially inbuilt notion that he's still too weak and pathetic to manage such a challenge. Jonathan's insinuation that he might not be very good at this annoys him. He hates having to deal with other people's expectations; his own are disheartening enough at the moment. He has always hated this stage in learning things, where all the newness distracts from the actual task.

Trying to put a damper on his irritation, Sherlock looks up and turns in a semicircle, watching the rays of light shining through the windows high up in the tower. There's dust twirling in the lights, softening the colours of the harsh autumn sun. He then turns to stare at the wall, and trying to make the theoretical connections in his mind between what he assumes a climber does, and what the belayer does from the ground. It leads him to give John an appraising glance. "What if the belayer is much lighter than the belayee?"

"We just say 'climber', Jonathan corrects. "If there's a real disparity in weight, then we clip the belayer to a length of rope attached to a floor anchor. Not a problem. Their toes might lift off the floor if the climber falls, but it's perfectly safe with top-roping. It's only with lead climbing that you see sudden significant forces being put on the rope."

"Lead climbing?" John asks.

"That's when you are the first climber to ascend up a route, being the one to attach the rope to the
wall. This is done either by clipping the rope to pre-installed carabiners, which is referred to as sports climbing, or wedging things you bring with you into crevices in the rock to run the rope through. The gear you carry for that is referred to as your climbing rack. That's how a lot of outdoor rock climbers work their routes - it's called trad climbing when there isn't anything pre-attached to the wall. Whatever you put on the rack, you have to take out, and you have to make do with the gear you have selected to carry, because you can only take as much as you can comfortably drag up the wall. But, that's getting ahead of ourselves here."

Jonathan points at the wall and grabs a rope hanging from the ceiling. "You'll climb first," he tells Sherlock, then secures the belay device onto John's harness with another carabiner. "John, you need to learn how to belay before he heads up the wall. It’s actually more important than climbing, because you’ve got someone’s life in your hands. And it isn’t as easy as it might seem, so Sherlock you need to watch this, too, because you’ll be belaying John after your climb."

"Stand here." He points to a place about six feet out from the bottom of the 80 degree incline. "You need to be able to see him climbing, so you can anticipate a fall."

When John nods, Jonathan positions his left hand onto the rope. "This is your braking hand. Keep it at least six inches down the rope from the grigri, and anchor it to your left hip. If your hand is too close, in the event of a fall, the rope might yank your hand into the belay device, pinching it, or worse - making you let go of it in a panic."

"The challenge is to use your non-brake hand to take up the slack as he moves up the wall. You have to remember one thing more than anything else: never, ever take your brake hand off the rope. If there's threat of a fall, you need to be able to lower it next to your thigh immediately for the locking mechanism to work, especially with other types of belay devices. You’ll use your right hand up here," he says, positioning John’s right hand about fifteen inches up the rope before it passes through the grigri. "As he climbs, you take up the slack. Because he’s a beginner, you need to keep it taut but not tight. You pull the slack through the grigri with your brake hand, moving the right hand down to collect the slack and then let your brake hand slide back up to return to your hip. Now, practice the movement. It’s a bit odd at first, but you’ll get the hang of it soon."

John practices the manoeuvre a few times, and then Jonathan nods. "Right. Time to get Sherlock on belay." He takes the climber's end of the rope and deftly loops it through two of the straps on Sherlock’s harness. "You need a double figure of eight."

John smirks. "I was a cub scout and learned my knots. What about you, Sherlock?"

Sherlock looks up from where he has been watching the two of them. "I learned them for sailing at school, and a certain level of knowledge is obviously required for cases dealing with hangings and ligature marks."

Jonathan raises his brows, but doesn't ask anything. He hurries to the wall next to the office space and flicks a light switch. Soon the area they are in is flooded with yellowish industrial light from old halogen tubes.

"Right, you are now on belay," Jonathan tells Sherlock. "Tradition says you call that fact out to your belayer, who answers, 'belay on'. You respond 'climbing' - and only then get going."

The holds on the wall they're standing in front of are large, brightly coloured, each sticking at a few inches away from the wall. There's an abundance of options of things to grab hold of.

Sherlock crosses to the wall and puts out a hand, but then stops. "Is there a preferred method to this?" He feels marginally intimidated, and wonders whether he should ask Jonathan for a
demonstration. He has never seen someone do this up close before. Had he known where they were going, he would have done some pertinent research beforehand, so he’d feel less like an underdog.

Jonathan chuckles. "It isn’t rocket science. In general, you move one limb at a time. That's all you need to know at this point."

A silence falls, heavy with expectation. Sherlock swallows, as the pause grows. If even stairs give him trouble, then how will this be? At least he can use his upper limbs here to compensate for the weakness in his leg muscles. Not that his upper limbs are very strong at present, either. Better just get on with this. If it all goes to hell, at least getting it over with will deliver him home faster.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, he decides, and lifts his right foot onto a blue, wedge-shaped protrusion. He then reaches for a handhold a couple of feet up. He can practically feel two pairs of eyes on his back while he struggles his way up a few metres.

Jonathan calls up to him. "Sherlock, I’m going to ask John to keep the rope taut so you can rest whenever you need to."

Sherlock doesn't answer. Pressing himself as close to the wall as he can, he manages to balance his right foot on a much smaller hold. After finding two sturdy handholds he leans back to see up the route better, but that makes his left leg nearly slip off the precarious position it's in, on top of a small, square hold. He yanks himself back against the wall and fights the vertigo that's threatening to hit. It still sometimes comes on, when his sense of balance feels off sync with the rest of his body.

He isn't even that far off the ground. Pathetic.

"Just lean back on the rope and sit on the harness if you need to," Jonathan prompts.

The notion feels akin to cheating. Isn't a climber only supposed to use the rope as a safety device to fall back on, instead of as some sort of a pulley system to drag themselves up a route?

The need to rest, however, does arise soon. By the time Sherlock has made his way up the route a few more metres, his breathing has become laboured, and the combination of anxiety about doing something wrong, together with the pull on muscles that he has not used in ages, are severely working against him. He has to battle against his fear of falling for a moment, until he manages to convince himself to unpeel his fingers from the handholds. He isn't afraid of heights, never has been, and he certainly isn't worrying about John's abilities to catch him if he falls. It's just that he doesn't trust himself right now.

After a moment of breathing in deeply, he lets go and leans back away from the wall, putting his weight on the rope. Once the pressure is off, pins and needles compete with a cramp on both his arms, so he shakes them vigorously, glancing down at John.

"Alright?" John asks.

Disturbed both by how little progress he’s made, and a sudden worry about his current lack of balance, Sherlock snaps his line of sight back to the wall. Angry at his already aching muscles and lazy, half-offline nerves, he grabs a hold resembling a horn with both hands, and uses it to hoist his legs onto a narrow ledge off to the side of the centre of the route. This leaves him panting and forces him to sit back on the rope again. "Useless," he mutters to himself.

The large, echoing hall must have carried the sound down to the ground level, because Jonathan’s cheery "You're doing fine!" comes up from the floor. "You’re making progress. That’s all that
There’s that hateful word again, progress.

At least he hasn't given up, told them this is ridiculous, and walked out. He's a third of the way up the wall, now. Tired of looking decrepit in front of others, he realises this is an opportunity John is giving him to change that notion. He's going to make use of it.

Sherlock gathers his thoughts, and narrows his focus onto the next foothold, pulling himself up with his fingers. If the violin practice is good for one thing, it is to strengthen them. It takes another fifteen minutes for him to reach the top of the route, where he has to sit back on the rope and breathe hard for a few minutes. John then lowers him gently down.

"How was that?" John asks.

Sherlock doesn't really know what to answer. He looks back up the wall. "I can't possibly comment based on a single route. I need more data."

Jonathan looks pleased. "Then let’s try another one. The one over there is up the silo’s brick wall. The holds are smaller, imitating rock climbing a bit more closely. It's a straight vertical one, but there are plenty of holds."

"Lead the way," Sherlock says, untying himself from the rope hanging from the ceiling. It takes him several tries to loosen the figure-of-eight. John reaches out to help him, but Sherlock petulantly drags the rope away from him and turns his back before finishing the task.

They assemble in front of the route Jonathan had introduced, and replicate what they'd done earlier to prepare for belay. This route feels more exposed, more awkward to negotiate, because the vertical face makes it harder for Sherlock to find his centre of gravity. On the route, sometimes he’s spread-eagled, other times he ends up with his feet on one side and his arms on another and then the balance seems very precarious. At times, the rising tide of panic is hard to fight off. Twice he has to stop and lean back on the rope to re-position himself.

Jonathan coaches him from the floor of the silo. "Think of your centre as being in the middle of your belly - keep that in the right place, and don’t worry too much about the arms and legs."

At one point Sherlock's fingers seem to lock, and his momentum grinds to a halt. It's not exactly a cramp, more like his nerves have suddenly forgot what it was that they were supposed to signal to his muscles.

Jonathan talks him through it. "If you hang on for dear life, or try to pull yourself up by your fingers, you’ll exhaust your forearm muscles. That’s game over. Think of your fingers as just a way to help you balance and keep you centered. Once you get going again, try to build up a bit of momentum again in your movement. The rhythm will help you extend your reach in synch with the lift from your leg muscles."

This time, Sherlock calls down to him, rather than turning his head downwards to look. "How close to the wall should I be? I keep banging my knees on it."

"Theory says that closer your face and body are to the wall, the easier it is to keep your balance. But, don’t point your knees directly in towards the wall. You're tall, so you probably tend to think you need to stand up straight. When climbing, that pushes your centre of gravity away from the wall, which is hardly ideal."

After twenty minutes of work hard enough to rival the most intense training sessions at Harwich,
Sherlock reaches the top of the route. The relief at making it is, admittedly, exhilarating. He needs the whole abseil down to catch his breath again, and once he reaches the floor his legs feel weak, but they do still hold his weight.

"Again. Practice makes perfect," he announces.

John is giving him a worried look, which he ignores. Fortunately, Jonathan doesn’t see their non-verbal exchange, and he lets Sherlock try the same route again. This time, he manages to be slightly faster, but his legs are terribly shaky when he gets down.

Jonathan seems to notice this, because he says that it is now John’s turn. They return to the slab route, and there Sherlock is clipped into the belaying device. Jonathan makes him practice the arm movements. On the fifth pull of rope with his left hand, Sherlock lifts his right hand off the rope to pull it through, and Jonathan grabs his hand, looking stern. "No - never take that hand off the rope. If John were to fall at that moment, and the rope isn't downwards, the brake won't activate and he’ll likely fall the whole distance."

Sherlock freezes, looking down at his hands in horror. He takes a ragged breath and then just drops the rope out of both hands, and uses them to grab at the locking carabiner, fumbling as he tries to unscrew it. "I can’t do this. I’ll do it wrong, and he’ll be hurt. You need to belay him," he says quietly, hoping John won’t hear.

"No." Jonathan sounds calm as he grabs hold of the grigri and stops Sherlock from detaching himself. "You won’t make a mistake, because now you know what to do." He threads the rope into the grigri while John ties himself to the rope with a flawless figure of eight.

"I won’t be strong enough," Sherlock points out, and his own voice sounds hollow and defeated in his ears. "I weigh less than he does now. I won’t risk his life because I’m not fit to do this."

Jonathan takes the other end of the rope that is lying at Sherlock’s feet and clips it into the floor anchor behind him. "Belt and braces. That'll keep you from being yanked up in the air. You won’t make a mistake, I promise - the belay working is not up to strength. Now pick up the rope and get him on belay." There is a bit of steel in his voice now.

They end up in a staring match.

"I can't do this," Sherlock says more pointedly, directing his words at Jonathan only, although John is now bound to hear them, too. Is this what the point of this whole exercise in futility is - forcing him to publicly declare to all the world his current state? What good does that do? Do Jonathan and John think he isn't aware of it? Nary a moment goes by when he hopes he weren't, especially not this acutely, and this constantly.

This is why he had sent all those physical therapists packing. He had wanted to come home and get on with his life, not to have his nose ground in what he'd lost every five damned minutes. John clearly somehow thinks it will level out the playing field that they're both beginners in this, but it doesn't change the fact that they're here, doing this, simply because Sherlock's body had decided to self-destruct. At least John's injury is a war-inflicted one, making it understandable and not his own fault if he can't function as he used to. He got shot, instead of being betrayed by something that was supposed to be under his command. John is a victim of a conscious decision to put himself in harm's way, Sherlock had been sidelined by rotten luck. There's no valour there, no achievement to be found within recovery. Everyone is simply for waiting for him to resume normal functioning so that he wouldn't trouble and inconvenience them anymore.

John has now caught wind that there's an issue. He walks up to them from where he'd been
surveying the route. "What's going on?"

"First-time nerves," Jonathan says with a disarming smile.

John looks confused. "I'd have thought going up the wall was the more exciting bit," he jests sheepishly, studying Sherlock's face.

Jonathan offers Sherlock the belay device again. "It's fine. There's two of us down here, making sure it all goes smoothly."

He's being reassured like a child. It's infuriating, and what is worse, the more attention he calls to the subject, the bigger the ensuing fuss will be.

"Just do it, Sherlock," Jonathan prompts.

Sherlock almost snaps back never to ask him to willingly risk John's life, but then he locks eyes with John, and the naked trust in the man's eyes halts his tongue. He knows when he's been played and outnumbered.

Sherlock picks up the belay device, clips it to his harness and grabs the rope without further protest, taking up the belayer's position.

John clambers up the first route, which Sherlock can tell is an easy one compared to the routes on the neighbouring walls. He notes that it takes John much less time to get to the halfway point as compared to him. Jonathan tells Sherlock to give his climber more slack since he's advancing well. Unlike him, John doesn’t need the top-rope to fall back on, doesn't need frequent breaks, and he watches John even build up some momentum as he climbs without having to even think about the rope. The contrast with his own experience is stark and upsetting.

While he is watching from below, Sherlock wonders about John’s shoulder. He is curious about whether the shoulder injury makes a difference in this. He has never seen John do any exercises that could be thought of as physical therapy - no pull ups or push ups, not even a shoulder roll or two. John clearly suffers from joint stiffness and some mild chronic pain associated with the injury, but tries to avoid taking any painkillers. He also avoids talking about it, only complaining that is neck is stiff at times in the morning, especially after a late night on the sofa watching television. Sherlock's attempts at getting him to divulge the details of how the gunshot wound had happened are met with adamant refusal to get into it. The climbing John seems to be doing without any visible fear or pain, *Lucky him.*

John manages the brick wall route equally effortlessly. When they switch back again to tackle a new bit of vertical wall, Sherlock’s disappointment with his earlier efforts means he sets off at a faster pace this time, being less deliberate. He makes good progress, but this wall has hand- and footholds that are not so easily reached. At one point about half way up, Sherlock moves his left foot to a small blue hold above knee height, and uses his fingertips to pull his torso upwards.

Suddenly, his foot cramps and slips off the hold.

His climbing shoes skitter down the face of the wall, and the weight rips the handhold out of his fingers. John had given him a bit of slack on the rope since he'd been doing better, so now he first falls the length of a forearm until the top rope catches him and tightens at his waist with an uncomfortable yank. He hears John grunt below him as the belay takes his weight just before he gets thrown forward into the wall, knocking the breath out of his lungs.

"Okay, Sherlock?"
"I’m fine."

Jonathan’s question embarrasses him. As he catches his breath and tries to still the fear constantly nipping at his feels, he feels the scream of pain move up from his right hand fingers to his shoulder. He’s dangling from the harness like a carcass, which makes him even more disgusted and angry with himself.

Unfortunately, the fall has rather stranded him. There is a handhold to the left above him, but the only foothold is off to the right out of reach. He reaches up to the red hook shape above his head and manages to grip it, but his toes can’t find traction against the wall, and his fingers now feel numb and weak, tingling and shaking with adrenaline.

"Wait, Sherlock. What you are trying to do is too hard." Jonathan calls up to him from the floor. "John, lower him down a bit so he can re-try that manoeuvre. Sherlock, lean back on the rope and walk the wall down a meter or so."

The humiliation of it. He bellows out, "NO!" knowing it is too loud, but he doesn’t care. He will not be defeated like this. He hates his foot for betraying him. He hates his disobeying fingers. He's had it.

His left shoulder is taking the strain of his weight, but then he realises that it is easing, as John tightens the rope. That means John and Jonathan have patronizingly decided to recall him.

"Stop it!" Sherlock yells, voice raised a pitch above normal.

Jonathan tries to reason with him. "It’s not a problem, Sherlock; just relax and have a rest."

"I will unclip myself from the top rope if you don’t let me continue from where I was," he announces. He can hear the petulant anger in his voice, but no longer gives a damn. He is too ashamed, too furious at the entire uncaring fucking universe at making a mess of this to care any longer. This is what he had only allowed himself short moments of at the hospital - to rail against his inequitable fate, because it's pointless - it doesn't change a thing, and dwelling on it had no point. John wants him to talk, Mycroft wants him to co-operate - none of them have lived this, nobody is listening to him and nothing will bring back the way things were before.

He wants a single fucking moment without being managed, mollycoddled and instructed - a single moment when failure is not the defining word of his entire existence.

Looking down, Sherlock can see Jonathan glancing at John. "He's joking, isn't he?" Jonathan asks with a low voice.

It infuriates Sherlock even further to hear them discussing him like this, as though he wasn't present. As though nothing he says ought to be taken seriously, because he's a patient incapable of advocating for themselves or even understanding the repercussions of their decisions.

"Wouldn't be the first time he risks his life to prove something," Sherlock hears John reply.

It isn’t what Sherlock needs to hear. He’s stuck in a cliffhanger of a situation, and doesn’t need snide comments from the gallery.

John's comment makes Jonathan spring into action. "Don’t you dare!" he yells up towards Sherlock.

"Just SHUT UP, both of you!" Sherlock counters.
Chapter Notes

We couldn't keep you hanging by your fingernails for long, could we (pun entirely intended, of course)?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Just SHUT UP, both of you!" Sherlock counters.

He looks down to the ground far below, and grabs the rope with one hand when vertigo hits. He needs to decide whether to admit defeat, let John lower himself down and leave this place forever, or to try something. In all honestly, whichever way he leaves this earth, he certainly doesn't want that to happen by falling fifteen or so metres onto a concrete floor. Still, the fact that they'd taken his threat seriously gives Sherlock a modicum of satisfaction. It feels good to be heard. Apparently the anger he'd pushed away at the hospital because it served no purpose and didn't further any of his causes refused to abate, if left unexpressed.

Giving up would mean that there's nothing left of him. He's not there yet, he doesn't want to be. There are still things he wants, even though he doesn't know how to even start trying to reach for them.

He dangles there, moments passing - how many, he doesn't count. He can hear John and Jonathan quietly talking down on the silo floor. He tunes out their words. It's all irrelevant. The only thing that matters if what he does now, what he decides.

John brought him here for a reason. John thinks he can do this. So does Jonathan. When something doesn't work in cases, he doesn't bang his head against the wall and try the same thing over and over again like a madman. He finds another way, tries another approach.

"Give me some slack so I can move more freely," he yells down, grabbing two passable handholds which are now within reach after John had lowered him down a bit already.

He feels the tension on the rope ease, and uses the moment to close his eyes and focus on his mental image of his plan before the cramp denied him a chance to execute it. He knows that the blue foothold is too high, but if he can get his shoulder to cooperate, then he could reach it if he swings to the side. Without tension on the rope, this will be easier to do. But he has to get his breathing under control, and stop focusing too much on the notion of falling.

Time seems to slow down, then Jonathan calls up to him again. "Sherlock, are you stuck? Putting all your weight on your fingers is just wrong - you can't hold on like that for long."

Never mind his fingers; the pain in his shoulder is now excruciating. Now or never.

He leans first to the left, then swings his weight to the right, and his toe catches the blue projection. In one mighty heave, he thrusts upward, using his momentum to surge up the wall so he can reach the next handhold with his other hand. A tendon snaps painfully on his forefinger, a
shoulder feels like it's on fire. His knees are shaking so badly that it threatens to make him lose his footing yet again.

The slack in the rope is taken up. From below comes another comment from Jonathan. "Well done. But now you're taking a rest, or this climb is over."

Having defeated his earlier ineptitude, Sherlock is only too happy to co-operate. It must be more than five minutes before he can resume climbing up the last metres of the rope, but when he does, he makes it to the top without further incident.

Once John has lowered him back down, Jonathan insists on a break for all three of them. Sherlock, feeling almost giddy, lets him help with releasing himself from the toprope, since his fingers feel swollen and numb and a cramp is threatening to break out on his forearm again. He knows John is watching him carefully, but not insisting they call it a day or hovering, asking how he's feeling. Perhaps his concrete request for a bit of slack has been truly taken to heart.

They have a drink of water, sitting on the old, beaten up chairs near the entrance.

Sherlock is quiet, but feels calmer now. Finally, he asks Jonathan, "Once you've found out the best route and done it quickly, where's the challenge?"

Jonathan swallows and lowers his water bottle. "That's the whole point - all those handholds are movable. We try and change the problems every day here to freshen things up."

"Problems?" Sherlock asks, giving in to curiosity.

"We call them problems. It's like solving a puzzle, really - figuring out a way to get up a route. Your head does it first, since you need to decide which holds to go in for. Then you test that idea by actually doing it."

"Testing a hypothesis," Sherlock says.

"Yeah. There's a lot more brainwork in it than most people realise. In trad climbing outdoors, you really have to keep it together on longer routes - sometimes you have to stay overnight in a kind of a sleeping bag hanging from the wall, or dare to take that leap to that bummer hold even when you know you might fall or it might, at least, tear the skin off your fingers. You just need to go for it, really, believe that you can do it, and not think about the consequences too much."

"That sounds like you," John points out to Sherlock, who is patting off magnesium dust from his sleeves. He feels coated in the stuff.

Sherlock finds John's words curious, since they had been spoken in present tense. Does that mean John equates what he sees now with the way he was, after all? Even though he will readily admit, at least to himself, that lately he has considered the consequences of his actions, since everything he does seems to lead to an endgame of defeat and humiliation. He has become discouraged and risk-averse. Hardly the sort of man John has just professed seeing, when he looks at Sherlock.

Sunlight is no longer streaming through the windows - it's now dark outside, and the vast turbine hall they're standing in feels draughtier than it used to. They're tired and sweaty. Sherlock's hands are still shaking from the exertion, and he spills a bit of water on himself when trying to replace the cork on the bottle.

"I think that's enough for tonight," John says.

Jonathan collects their bottles. "You go change. I'm going to start locking up."
"Thanks for doing this," John says.

"Don't mention it. When I'm in London I try to pick up as many work shifts as I can, which means I don't get to come here as often as I would like. But for you two, I can make arrangements; just let me know when you'd like to head out here and Darren or I can probably come by to let you in. This is a good start. Don't let it go to waste."

Two hours later, John puts his fork down, plucks up his courage and goes for it. "Did you like that?" he asks. It had been very hard to decipher Sherlock at the climbing centre. He'd gone through with it all, admittedly with some griping and grousing, but he'd done his best and not given up. John has to admit Jonathan had been right with one thing - it didn't feel like going to the gym.

John isn't sure what to believe regarding Sherlock's reaction when he'd fallen a bit and had been incapable or resuming the route from that spot. His threat had been worrisome, but he'd been gripping the rope so hard John really doubts he could have unclipped himself even if he'd been in a good enough position on the wall to do so. At least that's what he wants to believe. There had been a certain truth in his words to Jonathan - their very first case had proven that when his abilities are called to question, Sherlock can get utterly reckless. What had happened up the wall had felt similar.

Looking at Sherlock now, at least, abates the most frightening possibility - that he'd been so utterly defeated that he was willing to, that he could have --- not going there, John tells himself adamantly. No. He wouldn't risk his life like that, against impossible odds. Just look at him, now.

Sherlock looks up from his portion of palak paneer, which he is - lo and behold - actually eating. The climbing had made John excruciatingly hungry, and it seems to have whetted Sherlock's appetite, too. It's pathetic, really, how lovely the sight of Sherlock eating something is. John suspects his relationship with hunger and food mirrors that of his relationship to everything else that relates to him being a mere mortal: irritation and denial. Right now, he's exhibiting neither. On the cab ride to Victoria Station, around where Sherlock had decided they should hunt for a restaurant, he'd seemed to be in good spirits, carrying on an almost philosophical monologue on London architecture with bits and pieces of the Watford case woven in. On occasion, when he'd suspected John had lost the plot, he'd poked him on the arm to get him to pay more attention. He actually seemed to be in a good mood. John isn't naive enough to think it was specifically the climbing - all exercise tends to raise the mood, perhaps it works like that for even Sherlock, whose moods are a mystery to rival the Bermuda Triangle.

"How was it?" John asks again, realizing that if Sherlock had replied, he'd been too lost in thought to pay attention. Serves him right for always ignoring me.

"What? The paneer is a little chewy, but passable."

John sips his water, and tries again. "I meant the climbing."

"Did you like it?"

John tries to fathom whether Sherlock is stalling by answering his question with a question of his own. "I asked you first."
A crease forms between Sherlock’s brows, before he looks back down at his plate. "Is it somehow important to you that I like it?"

"Just answer the question, Sherlock," John says, shaking his head with a smile as he rips a piece off his naan for salvaging some sauce off the bottom of his nearly empty plate.

"Why is it important to you that I like it?" Sherlock reiterates.

This further evasion makes John snort. "Because I want you to enjoy yourself."

"I assume it to be an attempt to replace physical therapy." Sherlock pops another piece of the paneer into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. He's still gauntly thin, much more willowy than he was before the illness got hold of him - he should be eating much more than he has been, lately - even though his appetite has already marginally improved - and John fears having a case will make him revert to his old habit of eating practically nothing when there's work on. Sherlock really can't afford that right now, health-wise.

"No, this is you and me. Doing things together - something other than just the case work. Stuff we can both enjoy. That's what this is about and why I want you to not hate it." He needs Sherlock not to discard this, because he doesn't have a whole lot of other ideas lined up. Even this one had come from someone else.

With a slightly mischievous tone, Sherlock asks, "Does that mean you don’t enjoy the cases? We do those together."

John lets his exasperation show. "No, you berk. That’s not what I said. Stop avoiding the question. Did you enjoy any of the climbing?"

"Yes... and no. I did not perform very well."

John chuckles and breaks off a piece of a poppadom Sherlock had ordered but not touched. He uses it to scoop up some of the thick rogan josh sauce from his plate. Maybe they should have the rest packed up for home - he might be able to coax Sherlock into having some at breakfast. "We were both rubbish. Then again, the first time anyone tries something new, generally speaking they are bad at it, but once you've practiced something enough times, it becomes automatic and even if you don't do it for a while, relearning is much quicker than learning it in the first place."

"You're referring to muscle memory."

"Exactly."

"I'm starting to think most of it is a myth," Sherlock says, a glass of water held between both palms. John wonders if holding it like that had become a habit during when Sherlock's coordination and strength had still been mostly decimated by the GBS, when he'd had trouble managing even the simplest thing such as holding a toothbrush.

A memory barges in, sudden and upsetting. Sherlock, in his room at the National, being helped with a cup of tea by Jonathan. John had just returned from getting some things from home, and this is what he'd seen when glancing through the window in the wall between the patient room and the corridor. He'd paced the hall until Jonathan had exited, utterly convinced that this was something Sherlock would not have wanted him to witness. He'd told John as much, allowing his presence begrudgingly during meal times but insisting John keep everyone else he knows out during those occasions. The fact that he'd cared so much about something that was quite logical, quite natural considering the nature of his illness - needing help with everyday things, this had seemed to be so.
very important to him.

John berates himself for thinking about this at a moment when Sherlock is sitting right across the table, looking to be in a better mood than John can possibly remember him being since he's come home. It's just that the memories come when they come, and there's little he can do to keep them at bay. And it's not just the memories - it's also about knowing what could have happened. When Sherlock had been at his weakest, utterly dependent on the respirator, anything could have wiped him out. Pulmonary embolism, pneumonia, anything.

*I nearly lost you.*

Maybe the heart has muscle memory, too, because the same cold hand that had clamped around his own the night Sherlock had been admitted into the National, and which had only let go when he'd been wheeled out of there to Harwich, has reappeared. John's fingers curl around the table leg and he squeezes it, tired arm muscles aching and complaining, until the memory seems to let go, at least a little.

Sherlock, thankfully, seems to be focusing on his meal.

John wipes his mouth on his napkin and commands himself to get back to the conversation. "Take riding a bike, for instance; hard as hell when you're five years old and try it for the first time, but eventually you get the hang of it, and it's brilliant.

Sherlock's fork halts, but he doesn't look up to face John. Instead he keeps his gaze firmly directed at the table in front of him.

"Oh God. Please tell me that I haven't just insulted you. You *do* know how to ride a bike?" John asks with an incredulous smile.

Sherlock looks back up at him, annoyed. "*Of course,* I do. But..."

Silence, again.

John realises that he knows so very little about Sherlock’s childhood, because he never willingly talks about it. "But?" John presses. He's on to something here, and it might be important.

"I learned late. I... um... wasn’t the most co-ordinated when I was little. My parents wouldn’t let me do such things. They said I’d hurt myself, that I’d be no good at it. When I was ten, I took Mycroft’s bike out to try it, and they were right. I crashed, smashed the front wheel." He trails his fingers down his right shoulder. "Broke my collarbone, too, when I came off it at speed. I tried to hide both the state of the bike and the fracture for almost a week."

John tries to imagine a ten year old Sherlock going through that. "What happened when they found out?"

"They banned me from trying again, obviously. When Mycroft came home from boarding school at Easter, they made me tell him and apologise. Instead of telling me off, he got it fixed and then set the bike up in the shed on a frame so I could learn how to ride it without falling off or getting distracted by the way it felt. By the time summer came, I could manage it. He went with me out on the road for the first couple of weeks, and then we told our parents."

"So, not a completely useless big brother, after all?"

Sherlock snorts sarcastically. "He’s had his moments, but very few and far between. Contrary to popular assumption, he does sometimes get his hands dirty. Or at least he used to, before amassing
an army of minions."

The waiter arrives to deliver the last part of their order - two small fruit salads. Sherlock used to regularly order dessert - sometimes as his only course.

John decides that it is time to return to the more important issue at hand. "So, climbing. Do you want to do it some more? So we can get better at it?"

"Yes. Don’t you?"

John wonders if Sherlock can read his relief on his face. It had been a gamble to agree to Jonathan’s invitation. Originally, John had done it because he wanted Sherlock to do something, anything, to approximate physical therapy, but he's not going to advertise that to Sherlock lest he think he's being pressured. What John had not appreciated was that he had enjoyed it himself. It was like he'd sold it to Sherlock - something they could do together, to stop getting stir-crazy in the flat, without the stress of work.

"Yes. Yes, I do," John agrees. To be honest, he'd had much more fun when trying out several other sports during his university days, but he wants to sound enthusiastic, in case it might give Sherlock extra incentive to continue with it. After all, he had agreed to the first session because John had asked him to, without even knowing what it was that he was signing up for. It's a big thing in John's books.

"Even if it reminds you about your shoulder?" Sherlock asks in a casual tone. Too casual.

John makes a face. "You just had to bring that up, didn't you?"

That makes Sherlock look more closely at him. "Why does that bother you?"

"For the same reason you don’t like talking about what it was like lying in that bed unable to move, talk or breathe for yourself," John snaps. "Or why you froze on that last climb." He wants to bite his tongue for getting so defensive. All he can do is hope that Sherlock's good mood will mean that he won't be discouraged by his dismissiveness to continue talking, because discussing what had happened when Sherlock got stuck on the climbing wall is something that John really wants to do. He needs to understand what drives him to such extremes, but he isn't harbouring any fantasies of Sherlock's willingness to entertain the subject.

It's Sherlock's turn to look dismissive. He pushes away his plate and gives the fruit salad an unappreciative once-over without even picking up a spoon. "Fair enough. I’ll stop asking about your shoulder, as long as you do me the same courtesy."

John then realises that he’s been rather deftly manipulated into a corner, forcing him to abandon his line of questioning. "But, you will go again?"

Sherlock nods, "As long as you want to."

John smiles and then admits, "My shoulder’s likely to hurt like hell tonight, but I don't really care. It was worth it, and I had fun."

That raises an echoing smile from Sherlock. "Let's make a vow to look less like a pair of arthritic spiders next time."

John shook his head. "Good thing Jonathan isn't easily spooked, because you looked more like a praying mantis. All spindly limbs and murderous looks."
Sherlock can tell he's teasing, and takes the bait. "It must be irritating to be so short; you can't reach half the holds I can. Must be twice the challenge to manage. No wonder you're not much of a musician, either - your fingers are quite stubby."

"Git," John calls him with a grin. He reaches for the last piece of his naan, but Sherlock gets there first. He rips it in half and passes the other bit to John.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"A case in the Docklands, then?" Mycroft inquires in a mostly disinterested tone when he calls John at nine that evening.

"No, just a bit of spontaneous exercise," John says mischievously.

"In yet another derelict mill? Lord knows where you find these places." Mycroft is dismissive. "Is it a coincidence that it was in the Barking Mill that Sherlock nearly collapsed going up a set of stairs? He has been known to so obsess about his failures."

For a moment, John wonders how the hell Mycroft could know such details about their new case, but then realises that he might have easily spoken with Lestrade in order to keep an eye on things. They seemed to keep in touch sometimes - Mycroft had even summoned the DI to Dartmoor, presumably to ensure Sherlock wasn't going to invade any more secret government facilities.


"How did you manage to convince him to do that?" Mycroft asks, not entirely successful at concealing his surprise.

"He does sometimes do what other people request or invite him to, you know, if you ask nicely instead of blackmailing him."

"I'm going to ignore that failure to understand our fraternal relationship. I don't blackmail Sherlock; he is immune to such manipulation."

"Assuming he can tell when you're doing it."

"Oh, he knows perfectly well---" Mycroft replies snootily, but then seems to snap his mouth shut when he realises he's as good as incriminated himself.

John chuckles.

"Nevermind," Mycroft says with a commanding tone. "Sherlock isn't answering his phone. Might I request---"

"His phone has been right next to him on the coffee table all evening. If he isn't answering, I guess he doesn't want to talk to you. Besides, he's in the bath right now." John decides against telling Mycroft that Sherlock had taken an extra anti-inflammatory tablet before retreating to the bathroom - he doesn't want the big brother to suspect he's let Sherlock overexert himself. John had done the
same for himself, since his shoulder had been throbbing dully ever since they'd ended the climbing session. Their expedition is likely to make them both sore as hell by the next morning. John wonders if he should coax Sherlock to take an extra dose of tramadol tonight. He might sleep better.

"Very well. Are you certain that such a strenuous and dangerous sport is a wise thing to be taking up, when his balance is still compromised?"

"Can’t wrap him in cotton wool, Mycroft. That will just make him more prone to do what the hell he wants, as I think you know." John stirs his tea. He has half a mind to explain to Mycroft that practically dangling from the rope, Sherlock is hardly going to be endangering himself despite his still recovering balance and lacking muscle strength, but he finds himself annoyed at Mycroft's incessant scepticism and decides he doesn't owe the man any explanation as to what he does or doesn't do with Sherlock.

However, there is one thing he really wants to discuss, and Mycroft might have some answers. It's a question that has been sitting at the back of John’s mind for weeks, now, and the events at First Ascent had made it even more acute. "Why is Sherlock so hard on himself? He insists on such impossibly high standards - where does that come from?"

Mycroft doesn't say anything for a moment, and John wonders if he's crossed some line he isn't even aware of. The older Holmes brother is usually quite forthcoming about such matters, but John has never been in the habit of asking these sorts of things - doing so makes him feel like he's sneaking behind Sherlock's back.

What had happened half way up that last wall still feels to John, for lack of a better word, frightening. Sherlock had been so determined to get his way, clearly refusing to employ a healthy sense of proportion and realism. He had looked so angry that John had wondered if another meltdown was imminent. Thankfully, it had not materialized. Maybe the physical exercise had prevented it, allowing Sherlock the channel his frustration more constructively. Still, it had been more than a bit not good.

John remembers telling Molly that he suspected he wasn't very good at being supportive and helping Sherlock to face things he was hell-bent on ignoring. At the hospital, Sherlock had had very little choice in what happened to him. Now, he could decline anything and everything he didn't want to do, whatever form of aid or rehabilitation that was offered to him. John has been wondering if his tendency to ignore his limitations and to refuse all manner of therapy is a delayed reaction of some sort, an attempt at wrenching back control. A desire to push for the impossible - and to hell with the consequences - could well be reactionary denial.

"The quick answer is that the reason for his high expectations of himself is that he usually meets or exceeds them. Your question suggests that he didn’t, on a specific occasion that has brought on this inquiry. What happened?" Mycroft’s curiosity is clear from his tone.

"He got stuck at one point, halfway up a climbing wall. Slipped, lost a foothold and then sort of froze. First, he sounded embarrassed but then got really, really angry with himself. I got worried that it would escalate into a meltdown." John decides against telling Mycroft what Sherlock had threatened to do. No need to alarm the big brother further. "We tried to get him to give up and start over again, but he wouldn’t hear of it. All part of that if-I-can’t-do-it-perfectly, I’ll-die-trying habit he’s got."

"He doesn’t like being told he can’t do things. Such a statement would simply make him want to try harder."
"Like riding a bicycle?"

"He told you about that?" Mycroft says, failing at hiding his incredulity.

"Yeah, he said you rigged up some sort of stationary frame in a shed, so he could learn."

Before John could ask another question, Mycroft elaborates: "Sherlock’s neuropsychiatric issues, particularly those of sensory nature, created problems for him as a child. When he was six, on the fifth visit to the local Emergency Room in four months, after meticulously ruling out parental abuse yet again, the doctors there decided he was dyspraxic. Our parents were mortified and fed up with the accusations flung at them on these visits, so to spare everyone's nerves they concluded that Sherlock needed protecting from himself. After that they began to limit what he was allowed to do."

"But you didn’t agree?"

"No. Because he also lacks impulse control, I knew he’d just try all those things again anyway. By making him slow down and to take it in steps, instead of saying no, I thought there might be a chance he’d manage it without getting himself killed in the process."

John snorted. "Yeah, that makes sense. Especially after today. But still, I’ve always thought of Sherlock as, you know... really athletic. He’s got the martial arts and fencing evidence on the bedroom walls to prove it."

"Never underestimate the hard work and practice that was needed to teach himself things that others take for granted. It has been ever thus with him. He won’t let anything get in the way. He practically overcompensates for what he sees as one of his Achilles heels."

"But the anger? That kind of surprised me. He's very determined when he wants something, but this was more desperate than decisive."

There is a momentary silence, as if Mycroft is weighing up how much to say. "When Sherlock began to realise years before the bicycle incident just how different he was from other children, it distressed him. Deeply. When the subject of dyspraxia was raised with him, he wasn’t sad; he was angry. He said it wasn’t fair. I pointed out that the vast majority of the Earth's population is much less intelligent than he is, which is hardly fair, either. I also told him it's pointless to rile against things one cannot change. It's better to direct that energy someplace else than shaking a fist at the heavens. I like to think that sensible approach stuck and carried on to his hospital days. Any advice I give him rarely has a lasting effect."

John knows he is smiling as he imagines the conversation between a tiny Holmes genius and an older brother who might just be even more intelligent. It's true that Sherlock had not railed against the GBS all that much when it was happening - only against the uncomfortable changes it made to his daily life. Part of him can't help wondering if, maybe, he should have. At least a little. Anyone would be upset, angry and discouraged by something so unfair happening to them. Could Sherlock possibly be able to just take in all in stride like that? John finds himself sceptical. "I bet that went down badly."

"He did not find that very consoling, no. Mummy explained the dyspraxia to him by saying that it was just his body that was the problem, so he should just ignore it, and focus on the things his mind could do instead, because that was clearly his greatest asset. That notion seemed, at least, to get him through puberty unscathed."

John just closes his eyes. God save us from well-meaning but clueless parents, and maybe big
brothers, too. "So that’s where the it’s-only-transport started? The fact that he is so dismissive of his physical needs? It sounds like you didn’t agree with your parents, though?"

A sniff sounds from the other end of the line, and John can easily imagine a patrician shrug. "If he was determined enough to do something, he’d find a way," Mycroft contemplates. "It was better, safer, to find unorthodox ways to help, than to sit and wait for him to come up with some harebrained, likely dangerous scheme to get his way. The approach is still better than to try to stop him. He has always so hated people telling him what he can and cannot do, and what he lacks in skills he makes up for in stubbornness."

John begins to understand even better why Sherlock has been so averse to all the physical therapy after returning home. Part of it entails professionals telling you what you can and can’t do at present, and then making you do it anyway. John had hated all of it, too, after the shoulder injury. He really, really couldn’t deal with being constantly confronted with the fact that no matter how much he worked at it, he’d probably not be able to work as a surgeon again, or to be sent back to the battlefield. That fact had robbed him of all motivation and plunged him into clinical depression.

He's come to the conclusion that Sherlock is depressed, even though he is keeping up a facade. Anyone in his situation probably would be, and John wants to kick himself for what he now recognises as a naive hope that coming home would fix the way he'd been at Harwich, to fill him with motivation. No matter how many times it has been repeated to him, both at the hospital and after his discharge, that there is no reason to assume he won’t make a full recovery, Sherlock seems deeply sceptical about it. Is he convinced that he has lost some of his abilities permanently?

The anger John may have been mistaking for determination might be a way to express just how scared he is of that possibility. Is this what has been keeping him irritable and on edge about the Watford case, too? To John this makes only partial sense - apart from the physical difficulties navigating the crime scene, there's nothing wrong with Sherlock's abilities - he'd been his irritatingly clever self even during the worst days at the ITU, hadn't he?

"Mycroft..." John struggles to find the best way to phrase the question. "He had two meltdowns the day before yesterday. At least that's what I think they were. He sort of admitted it himself. He said it had been a long time since he'd had one, and he didn't really want to talk about it."

"Perhaps not that long a time, although the last instance was relatively minor, and there is the confounding factor of a hallucinogen," Mycroft recounts dryly.

John's jaw drops. The deduction of what Mycroft is referring to is rather obvious. "Dartmoor? How do you know about that?" On second thought, he's talking to Mycroft Holmes. The man did send Lestrade to spy on them. John wouldn't put it past the man to have bugged the hell out of his and Sherlock's hotel room. He's half-tempted to ask for the footage, but then he realises he doesn't need a reminder right now of how badly he may have failed to help Sherlock at that time.

"How I know is irrelevant."

John is convinced he's guessed right. It's starting to look even more likely that the British government has been privy to the details of their stay at the Cross Keys. It may be a bit tit for tat - they did use Mycroft's keycard to enter a top-secret military installation - but John is not about to point that out to the man.

"The re-emergence of the meltdowns is hardly unsurprising, but very worrying. I’ve been wondering when it would all catch up with him."

"What do you mean? What would catch up with him?"
"We spoke about this briefly at the hospital. I told you then, that trapping a mind like Sherlock’s inside a totally unresponsive body would have severe repercussions."

"Such as…?" John remembered the brief, tense conversations he’d had with Mycroft at the National, usually in the ITU corridor, neither of them willing to leave Sherlock without supervision for long. Mycroft had hovered in the background while John had been trying to deal with the GBS as it ran its horrifying course. He can recall only snippets of what had been discussed due to being so exhausted and distracted, but John is pretty certain that a possibility of something like the meltdowns he has now witnessed had never been mentioned.

"The curse of an eidetic memory. As much as he claims to have unparalleled skills in deleting recollections he dislikes, I'm certain he cannot simply forget such a profound feeling of helplessness as he must have experienced since his daily life must still be filled with potential triggers of those memories. I wouldn't be surprised if that memory were now a part of his every waking moment. The way you described him as desperately, frustratedly determined to push past his current challenges, speaks volumes of how much stress he's under."

With a rising sense of despair, John asks, "Why the hell does he bottle all that up and not say a word?"

"He has never been gifted with what you medical professionals call 'coping skills', or the ability to pick apart or communicate his emotions. What further complicates things is that he has been distrustful of those who want to help him."

John wonders why that seems to apply even to him. It can't be the fact that he'd mentioned Sherlock being ill on the blog post - him not talking has been going on ever since the hospital. John really doesn't think he's ever done anything to significantly betray Sherlock's trust. Even with what had happened at Dartmoor, he hopes he has now proven he's well capable to taking such issues seriously.

"What happens when--- if he can’t cope any longer?"

"That is my worry. Given previous form, this will not end well."

John hates it when Mycroft is cryptic. "What’s that mean?"

"It means that you need to intervene. Unless you would like me to try."

Anger flares up in John. At times, during Sherlock's hospital stay, he'd felt that Mycroft had deliberately stepped back and laid all the responsibility, all the duty on him. It was somewhat understandable, since it clearly seemed to be what Sherlock preferred, but now it was happening again - Mycroft pressing him to look after Sherlock, without really providing a lot of tools to do so with.

"Intervene how?" John asks, unable to keep an accusatory edge off his tone.

"Far be it from me to give you anything so mundane as relationship advice, but it may make a difference to him to hear something from you on this score. He may believe the blame for things that are not going well lies all with him, or are the result of his infirmity. Now, I still have work to do, so I will bid you good night." Without waiting for John's reply, he ends the call.

John stares at the phone, in disbelief. He realise that Mycroft has yet again landed the whole mess in his lap, as though it's a punishment for daring to embark on a relationship with Sherlock. He has no idea what to do.
Chapter End Notes

There's a new picture post at tumblr on the series.
The Crux

The toxicology report on Mark Watford finally comes back two days later, with predictable results. His blood has tested positive for high levels of thyroxin and anabolic steroids. The bottles found in the man’s safe had linked directly to the blood sample. "Whizzy wig," Sherlock mutters when Molly calls to tell them the news.

"What?" John asks.

Sherlock covers the phone with his palm and brings it away from his face to answer. "W.Y.S.I.W.Y.G - what you see is what you get, when it comes to using prescription drugs for doping. The lab techs think they know what to look for, none of which explains the precise sequence of events leading to his death, or how he was murdered. The more insidious, cutting-edge substances won't show up on standard tox screens."

Sherlock turns on speakerphone and holds the device between him and John's chair so that they can both hear.

Molly ums and errs a bit. "Sherlock, I can’t prove anything other than the presence of the prescription drugs, which may or may not have a link to his heart attack. High levels of thyroxin could have a detrimental effect on cardiac function, but he wasn't really exhibiting signs of severe hyperthyroidism. He probably hasn't used any of the drugs for very long, just very big doses. I’ve had to file unknown as the cause of death. Lestrade isn’t at all sure whether it’s worth pursuing as a murder. The Coroner is going to have to make a decision based on the evidence we have, which is very little. We know his heart gave out, but it's a bit of a stretch trying to convince the coroner it didn't just give up because of the doping and maybe some sort of genetic disposition to arrhythmias."

Sherlock huffs in frustration. "Injustice can easily hide behind what's most convenient to believe." He’d then ended the call, snatched John's newspaper away from him and and pushed him into a taxi to take them both to Barts. There, they begin the painstaking search for the missing compound in the remaining two test tubes still containing blood samples from Watford. The police are still working their way through the list of personal trainers associated with The Vault, and they have not yet found one willing to admit to having Mark Watford as their client. Some had even retreated behind solicitors, whose stalling tactics are clearly grating on Lestrade's nerves.

The gas chromatograph has now spent the rest of the afternoon whirring away. John had decided to be helpful, so he was the one who filled the sample vials for the test runs. His offer provoked a glare at first, which he managed to melt away with a "come on; it's donkey work that I can actually do". His shoulder was still hurting, courtesy of the climbing, but thankfully there was no tremor in his hand, so nothing got spilled.

They didn’t talk much. Sherlock was concentrating on the spectrographic data, making sure that he got the sampling snapshots done at just the right times to preserve the data.

Since Molly’s post mortem had not proven that the heart attack was deliberately chemically triggered, rather than a logical result of excessive steroid use, now the whole investigation might be pulled, unless Sherlock can pull some rabbit out of a hat in the laboratory. John isn't surprised that he'd go back to the Barts lab - despite what had happened there the last time, it's clearly one of Sherlock's favourite places. John has a distinct sense that what he's looking for here isn't solely
Two hours after he and John begin the lab work, Sherlock is sitting frowning at the remaining three tubes of blood. All other samples have already been used up.

"What's next?" John asks, stripping off a pair of latex gloves.

"I would have said a series of filtration, distillation and extraction procedures. But..." He looks down at his fingers as if they insulted him with their mere existence, "...I'm not sure I could manage the fine motor skills required." He sighs, not turning to face John. "In any case, it's pointless to even try. We know that the compound that killed Mark Watford is an alkaloid by nature, but the test results are showing trace amounts of seven different unknown alkaloid compounds. It's an immensely large group of compounds, which means that identifying them is going to take a larger quantity of samples than we have left." He shoves himself angrily back from the lab bench and stands beside it, thumb flicking across his fingertips. John has begun to pay more attention to these tells lately. Sherlock has many of them. It's stimming, isn't it, what it's called? Most people do similar things to a mild extent - swing their legs when sitting bored, turning objects in their fingers, rattling coins in their pockets, drumming fingers on tabletops, but Sherlock tends to resort to these less consciously, when he's under stress, and his are more intense than the average person's. He hides them well in the presence of others, only letting the excessive blinking and the stranger things he does with his hands such as flapping, commence when he's extremely upset and forgetting himself or at home and convinced John hasn't noticed. There's also the violin and the way he plays around neurotically with his phone in public transport which, in the light of recent events, have made John wonder if it's all part of the same thing.

"Can you get access to the rest of the samples, the ones Molly sent to forensics?" John asks.

Sherlock shakes his head. "Too late. They will have been mucked about with too much by those idiots. And in any case, even doubling the trace amounts won't be enough."

John opens his mouth to somehow lighten the atmosphere, to reassure Sherlock that there's always some other aspect of the case they could explore. Maybe Sherlock could work out how to make the personal trainers divulge their client lists?

Sherlock leans his palms on the table in front of him, biting his lip. "Dead end. I have failed."

Shit. John had had a hunch that Sherlock desperately needed to make progress here, even just a glimmer of hope that might break the man’s increasingly sour mood.

If he didn't know the man as well as he does, John might have thought Sherlock openly admitting his decreased fine motor skills was a step forward, but the defeat inherent in that statement had been unsettling. Sherlock actually saying the word 'fail' out loud is even more deeply alarming. John tries to come up with something, anything, to suggest, to reassure, to comfort, but nothing comes to mind. Telling Sherlock that he'd tried his best would probably be taken as an insult. In all likelihood, Sherlock would not appreciate someone insinuating that this was the best he could do, if it led to a case remaining unsolved.

Sherlock’s every movement radiates disappointment and annoyance, as he collects the test tubes
and stumps off back towards the mortuary. John grabs his coat off the rack near the door and jogs after him.

Molly’s eyes light up when she sees them enter the mortuary. She had been rummaging around a freezer in the corner. "Find anything?" she asks, sounding hopeful.

Sherlock puts the tubes back into the evidence rack in the fridge, and then slams its door shut. "There is a compound that’s bound to be the murder weapon, but I am unable to isolate it."

And then, without a further explanation, Sherlock storms out.

"Oh, dear." Molly’s face shows what John is thinking.

He sighs. "Tell me about it."

The case remains at a standstill for days, and Sherlock’s level of irritation is kept only barely at bay by crap telly and a climbing session, the scheduling of which had largely been determined by Jonathan's work shifts. Sherlock has practiced on the violin as well, but John thinks it's doing nothing to curb his anxiety. He’s like a tightly wound coil, ready to explode from the slightest prompt.

John pries a packet of nicotine patches from his fingers, and marches him off to First Ascent for their third visit. They could perhaps already have managed the safety measures on their own, but Jonathan happens to be present, standing in for the owner who has taken his dog to the vet. John notices Sherlock’s expression soften a little at the thought, and he'd actually asks about the breed of the dog: a Beagle.

John has made note of Sherlock's penchant for dogs before. John himself doesn't consider himself much of a dog person, and since Harry was allergic to most furry creatures, they'd never had a pet in the family.

By the time they'd changed their clothes, Sherlock hasn't even bothered to negotiate who would take the first belay turn. He simply grabs a top-rope, ties his figures of eight with two fisherman's knots, and then heads up the first slab route before John had even completely set up his belay.

John apologises to Jonathan, who had clearly been about to bollock Sherlock for his failure to follow the safety procedures. "It's best just to let him get on with it."

"Bad day?"

"Understatement of the year."

Sherlock makes good progress on the two routes they had pioneered during their last session, but even managing to climb them much faster than before does not seem to satisfy him.

When Jonathan tries to compliment him on his improved technique, Sherlock brushes it aside. "These are too easy. I need a proper challenge."

Sherlock's marginally milder mood doesn't last long when he actually is faced with that challenge.
An hour into their climbing session, considering that he'd just demanded John and Jonathan to shut up in order to allow him to concentrate, Sherlock is making an awful racket.

For a man who doesn’t ordinarily curse, the expletives that come echoing down the grain silo wall demonstrate just how rattled he must be.

Standing close to the wall, belaying, John hears it all, aware that it is the end product of a long series of setbacks.

He still doesn’t know what will work to help ease Sherlock past this phase, over the frustration. This is Sherlock’s third time attempting what should be a straightforward route bolted into the wall of the grain silo. It makes use of not only artificial holds, but also some protruding bricks in the wall’s structure. There’s a spot along the route where the next handhold is just beyond reach - even for someone as tall as Sherlock. A crux is what they call such a thing - meaning the most difficult, the most challenging part of a pitch or route - the bit that weeds out those unfit to handle the challenge.

Watching Jonathan climbing the route before Sherlock had had a go, John had opted out of even attempting it, simply going on a sideways detour about two meters to the left, where the handholds were more reachable. Unsurprisingly, Sherlock is hell bent on taking the same route Jonathan had done, and as a result he has now become stuck. Practically standing on his toes, trying to grip the handhold, his every attempt so far has resulted in his reach falling just that much short, losing his balance, and collapsing onto the rope. Each time the cursing gets louder, and on his latest try he bangs his fist on the wall, causing a bit of dust and plaster to rain down on John. As high up as Sherlock currently is, John can make out how sweat-matted his curls are, how badly his hands are shaking and how pale he’s getting. As usual, he's overdoing everything by a mile. And, as usual, John is at a loss to know what to say or do to make Sherlock stop beating himself up over such a thing.

Before they had left home John had felt tired, longing for a quiet night at home, perhaps with a bit of time for himself, but he's convinced they need to do this. It might really do Sherlock some good to pour his frustration into something physically demanding but less demandingly detailed than lab work or playing the violin.

After the fifth attempt at the seemingly impossible direct route, Sherlock’s swearing finally stops.

"You're not thinking about trying again, are you?" John hollers, looking up the wall.

Sherlock offers no reply, so John makes the decision for him by lowering him down.

At the bottom, he tries to offer some consolation. "Give it a rest, Sherlock. Let me have a go on something. Next time we come you can try again, only maybe you should take the detour on the second attempt. There are good holds off to both sides of the hard part."

Without a word, Sherlock unclips himself and storms off to the chairs and grabs a water bottle. He stands there, pushing the bottle onto his forehead to try and cool down, chest still heaving from the exertion. John can see the painful-looking scrapes on Sherlock’s knees and elbows even from where he is standing.

John sighs and starts to unfasten his belay gear to go talk to Sherlock, but Jonathan stops him.

"Let me,” he says.

John offers no reply, but Jonathan seems to take his silence for acceptance and heads for the line of
chairs.

John struggles to unfasten himself from the grigri device, but the locking carabiner is rather stiff. The screw safety lock is tight, possibly from bearing Sherlock’s weight during his failed attempts.

He steals a glance at the pair. Sherlock is pointing at the route, shaking his head. Jonathan sits down on the last chair on the row, and begins animatedly explaining something.

John is sceptical as to whether Sherlock would listen to anybody right now. He certainly isn't interested in anything John has had to say recently. To anyone else, he looks quite fine except for the weight loss unless he does something physically demanding, but the impossible demands he places on himself must mean that at present, he is bound to see himself as a failure.

It's all very logical, but it doesn't explain why Sherlock won't talk to him, and why he so completely withdraws from whatever connection they've had when John tries to prompt such a discussion. He used to think that there was trust there, that Sherlock knew he could come to him with his worries. Why the deliberate distance, that is only occasionally diluted by moments, where they actually do behave as if they're involved?

John does have a theory, one that tries to creep into his consciousness late at night, when the darkness allows exhaustion and desperation to mingle. He's tried to push it away, stubbornly refusing to consider it, because it would make the bottom drop from his universe.

The theory is this: what if he, too, is now a reminder of everything that's gone wrong, of those days at the ITU, of the chasm between how Sherlock is at present and how he used to see himself?

He has a sudden impulse to walk out, to get some air, but then he spots Jonathan walking back to him, a water bottle in hand which he gifts to John.

Sherlock discards his empty bottle in a rubbish bin, then clasps his arms behind his back and bends them upwards in a circle to loosen his shoulder blades. He then strides back to offer John the belay device he's just got out of.

Sherlock is not thinking about trying again, is he?

"Really?" John asks, making it known by his tone what he really thinks of the idea.

"Really," Sherlock imitates with a sneer, clips himself back onto the rope, and sets off up the route at an even quicker rate, building up speed and momentum as he goes.

He reaches the holds just below the crux of the route, then leaps up, grabbing the misbehaving handhold with both arms. A foot slips, and he yelps when his full force is suddenly forced onto his arms, his legs dangling momentarily in air until he manages to plant his feet against the wall, hanging by what looks like his fingernails from the precious handhold he has finally reached. Grunting and grimacing, he drags himself higher, finally clearing the section that’s been defeating him every previous attempt.

The last few metres up the route are slow. Sherlock reaches the top, touches the ceiling and then pushes himself off from the wall, a signal to John to lower him down.

Once on the ground, he collapses onto his knees, eyes closed. He coughs, lungs working like bellows, pale and sweaty. He leans his palms on his knees to stand up. He looks spent, but somehow serene.

John reaches out to unclip him, but Sherlock pushes his hands away, clearly wanting to do even
this last ritual himself.

His fingertips are crackled and there are bleeding bruises when his knuckles have scraped against the brick wall. The skin on his left knee has been practically chafed off. One of his finger joints is swollen and looks painful, and the nail of his left ring finger is hanging on only by the cuticle - it has probably been ripped off during a fall. Dried, crusted blood frames it.

John feels downright sick when he sees Sherlock raise the finger to his lips, clamp his teeth onto the nail and rip it out. He holds it between his thumb and forefinger as though he doesn't quite recognize it as his own, shoves it in his pocket - of course he'd keep such a thing - and heads for changing area.

No, when it comes to Sherlock Holmes, it's not okay to fail, not at anything.

Not even a little.

Conversation does not grow any more evident later that day. Sherlock buries his nose in chemistry books, muttering quietly about this and that, sticking increasingly indecipherable post-its on the sizable collection already on the wall. Eventually, he falls asleep on the sofa amidst randomly scattered notes, only to wake up an hour later with a gasp, eyes wide.

"Nightmare?" John asks calmly from his chair. The only light in the room is the flickering from a late night programme on the television. He should go to bed as well, but he'd stuck it out to see if Sherlock would head to the bedroom at some point.

Sherlock drags himself to a sitting position, eyes bloodshot and hair sticking out in all directions. He cards a hand through his curls, looking pale and young. "Yes."

"About?"

Sherlock curls his toes and stands up. "Irrelevant."

"Maybe, maybe not", John replies and trails behind Sherlock to the bedroom. Seated on the bed, Sherlock shoves the books he'd dumped on the bed to the floor. While walking to the other side of the bed, John idly runs a hand across his left shoulder, then touching the short hairs at the back of his neck until he gives Sherlock's right arm a squeeze. "The hospital?" he wagers a guess.

He decides to take the ensuing silence as affirmation. They slip under the covers. John rummages around the bedding for Sherlock's hand and gives it a gentle pat. He's not sure what Sherlock would prefer right now - solitude or company. His skin feels slightly clammy and his fingers are cold even under the duvet.

In the end, Sherlock makes the decision for him. John nearly yelps when icy toes get shoved between his shins. The rest of Sherlock eventually ends up nestled close to his side, John's arm under his neck. "My hand'll fall asleep like this," he points out.

Sherlock arranges it between them and jostles John around onto his back so that Sherlock can lie on his side, arm across John's torso. It takes a bit of negotiating to figure out how to evenly wrap the duvet around them.
"You don't have to tell me things you don't want to, but you need to know you can. If you need to",
John tells him quietly. He can't tell if the ensuing shift is a nod or just a readjustment of Sherlock's
position.

Sherlock stays close for a moment more before yawning and turning to his own side, but John is
glad for at least this much comfortable closeness. Maybe Sherlock had become a little too warm for
comfort.

Minutes later, Sherlock falls asleep. Actually asleep, which is an important distinction, and
witnessing it is something of a revelation.

What John had previously mistaken for Sherlock being asleep, was obviously what Sherlock had
observed in other people. He’d acted the part to perfection. Curled slightly on his side, he'd done
slow and even breaths, his muscles seemingly paralysed once REM sleep would have normally
taken hold. Apparently, he expertly mimicked these behaviours, when he wanted to fool people
into thinking he was asleep. For weeks since Sherlock’s return, John had been taken in by it.

Sherlock’s eyes start to shift beneath his closed eyelids. Then, the man begins to move. At one
point, John is nearly throttled by an arm thrown wide, as Sherlock decides to starfish across the
whole bed. It doesn't seem to matter if his feet dangle off the end of the bed, or if arms fall off the
side – he sleeps through it all, totally oblivious to this almost constant shifting.

John realises that Sherlock has likely had what looks like a REM sleep disorder for all the time
they've been living at Baker Street. Could this be linked to his neuro-atypicality? John makes a
mental note to ask Mycroft sometime.

After nearly half an hour of playing dodgems with flailing limbs, John decides he has to make a
choice - either abandon ship for the sofa, or come up with a solution. His shoulder would hate him
even more than it already did, if he slept on the sofa, so he decides to take a calculated risk. The
next time Sherlock moves, John shuffles over in the bed until his chest is right up against
Sherlock’s back. Then he moves his hips in, so his groin is curved around Sherlock's bottom. Then
he puts his left arm over Sherlock’s arm, creating what could only be described as a soft embrace.

It works. The thrashing stops, and Sherlock’s breathing begins to approach the rhythm of John’s.
Relishing a rare moment in which he doesn't have to second-guess everything he does because he
feared that Sherlock would run for the hills at any moment, John buries his nose in the dishevelled
curls on the pillow in front of him. Despite their height difference and the fact that Sherlock's
current physique is full of hard angles as though he was made of bean poles strung together, they fit
together just perfectly.

John relishes every occasion that he gets to get close like this, because when Sherlock initiates
intimacy, the moment seems heavily laden with apprehension. The night when John had fetched
him from the bathroom had been a rare exception. When John himself starts something he's always
left wondering if Sherlock is going along with it only because he thinks John wants to. He
remembers his own nightmares about the war, which had become rather scarce during the recent
years. When waking up from them, he would have liked nothing better than to have someone close.
In a strange way, this feels as though they've been doing it for years.

John stays awake for some time more, relishing the closeness he is again allowed, albeit in
Sherlock’s sleep. It isn't long before John, too, drifts away.
John wanders to the kitchen around nine in the morning.

Sherlock is rosining his bow, frowning as the block keeps slipping off the hairs. He puts down the block, makes a fist and then flexes it open, fingers splayed.

"Do you want a hand?" John asks out of politeness - in truth, what he wants is tea and a cross-eyed look at the paper, but he would prefer not to have to try to enjoy those things in the vicinity of Sherlock emanating such tension as he currently is. The fingers that were ripped raw and the nail that had been torn off two days prior on that last climb are bound to be giving him hell. John knows he probably should have dug out the first aid box and had a look, but has learned by now not to mention such things, or ask Sherlock to give his body any other kind of slack. John had found discarded pieces of the parchment backing of plasters in the bathroom so Sherlock must have attended to the issue himself.

Sherlock slides a finger between the stick and the horse hairs to stiffen them so that he can more easily scratch the rosin block against it. He doesn't even deign to reply to John's question.

John tries again. "Did you sleep well?"

There is no answer.

Great. It's one of those moods, continued. Yesterday, Sherlock had barricaded himself on the sofa with books and pillows, mostly ignoring John. He looked as though he had barely moved during the day when John returned from a long, impromptu work shift.

At least some of the anger he has been carrying around seems to have dissipated. Instead, Sherlock seems more distracted, lost in thought, distant, and John keeps finding him in front of the bathroom mirror or staring out onto the rainy streets as though he's been mesmerised by something he's seen there, and completely forgotten about his surroundings.

Helen, the violin tutor, is due for a session in half an hour. John notices Sherlock is still barefoot. He can handle all other items of clothing now, including socks, but tying shoelaces still takes a long time, and the tied ends tend be so loose that the bow disintegrates, unless John does it for him. He still stubbornly refuses to wear anything other than his lace-ups.

That just about summarises the situation. Sherlock is still trapped in denial that there is anything that stops him from doing just what he used to do, irrespective of whether he can manage it or not. Such determination does give him that drive that leads to even the most challenging mysteries getting cracked, but when turned inward like this, to John it feels rather frightening and most decidedly not healthy.

Yet, he doesn't regret the climbing. At least the first session had put Sherlock in a better mood than anything else lately, and even the last one had at least proven that when presented with a challenge, he'll gladly participate in some sort of physical exercise.

Still, there is another thing that scares John, now, besides Sherlock's self-destructive determination:
he finds his own mood being dragged down to the depths by his inability to help, and the way things have stagnated. He can't tell if things are getting better, but he can tell that Sherlock isn't happy, and his own conviction is weakening as to whether he - or anyone else - can make a difference to that. Sherlock has always drawn all the attention in the room wherever he goes, and his black mood that seems to have become a permanent climate state, is like a black hole sucking in what little light John tries to bring in. Still, quitting is not an option, not for either of them. They've lost too much and risked too much and wasted too much time already.

After having a cup of tea and some toast John finds himself a pair of trousers and a jumper, just in time before there's a knock on the door. He then tries to draw as little attention to himself as he can while lingering in the kitchen as Sherlock and Helen get to work.

John is quite certain he'd woken up briefly at some point during the morning to hear Sherlock practicing, and it seems to have paid off: his left hand on the fingerboard is getting faster.

They're doing scales again today, changing between sharper, shorter notes and longer ones with a singing tone - *legato* is what Sherlock had told him the technique is called. When played in that way, notes are supposed to sort of blend into each other.

There's another word of Italian that frequently gets mentioned - *vibrato*; the vibration that marks most of the longer notes, a waver that gives the violin a distinctive, polished voice, created by rolling the fingers of the left hand against the fingerboard. Sherlock had told him there are two types - arm vibrato and wrist vibrato; advanced-level violinists can make use of either, depending on their finger position and the sound they want. He had demonstrated the technique to John, slowly, since he had asked, but hadn't let John try it himself during their short practice session late last night, insisting it's too difficult for him at this point.

John had done some half-hearted practice on his own, but he has been unable to escape the notion that Sherlock giving lessons is for Sherlock, not him, so it doesn't really matter how far he gets.

It must speak volumes for Helen's Sherlock-managing skills that the man is taking this so seriously. He obviously has few expectations for John, but he's dutifully finding exercises online to demonstrate the basics, and correcting John with a patience unexpected from a man who usually has trouble letting people finish entire sentences before cutting in. At times, John has the strange sense of being let in on a secret; he now knows that anything related to music and the violin is terribly important to Sherlock, so maybe teaching him about it somehow makes Sherlock feel like John is trying to understand him by complying.

Despite all of this, John has to admit he has been finding excuses to avoid the violin lessons, because his shoulder is really not fond of playing it. As he reaches to put the tea canister back in the kitchen cupboard, his shoulder gives him a sharp reminder of the exertions from two days prior. *At least this time the excuse is real.*

John winces when Helen makes Sherlock repeat a particularly high and especially screechy note over and over again. While fetching some half-drunk mugs of tea from the sitting room, John steals a glance at Sherlock and sees that he's trying to arrange his left little finger on the E-string to hit the right note. The distal joint keeps snapping straight, as though there isn't enough strength there to keep all the small joints flexed.

John knows that finger more intimately than probably any other part of Sherlock, since he'd given it temporary asylum on his own palm. This little finger had saved probably both their sanities. It had been a lifeline, their only means of communication for days and days. He will forever remember how it felt, holding hands like that.
He misses it. He misses those moments when it felt like there was a connection there, an understanding, a thread running between the two of them, the closest to telepathy John could imagine ever getting. They went through that hell together, hand in hand, but after Sherlock had no longer needed him to communicate for him, it had felt as though a tether had been cut, a back turned. There had been that conversation in the winter garden, of course, and a motley collection of happier moments during Sherlock's early recovery - moments when flickers of the old Sherlock&John had been present - but now that they're supposed to actually be together, John has never felt more apart. He tries to remember Sherlock is not pushing him away deliberately, but who could possibly take rejection day in and day out without feeling a little stung by it all?

"Your little finger is all over the place," Helen points out.

Sherlock suddenly lets the bow drag across all four strings, creating a dissonant chord any modern composer would be proud of. "I know!" he exclaims loudly, clearly exasperated. He lets the violin slip from his collarbone and drops it on the sofa. His bow hand descends as well, fingers slipping off their position.

Helen glances at her wristwatch. "We've still got a few minutes. Do you want to try the Gavotte again?"

"No. I have work to do," Sherlock says dismissively.

John wonders what work that could possibly be. They haven't heard from Lestrade in days, and Watford's body has been released to the relatives.

Helen looks slightly disappointed. "Alright. Friday, then?"

Sherlock doesn't reply. Helen puts her own violin in its case and heads for the coat rack.

"He woke up like that," John says with a rueful smile when he thinks Sherlock is out of earshot.

"What did he do to his hands? His fingertips look like he stuck them inside a meat grinder!"

John gives an apologetic shrug. "We've taken up indoor climbing. He took out some of his frustrations on the wall."

Helen looks relieved. "Good, glad to hear it's just that. I was afraid that he might have done something to hurt himself because of the violin. Self-harm is a risk."

That pulls John’s thoughts up short. It’s not the first time Helen's bluntness has caught him off guard and made him feel a bit naive. "Really?"

"Yes." She looks sad. "I didn’t see it in my own husband until too late. Losing one's occupation can easily bring on depression, self-harm, even suicide, as it did in his case. When I took on this job, I promised myself I would always care more about my clients’ mental health than their musicianship."

"Oh, God." John theatrically smacks himself on the forehead. "I’m an idiot. I am so sorry to have brought that up."

"It's fine," Helen says, "It happened, and if something good can come of it, then I'm not going to bury it under the floorboards. With your explanation about his hands, I won't worry. There's bound to be good days and bad days. He's progressing well, considering."

"Considering?" John asks. Helen has been wholly supportive so far, so even this minor note of
Pessimism is new.

"Considering I had my doubts as to whether he'd be able to play again."

"You never said that before," John replies quietly.

"I was worried he would see the gap between his current potential and the level he used to be at as too big, and decide to call it quits, despite how much the instrument may have meant to him. He’s struggling so much now, because he can’t reconnect to it, at least not yet. The more he improves his motor control, the more frustrated he’s going to get, if he doesn’t learn to relax, to focus more on the music than achieving perfect technique. So, this is a tough time. I hope he doesn’t quit."

"Sherlock doesn't quit," John says, "You should see him on cases." And climbing walls, he adds silently as she nods and lets herself out the front door.

It may, however, only be half the truth. Does he truly not give up, or have they simply not reached a stage yet where that would happen?

John remembers Mycroft’s warnings again; maybe Sherlock never quitting things means that sometimes he pushes himself forward even when he shouldn’t.

Five hours later, he realises that climbing the walls of Baker Street should be added to the list of things that Sherlock won't call quits on. After Helen had left, John had spent a good chunk of the day watching Sherlock’s increasing frustration coming out in tiny little tells. He can't seem to be still, so his classic ghostly perambulation has made a reappearance. From a thumb that constantly flicks his index finger, to the path worn in the carpet between the sofa, around the kitchen table and then to the mantelpiece before returning to stare out of the window for a moment, Sherlock’s anxiety is becoming increasingly contagious. When he isn’t pacing, he’s flitting between picking up the violin to practice a couple of scales - until he hits a bum note, and put the instrument down with a grimace. He then flops onto the sofa and stares at the ceiling while pretending to read a forensic journal without turning a single page. Invariably, the magazine gets flung onto the floor, and the pacing resumes. It’s like the worst days of nicotine withdrawal all over again.

Whenever John tries to get him to talk, Sherlock just shakes his head. Twice, when he’s really pressed, John gets a terse "Thinking!" in reply, and a dismissal in the form of a waved hand. Finally, after John's fifth attempt, Sherlock shoves on the headphones, descends upon the sofa like an overgrown bat in his black bathrobe, and tunes John out.

At quarter to four, John delivers a cup of tea to the coffee table and removes the half-full, stone cold one left there since lunchtime. The meal that Sherlock had refused to eat has been returned to the fridge, with a yellow sticky telling him to put it in the microwave to heat up if he actually opens
the fridge door in search of sustenance.

John taps on Sherlock’s shoulder, and gets startled by how fast those oddly coloured irises snap open to glare at him.

"What?!

There is annoyance in the tone, but John takes it in his stride. "I’m off to work soon. Your supper is in the fridge. I’ll be back before midnight," he informs Sherlock after stretching one headphone away from his scalp.

Sherlock nods, then tears off the headphones completely, heading for the bathroom.

John uses the opportunity to tidy up the pile of forensic journals that Sherlock has tossed aside onto the floor in his frustration. His phone rings, and he finds himself hoping that it is the clinic, saying that they don’t need him tonight after all. But, it turns out to be Lestrade.

"He really isn't coming?" the DI asks.

"To what?" John asks.

"Sherlock isn't answering his phone or his texts. I told him we have the Watford pre-Inquest hearing with the Coroner today at five. It’s his chance to make a case that this was murder. All we’ve got is what he has to say, and the ballistics and post-mortem reports, which confirm what he thought from day one - that the shots had been fired from less than three metres away into a body that was already dead from some sort of a heart attack. Definitely not a drive-by, since the trajectories radiate outwards from one point. The shooter could have tried to fake a moving point of firing by taking a step forward after each shot to line up for the next one, but they didn't."

"You've told Sherlock all that?"

"I did, yeah, in a text. It’s the only thing that makes this less than an open and shut case of sudden or unexpected death. The post mortem report isn’t strong enough to warrant the coroner calling for new, costly forensics tests to be done on the samples we got from Watford, and, apart from the seemingly unrelated location we found the body and the bullets fired into it, there’s not much that points to murder."

"Sherlock hasn't said anything about an Inquest being today," John admits. Normally not even wild horses could keep Sherlock away from such an event, not if there was a point to prove.

"I’m grasping at straws here, but what did he do in the lab? Anything that could help us, at all?" Lestrade’s frustration is evident. "Molly tells me he couldn't find anything."

"He has found something he keeps calling the murder weapon, but there is too little of it to be able to do the science to separate it out. Some alkaloid or other. It’s not enough, and he’s pissed off about it. Seems to be taking it personally."

"Damn. How’s he going to take it if the Coroner decides it’s just natural causes? If that is the case, then the stalling that the personal trainers are doing is going to pay off - the warrants will fall away once the decision is not misadventure or unlawful killing. Look, I have enough work as is, and I'll be glad to be able to close this one early, but he's right in that things don't add up, that we really don't know what happened, and that should annoy anyone. Does Sherlock still want to keep updated?"

"Tell me first, will you?" John says, although he's wondering what he’s going to say if the ruling
won't match Sherlock’s conclusions about murder that won't lead to a strop and shooting the messenger. "I've got a twilight shift – six until ten - this evening, but I think I could wiggle my way out of it if something really juicy comes up. Keep me posted. Some good news would be nice for a change," he says, hopefully. He knows that calling the locum agency with some excuse that would warrant a replacement being sent mid-shift would not go down well - they've already warned him once for cancelling too many shifts on short notice. There are other agencies, but the problem that The Work often requires short-notice attendance will probably never go away. He needs to work to preserve his medical licence.

"Sure thing," the DI answers with a laugh. "You know it says something about the two us that he’s got us both thinking that a murder ruling is good news."

Minutes later, John is standing by the closed bedroom door. He knocks. "Sherlock?"

"Go away," is the reply.

"I need to change for work, and this is my bedroom, now, too," *in case you've forgotten,* John is tempted to add. He doesn't have any expectations about their new arrangement right now, John is honestly doesn't, but not knowing what it is that Sherlock expects is making things awkward.

He opens the door and steps in, since it isn't locked. Not even when he'd slept upstairs had Sherlock ever locked his own bedroom door. It had seemed important for them to be able to access each other's spaces, in case of assassins and whatnot.

Sherlock is sitting on the bed, and it seems like he's not doing anything in particular.

"Lestrade called," John says. "Any reason you wouldn't want to be there for the pre-inquest hearing?"

"Tedious," Sherlock says dismissively, gaze roving across the walls, voice distant. He's pinching the skin on his forearm in a distracted, repetitive manner that, to John, looks painful and odd.

John sits down next to him on the bed. He still has plenty of time before he needs to be at the surgery. His instinct is to cancel work - again - and stay in. He remembers when Sherlock had tricked the surgery into thinking he was ill, and John had reasoned that it was probably because he simply hadn't wanted to be alone. A sudden surge of protectiveness kicks in, and John doesn't really know why.

He puts a hand on Sherlock's shoulder, in the hopes of reassuring him.

There's a flinch, and a breath before Sherlock drops his shoulder, allowing the hand to stay there.

"Sorry," John says reflexively.

Sherlock touches the back of John’s hand with his fingertips gently, as if to discern what exactly has been placed there. "It's--- fine."

"Helen said something that stuck with me. It was about being over-sensitised, I think, about things feeling painful that shouldn't. Was that something you talked to her about on the phone, or---?" he
leaves the sentence unfinished, in the hope that Sherlock might fill in the blanks.

"I assume you've read all my hospital and Harwich records," Sherlock says in a flat monotone, letting his hand drop away from John’s.

"I haven't, apart from the diagnostics results that were told to me first and in person. The rest are all confidential. I know you probably wouldn't mind, but I would have asked permission first."

Sherlock snorts. "Mycroft has never awarded me that sort of courtesy."

"If there's anything I need to know, I hope you'll tell me."

"Define 'need to know'. If they are not things you can fix, why bother dwelling on them?"

*Because you clearly are?* But John doesn’t voice this. Instead, he tries a different tactic: "We haven't really talked all that much since the National. Well, bits and pieces, but not... about what you told me," John tries to explain. Why is this so hard?

Sherlock is now regarding him with mild interest and apprehension, as though he doesn't know whether to flee or to launch an interrogation.

John feels as though that pair of strange-coloured eyes are dissecting him already, before he has even said anything very revealing. But something in him says he has to do this *now*. The weeks of uncertainty, and now Sherlock’s increasing distance over the past few days, has driven John right to the edge. He draws in a quick breath. They *both* need to hear this. "I'd like to know if you're still in."

"In what?" Sherlock asks and John briefly wonders if Sherlock deliberately wants to torment him, or if he genuinely cannot deduce what John is trying to ask.

John decides to bite the bullet. "Love," he says. "In love."

"Of course," Sherlock says sharply, as though John has dared to question whether the Earth is round or not or if the sun sets in the west.

It should be the answer John was expecting, but it has come too quickly and too abruptly, somehow. Or maybe he shouldn't inspect it that carefully. "It's just that I wonder if there's something you don't like, or something that's affecting the way you're... reacting to things, to me. Is something getting in the way of dealing with what's happening? Like... pain, for instance?"

Thankfully Sherlock has stopped the painful twisting of his arm. There's a red blotch on the skin. John lays his palm gently on it. "Is this sort of touching alright?"

Sherlock nods. "Sometimes... When you do something without prior notice, it's almost painful. *Especially* if it's not done very firmly."

Now they're getting somewhere. "You mean like this?" John asks, replicating the way he'd gently landed his palm on Sherlock's shoulder.

Sherlock actually squirms away from his touch.

John wonders if this is due to the after-effects of the GBS or Sherlock's long-term sensory issues. Maybe the point is largely academic. "Over-sensitivity is to be expected, given the battering your nerves have had. What they prescribed you should help, or at least keep it from getting worse - but it takes time. The nervous system adapts slowly, and fixes itself even more slowly."
"Or not at all. Nerve regeneration often fails to happen altogether."

"You haven't lost the nerves, they just went offline." There is the fact that the myelin sheaths surrounding them had been wrecked, and in some severe cases recovery may not be complete, but right now it probably isn't useful to bring that up. Besides, he suspects Sherlock is painfully aware of that fact. "Now that the nerves are working again, it takes some time for them to recalibrate - over-interpretation of normal things such as pain could be part of that process."

Sherlock lets out a breath, as if disappointed. He says dully, "I've done the research, doctor. It's sensory neurons requiring more input than before for the gate neurons higher up in the tracts to kick in and limit the amount of information reaching the brain. I know that, but it doesn't change anything."

"You put your body through a lot, two days ago on that wall," John says. "Any side-effects?"

"Muscle cramps, mostly. Knots in shoulders if I sit too long in the same position. Random aches that I can ignore. Some areas are currently registering touch as pain, like you suggested."

"Such as?"

"Fingers."

John's brows knit together. Does this mean that violin practice has been causing Sherlock actual, significant pain? The notion makes him remember Helen’s self-harm comment. Has Sherlock been practicing with such a vengeance, and ignoring his injuries on the wall, because he is somehow using the pain to punish himself? The thought makes John feel sick. He finds he hates the violin sometimes, no matter how important it might be to Sherlock, if it demands such insane ignorance of reason and comfort. All John can manage to voice is a bit of basic anatomy. "It's logical that your changes would be most prominent in places where there are more nerve endings than average."

He takes firm hold of Sherlock’s right hand - and finally inspects the torn nail and the rip in the cuticle that extends right down to the nail bed. When he presses down on the swollen skin near where the nail used to be, Sherlock hisses. He doesn't like how warm and sore the finger is. He makes a mental note to check on it tomorrow and consider antibiotics if it starts looking infected. "Do you actually like the climbing if it’s causing you pain?"

"It’s different. I can’t decide yet if it’s something I’m going to continue, but I like the idea of problem solving, even if they are simple, beginner ones. It does hurt, especially during the last attempts."

"But I thought the nail came off at the crux of the last go?"

"No, it happened on the slab route after warmup," Sherlock says nonchalantly, as though it's the most normal and sane thing in the universe to continue climbing after a bloody nail has been ripped off. Leave it to Sherlock to see the intellectual challenge of finding the route to be worth the pain. "Then why did you keep doing it even after?" John asks.

"Because failing is not an option."

It makes John’s heart break a bit to hear that. "Why not? I think we’d better stop the climbing, and scale back the violin, too. Give yourself a chance to heal."

Sherlock snatches his hand out of John’s. "You don't get to make that call. All of you are trying so hard to help me, but no one can. It’s my fault that I can’t get past these problems. I’ve failed the
case, the violin is a struggle, so don’t you dare say I should stop the climbing. It’s the only thing I’ve managed to do right. I did it, I got past that crux," he practically pleads.

That makes John wonder yet again what it was that Jonathan had said to Sherlock that gave him the means to push past it. "What was it that cracked it for you?"

"He called it the dead point."

John feels a slight pang of anxiety at the wording, even though he doesn't know what it means. "What’s that?"

"The dead point is part of a dynamic climbing technique. I’ve been taking things too slowly, trying to be too methodical, breaking everything down into a static style of movements and pauses. In other words, I’ve been too careful. He said I should imagine the crux as the top of a parabolic arc, while I quickly move my weight upward dynamically. The dead point is the point your body changes directions vertically. At the dead point, your hand should be at the top of the arch and at the hold - it's what determines whether you'll fail or succeed. At this point your upward direction has stopped and you need to get a grip on the hold before your weight begins to settle. As long as I could manage the pain that comes after, I could do it."

To John the explanation sounds sensible and not ominous anymore. He'd seen Jonathan do what must have been a similar move - it had almost looked like taking a few running steps up the wall while quickly changing handholds, then leaping up and grabbing a more elusive spot until his body began dropping, at which point he had a firm hold higher up. Must be murder on the upper limbs, though. John has no desire to try such a manoeuvre himself.

"Fear of the pain was stopping me. That’s what the illness has done to me, made me afraid." Sherlock says quietly.

John slides his arms around Sherlock’s waist and tugs him closer. They're now side by side, with Sherlock's hands on his own lap, palms upwards as though in supplication.

Sherlock leans slightly forward instead of relaxing against John, but doesn't make a move to disentangle, either. He sighs. "I’m getting tired of not feeling good. I can’t even enjoy something like this." Patting John’s arm stiffly, he continues "…Something I wanted for so long. Something I still want, even if my body can’t appreciate it. Will it stop, ever?" He turns to look John in the eyes, "Don’t, just don’t tell me a lie."

All the reassuring phrases that have been ingrained into John by years of medical school and working as a doctor vanish into thin air under the assault of that plea. "I don't know," he finally starts to admit, because he's being asked for honesty instead of empty promises, even if that honesty shatters both of them. He bites his tongue against adding in the word, 'love' after his answer to soften the blow, wishing he had some acceptable endearment at his disposal, but Sherlock doesn't seem like a person who would appreciate pet names. Judging by what little John has learned of his childhood and youth through the years, Sherlock may well have had a collection of nicknames given by others, but few, if any, of them had likely been very flattering. 'Freak' may just be the last one in a long list.

Sherlock is studying his face, looking as though he's expecting a further blow. He looks like something left out in the rain, discarded, abandoned. "Will it ever change?" he repeats himself, as though he'd found John's answer unacceptable, and erased it from his memory. He watches John, probably trying to over-analyse every shift of expression, every blink of an eye, every syllable.

Feeling exposed under the scrutiny, all John can manage, is a quiet "I hope so."
Chapter End Notes

Our writing soundtrack.
Walking On Old Paths

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

John is going to work.

The thought is unsettling.

It means that Sherlock is going to be alone in the flat, again. Yesterday had been bad enough, and today is certainly not one of the better days. There are no good days anymore, only bad or bearable ones. Right now, being left behind with nothing but the contents of his own head for company is a terrifying idea, because his control is slipping.

He has revealed too much to John today; he had let slip his insecurities, even given John a glimpse into the depth of difficulty now inherent in interpreting physical sensations. He had also admitted to John how fed up he was with feeling so alien to himself. He doubts John had understood a single word. As a doctor, he operates on the level of symptoms and evidence, of things that are there to be measured and evaluated. There is no way to evaluate or measure this kind of absence in any meaningful, scientific way.

At the hospital, Sherlock had thought that the muscle weakness and the loss of feeling were the worst parts. He had naively thought, that once the disease finally withdrew like a morning fog, it would leave him as he had been before - not in this state of in-between. He doesn't trust the vertigo to stay gone, he doesn't trust his muscles to function, he can't trust the syndrome will not relapse. Every minute could be borrowed time. No one can promise that the Guillain-Barré isn't going to come back and rob him of what little he has regained. This is the edge of an abyss, without a top rope or belay. This is the moment of sheer panic before freefall and then a crash landing. It could happen again.

He still watches himself constantly, examines every sensation for signs that there could be a relapse. It's highly distracting, because he's spent his life trying to tune out the alarm calls of the Transport.

He has always been sensitive to many things - filtering the constant barrage of information that the universe flings at him has always been a challenge. There is a long list of smells he abhors. Many tastes and textures of food are off-putting. He has learned to deal with his senses being keener than is good for him, and but now they are feeding his brain distorted and downright false information, and it requires an astounding amount of effort not to bang his head against the wall to make it stop.

Desperation had commandeered his tongue, and he'd let loose the question that haunts his every waking hour: will it ever get better, in any permanent way? He appreciates that John had not resorted to pointless platitudes and empty promises in his answer. "I don't know", "I hope so" - six words of more honesty than he remembers getting from anyone for a long time.

John has hope, but he's not the one whose very life hangs in the balance. It doesn't even matter how well he does physically, it's his head that's beginning to worry him above all. The meltdowns are unacceptable. Why have they returned? Why is he disintegrating like this? It's crucial he project an image of being able to cope, because he knows what will happen if that effort failed, and he's not going through that again. John is already talking to Mycroft about him. The sudden thought that he
might be fighting against a tide makes him feel like he's sucked out to sea by an unstoppable current. He's not ill, in the sense that he was at the National, but he's not well, either. What if John being here won't be enough to keep him together? Surely losing whatever weak grip he has of his sanity will convince John even further that whatever the thing is that Sherlock calls love, can't possibly be that - that if his perception can't be trusted, his emotional state might be doubtful, too? Was that not what John had believed at the National - that when he was not well, he was in no state to actually understand what was going on, or sensibly decide what he wanted?

He has no energy, and he can't concentrate. During the past two days, he has begun to forget where he is, what he was supposed to be doing in the room he discovers having wandered into. He chases his thoughts like errant butterflies, but they scatter to the wind, evaporate like mist, and he can't get hold of any of them. He can't sit still, can't focus, because of the churning mass of panic and desire to flee that his brain has become. There is a drumbeat of adrenaline in his blood that he can actually hear in his ears and feel prickling in his veins. Yet another useless ghost sensation uniquely designed to drive him mad.

The anxiety had begun to properly build up when John had mentioned over breakfast that he had a locum shift today, too. How many does he actually need to keep his license? Does he want to get away from Sherlock?

He had decided to hide in the bedroom until John leaves, or until he comes up with something to make him stop wanting to peel off layers of himself with something sharp, until there's nothing left but the sort of real pain that even his broken brain, misfiring spinal column and mauld nerves would understand and signal correctly. With dreadfully exquisite timing, John had then had decided to enter the bedroom and, instead of dressing for work as he had promised, the man had decided that now was the time to stop beating around the bush and demand they address the elephant in the room. What else could this sudden interrogation and haptic exercise have been about? Sherlock's suspicion had been confirmed, when John had actually said the words.

'Are you still in?' John had asked, as if being in love is something that easy to ascertain, as though it's possible to reduce such a concept to a simple yes or no question.

The posing of the question means that John doubts his conviction and his devotion. This is how far they've drifted apart, and it's all his fault. When it comes to John, his heart is all in, always has been, but his head isn't following and his body... he doesn't even want to think about.

Sherlock knows his answer had been quick, too quick, judging by John’s reaction. He did not, does not have the courage to ask his own of John in return. What if he asks, and then deduces that John means no, even if he says yes? Even without the question, their conversation leaves him wondering if John still loves him, despite the fact that it is becoming clear that Sherlock may never be the version of himself that John fell in love with.

It's all his own fault, of course. He had initiated a relationship, and John now assumes that it's only a matter of time before Sherlock makes good on his promise of more. What else could possibly draw the line between friends and lovers than sex, intimacy, sharing of emotions, revealing of truths he doesn't even want to know himself? Of course it's not all about sex, it never has been, but none of the other sides of it feel any easier. He has deduced that John, in his conviction to treat him like a fragile thing, is looking to him to take the lead, in several aspects of their relationship, which is patently unfair. If John doubts his abilities in everything else, why assume that love, of all things, is something that he could manage properly right now?

He had actually tried to explain some of this to John in terms of the climbing, using the dead point as an analogy. It’s the only way he can explain such fear of pain and of failure. John had tried to
reassure him, but his admittedly optimistic 'I hope so' leaves so much room for doubt. Or worse, it may actually confirm to Sherlock that John's love depends on him returning back to what he was.

What he is now, is a bundle of nerves, hanging out of every inch of his skin. Life itself, just breathing, is tinged with a horrid halo, a corona of orange that he knows is just pain in a different guise. Whether it's physical or just in his head, he doesn't even know anymore. Was there ever really a distinction? Does it matter? John thinks it's about the pain. It isn't. Most of the time that's manageable, or occasionally absent. It's the only thing that might actually be withdrawing, getting better.

The moment the front door closes behind John, Sherlock starts to pace.

He needs to think through all of this before this escalating anxiety drives him into a sensory storm, because ignoring these things clearly isn't working. He needs to solve it, even though human emotion is a Moebius strip: the more he tries to find a solution, to make sense of its twists and turns, the more he feels like being constantly returned back to the start, where nothing makes sense.

He so desperately does not want to disappoint John, yet he knows he is doing just that. The man expects physical contact - the hand on his shoulder, holding his fingers under the pretense of looking at the damage to his nail, then the arm around his waist. He'd woken up once sometime during the night with John attached to his back like a limpet, and Sherlock had to wiggle out to his freedom to be able to resume sleep. John's subconscious wants more than Sherlock can give him, when awake and driven by anxiety as he is these days.

His thoughts shift to the case. Lestrade is expecting him to continue with this wretched Watford murder, conjuring up some chemistry miracle to convince the coroner not to rule out murder. Lestrade trusted his opinion over that of the rest of his team and now Sherlock has let him down. The looks he'll get when he goes back to the Met will be full of schadenfreude. They will take his now officially overruled theory as further proof of his insanity.

If he goes back to the Met, that is. What if Lestrade concludes that Sherlock no longer offers enough value to the investigations - that it's not worth the fuss he invariably causes? He has already been judged volatile. The Work could vanish overnight, a casualty of his incompetence.

On the third circuit of the sitting room, his eye alights on the violin case. He knows that if he picks up the violin to do even the most childish of pieces that Helen has picked out for him to practice, they will sound terrible. He keeps making the same mistakes, and those mistakes will keep ripping him out of the headspace he seeks when playing - feeling the music, forgetting about the rest of the world. The pain in his fingers, the nail driven into his ear at every missed note or screechy string, keep hammering home the truth that the feeling good part of music will never, ever come back.

And lurking in the shadows is Mycroft, who has expected him to fail, practically ever since the day he had been born. Mycroft thinks being big brother simply means running damage control and reducing the risk of Sherlock's failures ending up killing him. His brotherly love has always been of the suffocating kind without any faith as to Sherlock's ability to overcome his difficulties.

He drops to the floor, wrapping his arms around his knees. He's just so tired. Everything requires such an effort; everything reminds him of what he's lost, things he doesn't want to think about. He doesn't understand why he keeps feeling progressively worse, why his temper and his concentration are all over the place. Nothing new has happened during the past week, has it?

He needs a single moment of clarity, just five minutes without the doubt that drags him down and makes him hesitant in both his steps and his words. He wants to feel things as they should feel,
without his nervous system betraying him. He needs to feel like himself again, even if just for a moment.

The damaged nail bed of his finger is throbbing. He allows himself a morbid daydream about slicing open the rest of his fingertips and then climbing the crux on that wall again, because that pain he could understand, as opposed to the searing, burning feeling in his gut he gets now, without anything physically harming him. On the wall, he’d used his anger to get around the obstacle, but even that now feels tapped out, leaving in its place only despair. If only this grey haze that poisons everything and makes him doubt even himself so completely would lift!

He hadn’t been honest with John - or at least had not told him the whole truth about what Jonathan had said to help him over the crux. Jonathan’s words about the dead point had been as he had repeated to John, but after that Jonathan had spoken further: "You need to get over your fear of failing. Climbing is about learning how to make a good fall. If you climb, you will fall eventually. Until you do it a lot, you won’t learn to trust the top rope and your belayer. When you make a good fall, and learn the lesson that it won’t kill you, only then you'll learn to climb better."

He needs that, a good sort of fall. He wants to let go, to seize the moment, to forget about common sense and the constant doubt. He wants to kiss John, wants to wrap his arms around him, feel every inch of him without having to constantly question his senses. He wants to hear, and taste, and smell, and immerse himself in the very essence of John, carve out a place for himself in the man's arms and stay there, to learn what makes the inconspicuous bomb that is John Watson tick and go off. He wants to be so completely everything to John that he would tell Sherlock that no woman could ever compete, ever. He wants to find a way to crawl out of his own head.

The desire to give up is dangerously tempting, to withdraw from everything, to retreat to the Mind Palace, to give in to the illusion that he isn't real, since the connection to his body has been lost. He has fought the temptation to disappear into those empty, imaginary halls, because he recognizes how addictive that avoidance could now become. He knows that his dissociative skills, this ease with which he can let go of reality, is a bit not good, possibly unhealthy, certainly pathological - they did lock him up for it once.

There is a chemical alternative on offer, of course, but the logistics of it are currently troublesome, and if he makes a miscalculation it might lead to John or Mycroft finding out. The problem had never been the drugs, no matter what Mycroft thinks. The problem has always been him.

He stands up, his back complaining of the hunched position he’d sat it. He feels so much older than he is.

He needs to stop thinking about all of this. He ought to try to be sensible and optimistic in order to preserve his sanity and flimsy peace of mind, at least for a moment longer. He needs to take a timeout, spend some time without thinking of the case, or the violin, or anything else, really. He can still decide which side of the dead point this is - the momentum upwards, or the fall without a grip. He tries to convince himself he could push the emptiness away for a moment more, if he wants to, as long as there are no sucker punches to further crumble his state of mind today.

He has wandered to the sitting room window without realising. The sun is setting.

Maybe he should go to the Inquest, after all, just to have something to do - even if it proves pointless. It might offer a pathetic momentary distraction to argue with some idiot Coroner. If he hurried, he might make it on time. Anything would be better than doing more thinking.

There's a knock on the door before he can make a definite decision. Sherlock turns on his heels just as someone starts opening it.
"Oh," Sherlock says, losing his interest after recognizing it's Mrs Hudson.

"There's a man downstairs with a delivery for you, from a florist of all places. Shall I let him in?"

John comes home an hour after his shift had officially ended. He had been forced to linger behind after the clinic closed, in order to wait for ambulance transport for an elderly woman struck down by acute cardiac dysfunction. It's a Thursday night and not the weekend, but the London emergency services tend to be busy with drunks, accidents and drunks who have had accidents on any given day. At least the polite near-centenarian appreciates his efforts, and shares bits of her colourful life with John while they wait.

He listens only with half an ear. During the course of the evening he had fired off a few texts to Sherlock. What worries John is that no reply has come. According to his phone’s messaging software, they have been read, but that fact offers only a modicum of relief.

He should have cancelled this shift, but he's convinced the agency would probably have dropped him. He had already received two warnings for cancelling so many shifts on short notice. Word does go around, and he worries about getting more work if he gets kicked out of a well-known service. He needs to hang onto normality, and work is part of it, even if he finds it hard to concentrate on it right now due to his thoughts constantly turning back to Sherlock. He'd picked up more than a few shifts when Sherlock had been at Harwich, which had certainly improved his finances. Mycroft had sorted out all their living expenses during Sherlock's sick leave, but John liked to think he wasn't dependent on the charity of the older Holmes brother.

For a while after coming home from Harwich, Sherlock had seemed oddly reluctant to allow John out of his sight. He hadn't protested tonight's shift, and John likes to think their conversation had ended if not exactly on a high note, then at least with some modicum of reassurance, since Sherlock had actually opened up to him, at least a bit. John hadn't been all that surprised by most of the things Sherlock had said, but the sadness and surrender carried by those words had been worrying. For someone to ignore or potentially even find reassurance in pain is a thought John can't reconcile.

Finally, Mrs Cotton gets picked up by an ambulance.

It feels like karmic justice for all the overtime that John easily manages to hail a cab at midnight.

From the back seat, he texts Sherlock again: **HEADING HOME FINALLY. LET'S HAVE A LIE-IN TOMORROW.** He presses 'send', and only after the fact begins to suspect that Sherlock, in his infinite capacity of over-analysing everything, may misinterpret this as a come-on. It's not meant that way, it really isn't, and Sherlock certainly doesn't have a habit of picking up on even very blatant innuendo, but he's been very touchy lately when it comes to even broaching the subject of
certain aspects of their relationship.

*MAYBE I'LL EVEN LET YOU PESTER MRS HUDSON FOR BREAKFAST*, John types into a second text he sends in order to soften the effect.

John wonders if it's just the result of his own pointless insecurities that makes him think he needs to walk on eggshells like this. He hasn't ventured into these waters before - starting a relationship with a man - and no sort of prior experience could probably offer many pointers on embarking on an adventure like that with *Sherlock* of all people. There's no roadmap here. All John has to go by is intuition.

He arrives home to an empty flat. The kitchen lights are on, and so is the television, as though Sherlock had either left in a hurry, or intended to return within a few minutes after popping out. He hopes that Sherlock hasn't gone out to buy cigarettes. He's hardly in a state for a longer walk in the middle of the night, either.

John checks all the rooms, even his own former bedroom upstairs: no sign of Sherlock. He checks the foyer: Sherlock's coat is missing. Phone nowhere to be seen, either. Gone out, then, not kidnapped. Besides, there would likely have been signs of a scuffle in the flat, had that been the case.

John nearly slaps himself on the forehead when he notices a post-it stuck to the television - Sherlock sometimes leaves such things on the fridge, and that's where he'd checked already, but in his haste, had not paid too much attention to the sitting room.

*GONE OUT. WORK. SH*, the haphazardly scrawled note says.

Sherlock had probably decided to join Lestrade at the pre-Inquest hearing, after all, or there could have been a new development in the case. But, even if this is the case, what could be keeping Sherlock out so late? If the Coroner’s reaction had not backed Sherlock’s view, how would he have taken it? As yet more proof of his failing ability? John draws a shaky breath. If he could only be certain of Sherlock's whereabouts right now, he might actually be able to relax a bit - something he hasn't done much lately. Tonight's shift has exhausted him, made him realize that he's been on edge for weeks, now. He's spent the last six months - Harwich notwithstanding - so attuned to Sherlock's moods and whims that he had sometimes wondered where one of them ended and the other began. After Sherlock's discharge from hospital, the upkeep of that connection had become painfully, exhaustingly one-sided.

John doesn't really know what he had expected to come out of the conversation he'd painstakingly induced hours earlier. He worries that maybe Sherlock has taken it the wrong way and is now convinced that John had succumbed into scepticism, too. John's only consolation is that Sherlock hadn't told him he'd made a mistake, that he didn't want any of this, after all.

The precarious, uncomfortable status quo continues, then.

John finds a half-dried bread roll - leftovers from some takeaway - in the bread bin, which he stuffs in his mouth without bothering to find the tub of margarine that must still be in the fridge. In the
old days, he would have worried whether any of the containers in the fridge actually held what it said in the label, but the appliance had been much safer to approach during the past few months than it used to. No experiments. Yet another thing Sherlock is avoiding.

After swallowing down the last bit of his meagre meal with half a glass of tap water, John kills the ceiling light in the kitchen. He turns off the television as well, but he's sure he doesn't want to go to bed without knowing where Sherlock is and that he is all right.

WHERE ARE YOU? He texts. When the game is on, Sherlock doesn't always keep his phone on or answer messages, but it's worth a try.

He tries to call Lestrade, but there's no answer. That might actually be confirmation that something important is going on with the case.

The silence in the flat feels worse than having to endure Sherlock filling it with nervous energy. John still can't put his finger on what is causing the worst of it. There are, of course, many things that are not right with Sherlock; not yet, anyway, which is hardly surprising. He still has a long way to recover physically, and anyone having gone through a severe case of GBS would be rattled by the experience, and likely also embarrassed by others witnessing their physical decline. The possibility of having lost the edge of his violin skills, maybe even permanently, must be daunting.

It all seems clear and logical: Sherlock is not all right, because he's under a lot of pressure. No one would be all right at this point. It's just that John fears he has only skimmed the surface of the issues here. There's something more going on, something that's related to how suspiciously Sherlock treats everything he views as an attempt to help or get to the bottom of what he's struggling with.

Helen had spoken of confidence issues, which, when it comes to the violin and other physical stuff, are understandable. What John can't seem to grasp is that these issues seem to now extend even to The Work. Why? At the crime scene and Watford's apartment, John hadn't seen or heard anything that would make him doubt Sherlock's abilities.

He's thinking about whether it's time to text Mycroft to see if he knows where Sherlock is, when he hears the front door open and slam closed downstairs, followed by a muffled thud.

He can then hear the door to Mrs Hudson's apartment opening. John decides to go down and make sure she hasn't fallen in the stairwell and is now trying desperately to get into her apartment.

The stairwell and the downstairs foyer are dark. Only a sliver of moonlight paints the walls a dull, nightly grey.

What John finds when he gets down is not Mrs Hudson. The landlady is present, however, hovering over the crouched figure by the front door which must've been the source of the noise. Her head snaps up, hair rollers jiggling. "Oh, John, thank God!"

As John negotiates the last steps, realization dawns who their mysterious nocturnal visitor is. This is no stranger, that's for sure. He drops onto his knees, hands outstretched, to try and make sense of the heap of woollen coat and blackish curls on the floor.

Sherlock rolls onto his back, eyes staring up into the ceiling. "Oh," he says absent-mindedly, "Hello, John." His features melt into a wide smile, eyes somewhat unfocused.

On his knee beside Sherlock, John can smell the mix of tobacco smoke and whisky that tell him the man has probably spent at least a part of his evening in a pub. Maybe celebrating a
breakthrough in the case? Anger flares up in John - why would Lestrade dump Sherlock at home in this state of exhaustion and inebriation? Must have been one hell of a wrap-up party.

"Are you drunk, Sherlock?" John find himself a little shocked, because in all the time he has known Sherlock he’s never agreed to having more than the equivalent of a glass of champagne or a shot of whisky, claiming it was bad for the brainwork.

Mrs Hudson turns on the ceiling light, visibly shivering in her nightgown.

Sherlock flinches, covers his head with the Belstaff, and groans. John wonders if his sensory issues get worse under the influence of alcohol. That could be a logical reason to avoid drinking. He doesn’t want Sherlock to throw up, if that's the case. "Mrs Hudson - that light’s too bright. Turn it off, please. We need something that won’t bother his eyes."

Tutting, Mrs Hudson switches the ceiling light off, and then heads for the small antique table lamp at the far end of the hall just inside her door. A dim, pinkish light creeps down the hall.

She lets out a yelp of surprise when she looks back down the hall at the two men.

After following her line of sight to Sherlock’s face, John’s jaw drops. "What the hell happened to you?" he demands. Even in the dim light, he can see the mottled red and swollen skin from Sherlock's jaw right up to the temple on the left side. On the left cheekbone, the skin is broken, raw and torn. His nose had bled but does not look swollen; brownish, crusted blood flecks his philtrum. His lower lip is split, doubled in size, and there's a sizable bruise on his chin as well.

"A dis--- disagreement," Sherlock slurs, "You should see the other guy." He then practically giggles. "Oh, John, it was glorious!" he announces and attempts to get up, only to turn a little green in the face and slump back down.

John runs his fingers along Sherlock's cheekbones, jaw and hairline. His forefinger brushes along Sherlock's neck, where he finds distended neck veins and a startlingly high heart rate. In the dim light, he can see that Sherlock’s pupils are wide, but they do react to the light symmetrically when he hovers his hand back and forth to block out the light at the end of the hall.

He looks up at Mrs Hudson. "Pissed as a newt. I think we'd better get him off the floor. Don't know about the stairs, though."

Mrs Hudson, the saint of a woman, opens her flat door wider. "I think he'll fit on the sofa. I'll find a blanket. We'll see about getting the whisky stench off the coat tomorrow." She hurries inside.

"Right, let’s get you more comfortable." John drags Sherlock up into what distantly resembles a standing position. The taller man is more pliable than usual; languid limbs drop around John in what is clearly an attempt at an embrace.

"Hmm, you smell good." Sherlock pulls John even closer to him and as his balance tips him forward into Sherlock’s groin, he can feel the evidence of the man’s arousal. "Want to go to bed now," Sherlock's slurry baritone vibrates straight into John's ear and down his spine.

"Christ. For the first time since his release from the hospital, Sherlock is reacting physically to his presence. He feels like yelling 'timing!', but can’t do it. Just when there is no possibility of taking that pleasant surprise anywhere else, the man decides to get randy. The thought is a little sad - that being drunk is what Sherlock needed to loosen his inhibitions. Is the idea that frightening when sober?

John makes a mental note to have a thorough yell at Lestrade for letting Sherlock get quite so
sozzled. Still, he can't help feeling relieved and happy at seeing Sherlock in such a good mood, thrashing or no thrashing. "Did you at least catch him, then?" he asks, while trying to keep Sherlock upright.

"I’ve caught you; don’t want anyone else." Sherlock mutters into John’s hair.

"Yup, you’ve definitely had too much," John half-heartedly complains under his breath, and then slips himself under Sherlock’s right arm and starts steering him down the corridor to where Mrs Hudson is waiting, smiling at the pair of them.

Once they get to the safety of Mrs Hudson's living room, assisted by the unfazed landlady, John cleans Sherlock's face with some warm water and a flannel. Sherlock talks throughout the whole process to no one in particular - going through case facts and going off on tangents about the London street grid, the taxonomy of gibbons and Latin vocabulary of Moon phases. John is very much looking forward to hearing how these things could possibly have led to the solving of a case mostly related to people being too fond of big muscles, but that will have to wait until Sherlock is a little more coherent.

After being coaxed to take a tablet of paracetamol with some water, Sherlock allows another closer inspection of his injuries, now that there's no blood covering up bruises and cuts. Nothing seems to be broken. Even with a bump at the back of Sherlock's head, John discerns that there's no need for a trip to A&E since there are no alarming neurological findings, nothing pointing to a significant loss of consciousness, and Sherlock isn't complaining of dizziness, headache or nausea. Everything he isn't managing right now can be easily be chalked up to his inebriation. All they would do at an A&E was observation, and he and Mrs Hudson are perfectly capable of handling that at home. John is certain Lestrade would have arranged such a thing anyway, had Sherlock shown any truly worrying symptoms before being deposited home. Or, the DI would have at least contacted John.

Sherlock must've only felt the full effects of the drinks after he had left the pub.

Some fifteen minutes later, after being escorted to the sofa and divested of his coat, Sherlock falls into a fitful sleep while John holds a bag of frozen peas to his jaw.

Mrs Hudson is sitting in her usual armchair, knitting, when John finally retreats from the sofa.
"You go up to bed, John. I’ll keep an eye on him."

"You should be the one to go to bed, Mrs Hudson. You’re not his nurse", John points out in just the same tone as she employs when insisting that she's not a housekeeper, either. They share a quiet conspiratorial chuckle.

"Not a problem. I’m an old woman who never sleeps anyway. This is no hardship for me. You look like you could use a quiet night as well. Go on, upstairs now."

John drags himself back to their flat, half asleep before he even gets to the bedroom. As he strips off and shuffles over to the bed, he can’t help but smile. Sherlock had behaved as though getting hurt while apprehending a suspect was the best and most fun he’s had in months. Sherlock Holmes, the happy drunk. As insane as it might be from the perspective of a normal person, John gets it. Many a brilliant moment had been shared between the two of them in an adrenaline haze right after the conclusion of an adventure, both of them nursing something like black eyes, sprained ankles, knife wounds or ligature marks. Getting back to The Work, and finally achieving some success in it must have felt wonderful. This is The Work, this is what Sherlock and him used to do all the time - what they will do again.

Maybe they've finally turned a corner.
Chapter title borrowed from Ane Brun's apt song "What's Happening With You And Him". You can have a listen to it via our writing soundtrack playlist.
A Rude Awakening

John's phone rings at six in the morning. After a mere three hours of sleep, he nearly drops the phone in his frantic scramble to answer it with sleep-fumbly fingers. "Hello?" he asks with an urgent tone, expecting Mrs Hudson at the other end.

"Morning," greets the glacial voice of Mycroft Holmes.

John throws himself back against the pillows and lets his eyes drift shut again. Does no one in the Holmes family ever sleep? Is he about to get a bollocking for not stopping Sherlock's celebratory pub crawl last night?

"Good morning," John drawls and yawns. He wonders how Mycroft could have even got wind of what has happened, assuming it's the reason he's calling. Does he have Sherlock followed on CCTV when there's a case on, or even when there isn't? John reasons that he probably does. He wouldn't be surprised if Mr British Government had even bugged the loo just to be thorough. He certainly hopes the man's prurience doesn't extend to the bedroom.

"I assure you that no part of this morning is good," Mycroft says sternly. "I need you to meet me downstairs."

John groans. "You're already here, aren't you?" The thought of slithering out of this warm bed feels nothing short of masochistic.

"Obviously," Mycroft says, sounding eerily like Sherlock. This doesn't often happen since Sherlock's tone tends to be more emotionally varied than his brother's, who to John often sounds like icy sarcasm is his mother tongue and English only came later in life.

"Right. Give me five minutes," John says.

What he should have said is fuck off, but Mycroft probably won't give up until whatever he needs to talk about at this awful hour on a Sunday morning has been covered. And, if John can run interference for Sherlock and give him a bit more time to recover from what will likely be an epic hangover, before having to put up with the big brother reprimand, all the better. On occasion, John himself has been in need of the release that came with being thoroughly drunk, as too many of his medical school and army friends would testify. He's certainly not going to be as holier-than-thou as Mycroft about it.

John grabs his stripy bathrobe and slips it on over his pyjamas. He can't be bothered to get properly dressed at this hour, especially not for Mycroft Holmes.

The air outside is misty and bitingly cold, but thankfully the impressive black Bentley waiting outside has perfectly adjusted climate control. When John opens the rear passenger door, a reassuring blast of heat envelops him as he slides to the seat facing away from the driver. He half expects Anthea - or whatever her name is - to be present, but the only other person in the back of
the car is Mycroft, looking as though he's slept even less than John.

"How is he?" Mycroft demands.

"Probably fine, since Mrs Hudson hasn't come to fetch me. Sleeping, most likely. He does that nowadays," John explains almost proudly.

"You left that old woman to mind him?" Mycroft's tone is laden heavy with disapproval. "I hope she at least had the sense to wake him up at regular intervals."

"It's not the first time Sherlock's got himself a possible concussion." There had been a bit of a bruised bump at the back of his head, but John's brief but thorough exam had pointed to nothing more serious than the effects of what smelled like whisky. "That old woman can certainly handle someone with a hangover who got into a brawl."

"Is that what he told you?" Mycroft asks with a bit of mockery.

"Got shoved around by a murder suspect. It's not as though that hasn't happened before," John snaps back. Mycroft has always been alarmingly well up to date whenever Sherlock has landed himself in a hospital, descending upon the scene usually within an hour, but he certainly doesn't usually make an appearance for smaller injuries or minor ailments.

"You're awfully cavalier about him being assaulted."

John crosses his arms. "Yes, I'm angry that Lestrade let that happen, and even more angry that even though he was pretty bloody marinated they just dropped him off at home without anyone making sure he didn't need help getting in the door. What I'm not angry about is that he's trying to get on with his life, and is doing so without needing constant harassment from you."

"Detective Inspector Lestrade had nothing to do with what happened last night," Mycroft says with more than a hint of condescension. He's regarding John with a look that artfully merges disappointment with disbelief over his assumed idiocy, but then again Mycroft always looks at people like that.

"You're saying… what?" A cold stone suddenly hits the bottom of John's stomach. "What do you mean?"

Mycroft shifts on his seat and produces a small laptop from a slot in the door. "See for yourself. Sherlock has, as usual, been economical with the truth, and more than willing to mislead even you."

He flips open the lid of the computer, turns the screen to face John and presses play. What comes on is CCTV footage of a nondescript alley presumably somewhere in London. A group of men are smoking, drinking and talking at the end of it. At the start of the alley appears a fourth man, whose coat carries a very familiar shape. Sherlock wanders closer to the group, taking his time. He appears to ask for a light. After the request being granted, he then smokes a cigarette, leaning against a wall. After a moment, the group begins to converse with him. Then it starts: one of the men throws his drink in Sherlock’s face, while another takes a swing at him. Sherlock is initially good at blocking the lower blows, but in the end, gets hit with a well-placed hook into his jaw and another to his face. He staggers backward, only to have one of the thugs fling him backward against the nearby brick wall. Thankfully, a police car then drives by, making the group quickly disperse.

On the tape, Sherlock turns slightly, takes a staggering step and then slides into a sitting position
against the wall.

"He spent a half hour there before I assume his head cleared enough to be able to drag himself to a better-lit street, from where he managed to hail a cab. The fact that the driver failed to deposit him at the nearest Accidents and Emergencies Unit is regrettable, so he must've been coherent enough to argue at that point."

John looks up, astonished, shocked and worried in equal measure.

"Where were your people? Or you? He could have had his skull fractured!"

Mycroft glowers at him from across the leather back seat. "Contrary to what Sherlock might have told you, I do have things to do other than watching him on CCTV. If you must know, I was still in Vienna last night. There have been most regrettable budget cuts, and the skeleton crew of the surveillance team at that hour regrettably lost his trace after his departure from Baker Street. Rest assured their work assignments now match their mental acuities. It took some time for image recognition software to identify him at that scene you've just watched." There is cold steel and barely contained anger in the look he is giving John. "I might ask the same of you. Where were you, when he needed someone to tell him what a dangerous stunt he was pulling?"

John's instinct is to get to Sherlock right now, to check him again, to make sure there aren't any injuries he could have missed, but most importantly, to ask what the flaming fuck Sherlock thinks he's doing, picking fights with people in alleys even when outnumbered from the start, and still far from any state of recovery to be picking fights of any sort.

Mycroft isn't finished with him. "Perhaps you would be interested to find out where this transpired."

"It doesn't matter what pub he went to, does it?" John asks. "He came home reeking," he adds.

Mycroft rolls his eyes. "You've just seen some lowlife throw alcohol on him, which well explains that. Think again, this time about Brixton. Does that name ring a bell?"

John hasn't got a clue what Mycroft is implying. "We've been there plenty of times."

"Before Sherlock sought his evening entertainment in this particular alley, CCTV captured him entering an abandoned apartment building in 3 Lauriston Gardens. I assume this address holds some significance to you?"

"It's---" John doesn't have to rack his brain long: "The pink case. Our first case. What did he do there?"

"As far as anyone can tell, nothing. From there, however, he made several stops along routes frequented by some of his old acquaintances." The last word is spoken with even deeper disapproval.

"He's got friends in Brixton?" John asks, irritated at Mycroft's cryptic accusations. "Who?"

"Dealers, John," Mycroft says, now sounding resigned - as though he'd wanted to spare both himself and John from the pain of someone saying the word out loud.

"No," John says sternly. "Just--- no. I've been with him for weeks. It's not that. He's actually talking to me, he's trying to follow through with things, he's exercising. He wouldn't relapse like this. It's not that," he says and in his own ears, he sounds as though he's begging.
"So, he's fine, then? That's your assessment?"

"Well, not exactly. Not yet, but he's making progress---"

"If this were a patient of yours, someone you didn't know personally, how would you describe the situation?"

"That's pointless. I'd hardly know how they were behaving at home. When they come for appointments, people are great at downplaying their problems at the surgery, if they want to."

"My point exactly. 'People are great at downplaying their problems, if they want to'. Let me rephrase: were Sherlock just another patient of yours, what course of treatment would you suggest at this point in his rehabilitation, if you suspected a drug relapse?" Mycroft asks.

John looks out the window, painfully aware that he’s probably letting false optimism cloud his judgment, and Mycroft has just called him out on it. He forces himself to face the man again. Quietly, he admits, "Psych consult. Assuming a drug relapse is proven, some sort of an addicts' support group, a program of cognitive behaviour therapy. If there was evidence of systematic, long-term drug abuse, then a detox rehab, and a treatment plan that involved all of the above." He then lets out an exasperated breath. None of those things would work with Sherlock - the very idea is preposterous. Sherlock probably eats psychiatrists for breakfast and picks his teeth with AA badges. John can hardly imagine Sherlock at some GBS survivors' peer support gathering, either. None of those people are Sherlock, as the man would probably be the first to insist.

"You think the GBS has driven him to this? Couldn't this just be... I don't know... a one-off, a chance to blow off steam?" John suggests, aware that he may be grasping at straws.

Mycroft's face takes on a blend of pity and condescension. "If your professional opinion were not compromised by your personal relationship with the patient in question, then you would know how deeply ignorant of the very nature of addiction that suggestion is, and how inefficient your, shall I call it a wait-and-see tactic, is proving. I have kept my distance in the hopes that your presence would continue to be the stabilizing factor that it has admittedly been in his life before now, but I can't turn a blind eye to this."

"Nobody's turning a bloody blind eye! Maybe I just don't pass judgment as fast as you do."

Mycroft clearly isn't interested in his counterarguments. "Perhaps it's high time to admit that being home has not proven to be conducive to his recovery. I suspect he is too preoccupied with things that are detrimental to him at this point. I suggest we consider that he come and stay with me for the time being. I can monitor him, introduce a more comprehensive routine of rehabilitation. You have allowed him too much free rein."

John is so furious his hands are shaking. "You are not taking him away! Not again, and least of all without him being consulted at all about what he wants! He doesn't need more of your reins and structure; it only makes things worse if he feels boxed in!"

"I did not choose Harwich with the purpose of childish bedevilment or the removal of your influence. I helped provide Sherlock with the finest care in the country. I find it odd, against the backdrop of your profession, that you would disapprove, even hold what very much resembles a petty grudge over it."

"He was lonely and bloody miserable there. Even an idiot could see that."

"And now that he is home, he no longer matches that description? Has your incomparable presence
cured the blues and put him back on track? Clearly, it has, since he has seen fit to celebrate with a seven percent solution."

John has never wanted to punch Mycroft Holmes more than he does right now. He squares his shoulders and does not shy away from looking Mycroft straight in the eye, even when the man is clearly trying to intimidate and belittle him. It's not easy, hearing his own fears of failure echoed back at him by someone who knows Sherlock so well, but he can't back away and let Mycroft take over. "I can handle this. Like I said, I think he's even beginning to talk to me, at least a little. It's damned unfair, you stepping back, throwing it all on me until things get bad and only then swooping in all high and mighty."

"I see there is little hope of presenting a united front on this. Having to battle you as well as him will not help his state of mind. I must still ask you to consider if the choice you are making for him right now stems solely from your desire to further his wellbeing, or from a rather selfish desire to keep him at home?"

"I don't know what goes on in his head at least ninety-five percent of the time, but I do know this - send him away from Baker Street right now, and you'll only stress him further, and enable him to block out everything that's bothering him. Again. The reason why I thought Harwich was not all good is because it was a really convenient escape, a break from real life. He could have done rehab from home, gradually adjusting to being back, but instead, that was postponed until he was discharged, and he probably thought everyone expected him to be right as rain and fit to work the minute he was discharged with fanfare from Harwich."

"Why would anyone have assumed that?"

"It doesn't matter what anyone else assumes. It's what he would have assumed. Jump through the hoops, go through the program, then you can go home."

"May I remind you that he was given plenty of counsel regarding recommendations of the Harwich physicians regarding a follow-up to the physical therapy routines introduced there. He failed to adhere to any part of those recommendations. I very much doubt the outcome would have been different, had he been discharged home early, straight from the National."

John glances out of the window. He doesn't have a good counter to that, which deflates some of his anger. Mycroft is probably right, but the gist of the issue does not even lie with the physical therapy. Regardless of whether Sherlock had been sent home, to Harwich or the bloody Moon from the National, John believes that he would have adamantly refused to talk about what had happened and how he was feeling. Of that John is absolutely certain. What he isn't sure about is why. Sherlock distrusts those sent or volunteering to help him, and that's where the piece is missing in the story. He probably needs to hear from Sherlock why he tries to derail every attempt to get him to face his anxieties. He needs to understand why, and Sherlock is the one with the answers. Coming from anyone else they'd be just conjecture.

Mycroft clears his throat to return to the discussion. "Do you honestly think he will trust you with the truth when it comes to issues pertaining to his recovery?"

John nods even though it may be half a lie, but he will lose this battle otherwise.

Without a word, Mycroft pulls out a beige cardboard folder from his briefcase and passes it to John. "Think again, Doctor. You don't know the full truth, and you will never receive it from him."

John reads the label on the cover, opens the folder and then slams it shut. Judging by the thickness of it, and the label on top, it looks as though these are Sherlock's medical records, likely reaching
all the way to his early childhood. "No. This is not on, you hear me? Don't you have any idea what a breach of confidence this is, not to mention *fucking illegal?*

"When it comes to the well-being and survival of my brother, I am willing and able to bend the rules. Someone has to since your judgment has been compromised by your decision to share Sherlock’s bed," Mycroft sniffs.

There it is, then, the gist of why Mycroft thinks he isn't up to the job. He's too close, too willing to give Sherlock the benefit of the doubt. It infuriates John to think Mycroft believes that he would be willing to watch everything go down in flames just because he's wearing rose-tinted glasses. He's wrong. He's so fucking wrong, but John has no idea how to prove him otherwise. "Why do you think I need these?" John says in a mock-innocent tone, placing his hand on the cover of the folder to signal he has no intention of inspecting its contents. He is repelled by the invasion of privacy that the folder represents.

"You will need those in order to avoid making the mistakes I made in 2007, because we cannot be far from a repeat of it, and Lord knows he needs all the help you can give him."

John is shocked. He nearly loses his grip on the folder, which threatens to spill its contents all over his lap and the car floor.

Mycroft Holmes admitting a failure?

For a moment, John is torn between needing to preserve Sherlock's trust, and finding out what the hell Mycroft is talking about.

Undeterred, the elder Holmes continues, "If he's falling back into old habits, he isn't *progressing*. But it’s worse than that. His relapses have been very consistent in that each time he falls, things get worse. It's been years since the last one, and that one nearly killed him, as the files you are refusing to look at show. I'd desperately hoped this day wouldn't come, which is why your cavalier attitude makes me most alarmed."

Almost forlornly, John sticks to his one argument. "I can spot the signs. This *has* to be the first time, and he just got lucky that I didn’t realise it last night. He knows I will put two and two together, that it's a matter of time before it's out in the open. *He must* know that." Sherlock does consider him an idiot in some matters, but John hopes he has enough sense to realise that living with a doctor with experience of assessing trauma patients at emergency departments, many of them addicts, means that hiding a hard drug habit is an endeavour destined to fail.

"You may be giving him more credit than is due; his ability to assess the consequences of his choices has never been a strength. If something has happened to trigger this, he may be volatile enough not to care about how either of us would react," Mycroft points out. His tone then turns bitter. "You once asked about his nervous ticks. Drug use is such a tic, one way in which he controls stress when his mental prowess falls short. Considering how often he makes use of his other compensatory mechanisms, you can understand how delicate his state of mind is even at its most stable. And it is far from stable at the moment."

John listens, gripping the folder with a ferocity that matches his dismay.

"He knows how to protect himself from stress by withdrawing from others, dissociating - you saw it at the hospital and possibly at Harwich. Retreating into the Mind Palace is the least pathological manner in which he employs these skills. I worried he might resort to such things more during his hospitalization, and I would certainly have expected him to agree to sedation, to wish for the chemical oblivion during the worst parts of it, but somehow *you* were incentive enough to maintain
his connection to the world."

John closes his eyes. He remembers the words, the choice Sherlock had made, as though he'd heard then whispered to him mere moments ago. 'Awake. With you.' Not even John had really understood why he'd chosen that. Maybe letting go of reality wasn't such a relief, at that time, after all, since what was happening to Sherlock likely felt like his connection to the world was disappearing, anyway?

If his memories of the National are this intense, what must it be like for Sherlock? Every time John tries to imagine what's going through his head, it's all just theory and guesswork.

"Combining narcotics with his propensity to dissociate carries a risk of his grasp on reality eroding to a dangerous degree. I understand he suffered an episode of delirium at the National?"

"It doesn't require a flimsy grasp on reality for an ITU patient to go through that. Anyone might, especially if put on a respirator for a long time. It's a recognized medical syndrome with an accepted list of risk factors. His case ticked nearly all the boxes."

Leaning back against the leather seat, Mycroft summarizes, "Regardless, the facts are as follows: he isn't himself, which you have been regrettably reluctant to believe, allowing the situation to escalate to a point where he relapses."

"Not that reluctant anymore," John is forced to admit. "But why now? Why yesterday?"

"That is something I should be asking you," Mycroft says, "But it seems that my brother has mystified us both."

A stone seems to settle on John's chest. It's guilt, mostly - guilt for leaving Sherlock alone despite what his instinct had been trying to tell him yesterday. He had been naïve enough to take the conversation they'd had as a positive development instead of realising Sherlock's state of mind was likely not all that much improved by it.

Mycroft nods at the folder. "I would advise you to read the notes so that you would have the full picture. I cannot force you to do so, but I know that Sherlock will not tell you these things, and you need to know them so you won't repeat my mistakes, whatever they have been."

Looking at the file, John realises reading it contains a risk that he will never think of Sherlock in the same way - that the words contained there might make even him seek easy, fatalistic explanations for Sherlock's behaviour, seeing illness and disorder in what had before been just *sherlockness*. That’s been part of the problem ever since the GBS diagnosis: John has had to think as a doctor, and it’s got in the way. He makes up his mind and passes the folder back to Mycroft. "No," he says adamantly. "This is not the way."

"Sherlock himself often says that it's impossible to operate without the requisite data. Have you ever made your stance on a potential relapse clear to him, whatever that may be?"

"I trust him to understand how I'd feel about it and to realise it's a destructive idea. He'd be an idiot to think I wouldn't intervene. He didn't come to me with this, but I doubt he's advertised his intentions to anyone else, ever, either. He needs to realise this isn't a solution, but he needs to come to that realisation himself."

"You're willing to trust him? Still?"

"Yes. And to have some bloody confidence in him, unlike you. Maybe that's what needs to be done differently this time."
Mycroft looks positively shell-shocked. He had probably been expecting the opposite from John after this intervention, expecting Sherlock to be watched like a hawk, for them to formulate a unified regime of control.

John has no way of knowing if he's making the right choice, but his gut feeling is that this is the only way to go. At least the only way he's willing to do this. Helping Sherlock and taking his side seems like the only way to preserve the last bits of control Sherlock probably feels he has over his own life. The GBS took control from him, and if John tries to limit his freedom or his choices now, he will be fighting a losing battle. If that notion offends Mycroft, then so be it.

Whatever help Sherlock needs, whatever difficult discussions he will have to initiate, John knows that the trust he needs to receive will not be given if he reads these files. He's not going to stoop to Mycroft's level. He owes that to Sherlock.

One sheet of paper from the folder has slipped out and ended up by his feet. He picks it up, and while passing it to Mycroft he inadvertently gets a glimpse of it.

_**Intake form, Royal Bethlem Hospital, 3rd November 2007**, _ the headline reads. Below, the words section 2 are written.

In other words, it's proof of involuntary treatment at a psychiatric unit.

John briefly second-guesses his decision not to know, but he realises this should change nothing. It's Sherlock's right to determine what he shares of his life, not anyone else's.

His heart in his throat, John shoves the paper onto the seat and exits the car.

While he hurries inside, he briefly wonders about Sherlock's visit to Lauriston Gardens. Was it a trip down memory lane? Did he go there to remember the case or the fact that it had been the first one they'd worked on together? Was it to remind himself of what life had been like back then when everything had been new and uncomplicated, what he'd been capable of before?

John calls the locum agency from the downstairs hall, informing them that he will not be taking on any work for the time being. Yes, family reasons. No, he doesn't know how long resolving them will take.

John then knocks on Mrs Hudson's door. Thankfully, she's already dressed and invites him in.

"Come in, John. He hasn't woken up yet," Mrs Hudson says, pointing a fork she is holding towards the living room. "Slept the night through, poor boy. Mind you, he did wake up whenever I shook his shoulder and then the lights went right out again." She then tuts, "My sofa's going to reek from all that whisky. I'll have to get it cleaned before I invite Mrs Turner in, or she'll think I've been drinking on the sly. Never mind. I'm cooking him breakfast, there's plenty for the both of you. My husband always said the best solution to a hangover was a full English. Besides, I want to thank Sherlock for the flowers, even though they are a bit funereal."

John is frowning, cogs turning in his head over what the hell he's going to actually say to Sherlock, not really listening to her prattle, but something Mrs Hudson had said has caught his attention. "Flowers?"

"They're lovely, John, they really are, he must've spent a fortune. The florist delivered them to him and then he came down and gave them to me. I don't really understand the card, though - the hip has not been acting that bad, honestly---"

Something really isn't adding up here. Sherlock doesn't buy people flowers. This is yet another
uncharacteristic thing he's been doing lately, and even in that context, this is deeply confounding.

"Show me?" John asks, trying to look encouraging but he suspects the edge of anger might be bleeding into his voice. He needs to not explode when he talks to Sherlock, but right now he there is a significant amount of residual anger in him after being told off by Mycroft, and disappointment over Sherlock's decision-making.

Mrs Hudson beams. She turns off the stove and goes to the sitting room, John trailing behind.

Sherlock is snoring on the sofa, swaddled in a motley collection of quilts and blankets. His lip is even more swollen now, giving his naturally pouty look a cartoonish quality. The scrape across his cheek looks sore. A thin film of sweat glistens on his cheeks and forehead even though it isn't very warm in the flat, and the veins on his neck are distended, likely pointing to elevated blood pressure even though he's sleeping. Now that he knows what he is looking for, the signs are there. He'd been an idiot to miss them last night, the biggest being that Sherlock doesn't drink. Period.

Mrs Hudson points at a side table. "I brought them in here last night to fight off the whisky fumes," she whispers conspiratorially.

A huge bouquet of white trumpet lilies, surrounded by thistles, with ivy trailing down the sides has been placed in a large vase on the table. Funereal is the word that occurs to John, too, when he takes in the sight.

Next, to the vase, there's a card. It's a white one, folded in two, but half of the lower part has been ripped off. There's a pre-printed text on the cover in posh calligraphy: Get Well Soon.

Mrs Hudson doubles down to smell one of the lilies, looking content. "When I let in the delivery yesterday, I never would have thought it was Sherlock's doing. I'd have easily believed they had the wrong house."

"Were these delivered directly to you?"

"No, to Sherlock. I told you, he came down to give them to me."

"And there was nothing on that card? You didn't rip a part of it off?"

"Why would I have?"

Without offering an explanation to the now confounded Mrs Hudson, John runs upstairs.

He up-ends every waste-paper basket and bin in the house until he finds what he's looking for in the bedroom. He dumps the lot on the bed.

A sliver of white cardboard, with one ripped edge.

Under it, two photographs with the picture side facing down. John turns them over.

The first one is of Sherlock in hospital, intubation- and nasogastric tubes still in place. He looks as though he's sleeping. John can see that it was taken late on when Sherlock was at the very depths of the GBS. His face is gaunt, ravaged and even in sleep, pain is etched on his face; he looks totally worn down by the horror of the illness.

It is an image that John, himself, would very much like to forget. He realises in a flash that Sherlock would hate seeing himself like this, that he'd be shocked to be exposed to such an image without warning. One advantage of being bed-bound and paralysed - no mirrors. He’d seen his own
reflection once when he'd already been on the respirator after asking John to offer him that
glimpse. He had seemed surprisingly unaffected by it then, even appearing a little disbelieving.
John strongly suspects seeing something like this now, especially if unexpectedly, could have sent
him reeling.

The second photo is from Harwich, of the two of them sitting on a bench in the garden. Side by
side, the contrast between his own health and the frailty in Sherlock is visible. Sherlock looks lost
and withdrawn, almost expressionless, while John is looking in the opposite direction, his eyes
attracted by something that has made him smile. This, too, is a cruel picture.

With shaking hands, John turns the ripped-off piece of card over.

_He may have forgotten how much fun you can be, but I haven’t._

_xoxo_

_ J. Moriarty_
Sherlock dreams of ravens, until sunlight begins to stream in through his closed eyelids, shading the darkness red.

Slowly, other senses come online as well. His nostrils are being assaulted by a heady, sickly sweet scent of flowers that makes his head pound to the rhythm of an erratic heartbeat. Moriarty, whispers a ghost voice in his head. A name he remembers before he's entirely even sure of his own.

Slowly, his fingertips find his forehead, trailing down over his lids and nose and a gratingly coarse stubble, making him feel a little more corporeal. His nose is running, forcing him to drag the same lethargic hand to it to wipe the drip off.

His mind feels like it's still slowly coming back online, painstakingly rebooting its less vital systems, and he realises he's in an uncomfortable bed that's not his own. The realisation causes a mild sense of alarm, so he opens his eyes. The room spins a little until his vision settles. He swallows back the bile creeping into his throat from what he now recognises as the smell of lilies. A set of irregular heartbeats makes him feel like the organ is somersaulting towards his throat. Extrasystole, his sluggish brain eventually supplies - heart contractions initiated by other sources of impulse than the sinus node, followed by a compensatory pause. Even a healthy heart is allowed hundreds of them a day, but they still feel uncomfortable. He'd had plenty of these in hospital during the worst of the GBS, and they had also been a regular companion during his more narcotics-filled days. This morning, the phenomenon is likely caused by the aftereffects of cocaine, along with dehydration - he certainly hasn't consumed enough water to soften the crashdown. Amateurish.

He waits, unmoving, until he feels slightly better and dares to take in his surroundings. The first thing he recognizes is a familiar, insipid painting of a vaseful of roses on the opposite wall, leading to the obvious conclusion that this is Mrs Hudson's flat. Memories of last night finally float in, and he's tempted to sink into them, wrap them around his brain like a soft blanket, to imagine that he still feels like he had last night, when the cocaine had released the dopamine his brain had been pointlessly re-absorbing, depriving him of its soothing qualities.

He'd felt invincible. Healthy. Back to normal. Calm. Not a failure. Not a has-been to be pitied, but a worthy opponent.

Moriarty had deliberately left him alive at the hospital. He had gone to the trouble of proving all of Mycroft's attempts to protect him had been as useful as spitting in the wind, yet he hadn't made use of the opportunity to rid himself of Sherlock permanently. Why? Sherlock certainly wouldn't put it past the man to kick someone when they're already down. Perhaps finishing Sherlock off would still have been too pathetic. No, it's not that. The words on the card, which yesterday he'd interpreted solely as mocking, may have carried several meanings.

*The title of arch-enemy must be earned.* Sherlock is quite certain he has proven his mettle before - how nice that *someone* still has faith in his abilities to return to the game.
The strangest image comes to mind, that of a child waiting for an ill friend to return to the playground.

Who took the pictures? This is what he'd tried to solve, sitting in the grubby ruins of 3F Lauriston Gardens. Judging by the angle, someone had stood on John's chair to snap the first one. John could be ruled out immediately, because he would have used either of their mobiles. Mycroft? What would have been the reason? Moriarty would not have stolen such images from somewhere else - that would have weakened his point of easily gaining access. John would not have taken a photo without Sherlock's consent - nor would any of the other people who visited. In any case, this was taken by a polaroid, not a camera phone. It was designed to be an intrusion, and to be recognized as one.

Could it have been a staff member? Those could be easy enough to corrupt, or even plant. One of the nurses? Jonathan? Thankfully, Sherlock had been able to rule the man out right away. He had not worked at the National between Sherlock's intubation and his discharge, and he'd overheard Jonathan giving his flight information to his girlfriend in Spanish. The flight number, which he had checked yesterday, had been genuine and the dates rule out his involvement. It's not watertight, but his intuition says he doesn't need to look into it further. Discerning whether he'd actually been on that flight would require Mycroft's resources, and he was hardly going to resort to that.

In the end, his deductions had taken the only possible route: what he and everyone else had mistaken for a hallucination, had only been partly so. In all likelihood, Moriarty had visited his room. He can't be sure what had been said, if anything - there is so much in his memories that is plain impossible, that he can't be sure of the validity of any bit of what he recalls.

This is what the wrong sorts of drugs do to him - rob his memory, distort the rest and eradicate his sense of reality. According to John and Molly, his delirium had been the result of several factors, not all of them pharmacological, but he doesn't care about anything other than the scathing anger he feels at being robbed of bits of his own life.

Moriarty is watching. And waiting. Sherlock can't really imagine him lurking around amongst a Harwich shrubbery, so that second image could easily have been taken by someone else from afar with a wide-angle lens, but the identity of the photographer hardly matters. What does matter is that the picture had showed him that the man sitting on that bench beside John was incapable of protecting anyone, let alone himself.

He wonders if Moriarty knows that their relationship has progressed beyond what it had been before he'd fallen ill. Would that matter? The man had taunted him about his “pet”; whether they shared a bed or not was probably irrelevant to him. He'd known, even before Sherlock had, that John was unique, significant to Sherlock in a way that no other person has been. If Moriarty had wanted to burn the heart out of him, Sherlock knows that at any point during his illness, the Irishman could just have killed John. Lying there in the half gloom of Mrs Hudson’s sitting room, Sherlock realizes that all his paranoia about Moriarty taking advantage of him at the hospital, of preying upon him while he was still recovering from the GBS - all of those fears are nothing compared to the threat the man poses to John.

The image of himself at the National had been the last straw. Seeing his own weakness reflected back at him, being taunted by Moriarty sending it… was just too much. He had recoiled in utter despair, desperately wanting to rid himself of the memories. The closest thing he could do was to rid himself of the flowers.

He is so tired of feeling miserable, of being less than he had once been, of dreading that he is never, ever going to get back to what he was. The lure of a way to fix that was just too strong
yesterday, even if the remedy needed to be administered intravenously. Cocaine be damned, it was just a means to an end. He is still addicted to the idea of being someone who could stand up to Moriarty, beat him at his own game, keep John from ending up in another semtex jacket. His only hope had been that the drug could give all that back, even if just momentarily.

Right now, though, he hardly feels like a man who could best anyone. His jaw is throbbing, but no teeth seem loose, and he can open his mouth without trouble. Likely no fractures in his maxilla or mandible, then. Half of his face feels like a big bruise, stinging around his left cheekbone as he feels around with his fingertips, meaning the skin is likely broken. His lower lip is swollen, and when he bites down on it gently, he tastes coppery blood. He has a vague memory from last night of John's hands on his rib cage, feeling around for broken ribs. Breathing or coughing doesn't hurt, nor does anything else below his neck - they must've disabled him with a well-placed hook to the jaw and the head-to-the-brick-wall move, then.

His nostrils are stinging, mucous membranes sore and inflamed. It had been a nuisance that he’d lost the needle, so he'd had to insufflate. Again, most amateurish.

He's well aware that it is not a nice or sane thing to admit to himself, but he had really needed what had happened last night - even if it means he'll have to battle the cravings and the worsened dark mood that always follow cocaine.

He'd felt like Sherlock Holmes. And it had felt so good.

Last night had proved that it's all still there, waiting to be released, if he could only get his unruly emotions in check. It might be a shortcut to continue using, but John and Mycroft would likely put a swift end to such a plan. But, at least he wouldn't have to deal with the ire of others right now, because he'd covered his tracks well. As far as John is concerned, he got innocently drunk last night.

Granted, he may have let the euphoria go to his head, and so went a little overboard with dosing. He'd only been provided one needle and syringe with the package, and he'd dropped the needle from his still fumbling fingers when the second high had hit. He then had to make do with snorting and rubbing it into his gums for the following doses, leading to sensible decision-making becoming rather difficult. He’d always been better at controlling the exact dose with injections, because the chemist in him kept track of the volume better. It took longer for mucous membranes to absorb, so he’d probably overshot in his impatience to feel the effects.

John's text had been sobering - Sherlock had thought that John would have gone to bed long before, not be sitting around waiting for him after a shift had stretched to overtime. He had tried to prepare for the performance of a lifetime, to put on his best imitation of fine, but then his head had begun to ache in earnest, so he'd surreptitiously taken another snort in the cab, with the result that the steps up to the front door had been too difficult to negotiate without ending up in a heap on the floor.

When Mrs Hudson had flipped on that awful overhead light, he’d nearly thrown up from the sensory overload. But as soon as John said the magic word 'drunk', Sherlock knew what he could do to lead them both astray. He figured that a bender would be easier to explain than a relapse into old habits. Never before had he been happy at an alcoholic beverage having been flung at him. This was not the first time for that to happen.

The room spins again for a second when he drags himself up to a sitting position, forcing him to slam a palm on his mouth to curb the nausea that hits almost simultaneously. Ignoring all of it with sheer willpower, he manages to stand up, a blanket sliding down to the floor. The thought of bending down to pick it up is not a realistic battle plan with his current precarious balance. He never used to get this weak after a binge - it must be due to the GBS. Or, maybe he has a
concussion. Had he hit his head? A quick pat down of his scalp reveals a bump. Maybe not GBS after all, then. It seems to have become his automatic target of blame for everything. Just as well.

Using a wall as support, he makes his way across the room after dragging himself up onto a pair of shaky legs. He passes a side table and the creamy, clove-like scent of lilies assaults his nose in earnest, thankfully somewhat dampened by the nasal congestion. His left nostril is no longer numb, just sore.

He stops to stare at the flowers, bleary-eyed, frowning.

Usually he enjoys the scent of lilies - hints of honey and cresylic, top notes similar to ylang-ylang and a balsamic-like, soft, lingering after-scent - but these particular aromas are spoiled by sensory oversensitivity and also by the proverbial stench of Moriarty’s taunt. The thistles in the bouquet are of a variety commonly growing in Scotland, and in the language of flowers they mean pain and pride. His hazy brain can't remember whatever nonsense ivy is supposed to mean, but it certainly grows in graveyards.

‘Get well soon’. He wonders whatever had possessed him to give Mrs Hudson that bit of the card. He should have dispensed with it, like he had the photographs.

He tries not to think about the images any more than he has to, now that the necessary deductions have been cemented, but the memory is too raw, too fresh in his brain to be shoved aside. He should have burned the photos, but his shock and urgency to flee the scene had overruled his common sense. John might still find them, although he has little reason to rifle through the rubbish in the bedroom bin. Mrs Hudson usually empties all the bins regularly, anyway.

There are cups clinking in the kitchen, from where Sherlock can also make out sounds of conversation and the ping of a microwave, all of which feel akin to hearing the scrape of nails on a blackboard in his current state.

Sherlock realises he is not going to get through the charade of playing the hung-over drunk, unless he has some chemical assistance to control his faculties. He feels too dull, too unreal, too slow.

The truth is simple: he needs a hit, if he's to deal with the universe today.

He needs to get to the coat rack next to the front door, because that's where he is likeliest to find his coat, the pocket of which contains the last of what he'd bought last night.

In the kitchen, John seems to be discussing some newspaper article with Mrs Hudson, arguing the merits of the NHS over complete privatisation of the healthcare sector. How public spirited of him.

Sherlock makes his way past the doorway to the kitchen, and its current occupants seem not to notice. He finds his coat, fumbles around the pockets, finding them disappointingly empty. He pokes his finger around the seams, suspecting there might be a hole and what he seeks might have slid down inside the hem. He bends down, his back protesting and black spots dancing in front of his eyes. He runs his shaking fingers along the hem, but the thick woolen fabric folded up on itself makes it hard to make out whether there's something there or not.

Someone clears their throat nearby. Sherlock, startled, swiftly stands back up, which does not go down well with his inner ear and makes him lose his balance. He takes a corrective step.

"Looking for his?" John asks in a clipped tone, a small bag of white powder held between his thumb and his forefinger in his outstretched hand.

Shit. Fuck. Buggering hell.
Is there any chance of plausible deniability? Could he claim it's related to the case?

Sherlock can't really tell what his chances are. His head is full of cotton. Perhaps a mouthful of deflection would work? "Is there any tea?" he asks, trying to pretend John isn't dangling anything interesting.

John cocks his head towards the kitchen and pockets the cocaine. Sherlock follows him without a word.

In the warmth of the kitchen, Mrs Hudson looks like she always has - busy as a bee, domestic and well-meaning. Perhaps John hasn't shared knowledge of his findings with her. Sherlock finds her presence reassuring - Mrs Hudson tends to defend him, cut him some slack. *Strength in numbers.* Sherlock has hardly decided on a seat and descended on it, when John grabs his right wrist. He tries to pry off the cold fingers, but John is having none of it. His dress shirt cuff gets unbuttoned with the quick precision of a former surgeon, and John slides his sleeve up to his bicep.

His left hand gets the same treatment and Sherlock averts his gaze when the truth is revealed.

John runs his thumb across the injection site of last night's first dose, and the small scab that has formed crumbles under his touch, flaking down onto the table. A small blue bruise has formed at the injection site - he hadn't pressed it long enough to stop the vein from trickling blood under the skin.

Mrs Hudson steals a look while walking past. She locks eyes with Sherlock momentarily and her expression, while not exactly scandalised, is full of warning.

Mrs Hudson has seen him use before, especially during the case of her husband. John hasn't witnessed any of this. Not ever. He was never meant to. Anger flares up. It's not Sherlock's fault that his Transport has driven him to this, now is it? It's not his fault, if this is the only thing that had helped when he'd been about to crawl out of his skin last night after receiving Moriarty's message. He couldn't go on like that, not knowing if there were even the slightest chance that *this* might give him a moment's peace, when nothing else had worked like that. He *knows* it's not a long-term solution, but he just couldn't take one more minute of despair of what his life has turned into.

John takes his pulse, peers into his pupils, presses a hand to his clammy forehead. Maybe he does this because he doesn't know what to say, or because he genuinely thinks Sherlock is in need of medical attention. The touching should feel awkward and uncomfortable, but thankfully it doesn't. It isn't exactly pleasant, but it's bearable. It was a useful lesson from last night that cocaine might actually tone down some of the hypersensitivity, even though the current sensation of ants crawling under his skin isn't exactly enjoyable, either. At least there's a perfectly sensible chemical explanation to it, unlike whatever the GBS still thinks it's doing, messing everything up.

An ice pick stab of headache makes him grimace.

"Do you have any idea---" John starts sternly, and Sherlock's scrambled brain tries to anticipate every possible continuation of that sentence.

--- *how worried I am?*

--- *how dangerous this is?*

--- *how stupid you are?*

--- *how much I love you?*
What the *hell*? The fact that Sherlock had even thought of that last one is surprising. Even more alarming is the intensity with which he’d like to hear it right now. He isn’t usually one to seek that sort of emotional validation.

Sherlock truly wishes for such a statement, but recognises the bright-eyed naivety inherent in such a desire. It wouldn’t change anything, but he finds himself yearning for some sort of reassurance that this isn’t how it ends, that John isn’t about to walk out because of what’s in his pocket, wrapped in plastic. He’d very much like to hear John is still fond of him, because he really doesn’t know how to like himself at the moment.

"--- how risky this is, when you’ve just had something that messed up your autonomous nervous system?" John asks in a carefully controlled tone. The fury Sherlock can sense underneath is like a glowing ember, ready to burst into flame.

"I didn't do it to be safe," Sherlock says and John stares at him.

Sherlock glances at Mrs Hudson who is busying herself with a fry-up. Looking straight at John right now is uncomfortable.

John has a pristine plate in front of him. It might be beneficial for John's mood to have breakfast. He's always more amicable on a full stomach. Sherlock grabs a plate from a pile at the end of the table to show an example. He'll likely throw up if he attempts eating, but he wants to encourage John to eat, because it might buy him a little time to come up with something in the way of a plausible excuse.

"No, you probably didn't," John agrees.

Sherlock imagines the small bag in John's pocket. What does he intend to do with it, now that he has already executed his plan of using it as a dramatic sting operation? Down the drain? *What a waste.*

Mycroft has told Sherlock that cocaine makes him selfish and even more obstinate than usual, even when the immediate effect has passed. Right now, he doesn’t care. All he can think is how much easier this scene would play, if he had just enough of that powder to fight off the worst of the crash. He needs to think clearly, and quickly, without having to fight his way through the fog.

Mrs Hudson fills their plates with eggs and bacon. She has probably eaten already, since she does not serve herself. The sight of the food makes Sherlock's stomach turn again. He swallows down foul-tasting saliva, hiding his shaking hands between his thighs and the worn, foam-filled, frilly seat cushion.

John grabs a fork. "Mrs Hudson? Could we have a moment, please?"

"Of course, John, of course," she says, sheds her apron, shuts off the gas hob and disappears down the hall.

One could hear a pin drop.

Then, John's fork screeches on the plate, making Sherlock cringe almost involuntarily.

"Go on, then, say it", Sherlock lets out, feeling defeated. Best get the yelling part over and done with, so he can crawl upstairs, go to bed and let sleep fix his head.

"I'm not going to ask you what happened in 2007," John says in a surprisingly neutral tone, watching him carefully.
Adrenaline rushes in, making fingertips tingle, heart pound and fear crawl up Sherlock's spine. What is this? Of all possible things John could have said, why this, and why now?

His fingers curls into fists under his thighs when he realises the answer. Obvious, really.

Mycroft is going to die, and Sherlock’s selected method will make the Ebola virus look like the summer flu. Couldn't the know-it-all royal arse focus on toppling dictators for once, instead of his incessant 221B drive-bys to cluck his disapproval at every aspect of Sherlock's existence? The meddling bloody prat is going to get a piece of his mind about sharing details with John that Sherlock had explicitly told him never to speak about to anyone, under any circumstances. "You're not going to ask about it, because you already know all about it, courtesy of The British Government," Sherlock snarls and stands up.

"SIT DOWN IN THAT BLOODY CHAIR!" John commands, probably loud enough for his voice to carry down the hall to Mrs Hudson. John glances towards the sitting room, nervously. He's clearly trying to spare Sherlock's blushes by not involving two people on the opposite side of this lecture.

Sherlock drops down into the seat before he even manages to realise he is doing so.

"No, I don't know anything about 2007. He didn't share those details, because I wouldn't let him. Only you have the right to decide what I'm allowed to know, which is determined by how much you trust me. You don't trust me enough right now, and that's not going to change for the bett--"

"I trust you," Sherlock interrupts brusquely.

John puts down his cutlery, likely in order to award this discussion his full attention. Sherlock stifles a groan, when he realises it means that it's far from over. The headache is killing him.

"Do you?" John demands. "Then maybe you need to learn how to show it, even just a little. Were you going to tell me about the cocaine? Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

"It was a one-off."

"Every time is a one-off, until the next one."

"It was a momentary lapse in judgment, for which I apologise," Sherlock offers as politely as he can muster. He leans his forehead on his palms, rubbing his closed lids with the pads of his thumbs.

"I'm not really the one who is being mistreated the worst here, but I appreciate the apology, even if it's just an attempt to make me shut up. Have you apologised to yourself for your stupidity? Or spared even half an actual thought for how Mycroft feels right now? Or me, since you already raised the subject?"

"This is the first time in three years."

"I believe you."

An alarm bell goes off somewhere in the fog of Sherlock's crashing brain. "You have no evidence to support that."

"I choose to believe you. That's the definition of belief, isn't it, that it doesn't require proof?"

Sherlock is taken aback. "Why would you?"
"Because if I don't, we don't have a chance in hell."

Sherlock's heart leaps a little at the word 'we', but it could just be the cocaine crash acting up.

"What are you going to do, then?" Sherlock asks, assuming there's some sort of a game plan John has formulated.

"It stops here. As you said, a one-off. If it doesn't stop, you can sure as hell believe I'm going to ask you again about 2007. Mycroft seems to be under the impression that's where you're headed again, and that you won't stop until you hit the buffers. He's demanding that he needs to intervene to stop the train wreck, and is threatening to bring in outside professionals."

Those last two words shouldn't come as any sort of a surprise, but the threat in them still seems to reverberate in the hollows of Sherlock's skull like the shock wave of a detonation. His gaze narrows, fight-or-flight kicking in. He wants to deny everything, wants to claim that 2007 had not been similar at all, that it had all been a misdiagnosis, that there's no way anything like it could happen again, but it would be pointless, now that Mycroft has planted the poisoned seed of suspicion in John's head.

He opens his mouth to say something, anything, to launch a defence, but when he faces John the man is looking at him with a pleading, naked, utterly exposed trust that makes him feel like the worst person on the planet and decimates his resolve.

"I don't agree with Mycroft. I trust you to be able to deal with this; I trust that we can fix it," John tells him.

Sherlock realises that John truly is stupidly placing his trust in him, and that is what makes the situation so heart-breaking: it's so freely given, despite better judgment, that it would be terribly cruel to betray it.

It's clever, really. Almost manipulative. Not even Mycroft has ever tried this approach.

Sherlock had vowed he'd rather die than live through 2007 again. Back then, it had probably been exaggeration to throw him in Bethlem, but in all honesty, he worries that things are even worse now than they were back then. The wreckage that stares back at him in the mirror every morning is something he didn't have to deal with that year. Granted, there were other issues at hand, but none of them so filled with doubt and uncertainty. This time he has to come to terms with the fact that he isn't getting better and probably never will. Back then, it had been his own choices that had led to disaster. In 2007 he never lost the sense that he could turn the tide himself at any moment if he so chose. This time, it's a tide of fate he's fighting against, and the feeling of utter helplessness it evokes has pushed him to the edge of the cliff.

If things get to the stage they'd got to in 2007 - bad enough that he just wants it all to stop, then he won't make the sort of half-arsed effort he made to end his life in 2007. This time it will be definitive, and he will end up in a mortuary rather than a secure psychiatric unit.

He scares himself these days. He's not going to touch the heroin, because he's afraid that it might cut the last strands of the rope holding his head together, to sever his last tether to reality and let what John charitably call his black moods have free rein. Besides, to take those substances would be to give up, to surrender. At least the purpose of the cocaine is to up his performance level, to fix himself. He's always done a better job at it than any doctor. The cocaine works to sharpen his attention and his motivation, while lifting his overall energy level so that he feels more like himself. Or, rather, the person he used to be. Granted, the delusions of grandeur might have put slightly too strong a damper on his sense of self-preservation last night, but it had been worth it for
the experiment.

"It stops," he tells John, hoping that it is true. "It was the only thing I haven't tried yet to fix everything. That experiment is now crossed off the list."

He half hopes that John will ask if it did actually fix anything, but then again John would be unlikely to believe it, if he said yes.

John puts down his cutlery and dabs his lips with a piece of paper ripped from a kitchen roll. "No one is expecting a one-size-fits-all miracle cure, and you shouldn't, either. It's mostly just time and patience that will do it." He sounds weary.

Sherlock wonders if John believes that cliche himself. He stares down the bacon strips on his plate. He should just eat, but as usual, the deceitful Transport that is still nauseous and exhausted, is standing between him and such a normal thing as having breakfast.

John digs out the cocaine from his pocket, places it on the table and pushes it across the table toward Sherlock's side.

Sherlock has no idea what he's expected to do.

He pushes it back towards John as though they're playing a tabletop game.

John suddenly looks like Sherlock has given a right answer in a quiz. He picks up the package and walks over to the sink. Slicing open the bag with the tip of Mrs Hudson's kitchen knife, he sprinkles the contents into the sink, opens the tap for a moment to rinse them into the sewer. Finally, he rinses the knife, and returns to his breakfast.

Sherlock realises that John clearly assumes that everything that had happened last night had been the result of taking the drugs.

It wasn't. He had simply needed the liquid courage of the cocaine to dare to test himself, to see if he could override his overwhelmed, churning, crushing, panicking brain, and that wish, together with the cocaine, had worked like a dream. At least until he'd overdosed, just a little, and he'd gone a bit reckless. Feeling limitless, invincible, he'd sought out trouble and found it.

Whatever he has just said to John, Sherlock doesn't regret the experiment. He is just so fed up with not feeling normal that isn't it practically inevitable that he would try to see whether an old habit might make a difference? It has been so long since he has felt the reward of deductive victory, the exhilaration of success with anything, that he'd been willing to consider a chemical stimulant to see if he could regain that feeling. He needed to know if he could feel like himself again, because if not, then he hasn't a snowball's chance in hell of taking on James Moriarty. Thinking of the Irishman's sneer implied by that card and the lilies was the final straw that broke his stalemate yesterday.

Now that he knows that he can't pretend last night didn't happen, Sherlock wishes just for a moment that John's love could be unconditional. Too many times he's had his drug use thrown in his face as a reason to withhold... everything. A wave of panic hits from out of nowhere and nearly makes him gasp.

*John will probably still leave.* Maybe not today, maybe not next week, but how could he stay, when----

He tries to shove the thought out of his mind, scrambling desperately to find a morbid sort of solace in the idea that *someone* still has faith in him, even if it is only Moriarty. Faith that Mycroft
and even John have been running short of lately.

Something that had been hard to decipher had drawn him to Lauriston Gardens, and he had stood in the street outside the house for a moment, staring at the boarded-up door and the broken windows. Clearly, the discovery of a homicide victim had put the developers off, and it was still just a ruined building. He had gone around the back and pried open a boarded window, then went up the stairs to the place where the woman in pink had been found on the floor. In his head, he had re-lived the scene when his deductive prowess had resulted in John’s comments of *amazing* and *fantastic*.

Looking around at the empty room, lit only by his phone rather than the police lights that had once been there, Sherlock had realised how completely focused John is on his shortcomings right now - they both are. It doesn't help that the current case is moribund, let down by his inability to solve it, his inept chemistry, and his decrepitude. Until that epiphany, he had not planned on using last night. The thought had depressed him so utterly that he left and headed for not one but two street dealers whom he knew from the days before John. He'd put off resorting to this last hope of his, but clearly it was time. If Moriarty was coming for him, he needed to know if he had *anything* left to fall back on.

The first hit had curbed his anxiety, the second restored him into a more upbeat mood, until he dropped the needle. That was a bore, but a half hour later, the old-fashioned method of snorting had restored his sense of who and what he could be. He felt *ready*.

He’d always been able to handle himself in a bar fight, so he decided to pick the equivalent of one, and see if the same fear that had stopped him from climbing the wall could be overcome if the cocaine overruled his sense of self-preservation. Could he push through it all, reach a dead point - and reach the grip on the other side of it?

He hadn't felt as *alive* for a long time as he did walking down that alley towards the men.

What happened next was, admittedly, a bit of a rude awakening. When he got beaten up so badly, he’d sat with his back up against the brick wall realising his folly. He *wasn’t* up to it. The drugs had masked his weakness - they’d only served to make him forget it. That sort of recklessness could risk both himself and others. *John.*

Sitting in that cab on the way home to Baker Street, he’d drowned his sorrow with more of the cocaine. At least he had found comfort in the fact that the cocaine had, essentially, achieved what he had wanted it to do - restored the feeling of normality. He'd already been in borderline good spirits in the cab, and the high - coupled with paralysing exhaustion and relief of being home - had properly kicked in right as he was deposited at 221B. He had barely managed to pay the cabbie.

John hasn’t asked about the brawl. Even if he and Mycroft are not aware of the details, Sherlock is wearing the evidence on his face, and yet John has not launched an interrogation into it. Does that mean he doesn’t realise that Sherlock had deliberately sought out the fight? John's naiveté feels like a blessing.

Whatever they think about the reasons why Sherlock took the drugs last night, John and Mycroft are invariably wrong. Everyone who tells him that he is making progress is *wrong*. He isn't going to ’*get well soon*’, no matter what anyone tries to promise him. He’s never been all that *well* to start with. *Well* and *normal* are false constructs invented by other people to keep the likes of him in check.

He has spent his entire life teetering at the edge of a *bit not good* and utterly wrecked, and that's not going to change, ever.

"*Eat.*" John’s commanding tone cuts through the wool-gathering his brain is doing. Sherlock looks
down at the fried egg and the bacon with more than suspicion, and wonders how long after eating it will be before it comes back up to remind him of just how awful coming down from cocaine is, without the heroin there to lessen the slope. At least with cocaine, this phase is relatively short and not as terrible as opiate withdrawal.

A quick glance at John shows that insubordination is not currently an option, so he picks up his fork and starts pushing the food around.

Mrs Hudson returns to the kitchen, and starts prattling on in the background, and Sherlock hopes that her talking will keep John distracted for a little while. Sherlock takes his first bite of bacon and deals with the explosion of salt, grease and pork flavour on his tongue.

John soon becomes engrossed in some inane conversation with Mrs Hudson, and this offers Sherlock a chance to continue to consider the situation.

He has always assumed that John has zero tolerance for drug use. The last thing Sherlock wants to do is make John decide to leave Baker Street. But, now that the two of them have admitted that they both want something more from the relationship, has that somehow changed things? Would John now be willing to cut him more slack, even with this? John seems… well, rather more relaxed about this than Sherlock had anticipated, even with the stern words he's just delivered.

The whole thing seems rather confusing now. Is John assuming that Sherlock’s explanation is to be taken at face value as the cocaine having been just a mistake, a momentary lapse? He seems suspiciously accepting of Sherlock’s haphazard reasoning - it is as if John wants to believe the very best of him, that he's convinced that things will simply go back to what they were and the problem will be forgiven, or even forgotten about. Could John have such an over-inflated view of Sherlock that he believes it is all that simple?

Somehow, this feels disappointing. Maybe some part of him wants John to see, to understand what's happening to him, even if he can't possibly risk the consequences of revealing the true extent of how beside himself he feels. He knows this is contradictory, but can’t help it.

John seems to believe that he had been simply self-medicating. He would probably never want to accept the other reasons he might have for using. Usually, when Sherlock is in his personal version of fine, the drugs are about sharpening his deductive capacity, by reducing the sensory distractions. Keeping dopamine from being re-absorbed meant his brain could break free of its shackles and see things he couldn’t normally see. Sherlock has always had a penchant for this, sometimes for as mundane a reason as alleviating boredom, and this can't have escaped John's attention, not with big mouthed Big Brother hovering in the background, ready to divulge all of Sherlock's secrets to John when he feels justified in doing so.

Is John’s lack of anger because he just doesn’t realise the depths Sherlock has fallen to in the past? By not hearing out the truths offered by Mycroft, is John simply closing his eyes to the real Sherlock? If yes, then Sherlock knows he’s out of luck because he knows he cannot possibly live up to John's ideal view of him.

This is going to end badly.

The thought gets into a loop and repeats over and over again, crowding out any other idea. Sherlock feels lost and in his desperation for a distraction, he blinks and turns to face Mrs Hudson who has stepped closer.

"Mind your hand, Sherlock. I don’t want to scald you.” Mrs Hudson is hovering with a tea pot.
Sherlock snatches his hand away from where it had been gripping his tea cup.

"Your favourite tea, Darjeeling. I keep a few teabags of it to give you when you need cheering up."

Sherlock has no answer. The idea that a cup of tea could make anyone feel happier seems to belong to a different world than the one he inhabits. Anything that tea contains is not what he needs, when he is getting increasingly agitated by how long a time has passed since his last fix and how fast the anxiety is closing in. Now that The Transport has been reminded how much fun its receptors could be having, it wants more. Infinitely more.

The trouble with cocaine is that it requires frequent re-dosing, and that it is only an artificial approximation of what his own brain used to do. The drug still works - of course it does - but it doesn't really prove anything except how far he is from what he once used to be. What had he even been expecting? Thinking of it as an experiment is an excuse. He might just be willing to admit that now.

For some reason, his mind latches onto another memory. It's one of his only somewhat clear ones of 2007 - maybe the shock of what had just happened to him has somehow cut through whatever has taken over his brain. The memory is of Mycroft sitting beside his bed after he'd been admitted at some place or other, while Sherlock pulled at the wrist restraints and screamed murderous threats that would be made good on the second he got free. He would have hurt Mycroft, then, if he'd had the chance, like he'd announced in no uncertain terms.

"You’ve already succeeded, Sherlock. You don’t need to be unshackled for that."

He’d informed Mycroft that what was going on qualified as torture.

Sherlock had seen, for the first time in his life, real, undisguised pain there on his brother’s face. "And seeing you like this is torture, too, Sherlock. This time, I can't make it better for you. I’m sorry."

Ever since he’d been a child, Sherlock had always turned to Mycroft to fix things, to sort his messes out, to smooth things over with their parents, with others. What had happened in 2007 had cured him of the delusion forever that Mycroft was on his side. Yet somehow, it had mattered that Mycroft had not walked out of that room unscathed, that he had been affected by what had happened to Sherlock.

Is John supposed to be his minder, now, like Mycroft has always fancied himself to be? Has the baton been officially passed? Is this the only way he can somehow carve out an existence for himself, by leaning on someone like a crutch?

He decides that he hates himself right now. He hates his weakness, his relapse, and what they have done to his head. Why should John care any longer, now that Sherlock has probably disappointed him thoroughly, maybe even confirmed his worst fears? The scent of grease on his plate mingles with his own self-loathing. He may have just ruined the only thing that has held him together, ever since the first tingle and numbness led to the GBS diagnosis.

John’s calmness as he scarfs down bacon and eggs is unnerving and somehow distressing. If this lapse doesn’t matter, is that because John has already decided he is damaged beyond repair, that he can't be held responsible for his mistakes because he can't be expected to know any better? Is this where John is going to admit, finally, that Sherlock is not worth bothering about? As he hates himself so much right now, isn’t it only right that John does, too?

Or, is John's unexpected serenity a sign that he still believes Sherlock to be in control of his
faculties? It's dreadfully hard to tell.

He sneaks a glance at John. His intuition is still telling him all might not be as fine as John is trying to project, but somehow he’s not able to figure out what it all means. Is this the effect of the come-down? If so, it’s another reason to be annoyed that he let his weakness yesterday lead him astray.

His nerves must be completely shot, if he can't even read John anymore. Not that he's ever been all that good at it, but right now he is drawing a complete blank.

"Alright, dear?" Mrs Hudson asks, frowning at his still mostly uneaten breakfast.

What if he said no? What would happen?

Sherlock pushes his plate aside. His breakfast on it looks practically untouched.

Something very closely resembling anger briefly flickers in John's gaze again and then disappears, carefully and deliberately concealed.

Sherlock wishes that he knew what it means, but he doesn’t.

Chapter End Notes

A special thanks to our proofreader Lockedinjohnlock for particularly helpful pointers regarding this chapter.
As John gives his thanks for breakfast to Mrs Hudson, Sherlock gets to his feet and wanders down the hall to pick up his coat.

He finds himself still surprised at John's overall reaction. The excruciating interrogation and rage he's been expecting has not materialised. Sherlock is not sure whether he's relieved at the reprieve, or actually slightly miffed that John hasn't grasped the significance of his experiment. He wants John to stand between him and the black abyss that had driven him to his experiment. Instead, he seems to be ignoring what might have put him on the edge of the cliff, taking his explanation of “experiment” at face value. It's not John's responsibility to keep Sherlock sane, but he trusts John to do that all the same. Perhaps it is the headache that comes with the crash that is putting him off, but he cannot deduce what lies behind John's response.

His train of thought is interrupted by Mrs Hudson, who says she is off now to do some shopping; do they need anything? Sherlock is tempted to ask if she would mind putting a small dose of morphine on her list but decides not to crack that particular joke in John's presence right now. The man certainly has a penchant for dark humour, but given the woeful tale of his sister, the subject of addiction is probably exempt from being used as entertainment at all times, even if it might provide some tension-relieving catharsis right now.

Best not to say anything at all, if that gets Sherlock to his own bed faster. He wishes he could put his aching head into the idle gear of sleep, but he knows that without chemical intervention, it will be difficult. When he’s coming down like this, he can almost never ride out the tail end of the crash by sleeping through it. He wonders if there might be a tablet or two of some sedative still lying around somewhere. He could use one, just this once. Heroin always quite nicely mellowed out this feeling of his skin crawling and his brain being completely offline. The demands of his Transport trump whatever brain work is needed to figure out what is going on. The much milder opiate, tramadol, that he' been prescribed for the GBS, is hardly going to do anything to sort it out.

There is another option that has been helping him to fall asleep lately - John, at close proximity. Sherlock wonders if the man could be persuaded to indulge in a close-contact nap. If not, then Sherlock hopes that the clinic calls and John volunteers for another locum shift, because at present he wants the flat to be dead quiet. If John proves unavailable, he's going to go lie on the bed, try to think about the case he's probably not even going to be able to solve, try not to think about cocaine, and just wait for time to pass. With any luck, he'll be largely back to whatever excuse of himself he's been lately, come evening.

When they reach their flat, Sherlock hears the front door downstairs click shut as Mrs Hudson heads out for her shopping trip. Thankfully, it means her annoying habit of leaving her radio on in the kitchen when she’s in won’t grate on Sherlock's nerves as the come-down continues.

Sherlock heads for the hallway and towards the bedroom, breathing a sigh of relief and letting his shoulders sag from fatigue.

Just as Sherlock is about to disappear from the man's line of sight, John calls out. "Stop right there." It's an order. There's no polite 'please' at the end of the sentence, no request implied in those
Sherlock is tempted to just keep going, but he’s still confused enough about John’s earlier reaction to this whole fiasco that he allows curiosity to get the better of him. He turns and faces the man.

What he sees makes him break out a cold sweat.

John is leaning his knuckles on the kitchen table, watching him from under knitted eyebrows, mouth a furious line.

Realisation dawns. This was going to happen all along, after all, just not in front of Mrs Hudson. Sherlock realises he has been rather naïve to think an incident like this would be swept under the carpet.

For a long moment, Sherlock disconnects, seeing himself from a distance, just standing there waiting for John to erupt.

"Would you mind telling me WHAT THE HELL YOU WERE THINKING?!" Although John's voice doesn't quite get loud up the point of shouting, his tone has an edge that Sherlock has never heard before. Eyes blazing, John pushes himself to stand up straight, knuckles pale as his fingers curl into fists.

John has nervous ticks, too. No, Sherlock corrects himself - this is John’s enraged tell.

"I was---" Sherlock starts, worried that his mouth may have started working before his brain has caught up and formulated an actual plan.

"DON'T. Don't try to come up with some hare-brained story or excuse. If you have the balls to do what you've done, then you're going to have the courage to tell me why you shot up and sought out that fight. There must have been some very detailed, analytical thinking involved," John snaps.

"I was trying not to think! And I wasn’t exactly intending to lose!" Sherlock blurts out, and judging by John's expression, it's the wrong answer.

John looks at the ceiling, as though looking at Sherlock is too much for him to handle right now, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "I should've fucking known! I should have known you'd do the stupidest possible thing just to prove you can. You really think it's overreacting, what Mycroft does when he watches you 24/7? Right now, I don't. This is how you assert your independence, eh? You go and risk getting yourself killed? I should've fucking known right from the beginning with that bloody cabbie."

'Because you're an idiot', is how John had described Sherlock when they hadn't even known one another yet: that he takes stupid risks when trying to prove his cleverness. This must be what John really thinks about him. Only now, instead of getting out of trouble, John thinks that he's a liability, who can't be allowed to make decisions for himself, who now needs both a minder and a brother to sort him out. This is where it starts, Sherlock realises. The end. When John finally realises that he’s made a mistake, the person he says he loves is a figment of his imagination. Now that he knows the real Sherlock will never come back and match the man’s expectations, it's all going to end.

He has no words to offer.

It doesn't matter because John is only just getting started. "Just like you always tell me, I can practically hear you thinking," John points out. "I'm pretty damned mad at you, but that means I care. You're clearly processing so much stuff so damned hard that you look like your head is about to explode, and I don't know how to get you to say any of it out loud. Am I going to have to get that
damned white board again, and ask you to point to some pre-selected cliché that sums up what's going on, because you seem to misplace all your words when I try to discuss anything important?"

John draws a deep breath and purses his lips, looking now less frustrated but so much sadder, and that makes everything even worse. "I know this is hard, maybe especially for you. But we can't not try. Not after everything. Not anymore."

Sherlock swallows hard and thinks about that white board, of those things John had added to the empty squares without asking for his permission, the ones he had never used, even though he probably should have. He still knows by heart how to signal those things - he'd taken good care to learn them right away, but it had felt impossible to take the plunge, to reveal himself so completely to John.

Sixth vertical row, fifth from the left. Scared.

Sixth vertical row, sixth from the left. I don't know what's happening to me. Yet, he can no more say those things than he could point them out on the board back then. This is what happens to him. The more stress he's under, the less able he is to find words. Any words.

"I thought everything would be easier now that we have this," John says, waving a hand in the empty air between them. The ire is suddenly waning fast from his voice as if he had heard the words Sherlock's eyes had sought on the board that exists in his mind's eye. Calmer still, John continues, "I thought it could be like it was at the hospital, and that once you could talk again, things would be easier than ever before, that we finally crossed that hurdle of not knowing what the hell we want. Instead, you're running away from me as fast as you can."

It's never going to be like it was at the hospital. Sherlock doesn't accept that period of time as part of his life. He never will. The illness happened, but he needs to at least try to pretend it was a separate thing, an alternate reality of which he's not going to have to accept ownership. He can't decide to accept its aftermath, either, because to do so is to admit defeat.

On the other hand, it doesn't matter what he thinks, when everyone else has already made up their minds. He can see it in John's eyes, hear it in Mrs Hudson's words, read it on his brother's face. Even Moriarty has seen fit to announce that he knows the extent of the damage.

All this is probably stuff that John would prefer him to say out loud, but he can't. Sherlock had learned at an early age that putting into words the contents of his head tends to upset people, or alternately they never listen or believe him. They dismiss his thoughts as by-products of his neurological makeup, or his drug use, or issues they're not willing to face themselves. John is not one to talk about his own emotions. He with his medical degree ought to have a long hard look at whether he's actually capable of facing the consequences if Sherlock suddenly decided to admit what is going on inside his head. In Dartmoor, for the first time ever, Sherlock had let his fear and his frayed nerves and his sense of disintegration be known. John hadn't even had good reason to chalk it up to the hallucinogen yet, and he'd still dismissed everything, dismissed him, by saying he must have been merely 'a bit worked up' - as though Sherlock had no right to be afraid of what he had seen or to believe his own perception.

John doesn't understand what it's like when the Transport and his brain are out of sync. He never will, because he doesn't have that problem. This terror is solely designed for Sherlock. The disconnection genuinely frightens him, and John has no right to tell him what he should or shouldn't be feeling. No right at all.

Mycroft is the one who understands at least to some extent, but then again, he has never believed Sherlock to be capable of sensible decision-making, least of all when it comes to relationships. Mycroft thinks he could never handle being with John. And, most importantly, if Mycroft finds out
how things are in his head right now, that'll truly be the end.

Sherlock knows the reason why he can’t even try to delete everything that had happened at the hospital. It’s because parts of it live on in his relationship with John, the good entangled inseparably into the terrifying. Trying to delete those things would likely be impossible and somehow, the thought of even trying feels blasphemous. For the sake of his own sanity, he knows he needs to hang on to the thought that however misguided John might be, the fact that he loves John is the only thing that is keeping him from running to the first heroin dealer he can find for a much more lethal dose.

Sherlock knows that he is just standing there, blinking like some moron. His intuition is telling him to flee the scene as fast as possible, but he knows it'll only postpone the rest of the anger John is determined to unleash on him.

They're standing at an edge right now, he can feel it. It would be easy to push John just a bit, to say something unforgivable, something deeply belitling, something shamelessly unrepentant and the man would fulfil Sherlock's prophecy and go. It might be a relief to finally give up hope, to see it happen, to have the confirmation that Sherlock had been right all along in his scepticism - that John isn't cut out for this, that nobody is, that Sherlock is simply not capable of having a relationship with anyone.

Still, there is a persistent notion in his head that keeps him from doing just that: the unfairness of it all.

Why can't he have what he wants, what he needs?

Why does he have to accept and watch while the life he's painstakingly constructed floats away? Why did GBS have to happen to him and not to someone else? Why does everyone demand that he be all right and fine when he isn't? Why isn't he allowed to make mistakes, and be forgiven like everyone else? Couldn't everyone stop assuming he does these things sometimes because his judgment is as flawed as any human being's, instead of because he simply isn’t wired right and therefore can't be expected to know better? Why does everyone always expect so much of him, yet so very little? Why can't John ever try to see things from his perspective, instead of his own?

The thought makes him angry enough to want to prove everyone wrong, including himself. The compulsion to flee disappears and he strides forward so he can stare down at John from the other side of the table.

"What is this, exactly?" he asks John. He mirrors the gesture that John had used, his hand moving back and forth between them, like trying to make the smoke clear. The analogy feels apt.

A soft smile appears on John's lips, which confuses Sherlock. John’s expression suddenly changes, and his shoulders relax. The suddenness of the change shocks Sherlock. Which one of them really is the moody one, if John can come down from such a rage this fast? Is this because he has realised it's pointless to try to get Sherlock to understand why he's so angry?

"I thought you had a pretty good idea when you told me you wanted it," John says, unflinching under Sherlock's gaze.

"You still do?" Sherlock asks, averting his gaze. He starts drawing a spiral on the table surface with his forefinger because the anxiety is coming back and he's finding it hard to keep looking John straight in the eye. "How is that even possible? I’m not… " the words run off his tongue and he hears them grind to a halt.
He looks for and finds the scratch mark carved in the table top by the kris carried by the assassin who had attacked him the day when John had had a fight with a chip and pin machine. How many times have they sat at this table, talking? Three hundred? Five hundred? Is he losing the opportunity for anymore? He might be, if he gets too honest about the mess in his head. Being honest about all that tends to scare people away. It tends to make them want to lock Sherlock up and throw away the key - or at least sign the sectioning papers.

"Yeah. I do," John says without hesitation. "Do you still need to ask?"

"But why?" Sherlock says, frowning. His fingertips feel the worn surface of the table, the uneven wood. He can't really tell if the skin is still over-sensitized. He doesn't remember how the table should feel. His head is like a sieve nowadays - it must be losing data, like sand trickling through a grille. No wonder the case feels like a dead end - the answers must be just beyond his grasp.

"You don't know?" some more of the tension has evaporated from John's voice, replaced by a tentative softness.

"I can't read these things like other people do," Sherlock admits.

"Then ask - as often as you need to," John prompts. "You'll get the same answer: I'm not going anywhere. What happened to lead you to relapse is something we need to talk about, and I don't think we're getting anywhere if you don't start telling me things. Tell me what you need, what you want - what you're thinking. Just talk to me, before you start feeling that the only solution is to go find a dealer. That's all I'm asking, Sherlock."

What Sherlock is thinking about right now, is the other him in the mirror. For everything else, it always has all the answers, it knows how to be him, but it spitefully withholds those answers. In this one area, that of relationships, however, it has no experience.

"What does it matter? How does it help, for you to know those things? You can't change them. If you tell someone not to think about pink butterflies, that's all they'll be thinking about."

"What do you mean?"

Sherlock stabs his temple with his forefinger. "It's all here, everything that's happened and it's going to stay there. I can archive it, file it away, bury it in the basement, but it's there, and it's not going away, I keep remembering. I can't delete it, I can't get over it----" he tries to coat the cliché with venomous sarcasm, but it comes out as more of a deranged howl that doesn't sound like him at all, and for a moment, he's unsure who had even spoken the words.

He lets his gaze drop to the table between them, leaning down on his palms, curling his sore fingertips so that they drag along the worn wood. With two short steps, John makes his way to the same side of the table, and grabs Sherlock's biceps.

He thinks he's holding me up. I can't do this anymore, but I have to.

"Sherlock, look at me."

He doesn't. What is there to look at? Sherlock knows there will be no answers to be found on John's features, which he has aged and ruined with worry and disappointment.

"I know about the photos," John tells him quietly. "He's kicking you while you're down, and you need to stop letting him."

"He's out there. He could decide any day, anytime, when to make a grand return."
"You're not responsible for stopping him alone. He's got some bloody twisted fascination going on with you, but that doesn't mean you have to take him on alone."

"I'm not the only one he’s targeting, or have you forgot that he wrapped you in Semtex?" Sherlock asks and leans back, lifting his chin. John's hands slide down his arms and then withdraw. "How can I let what happened to me put you at risk?"

Sherlock remembers what he'd admitted to Mycroft, that he doesn't know what to say or where to tug at the tangle of confusion and emotion in his head. Mycroft had suggested that admitting ignorance might be beneficial. He'd taken this with more than a grain of salt, but he's been at his wits' end when it comes to John long enough that he's willing to try.

"I don't know how to do any of this," Sherlock blurts out. "I didn’t know how to do it before, and I certainly don’t know how to do this now, when I can hardly trust my own body not to turn on me. Again. And it's not just about Moriarty…I mean other things, as well. You know, issues… between us."

There. It's out in the open, now. He stares down at the kitchen table, anticipating disaster. He waits for John to cheerfully and uselessly dismiss this worry with something like 'sure you can' or try to console him with statistics again that the GBS won’t return. It will be even further proof that Sherlock’s reality is not something that John understands or appreciates.

John says nothing for a moment. When Sherlock looks up, their eyes meet. John’s expression is thoughtful, hesitant, maybe even a little taken aback, but definitely not shocked. Not dismissive or incredulous, either.

"I can see that," John tells him. "The point is that we learn together. I hope you're not assuming that I know how to hook up with a gorgeous mad genius," he concludes with a smile that is, thankfully, not seductive in any way.

Sherlock runs his fingertips up his own arms, creating some distance between them as he tries to make sense of that statement.

John keeps using such words without any foundation. The body Sherlock commands at present is not gorgeous, and the brain that is trying to cope with that fact can hardly now be described as genius. His case work is appalling at present, and his ability to manage anything besides trying not to fall into pieces is questionable. Out of those three descriptions John has just used, he can only believe in mad at the moment.

Oblivious to the debate going on in Sherlock’s head, John continues, "I don't care if you need to wake me up in the middle of the night to talk--" "Yes, you do," Sherlock interrupts. Judging by past incidents, John certainly does care if Sherlock wakes him up in the middle of the night for anything other than a fire. That had happened once, and John hadn't even been very happy then, even though it had just been a very small fire.

"I won't mind, especially if it's about what makes you spend half the nights in the sodding bathroom," John says quickly, as though he might lose the courage if he doesn't get it all out in an instant. "Are we moving too fast? Do you want to me to sleep upstairs again?"

"No!" Sherlock tells him hastily. If it weren't for John, he's absolutely certain things would be worse. He knows very little for certain these days, but the thought of nights alone in that bedroom is even more terrifying than their current, odd arrangement.
"Nightmares?" John asks in a tone that's a little more knowing than Sherlock would like.

"Sometimes." Sherlock swallows. "It's more just waking up, and not knowing--- It's---" he breaks off, knowing that he is sounding silly, sounding childish, sounding damaged, pathetic and weak and disturbed and---

"Sherlock, just say it. No judgment here," John says softly.

There is no way to say it, to unravel the entire mess of it. Maybe he should offer up something more concrete - it might prove easier to grasp. His brain segues sideways, as his mouth utters, "I don't like the ceiling. It was the only thing I could see for so long. I think I've looked at ceilings more than enough for one lifetime."

"Okay. Um… I can work with that." John looks slightly bemused, but has obviously decided to take this cryptic message at face value. He's grasping at straws in his feeble happiness that Sherlock has deigned to try to answer his question.

Finally, the interrogation seems to have ended. John purposefully walks upstairs, leaving Sherlock in the kitchen. He can't gauge John's mood, but he thinks that the conversation hasn't been a complete disaster. It's hard to tell. He is finding it hard to concentrate long enough to make sense of what has just been said. Is he out of danger? Can he take John’s statements at face value; he isn't going to leave? So much hangs in mid-air, there's no closure in John's words. Everything remains as ambiguous as it was.

It's midday, yet Sherlock wants to escape from the maelstrom in his head, to hide and try to sleep. He retreats to the bedroom, ignoring the noise John starts making upstairs in his old bedroom. Feeling too drained to care about the creaking floorboards, Sherlock drops off, only to wake up almost immediately from a nightmare. He sits up so fast he gets dizzy, fingers still clawing at his mouth as if to rip out an intubation tube that isn't there. He drinks in air into his lungs like a drowning man, and his fingers curl into the duvet. He hugs it around himself to keep warm, but it takes a long time for the shaking to subside.

The aftermath of cocaine always brings on nightmares, even after short bouts of use. The dreams resurrect many unsavoury things which had happened to him before he'd met John. In his dreams, he has died a thousand different deaths, alone, and his fingers have been pried off the handrail of a trolley a great many times in order to be dragged into an ambulance and returned inside the walls of Bethlem Royal Hospital.

After the GBS there's plenty of new material his brain seems to delight in throwing into the mix. Mostly, he keeps waking up at the hospital, stuck in the horrific loop of finding himself unable to move, an intubation tube constricting his throat. Once, he'd woken up in the middle of the tube being changed, since they always underestimated how much sedative he could burn through in mere minutes. He'd startled the team by opening his eyes; the introducer threaded in through the old tube came off in all the commotion, necessitating him being put back under while the team scrambled to re-intubate. His lungs had burned from a lack of oxygen, vision swimming with black dots, panic swallowing him whole until the stinging anaesthetic had plunged him into oblivion. The worst part was that he could do nothing to fight, nothing to help himself. This is what his nightmare has thrown him back into yet again, almost instantly after he'd closed his eyes.

Sometimes, in his dreams, Moriarty is in attendance standing beside the bed, switching off the respirator as he had in the waking dream he'd had at the hospital, and Sherlock can never do a damn thing about it, can't even call for John. In some ways, John's absence is the worst part of it all, because it's a tragedy that has happened to him, in a way, when he had no way of knowing John would return to his bedside at the National after storming out. In the alternate reality inside his
dreaming, John walks away for good. The sinking feeling, the sense of the rest of his life shifting, rearranging, the desolation and the fear taking over as dream becomes reality, is something he'd readily swap for a bit of actual, physical torture. And now, because of his indulgence yesterday, he’s faced with the real possibility that John’s zero tolerance against drugs is going to fracture their relationship. He doesn’t know if he will be able to do what John has asked for - to talk to him before ever using again. How can he put into words what he often can’t even admit to himself? Now fully awake and distraught, it’s enough to get his heart rate back up to a panic level.

Retreating to sit back against the headboard, he tries to get his breathing back under control. He feels faint, disoriented but he can’t drop back to lie on the bed right now. Being on his back, staring at the ceiling - no.

He digs his fingernails into his palms, desperate for sensation, a reminder that things are working the way they should be. His chest feels tight and the cold sweat that has broken out is draining off all the warmth. His fingers, still clenched into fists, are tingling, and he shakes his hands frantically under the duvet.

The bedroom door he'd left ajar suddenly creaks open and he flinches. John steps in, a hammer in hand. Sherlock stares at him, not comprehending what's going on. His petrified brain seems to have ground to a halt.

John freezes as well, brows rising to frame an incredulous smile. "Sherlock?"

He tries to speak, but his mouth is so dry it only comes out as a raspy whisper. "I don't---"

John puts the hammer down - it now registers to Sherlock that he'd held a few small nails between his fingers as well - and takes a seat next to him on the bed. "What's going on?"

Sherlock curls even deeper into the duvet, like a clam into a shell. "I should ask you the same thing," he manages, eyes fixed on the hammer.

"I came to see if you're still asleep. Took me a while to find what I was looking for, but I thought I might do something about the ceiling."

Sherlock blinks. "The ceiling?" His thoughts feel sluggish, kept under the maelstrom of emotion by his panic, unable to surface as well-constructed speech.

John stands up, then briefly leaves the room to fetch something. "I thought we might hang this up there so you'd have something to look at," he says in a careful tone, as if trying to gauge Sherlock's reaction syllable by syllable. He's holding what looks like a roll of gift-wrapping paper, but it turns out to be an old star chart poster. So this is what he'd been looking for upstairs. It's slightly yellowed, and the year printed with tiny letters at the bottom says 1986. The corners have several sets of old tack marks - this has been up on several walls.

"Is this all right?" John asks.

All right in what way? Anything is better than the ceiling, but putting something up there won't change the fact that he'll still wake up feeling dreadful every time.

"I'm cold," Sherlock says, because it's the first sensible thing that comes to mind.

John is wearing just his trousers and a T-shirt. "I thought it was rather warm in here. You're not coming down with something, are you?" he presses a palm on Sherlock's forehead, pushing away some sweat-drenched curls with his thumb. "I guess not." He lets out a hollow, incredulous chuckle, eyes fixated on Sherlock's face. "You look like you've seen a ghost. Is it the---" he asks,
letting the sentence trail out. Now that he's no longer angry he seems reluctant to say the word 'cocaine' out loud.

"Nightmares tend to be part of the standard tour," Sherlock dismisses. He hopes John will soon get off the bed and get to whatever his plan is, because he feels brittle right now, and this scrutiny is creating cracks in him and things are threatening to spill out of them. His arms break out in goose bumps and he shivers, feeling utterly miserable, as though his body is going to join in the destruction that his sleeping mind has just rehearsed.

Instead of leaving him alone, John takes his pulse. He's quite convinced John has done that several times to him in this bed before, but he can't place all those occasions.

"Sherlock. Honesty, please." It's the perfect balance between a request and a command. Sherlock marvels at how John manages such a feat; it makes him want to answer, instead of feeling either guilty or the target of bullying. He hums something in reply, something noncommittal, neutral, harmless, something that means nothing at all.

"Do you need me to get you something for the withdrawal? Something legal, I mean. Normally, I wouldn't offer, but under the circumstances, I think it might be… Reasonable."

Sherlock shakes his head, hating the way his clothes and sweaty curls plaster themselves onto his skin. He wants a shower - needs a shower - but the thought of getting up is exhausting. He still smells like spilled whisky and fear. "I've been here before. It's not the first time. I've done this before," he practically chants, hoping one of these statements is phrased the way John would like to hear. "I don't want you to think I'd depend on something like that to get by." Cocaine come-down is somewhat bearable when compared to the more severe withdrawal of many other substances, which is why it's the only thing he's capable of using sporadically. His affairs with cocaine combined with heroin, however, tend to end up in binges, because the heroin withdrawal is so horrendous he'll eventually resort to anything to put it off.

It's not that he wouldn't want the benzos, or whatever John is offering to arrange. He just can't afford John thinking he needs something like that - that he can't cope, that he does idiotic things and someone else needs to mop up the mess.

"I know you've done this before. That's why I'm asking. Whether I like it or not, you're the expert here," John admits, and finally gets off the bed. Sherlock rearranges himself so that his arms are on top of the bedding even though he still feels downright hypothermic. The gesture does little to make him feel dignified. There is no dignity in this phase, there never was, and that's why he prefers to go through it alone. At least he used to. Now, the second-guessing of everything he's done lately and the loneliness he knows he's brought on himself are making him feel pathetically clingy, wanting to wrap John around himself like a blanket.

He'd made the decision to use so hastily yesterday that he hadn't spared a thought on how he'd hide this part from John. Usually, he would have just dragged himself out of bed and thrown himself to work, but the beating he'd taken, together with everything else that's been bringing him down, make that thought unenticing.

"It was cocaine, wasn't it?" John asks. "Not crystal meth, or---?"

"Cocaine."

"And it was just that? Not cut with anything else? How can you even be sure?"

"My contact doesn't sell subpar quality, and he tests for levamisole."
"Levamisole? The animal deworming drug?"

"Cocaine has been regularly cut with it for a long time. Regrettably, widely available test kits for it only came in around 2010."

"Did you take anything last night other than the cocaine?" John reiterates.

"No," Sherlock replies, and only after going back and forth in his head for a moment about whether saying more would be a sensible thing, he decides to bite the bullet, "Not last night. And I've never done meth for any significant time, only on two occasions when cocaine has been too expensive." He elects not to share that those two times had followed a week of having such vivid flashbacks of unsavoury things he'd had to do to increase his depleted funds, that he'd decided never to resort to those things again.

He still doesn't know what exactly had been in the cocktail he'd been sold in 2007 that had lead to the sectioning. Ketamine? Its predecessor, phencyclidine? LSD? Or had it been due to his fractured mind, after all?

"Has it always been just cocaine, your main choice I mean?" John asks, sounding like he doesn't really want to know but he's biting the bullet out of duty.

"I assume you're familiar with the term speed-balling?" Sherlock asks John. It's rhetorical, really. John has worked at A&Es. He is bound to have met patients who do that - combine heroin and cocaine in order to mellow the cocaine crash. It's risky, expensive and highly addictive, unless one knows what one is doing. Sherlock naturally does, being a graduate chemist and well above the average intelligence level.

"Jesus," John says and examines the duvet for a moment. "Cocaine, but not crack?"

"No freebasing. I find inhalation and insufflation to be unreliable and highly conspicuous. Intravenous is much more precise."

John swallows and keeps quiet for a moment. "Anything else?" he finally asks. It's more of a resigned exhalation than a question.

"Barbiturates, on occasion, during withdrawal. Dextroamphetamine. Morphine, when heroin has been unavailable. Fentanyl for the same reason, but its effect is shorter and its availability is abysmal for a good reason; idiots tend to underestimate its potency." He has never said no to China white when it's been on offer despite its short half-life - fewer side effects, including much fewer hallucinations and nausea than with morphine or heroin.

Heroin is the devil he knows.

After listening to this detailed, unemotional answer John invokes some more deities.

Sherlock decides against telling him how the cocaine is not actually meant for fun - it's meant to fix what has always worked incorrectly. For the normal, the average and the typical, using it will distort their brains' reward systems and kick their perception into an abnormally high gear. For him, it works the other way around - it alleviates the boredom, because it restores his reward system to a state of normality, and somehow makes him feel like the dys-synchrony between him and the universe has been repaired.

He knows it's not a long-term solution. He knows it's probably even more addictive to him than the average person. Cocaine is yet another example of how his mind and his body have always been incompatible - his brain can be restored by it, but his body risks ruin. He knows that using it
extensively will likely wreck his health and eventually kill him. It had come close to doing that already - although that hadn't really been the cocaine's fault.

It's his own fault.

These are the cards he's been dealt.

"Right," John says twice, because he's slightly nervous but reassuringly determined. "How do you want to deal with the next 24, or 48 or 72 hours, then?"

"I need a distraction," he tells John, who nods.

If Sherlock were on his own right now, he'd try to get his hands on some sorts of sedatives and some 5-hydroxytryptamine to fix his serotonin levels. He should have done something to prevent the dehydration - he hates the headache and increased lethargy it produces. On the other hand, he's convinced some of the pounding in his head probably comes from having it banged against a brick wall. His scalp feels like it's being nipped by tiny fish. Nothing new. Cocaine always messes up his senses afterwards. Unlike the aftereffects of the GBS, it passes, so it's bearable.

"I'll see what I can do," John says with half a smile, and finally retreats from the bed. Sherlock follows suit because he can't take another minute of sitting there, feeling pathetic about what had seemed like a very decent decision last night. The only possible decision.

John pushes the bed to the furthest corner of the bedroom, and Sherlock can't understand why. To make it feel more enclosed, more protective? John then proceeds to nail the star poster on the bedroom ceiling above their pillows.

Sherlock hovers by as John admires his own handiwork, not offering any opinions. He does appreciate the effort, if only because it proves John listens to him.

Sherlock has a quick shower and then dresses in the first clean shirt and trousers he can find. Once they've reconvened in the sitting room, John suggests a violin lesson in order to keep Sherlock occupied with something other than lounging around daydreaming about cocaine, as he phrases it. Turns out he can say the word out loud, after all. It seems that he's taken Sherlock's request for a distraction seriously.

Without really asking for permission, Sherlock downloads an app on John's phone to help with tuning the violin. "I'm not entirely certain your ear is good enough to do it manually."

"Thanks," John says sarcastically.

During the past two lessons, Sherlock had begun to realise John isn't really enjoying them. Whatever instrument would be best suited for John, it isn't the violin. Starting out with the violin as an adult is a punishing endeavour, and John needs a better motivation to put his mind to it than just Helen's prompting. So, his willingness to try must be more to do with what he thinks Sherlock needs than any sense of actual commitment to the instrument. He wishes he could find the words to let John off the hook, but at the moment, his own fragile state of discomfort in the comedown seems to be making him tongue-tied.

It's as though he's still feeling the scorch marks of John’s anger earlier in the day; it’s taken all the fight out of him. Every word seems like a potential misstep.

"You know, I wish there was a way that you and I could play music together, in a way that doesn't make me so useless compared to you," John says while fussing with the pegs in a way that makes Sherlock cringe.
Listening to John trying to tune the violin, Sherlock has to stifle the urge to grab it out of his hands and do it himself. That would just underscore the truth of what John is saying, and it makes Sherlock wonder why they are torturing themselves with this charade, even if it had been Helen who had commanded it. They do many things together, but the concept of playing music together with John had never even occurred to Sherlock. He has to admit it would probably be a very different experience, indeed, if they played as equals.

As dutifully as ever, John grabs the bow and starts making a complete mess of his assigned song. Sherlock confines his comments to the bare minimum.

After a good forty-five minutes of trying to make dead composers turn in their graves, Sherlock’s nerves are so frayed that he prays for John to rebel against any further practice. To be honest, he’d welcome the chance just to sit still and be left to his own devices for a while. His come-down headache is threatening to split his skull; the aching bruises on his face are almost a welcome distraction.

Maybe John senses his purposelessness, because he puts the violin back in its case. Soon Sherlock finds himself being dragged out for a walk. The thought doesn't entice - people are likely to stare at him, the state his face is still in. He isn’t vain, but right now, he does not welcome eye contact or curiosity from anyone.

"The best way to avoid you getting stir-crazy in the next twelve hours is with some fresh air. Might as well go get something to eat on the way, too," John insists.

The thought of food makes Sherlock's stomach turn, and the acids start to creep up to his throat. He briefly considers arguing that surely it couldn't be good for his heart to exercise so fast after using, but his own recent boxing match against those men in the alley would probably make that sound rather hypocritical.

Their walk eventually takes them to Oxford Circus. John waits patiently while Sherlock distractedly browses the selection at a music shop. Sherlock then waits impatiently outside a pharmacy while John buys Lord knows what. Probably those cheap toiletries he insists on using. He has, on occasion, borrowed Sherlock's products, mostly when preparing for a date. Sherlock has never minded this; the sensation of John walking past him in the kitchen smelling like him has always been… intriguing.

John's purchases turn out to contain several bottles of vitaminized water, one of which he shoves into Sherlock's hand, and wound dressings. They must have run out - they always do.

Sherlock appreciates the fact that John does not make a song and dance about telling him why he needs the water. He downs the whole bottle in one go and accepts another which he sticks in his coat pocket. Vitaminated water is an expensive scam, of course, but he decides not to argue the point.
Usually, at this stage after a binge, he'd be feeling outstandingly irritable and anxious. Paranoid, as well. Yet the exhaustion he's carried around these past months, and the way his head feels heavy, slow and aching, is beginning to counter some of the restlessness. Or, it could just be John's presence. Sherlock probably couldn't concentrate on anything, but right now he doesn't need to. He finds he's quite content following John around the twilight-draped streets.

When Sherlock refuses to express any preference for food, John drags him into a recently opened Italian restaurant. Angelo's would have been much better, if only because it is familiar, but Sherlock does not complain. Right now, he’ll do anything to hold onto the distractions John is doing his best to provide. Afterwards, on the walk to the nearest tube station, they get drenched by torrential rain.

Sherlock finds an odd, unexpected solace in the day's mundane activities. Once again, John has received a glimpse of the naked truth of him, but instead of walking away, he seems to want nothing more than to spend even more time with him, to share an umbrella and a plate of spaghetti all'amatriciana.

Their carriage in the tube is nearly empty, and John doesn't seem to mind at all when Sherlock lets his head rest on John's shoulder. It helps blot out the bright lights and sensory assault of the journey, and he finds himself at last able to close his eyes and stop thinking.

"Wake up, Sherlock. I can’t carry you from the station to the flat," John whispers with a smile when they reach Baker Street Station.

Without a word, he gets up and follows John home.

Chapter End Notes

We want to extend a very special thanks to our hard-working proofreader Lockedinjohnlock.

A big thank-you also belongs to all our regular commenters both here and at Fanfiction.net. I know many of you looked forward to this particular chapter with both dread and hope :) We are having so much fun on this ride with you.
"We got lucky," Lestrade tells John the next day after showing up on their doorstep at around half past eleven in the morning.

The DI's excitement is palpable, but John wonders if he is laying it on a bit thick in order to motivate Sherlock who is, at this moment, pretending to be welded to the sofa.

"Even though The Coroner ruled the cause of death natural, the bosses haven't officially closed the investigation, because they want to know who put the body in that sawmill. The warrants finally got us a name - Aiden Cole. He has thirteen clients registered at the Vault, and one of them has been confirmed to have been Mark Watford. We've got nothing out of his solicitor beyond the client list, so we're heading out now to talk to the guy himself. Will you come?" Lestrade emphasizes the last three words to signal how much he hopes for that outcome.

Sherlock doesn’t even open his eyes. He is still lounging about in pyjamas and his black dressing gown, despite them having company and it being nearly midday. John had pushed breakfast and tea down him, nagged about taking his meds, even managing to cajole him into a shave and wash. His forward momentum had run out after that, and he hasn't budged since. John had spent the rest of the morning dangling various activities to distract him — teaching him the violin some more, perhaps a climbing session, or even contacting Molly to get some exotic body part in order to finally resume his experiments — yet nothing seems able to shift the cloud of gloom that has settled on that side of the sitting room.

John refuses to let it ruin his own mood - he'd like to think yesterday had been a significant step forward. He’d said some things, Sherlock had said some things, and during the evening John had felt a flicker of what things had been like before Sherlock had fallen ill. They’d been comfortable around each other again. John had watched a movie while Sherlock sat with his laptop at the kitchen table, and when the film had ended Sherlock had hovered close by, finally suggesting they go to bed. John was certain, somehow, that what Sherlock had been after was not more sleep, but quiet company. They'd fallen asleep with their fingers entwined on the empty expanse of sheet between them. In the morning, Sherlock hadn't been in a bad mood - more like in no mood at all, as though the events of the past 48 hours had drained him.

Lestrade's arrival has perked up John's hope that the case might be just the thing that would oust Sherlock from the sofa. That's why he's now determined to help the DI, who is frowning down at the recumbent man. "Sherlock, you’re the one who said we needed a breakthrough if the Coroner is going to change his mind," John points out. "If we could wring something fresh out of this guy, the Coroner might still change his ruling to an unlawful death."

Encouraged by the support, Lestrade clears his throat. "We’ve got less than a week to find some fresh evidence, or this is going to get handed over to the local boys to investigate as illegal disposal of a body. I’m heading over to the Vault on Chilcott Street to interview this guy. I could do with your set of eyes, too, because you see things nobody else does, as you so annoyingly often remind me."

Sherlock doesn’t open his eyes. He does, however, grumble: "Why bother? Molly’s post mortem
says Watford died of a heart attack. I’ve failed to prove otherwise, so the Coroner has no reason to change his view that this is just a sudden, unexpected death with perhaps a bit of desecration of human remains thrown in. Whoever you might waste your time interviewing won't need to do much beyond keeping their mouth shut to ensure the case never moves forward. Not even you were ever that convinced that Watford was murdered."

John has to reluctantly agree. Lestrade has often reminded them of how many unclosed cases litter his desk at any given moment. It should be a gift to being able to put this one behind him, but on the other hand, the man has always seemed like one of the good ones - an officer of the law who actually cares about doling out a bit of justice, instead of just making the departmental statistics look good. Sherlock has been right so many times that he deserves the benefit of the doubt when it comes to this case.

John watches as Sherlock drags his eyes open, but instead of facing the company, those multicoloured irises firmly fix on the ceiling. A bony wrist rises languidly and then makes a shooing gesture towards the door. "Go away. You’re just doing this as some sort of…” he stops as if trying to find the right words.

"Some sort of what?" Lestrade is confused.

Sherlock’s eyes close again. "…charity, or therapy. Pandering to what you and John think is important, me getting back on cases again by beating a dead horse. Well, it won’t work. Clearly, I failed in the lab, and dragging me off to interrogate some hapless fool who happened to be the man’s trainer isn’t going to change that."

John has had enough. "Sherlock, enough with the wallowing. This isn’t all about you."

Sherlock snaps his eyes to John and there is real anger in them.

*Good.* John hopes his provocation will finally get the man annoyed enough to want to prove him wrong, to flounce off the sofa and argue with him, possibly resulting in a decision to continue with the case, after all. Sherlock certainly has the right to reject any and all cases he wants, but this time he seems to be giving up, instead of thinking something isn't worthy of his time. His dismissals reek of excuse.

*Sherlock doesn't quit,* John remembers telling Jonathan. He's beginning to question that statement.

Sherlock does lever himself off the sofa, after which he marches into the bedroom. But when he doesn’t slam the door, John releases a pent up breath and nods to the DI. "We’ll meet you there."

Lestrade gives John a questioning look. "What’s up with him today?"

John shakes his head. "*Up* is not a word I would use. He’s been a bit down in the dumps. Maybe this will snap him out of it." He won’t mention that the worsening black mood might well be linked to the aftereffects of the cocaine relapse. Lestrade likely wouldn't let Sherlock work the case if he knew, and being thrown out of the investigation again would do little to improve the situation. Sherlock might mistake playing dead on the sofa for some sort of a coping strategy, but John is convinced idleness is not a good thing for him at the moment. The receptors which have been activated by the cocaine are probably continuing to shout at full volume at Sherlock that they want more. The more Sherlock has time to *think* about cocaine, the less likely he is to move on and put the incident behind him. Sherlock had actually seemed somewhat embarrassed by the episode - he had, after all, tried to hide it from John, and after John had let his feelings on the matter be known, Sherlock had appeared almost wary of him, seeking out reassurance that he wasn't about to walk out for good.
John knows he ought to be happy that he's got at least this bit of leverage to make Sherlock think twice before pulling such an idiotic stunt again, but his contentment feels thin. The fear of him leaving had, despite John's reassurances, taken the form of Sherlock following John around the flat after they'd come home from their walk in the evening.

It shouldn't take a shouting match and a seven percent solution for the two of them to be able to talk - really talk, or for Sherlock to seek out what he needs. **One step forward, three steps back.** The ominous feeling of clouds gathering on the horizon hasn't left John; quite the contrary.

Lestrade departs, and John hears him talking to Mrs Hudson downstairs before the front door shuts. He keeps one ear on the noises emanating from the bedroom and hopes that the anger will give Sherlock enough adrenaline to be able to cope on his own with buttons and shoelaces. He has no wish to confront a grouchy bear in his den.

John dons his own coat and cheers silently when he hears the wardrobe door in the bedroom slam shut a little more firmly than is necessary. Sherlock on a case in a temper is still a lot better than a Sherlock wallowing in melodramatic self-pity and impersonating a possum on the couch.

John has coped with addictive personalities before. His father and his sister had demonstrated to him the danger of it. John has always been able to channel his own - probably at least partly genetic - tendencies in that direction by being an adrenaline junkie instead of leaning on drugs or alcohol. Mycroft had read his penchant for danger from him on their very first meeting, going so far as to accuse him of longing for the war, and being drawn to Sherlock because John had sensed him to be an acceptable alternative to the battlefield.

There had been enough truth in that to sting a bit back then. The excitement and the intrigue may have been part of the *why*, but in hindsight, John is certain that there had been more there right from the start - a connection that had sparked instantly when they had met. Sherlock had quickly become much more to John than just a means to keep the darkness at bay. More than *anyone* had ever been if he's honest with himself.

When John had finally realised that very fact at the hospital, it gave him the courage to meet Sherlock halfway in sharing what they meant to each other. **In sickness and in health.** John is quite certain that in many ways, it had been wrong to kiss Sherlock at the hospital, in a situation when the power balance of their relationship had been deeply skewed, and when Sherlock had clearly been at his most vulnerable. But, if he hadn't done that, would Sherlock have had the courage to say what he had in the winter garden? Probably not, so John has tried to forgive himself for being honest, if still ill-timed, in his actions.

To hell with Mycroft for thinking he can't do this, or that Sherlock can't.

What John has with Sherlock will now invariably be different - it's not a question of getting back to what they'd had before the GBS. He needs to find a way to get Sherlock to realise, that no matter what happened while going forward, life together, *thoroughly together*, is bound to be better than whatever they had before. It's also going to be different in enough ways that comparing now and before is kind of pointless.

Finding their footing again isn't about The Work, the violin playing or climbing. Those are just external factors when the most important things are intangible. This is what it means to make a life commitment: *for better or for worse*, and that yet unspoken vow John is determined to continue to fulfill.

A single conversation can hardly fix much, but a thing Sherlock had said last night had felt like a breakthrough: 'I don't know how to do any of this. I can hardly trust my own body not to turn on
To John, this confirms two things. Firstly, Sherlock refuses to communicate, not because he doesn't want to, but because he doesn't think he knows how and is thus deeply sceptical of his chances of success. It seems to be on John's shoulders to show him just how wrong he is about both of those things.

Secondly, he's waging a war against himself.

A half an hour later, they meet Lestrade at the doorway leading down to the Vault. This time the voice that answers the intercom is familiar, and John drags up a memory to put a name to it: Jason, the receptionist.

"Well, if it isn't my favourite consulting detective. How can I help you?"

Lestrade steps in front of the camera before Sherlock gets an answer in. "Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade. Let us in and we'll tell you."

The electronic latch is released, and they go down the two flights of stairs. This time, John is pleasantly surprised that Sherlock is moving more fluently and at a greater speed than he had on their previous visit. The climbing exercise seems to have made a difference in both his coordination and his confidence. Or, it could just be the adrenaline borne out of anger that's aiding him.

"What can I do for you?" The blond receptionist flashes Sherlock an appreciative smile as the three men arrive at the desk. Once again, it raises a pang of jealousy in John.

At least this time Sherlock doesn't mirror the man's delight.

Lestrade takes charge. "One of your trainers - Aiden Cole - is here, according to the schedule he's posted on his website. With a client, I presume?" He points to the wall screen which has the room numbers on it, about half of which are flashing red with a number slotted in. "Which one?"

Jason shakes his head and says without even looking at the wall behind him, "I'm not allowed to say since he's with a client," he says, upending a small bag of oranges into the fruit bowl on the counter.

Sherlock seems to wake up to the man. "You know Cole." He scrutinises Jason with his unnerving, forensic-level attention.

Under the intensity of that gaze, the slightest hint of a blush forms on the young man's cheeks.

John stifles a malicious grin. At least he doesn't get that embarrassingly flustered over Sherlock's attention, even though he gets to enjoy it on a regular basis.

"Yeah, sure I do," Jason admits. "He works here. I'm bound to run into him sometimes, aren't I?"

Sherlock sees something in that answer, and he leans forward onto the wooden counter top, intruding just a little into Jason's space. "No. He's more than just one of the trainers.... a friend."
This deepens the blush. "Not that kind of friend. I am single and available if that's what you're really interested in." He flashes a blatantly flirtatious smile.

Sherlock reaches over the counter and lays a hand on the man’s well-muscled chest as if to stroke it, and Jason leans in slightly. John stiffens his back and starts to move forward, but suddenly Sherlock snatches the man’s swipe card right off the lanyard around his neck. As Jason jerks backwards in surprise, Sherlock turns the desktop computer screen to where the others can see it and deftly runs the card through the reader on the side. He then peers intently at the screen. Practically gaping, and no longer at all smitten, Jason turns to Lestrade. "I thought you had a warrant so you wouldn't need to steal stuff! What the hell sort of police operation is this?"

Lestrade's smile is tight. "Well, he's not the police, is he."

John knows the DI well enough and can tell by his tone that the leash he's willing to give Sherlock in this is just about to run out.

"He's in number five - one of the four free-weight rooms," Sherlock announces.

Jason looks shocked. "How did you know that?"

Sherlock gives him a rapacious smile, almost predatory. "Because you couldn’t resist your friend's request for a triple session in there, could you? It's the only one, probably against house rules, but you’re willing to bend them for him, aren’t you?"

Then, in a swirl of coat, Sherlock is off down the marble hallway, leaving a startled John and Lestrade to chase after him. Behind them, Jason calls out. "You can't just barge in!"

John watches as Sherlock does exactly that. Placing the receptionist’s card against the swipe box next to the door, he pushes open the door as soon as the electronic catch releases.

When John gets into the room a couple of seconds later, he takes in the gleaming wall rack of weights and the chrome heavy-duty machine with a black upholstered bench. A client is in the midst of lifting a bar with substantial weights at either end. The spotter who had been helping him with it is now staring at the intruders in anger. "Who the hell are you?!

"Aiden Cole, I presume? Sherlock Holmes, and these gentlemen are Detective Inspector Lestrade from the Metropolitan Police and my colleague, Doctor John Watson."

There is a series of panting grunts from the client, whose red, sweating face shows the strain of the lift he is doing. John recognises him as a British actor, someone who has been rumoured to have just landed a big role in an action film based on some comic. Mrs Hudson was all agog about the articles in one of her celebrity magazines and had gone on about him over tea about a week earlier.

Sherlock continues, "We’re here to ask you a few questions about the suspicious death of one of your clients."

"And you think that gives you the right to just barge in here?! I told my lawyer to handle all that."

Before Cole can continue, the man lying on the bench drops the bar back with a loud clang into the rack above his head and starts to sit up. "What the fuck, Aiden?" It’s a rich baritone, and the underlying accent screams public school to John.

Cole is enraged and spits out, "This club is private; you have no right to be in here."
Lestrade gives him a smile. "Actually, we do - we've had a warrant to be on these premises for the past week - as you well know because your solicitor was the one who told you to pass over the list of your clients. Sorry to interrupt your session, but perhaps it would be sensible for your client to make an exit now. Unless you or he thinks he is important to our investigation into the death of Mark Watford."

Without another word, the actor gets up and grabs a towel. He’s halfway to the door when Sherlock says loudly, "I’d find another trainer if I were you." He gets a shocked look and then the actor bolts through the open door and down the corridor.

Cole stands up from the stool beside the machine, and John can see that he is taller than Sherlock, and likely weighs substantially more, too — a walking advertisement of a fit physical specimen, with every muscle group etched in high relief under the tight tank top shirt. He’s in his late thirties, tanned with an expensive-looking, trendy haircut and a gold coin on a black leather cord hung around his neck.

The only thing marring the man’s handsome good looks is the anger contorting his expression. "If you’ve just cost me that man’s business, I swear I will sue. He’s one of my best and longest clients; it’s going to cost you tens of thousands of pounds. I want, I demand, a written apology that I can show him, and a guarantee of no further harassment!"

Lestrade raises a placating hand. "Just calm down. No one’s accused you of anything. We just need to ask a few questions to see if we can rule you out as a suspect."

Sherlock has been watching Cole as he reacts to the situation. John can see the deductions happening at the speed of light — Sherlock’s eyes are wide, pupils changing size and fixed on the man, and he seems to be hardly breathing. Then suddenly, he snaps out of it and resumes his questioning by demanding to know where Cole was on the date of the murder, between 5 pm to midnight.

Cole looks startled at the question. "That was… um… a Tuesday? I was with a client, I work late on Tuesdays. Why do you want to know?"

Sherlock’s reply is instantaneous. "Because that’s when we think you might have killed Mark Watford."

Cole looks at him like he’s just sprouted horns. "What do you mean? The man died of a heart attack. At least that’s what his office said. I called them when he missed an appointment after there was no answer on his mobile. I heard he’d died, but nobody told me anything about a murder until you lot started pestering me about my client list."

"It’s sensible to ask questions, but I see no reason to believe you are involved. We’re simply investigating the possibility. We’ll check the phone records of both your number and Watford’s; we’ve got his phone."

"With a client, as I said. Here. And no, it wasn’t that client." Cole gestures at the door. Lestrade has opened a notebook and lifts his pen. "Name? We’ll need to check with whoever you were with for corroboration."

"No, the rules mean their identity is confidential. That’s the whole point. I"
can't break the contract."

Sherlock snorts. "Your solicitor gave the police the list, in response to the warrant. I can't see what additional harm could come from letting us corroborate your appointment that night. If you don’t tell us which client, then we’ll just have to contact them all." He smiles sardonically.

"That would kill my business. You can’t do that!" Cole seems to be regaining his composure and starts to argue. "You’re on a fishing expedition. That’s what my solicitor said, but he told me that it was best to comply at this stage. As you see, I have co-operated with the police." He glares at Lestrade. "So what’s with this guy throwing accusations around? What evidence do you even have that Watford was murdered?" He squares his shoulders and takes a step towards Sherlock. "Who are you to make such an accusation? You’re not even police. I don’t have to tell you a bloody thing."

Lestrade steps between the two men. "No one is accusing anyone of anything here, Mister Cole. We’re just investigating the possibility - checking who may have been the last to see him alive, that sort of thing." He gives Sherlock a warning glare, and then catches John's eye as if asking him to keep Sherlock under control.

As if I could. Sherlock looks like a hound that has caught the scent of his prey, almost oblivious to the other two men in the room.

Sherlock smiles and stands his ground even when Cole steps closer. "So, you won’t mind if I just go ask that client of yours if you’ve offered him under-the-counter steroids? I bet all those big Hollywood parts require an actor to buff up in a hurry. He wouldn’t be the first to resort to such means to boost a career. How many of your clients did you ‘help’ like that? Watford’s post-mortem shows he was abusing, and it would not be much of a stretch of the imagination to pin you as the most likely supplier."

As John registers the fact that Sherlock had managed to remember Mrs Hudson’s prattle about the actor, Cole starts laughing. "That’s just ridiculous. Why would I jeopardise my career by doing something that stupid? My clients come to me because I help them build their fitness. This isn’t some low-end club for people long on brawn and short on brains. My clients wouldn’t touch any of that stuff; their own careers are too important to them to risk anything so stupid — and so is mine."

Cole's vehement denial makes John wonder if he is protesting a bit too melodramatically to be credible. The man would naturally deny all involvement, even if he wasn't a boy scout in reality. Still, lying hardly equals being a murderer.

Sherlock turns to John. "Why don’t you have a look around in the changing room where the client has just gone? Maybe we’ll find some evidence, a used syringe perhaps?"

John doubts Sherlock actually expects them to find anything that convenient. He's seen this before - Sherlock resorting to blatant provocation to fish around for a reaction, for a slip-up. He doesn't do this often - usually only when he knows he's right, and that can hardly be the case right now.

Cole snaps out. "Don’t you dare! You have no reason to suspect him of anything. Believe me, if I don’t sue, he will."

"I'd be delighted to see either of you try."

"Sherlock----," John groans.

"Don't 'Sherlock' me, I'm working, just like you wanted!" is the sharp retort he gets.
Lestrade intervenes again. "Right, all of you, just calm down. Nobody is suing anybody, and no one is going to go sniffing around any locker rooms without probable cause. But, you do need to tell us where you were and allow us to verify that alibi. Otherwise, we will have to take you in to make a formal statement, under caution."

This intervention earns Lestrade a glare from Sherlock. John realises that the tension between the two men is rising quickly. Sherlock's provocation of Cole isn't really working, and he's forcing Lestrade onto legal thin ice. Usually, Sherlock uses more subtle means in trying to coax out information. There's a desperation-tinted urgency in the way he's bulldozing over the man, even though just the tiniest hint of a smile still plays on his features. Sherlock does enjoy this sort of thing, regardless of whether it leads to the conclusion of a case. It's just that he usually conveniently forgets that his antics could turn Lestrade's career into collateral damage. He's behaving as though he has very little to lose.

Cole starts smiling, too, looking Sherlock straight in the eye, but that smile is devoid of delight. "The proof is right here. Just check the records for the date and time; the computer swipe system will show that I was here that night." He pointedly walks around Sherlock and then opens the door. "This way, gentlemen." The sarcasm is acid on his tongue.

At the reception desk, Jason is looking anxious. Even before they reach the reception counter, he begins apologising. "I am so sorry, Aiden. He sneaked a look at the screen and just grabbed my card and…"

Cole just brushes his apology aside. "Doesn’t matter; it’s theft and breach of confidentiality —both of which are going into my formal complaint. Did he hurt you to get that card?"

Jason snorts. "Him? No; just startled me."

"Shame; I would have loved to add assault to the list." Cole turns and ignores Sherlock, looking only at Lestrade. "Right, Jason, just get the records up for when Watford died, and show them that I was here until after midnight with a client."

The blond taps away at the keyboard for a surprisingly long time. Up on the wall screen comes a visitor log dated on the pertinent night. Cole points at it. "There. You must have worked out my number by now—2238617—that’s me. And that other number is one of my clients. As you can see by the booking records, we did a full rotation through the five weights room, then went to the sauna and ended our session in the consultation room at 11.30 p.m." He pointed to the time stamp on the last record against his number. "That’s me, leaving at four minutes past midnight."

Sherlock leans his palms on the counter, leaning slightly over it so that Jason is clearly tempted to retreat. "Computers can be programmed to falsify the data. The manager said you had a hand in building the system. Perhaps for a friend, you were willing to do a little extra coding."

Exasperated, Cole retorts. "It's not just the computer records - Jason can confirm my being here personally. Remember? You were pissed off to be kept waiting that night, as you had a date after work."

The blond nods eagerly. "Yes. It’s the truth." He then starts glaring at Sherlock. "You can give me my swipe card back now." He then looks over at Lestrade next. "I have a mind to call the police. A different one."

Sherlock takes the swipe card out of his coat pocket but doesn't hand it over. "I will happily part with this - in exchange for some more information. The name of the client whose number is 4753205, please." He holds the card just far enough to be out of Jason's reach.
"I don't believe this shit," Cole mutters under his breath but doesn't make a move to recover the card from Sherlock even though he easily could. "Jason doesn’t know who that is, okay? And unless you have a warrant that covers this specific client, you have no right to know who he was." There is a ring of confidence in his voice. "My solicitor told me this, and that’s why I agreed to hand over the list. Now leave me alone! You have no right to harass me at work. If you don’t issue a formal retraction, then this is going to the Independent Police Complaints Commission or whatever that thing is called."

Sherlock isn’t giving up yet. "When was the last time you saw Watford here? That information is covered by the warrant, given his death is what we are investigating."

Jason answer comes so quickly that John can't help thinking it's a little odd. "Three weeks ago. He went home early, looked a little peaky. Said he was coming down with the flu. Haven't seen him since."

"So, you could recognise Watford by sight, then. Interesting," Sherlock says pointedly.

Jason shrugs. "He was nice to me, always had a cheery hello. Most of the clients ignore me. They’re here for their work-out and want privacy, I’m just part of the machinery to them."

John remembers how Watford's work colleagues had described the man - it fits with what Jason is saying.

Cole is emboldened by the direction the conversation is going, so he turns to Lestrade. "I’ve answered your questions, and so has he. You have all the proof you need from me - and a witness to corroborate it. If you don’t leave the premises now, I will call the manager and I’m sure you'll have to deal with a formal complaint from him, as well as me. Good afternoon." The personal trainer walks away from them and does not notice that Sherlock's eyes are still boring holes through his back.

Lestrade does. "Come on; we’re done here." Without another word, he walks off toward the exit. "Sherlock, come on."

Ignoring the DI, Sherlock lingers just long enough to speak to Jason. "Be careful. Steroids can kill you. It would be a shame to waste all your hard work for the sake of a shortcut."

Jason snaps, "I don’t need advice from the likes of you," he says, eyeballing Sherlock from head to toe. He then turns his back on them and returns the screen to today’s bookings.

If Sherlock’s ascent of the stairs is much slower than his descent, John chooses not to comment.

At street level, Lestrade is waiting, leaning against the side of his car with a scowl.

"Well, that wasn’t exactly helpful, was it, Sherlock?" the DI makes no effort to hide his annoyance. "Now I’m very likely going to have to deal with several complaints, and all for what? Stuff he might well have volunteered if you weren’t so bloody minded about annoying him. What’s got into you nowadays?"

Sherlock doesn't look him in the eye, watching cars driving by instead. "He’s guilty of something;
that much I can tell."

Lestrade just sighs. "Yeah, well, thanks to you we've hit a dead end; I doubt he's going to co-operate now unless we find something to enable us to actually arrest him. And if he does make a complaint, you know what's going to happen — we won't be able to work with you until it gets resolved."

John glances around the street. They've been in this situation before. He hates Lestrade's career taking hits because of Sherlock since he's always the one having to justify Sherlock to his supervisors. Lestrade sometimes even seems to blame John for it, even though he hardly has any sort of control over Sherlock.

Sherlock is already striding away down Finsbury Market without a backwards glance.

John hurries after him, but Lestrade grabs him by the arm. "Don't let him do anything stupid. If he tries to break into the guy's flat or some other hare-brained scheme, the evidence acquired will never stand up in court. And he'll probably end up blacklisted permanently from working with us again."

As soon as the DI lets go, John breaks into a trot and manages to catch up with Sherlock just as he waves down a cab on the corner of Finsbury Square. He throws himself into the taxi just as Sherlock barks out their home address.

John lets some time go by, hoping that silence will help Sherlock calm down. When the taxi goes around the Old Street roundabout, Sherlock pulls out his phone and starts swiping.

"Now what?" John asks.

Silence.

It isn't until after the taxi passes Kings Cross Station that Sherlock answers. "Nothing."

"Nothing? What does that mean?"

That gets him a look, the first time Sherlock has made eye contact since they were in the Vault. "Nothing, zero, zip, nada. Shall I continue in the fourteen other languages I speak, or has the message got through? The man practically oozes guilt, but I can't prove a thing. Yet another failure of mine. I would be ever so grateful if you would avoid mentioning it on your blog. Your last post made me sound pathetic enough."

Had Sherlock not even tried to employ his best interrogation skills down there? Had he given up before even trying, simply letting himself be dragged along so that he could prove how pointless it all was, and heckle a potential subject just for a bit of malicious entertainment?

John sighs.

Sherlock’s mood had been low before this; it would be positively subterranean now.

Today is definitely headed towards becoming another danger night.
There is a yellow sticky note on the bannister, awaiting them on their return to Baker Street. It's in Mrs Hudson's cursive, slightly shaky handwriting, and tells them that she's taken delivery of a package which she has left on their kitchen table because she is going out.

When John starts up the first step, Sherlock grabs his arm. "Wait."

In an instant, John connects his concern with a previous delivery. "You think it might be something else from Moriarty?"

That makes Sherlock look at him very closely.

"I did tell you I found the photos and the card," John reminds him. The reminder visibly upsets Sherlock. He frowns in alarm.

John decides he needs to make something clear. "I should have told you this before: I could never forget how much fun you can be because you've never stopped being you. So, next time I see Moriarty, I'm going to tell him to fuck off, because you're mine; all six feet of irritating know-it-all that you are."

Sherlock takes some time to process what John has intended as a compliment, and when he finally gets there, the tight line of his mouth breaks into a slight smile. "I hope you're not thinking of relieving Mrs Hudson of bin-clearing duty permanently."

John chuckles.

"Still, it could be another message," Sherlock adds, his own amusement waning as he hesitates on the stairs as though expecting a bomb to go off any second. He seems to now be seeking on John's face a confirmation for his worries.

John shakes his head. "Most likely, it's what I ordered three days ago on Ebay." He pushes past Sherlock up the stairs.

By the time Sherlock gets his coat off and returns from a trip to the bathroom, John already has the brown paper and bubble wrap off a soft-sided black nylon case, which is a bit thicker than a computer, but smaller than a briefcase. When he glances up to meet Sherlock's gaze, he finds open curiosity in those blue-grey eyes. Good. John certainly hopes this might break the mood.

As he wrestles the last of the packaging off and begins to unzip the bag, John starts the spiel that he'd worked on. "I know Helen wants you to teach me, but I have a hunch it isn't helping either of us. The violin is all you - I don't have any attachment to it. You know perfectly well how much better you used to play than a beginner like me, and how you still do. I object to being forced to torture myself for your benefit. Besides, the trouble with learning to play your instrument is that it means only one of us can play at a time."

He finishes the zip and opens the bag out flat to reveal the black and silver pieces of a musical instrument. John lifts two of them out, and with practised skill, fits them together.


John smirks. "Good deduction." He can't resist smiling at the look of surprise and confusion on Sherlock’s face. "This is something I can actually play, without it sounding like a badger being run over by a lawn mower. Granted, it's been a while, but I promise to do a bit of practice. As
competently as I play second fiddle to you while on a case, I’d rather us play something together at home." He rummages around in the case, and then thrusts a packet toward Sherlock. "Pick one, and go get your violin while I wet the reed and get it fitted."

Sherlock opens the manila envelope and pulls out what John had ordered, reading the title out loud: "'Easy Duets for Violin and Clarinet'."

As he dips the yellow reed into a cup of water, John answers, "Yep - Mozart. Thought you’d like that. The transcriptions are by an Italian-American jazz composer named Fabrizio Ferrari - no, not kidding about the name. Once we get the hang of these, then you can transcribe whatever you like for us. I'm sure you can, I've seen you compose."

Sherlock walks over to the music stand and drags it into the centre of the sitting room. Opening the sheet music, he then pulls out his violin, quickly wipes rosin dust off the strings and reattaches the clip-on shoulder rest Helen has brought for him. His old one had been rather worn, and much less customisable. He begins tuning with a frown of concentration, but stop halfway. "I believe it is customary for the violins in an orchestra to be tuned according to an A given by a woodwind?"

The clarinet had been picked for John by his mother, and he had never been all that into playing it, especially since he got to hear it from some of the rugby team boys how un-masculine they considered such a hobby. He'd eventually given up and joined that very team. Sports was more his thing, better for blowing off steam that trying to perfect how to play a piece of music.

Still, this could be something they could do together.

John slips the reed into place, tightens the leather ligature and turns the screw. Stealing a glance at Sherlock, he plays an experimental scale and pleased with the sonorous tones even after years without practice. It's somehow very reassuring that he has not forgotten all of it. He gives Sherlock an A, allowing him to finish tuning the violin.

"That did sound better than your violin playing," Sherlock comments.

"Unsurprisingly," John says and smirks at the fact that he's grown so used to such insults that he has considered them a form of affection for a long time already.

John notices Sherlock circling his wrist with his thumb and forefinger and rubbing it again after having placed the violin on John's usual armchair. He puts down the clarinet and grabs the same wrist despite Sherlock's protests. It's slightly swollen, and warm. "Have you been overdoing it with that tennis ball again?"

Helen had given the ball to Sherlock to practice finger strength. As could be expected, Sherlock had really thrown himself into it in his fury to get better. Maybe an impromptu music session isn't such a good idea? "Yup, looks like tendinitis. Better lay off it and put something cold on that," John suggests.

"Later," Sherlock dismisses and shakes off his prying fingers. "Surely it won’t be too detrimental to do one or two of these," he says and arranges their new sheet music on the music stand.

John leafs through it.

"Actually, I am relieved," Sherlock admits. "I was dreading having to teach you how to manage vibrato. On the other hand, maybe the intermittent tremor in your left wrist might actually allow the same sound without you having to actually learn anything."

"Your hands probably aren't exactly rock steady at the moment, either, after your binge."
This shuts Sherlock up.

They tackle the first duet. It sounds a little rough around the edges, and they are not exactly in sync for most of it, but it does actually sound like passable music.

After three pieces, Sherlock is rubbing at his wrist again and actually puts his violin down on the window sill momentarily. John joins Sherlock by the window, clarinet in hand. "Seriously, though: how are the cravings? A relapse is not a question of mind over matter. Not with your history."

"Cocaine isn’t like that. Its addictive properties are not the same as an opiate's."

"I know. Otherwise, I'd be following you into the bathroom daily for a few weeks, asking you to pee in a cup. Doesn't mean you've passed the danger period, though," he adds. In all honesty, there is no set danger period - apart from the rest of Sherlock's life.

Sherlock rolls his eyes and returns to the music stand. "Let's try the third one again."

They trudge through the composition, the trioles giving John some trouble.

Halfway through it, Sherlock's bow suddenly comes to a literally screeching halt. "John..." he starts, sounding surprised, alarmed and a little excited at the same time.

John unwraps his mouth off the clarinet, "What?"

"You are a genius!"

"Me? Why?"

"Urine.... It never occurred to me."

"That’s funny. I distinctly remember you going to the loo about twenty minutes ago," This earns John an eye roll.

Sherlock quickly but carefully places his violin on the coffee table, and then practically runs to the stairs, shouting: "Get your coat. We’re going to Barts!"

Chapter End Notes

The duets exist, and so does the composer (yes, that really is his name). Have a listen.
"I was just on my way home," Molly protests when Sherlock practically manhandles her back into the mortuary. They have caught her just as she is locking up for the night - it's past eight in the evening.

"No, you're not," Sherlock says and takes off his scarf. "You're helping us solve a murder. That's so much more fun than feeding your cat and watching whatever pointless thing on television you're currently hooked on." He looks at her carefully, tries to remember what sorts of personal things she's been prattling on lately. Her expression had made a minuscule shift when Sherlock had mentioned television, so there must be something there. Her movements had been hasty at the door, and she had checked the time on the wall clock twice already. "I'm certain that you've already put the programme you're worrying about missing on to record, just in case you were held up getting home. And I can tell you that you would have been because the Central Line has delays on the line caused by engineering works."

She sighs and then tears off her own scarf. "I don't work for you. One of these days, I'm going to have something important on, and I'm actually going to tell you no."

He considers this. "Unlikely. Anyway, this is important and you like being useful." He decides to add in a bit of flattery, because he knows she appreciates being appreciated, "...Especially when you can help finally prove that Mark Watford's cause of death was not natural."

"I had a hunch you wouldn't let that one go." Molly pinches her lips together. It seems obvious that she'd prefer to bury the case. Sherlock doesn't appreciate such cynicism, not when there's a mystery here to be explored.

Even John looks perky enough as he unzips his coat and glances around the mortuary. He's smiling at Molly apologetically.

Sherlock wonders whether perhaps he needs to work harder on keeping the pathologist on his side. Molly has her uses, and he respects her professionalism. Only once has she crossed the line when it comes to intervening with Sherlock's personal life, and since he believes in ends justifying means, he can hardly be angry at Molly for having been a catalyst for the first kiss he'd ever received from John.

Building and cultivating relationships has never been something Sherlock is good at. He still sometimes wonders what magical thing he had done without even realising, which had made John move in with him and follow him around to crime scenes. Of course, John still thinks he's brilliant and possibly fun, and possibly John might consider him pleasing to look at, despite the ravages of the disease taking its toll, but he can't quite put a finger on what exactly had made John want him as more than just a friend. Especially now that he's, well--- less than he was.

That thought makes him look at John, aware yet again that he needs to improve that relationship even more urgently. The relapse has dented his confidence in his ability to keep John happy, and despite John's reassurances, he does still worry just how unconditional the man’s love is for him.

It's John who knows how to do this sort of thing, connecting with people, and predictably, John senses the awkward situation with the pathologist and comes to Sherlock’s rescue. "We're sorry to keep you, Molly, but we just need whatever you’ve got in the way of bladder contents."
Sherlock decides he rather likes the 'we'. It's much better than putting the blame solely on his impatience for her ruined evening.

"Sherlock thinks he might be able to do something with the urine that will reveal the unknown compound that he found in trace amounts in the blood. You could just sign it out and leave us at it," John suggests in an encouraging tone.

It's true - Sherlock knows all the equipment and has the knowledge required for this project. Molly could be a useful pair of hands, and ideas could be bounced off her, but she's hardly vital. Sherlock opens his mouth to point that out, but John seems to be trying to signal him to shut up.

Molly moves her gaze from John and Sherlock, and sighs. In a rather weary tone, she then asks, "What did you say you need? The urine samples?"

She goes to a large fridge in the corner and touches the keypad code in to unlock it. The evidence storage facility is there to be used in cases just like this one - contingency for the possibility that the Coroner’s Inquest orders further testing.

Molly turns back towards him and John, bearing a stoppered Erlenmeyer flask of yellow fluid. It’s labelled with Watford’s name and the date of his post mortem. "I've already done the standard tox tests on it."

Sherlock eyes the volume. "Hmm... those took only 30 millilitres. And you have nearly four hundred here practically going to waste." The edge of his mouth curls up into a fledgling smile.

"Not to waste, Sherlock. I still have to account for every millilitre of it, if there's to be an intact chain of evidence, so you have to keep meticulous records of whatever it is you're planning." She gave John a rueful smile. "That also means I have to be present when tests are run on it, at least until the inquest."

Molly has usually awarded him as much elbow room as he has needed, allowing him to often use the premises and equipment on his own. For a moment, paranoia sets in and he wonders if Molly now thinks him defective and requiring of supervision, too. "You weren't present when we analysed the blood," Sherlock protests.

"I was in the building then, close by, and could have made a case that I was still nominally supervising you. If I leave now, that won’t apply. So, lead on."

The three of them go upstairs to Sherlock’s favourite lab. There are several in the building with similar equipment, and he could have picked any one of them, but somehow, right now, he's drawn to this particular one.

It's the place where he had first met John.

So much has happened since that first question he posed, "Afghanistan or Iraq?" Ever since John has proved both a mystery to be solved, and an unending source of fascination and unwavering support. As they walk in, he sneaks a look at John's reflection in the glass of the wall cabinets and takes in the man's easy movement, the sense of belonging which had been absent on that first occasion. I did that, Sherlock sometimes allows himself to believe. At least that's what John keeps telling him.

The day they had met he had seen the crutch, the damage in John, the danger and volatility simmering beneath an amicable conduct —that first look had been enough to fascinate him. He can no longer look at John without a flood of shared memories being triggered. Odd, but it now gives
meaning to a place he had always thought of in a rather utilitarian way.

Where would John be right now, without that chance meeting? If John is convinced that such a singular event had defined the direction of his life, is there a similar moment happening now for Sherlock? A moment in which he makes a choice for survival or destruction? Lately, he's felt like standing at a crossroads, and he can't see where any of the roads diverging from it lead. Push on, trying to regain what he had lost, or give up? Desperately cling onto hope that he can somehow work out this relationship thing, or submit to the notion that it will never really amount to anything, given his failings and ineptitude? Or might there be a third road opening before him that he simply can't see yet?

Concentrate. Sherlock knows the case means he needs to focus. This lab work is what he does, and he mustn't allow sentiment to come between him and the solution to this case. He squares his shoulders. "We're looking for the identity of seven different unknown alkaloids. That much can be deduced from the traces in the blood. But they weren't in sufficient quantity there to be able to fractionate and identify in terms of their chemical structures. The gas chromatography and mass spectrometer analysis I did wasn't able to define anything more than the fact that they belonged to the larger group known as alkaloid compounds; I couldn't even manage to identify the general family."

"What process are you going to use?" Molly seems to have been mollified by John's soothing words and has let curiosity overcome her initial reluctance. Sherlock knows that behind her awkwardness around other people, she is a very competent scientist. Sherlock can relate to that - not knowing how to be around others while possessing more than average intelligence. The fact that she is interested in what he does means that he is not uncomfortable in her presence, nor she in his, so long as he can keep her focused on the science.

"We begin by driving off the obvious element of urine—the 95% that’s water and then running the remainder against the Urine Metabolome database to pick out everything that should be there."

"That'll take ages," Molly points out, but doesn't sound defeated - at least not yet. "Urine has over 3,000 metabolites in 230 different chemical classes. Since there are about 350 chemical classes in the entire human metabolome, that's over a half of them."

"A pretty impressive biofluid, indeed," Sherlock agrees.

John smirks. "And there I was thinking it was just a bottle of pee."

Sherlock rolls his eyes. "I just lost my last shreds of hope in the quality of British medical school education."

"You're sure it's an alkaloid that is the toxin?" Molly asks, "If it's something that had already been largely metabolised, you might not find it in the blood in easily extractable quantities but the urine might reveal it."

"Balance of probabilities. After driving off the water, I'll start by extracting all the alkaloids from what remains of the urine, into an acidic aqueous solution, which will turn it basic. Then I'll do a back extraction into an organic solvent. From there we can start exploring."

Molly nods and dons a lab coat. John strips down to shirtsleeves since the space is well heated.

Sherlock begins assembling the equipment he knows they will need.
Hours later, they don't have any more answers than they started with. Extracting the alkaloids has taken a lot of time. The human body produces quite a few which are normally present in urine, adding to the complexity of the differential process, and the mixture they have extracted still carries a large number of different types of alkaloids, any one of which might be the unknown killer that caused, or at least exacerbated, Mark Watford’s heart attack.

After the second coffee break, John asks the most important and also very obvious question out loud, as is his habit: "So, how do we work out which one did him in?"

Sherlock leans back from where he'd been hunched in front of a computer at the end of the lab bench. "To allow the families of alkaloids to be purified from one another, we have to play around with their ion charges. Didn't they teach you any chemistry prior to medical school?"

John yawns, then smiles at him again. "Biology and maths; didn’t need all that much chemistry to get in."

"The entire human metabolism runs on chemistry. Funny they didn't feel as though teaching doctors much about it was very pertinent."

"Must have deleted it," John teases him back. "Since I wanted to be a surgeon from the get-go. We did actually do a lot of medical biochemistry and pharmacology in the first years of medical school."

Sherlock sighs and starts preparing the machine next to the computer. "These are a series of ion exchange columns, which have a strong cation exchange resin. It works as a catch and release mechanism. The basic compounds are removed from the crude mixture and then released after the other impurities are washed away. After that, we can tinker with the ionic strength and the pH of the solvents to purify a collection and isolate compounds."

He slaps the top down on the equipment. "Well, I say that, but actually it’s the machine that initiates automatic solvent switching to generate multiple gradients with cations of increasing strength. These elute the alkaloids with a combination of ionic strength and pH control. Multiple gradients can separate the stuff we can identify from what we can’t." He can't help smirking as he notices that John’s eyes have glazed over during his detailed explanation. "It's very simple, really."

Only, identifying the substances turns out to be not simple at all.

By midnight, John is running out of steam, and Sherlock can feel the man’s eyes on him. John is probably hoping for tea, a snack and bed, having lost interest in what they're doing hours ago. Sherlock can hardly blame him. John doesn't have anything to prove.

To his surprise, it is Molly who comes to his defence, clearly having noticed John's decreasing patience and waning interest. "This really isn't easy. Almost all the experimental chemistry involved with plant alkaloids has been done through extraction procedures. Scientists start with the plant and extract the toxins. Working the other way around is like finding a needle in a haystack."
Every time you test for one, to eliminate it, you destroy the rest of the sample’s alkaloids in the process. We just have to be patient."

Sherlock finds himself grateful for Molly's faith that this will actually render results. Then again, Sherlock can tell Molly would clearly walk to the ends of the Earth to help a friend out.

John eyes the array of sample vials in the rack. "And hope we don’t run out of pee." He rubs his forehead with the heel of his palm, and sits back down on a lab stool he'd commandeered hours earlier. He then dutifully continues what Sherlock had tasked him with - dividing samples into smaller test tubes for their next round.

Sherlock drums his fingertips on the counter, unsure of what to do next. The late hour, John's escalating impatience and the fact that they still have a mountain of work to do, with no guarantee of results, is grating his own tenacity thin. He has to resist the desire to slip down from the lab stool and pace to expel some of the nervous energy gathering.

Molly is hard at work, frowning as she transfers a batch of samples already sorted by the ion charges of their compounds from a machine to a side table, making sure the results have been printed out.

Sherlock absent-mindedly slides his fingers into the pockets of his trousers, but his phone isn't there. What did he even mean to do with it? For a moment, it feels as though his brain has ground to a halt, untethered, confused. He blinks fervently, as he tends to do when he gets confused. John would probably tell him that he hasn't eaten or slept enough. Those things never used to decimate his concentration like this - if anything, they made him sharper. Ever since the illness, his base energy level has been abysmal. He needs sleep, more than he ever has, and there's a layer of exhaustion that makes everything harder than it used to be.

He glances around the laboratory. Kind John and even kinder Molly have spent hours toiling away on what could be a wild goose chase. How is he worth all this faith, if he can't muster it up for himself?

Molly looks very focused, and even John seems oblivious to being watched. Just as well that someone can keep their attention focused where it belongs.

He has a headache again. His back hurts. Before, these sorts of things used to be irrelevant, but now they seem to underline his declining mood. He's almost tempted to grab his coat and go home.

He does get up and pace.

Finally, John intervenes. "Sherlock. What is the matter?"

"It's like looking for a needle in a haystack, and I can't help but think that I'm missing something obvious, something simple that could cut through all this." He glares at the whirring machinery as if accusing the equipment of conspiring in his failure. He keeps pacing, finally stopping at the far end of the room and putting his hands into his hair to pull at the curls in frustration.

John is going to try to placate him, he can feel it coming. Any minute now, he's going to say that they'll keep at it until something gives, and more importantly: it doesn't matter, that it's alright if he doesn't crack the case, that it's okay to fail.

Before that can come out, Molly speaks up quietly, almost apologetically, "Maybe the equipment here just isn't sophisticated enough. The UCL lab has a pH-zone-refining Counter-current chromatography set up that enables separation of organic bases into a succession of highly
concentrated rectangular peaks, which elute, according to their corresponding pKa values and hydrophobicities. I know someone there who might let us have a go. Or, I could see if we can get access here to the Clinical Chemistry Unit's spectral and X-ray crystallographic equipment?"

Something in Sherlock just snaps at that and he barks out, "It’s not the equipment that’s at fault here. It’s me." He feels like he’s about to explode. The cool scientific detachment needed to find this elusive chemical is gone, blown apart by his anxiety and all he can think of is that he wants to break something. Preferably glass, and something that will make a lot of noise, and possibly cause pain. Even draw blood. Something tangible, anything to cut through the adrenaline that is coursing through his veins right now, screaming at him to solve the bloody case.

John is suddenly beside him and takes his hand away from his hair. Sherlock sees it all as though from a distance, staring at his hand that is visibly shaking, grasped in John’s. It doesn't feel like it's his own. Oddly, he feels ice cold, almost to the point of shivering.

John’s hand around his wrist is the one point of warmth in the whole room, and the contact somehow anchors him.

"Sherlock. Stop this." John grabs his other wrist, too, shaking them slightly to further his point.

"I can’t. A man is dead and I can’t find out what killed him."

What is wrong with him? If he can’t solve this, then he might as well just give up. On all of it.

"Maybe we’re going about this the wrong way. Why not eliminate the obvious suspects and then just test for what’s left? My father always said that a needle in a haystack was a stupid saying; why not get a magnet and make the needle come to you?"

Sherlock stands, dumbstruck. His hands come up of their own accord, snaking out from under John's grip, to plant themselves in a steeple under his chin. He pinches his eyes closed, chasing the idea he knows is somewhere in his head if he could only net it like an errant butterfly.

Finally, at the back of his mind, something dawns. It's not a fully-formed realisation yet, but it's a distilled sort of anticipation, a certain sort of deja vu that tells him he knows something that fits.

This is what John does to him, reminds him of things he has forgotten, connections that elude him. John is the art of the obvious, the symphony of the simple, and he cuts through the haze of Sherlock's sometimes over-complex thinking by simply being himself.

A whispered "oh" makes its way past Sherlock's lips as he stares at John. He then stands still for almost ten seconds, thoughts darting off in a thousand directions until those directions converge---- -- suddenly he runs to the white marker board at the end of the room. "Stupid, so stupid. I’ve given the thinking part to a bloody machine."

John sounds both puzzled and worried when he asks: "What does that mean?"

Sherlock is still downright stunned. "We are doing this the wrong way around. We’re trying to identify the alkaloid, when we should be thinking about what it has come from, and where it currently is. Molly, work with me to eliminate the obvious. You must be familiar with the alkaloid families."

Molly nods. "Sure, many of them are pretty basic clinical pharmacology. Some alkaloids are rather harmless - like the pyridines. They're what lie behind nicotine. The same with the xanthine alkaloids - some of them are in tea and coffee. We can also eliminate the quinilines - those are used in anti-malarial drugs, hardly lethal, even in large quantities."
Sherlock nods, jotting down the compound families on the marker board, and then slashing a line over them to denote that they should be promptly ignored.

Molly walks closer, inspecting the board. "One group we should look at are diterpene alkaloids. Many of them are highly toxic, and thus often prime suspects in poisons, such as aconitine and its derivatives. They activate---"

"---Sodium channels, messing up the excitability of cell membranes, I know this," Sherlock complains impatiently, "Rapid muscle paralysis with cardiac and neural disturbances. Any idiot with basic chemistry skills could extract yunaconitine from Monkshood plants found in their back garden."

Molly grabs a red marker and writes down 'aconitine' on the board. Sherlock circles it.

"Another back-garden suspect is Atropa belladonna, a.k.a. Deadly nightshade, from which atropine and scopolamine can be extracted. But the symptoms don’t match, do they?" Sherlock asks, and this time he's looking at John.

"Atropine can cause tachycardia, but I wouldn't think that alone would have killed him unless he was given a pretty hefty dose."

Molly agrees. "No sign of rash and the pupils were not unnaturally dilated. I doubt it would inflict that kind of a myocardial infarction, even with steroid cardiomyopathy to help it along."

Sherlock sets off again, pacing up one side of the lab bench and then back again. "Any of the benzylisoquinoline alkaloids would have triggered a positive result in a standard forensic tox screen, showing also most of the opiates belonging in the compound group such as codeine and morphine. Thebain would have shown up in that, or at least in the test you did on the blood, and the GSC-MS I run did last week would have picked up the rest of the opiate agonists, as well as the antagonists naloxone and naltrexone."

If John looks a little more interested in what he is saying at the moment, Sherlock decides to ignore it. He doesn’t want to underline the fact that he's very familiar with the unique signatures of almost every street drug and pharmaceutical used for recreational purposes. He could, of course, point out that they're relevant for exactly these sorts of cases, but John is already wearing that expression so he'd better just get a move on.

He clears his throat and turns to face the white marker board again. "There were no chemical signatures for ergot alkaloids, and using them for murder would be ridiculous. Their effects are more akin to hallucinogens than what one would describe as a poison."

Molly has dug out a large book from a shelf, running her finger along a page. "We can probably also ignore indoles used in antitumor treatments, cardio arrhythmic drugs and blood pressure medications."

"LSD is also an indole, but, as I've already established, it would be idiotic to try and kill anyone with a hallucinogen." Sherlock hastens on, again worried that John might draw the wrong conclusions about his knowledge of LSD. He has tried it, but John hardly needs to know that. Practical knowledge of such things could be seen as vital for detective work. How else would he know what the drug might make someone do?

"Well, you did say the murderer was an amateur," John jokes.

Molly lifts the book she'd been browsing through. "There are over 4000 indole alkaloids. So much
for narrowing it down.”

Sherlock turns on his heels to look at John again. "What did you just say?"

"That I doubt atropine would kill him?" John suggests.

Sherlock makes a face. "No, just now!"

"That the killer is an amateur?"

Sherlock taps his lower lip with his forefinger. Again, John seems to have triggered an idea. If only he could grab the tail end of it---

Molly actually gets there first, in a way. "What if we only looked at those indoles which we know have been used in murders? For instance, strychnine? That's a classic."

John’s snorts. "I thought that was something out of an Agatha Christie novel. And if it's such a classic, wouldn't there be a standard forensic test for it?"

"Strychnine was used in the early twentieth century as a performance enhancing drug. It might be easy to disguise in whatever the murderer injected in terms of steroids." He walks to the white board and writes up C21H22N2O2. "It has the advantage of being easy to obtain - rat bait bought illegally from overseas might contain it. You can even manufacture it yourself if you can get access to the seeds of the Indian tree, *Strychnos nux-vomica*. Even the Latin name of the tree tells you what it does."

Molly is shaking her head. "But, Sherlock - the symptoms don't fit. Strychnine is a neurotoxin that inhibits neurotransmitters in the spinal cord and brain, leading to hyperthermia, generalised rigidity and tonic-clonic seizures. Death results from anoxia and exhaustion – not a heart attack."

"Maybe, but if the steroids had damaged his heart, convulsions might be enough to trigger a cardiac event. As for your question, John, they don't test for it automatically, but it is easy enough to test for. In fact, *ridiculously* easy: Mandelin’s reagent invented in 1883. Forget all this expensive equipment. The reagent colour codes twenty-three alkaloids. If it is strychnine, then it will show violet blue, then orange-red, then yellow."

Molly practically runs to a cupboard of chemicals, while Sherlock rummages around a drawer, produces a sheet of thin layer chromatographic paper, and painstakingly uses a pipette to transfer a sample of the alkaloid mixture on it. It takes him a few tries to get it exactly where he wants it - thankfully it doesn't matter if there are drops dotting the paper outside the testing area.

He looks at his shaky right hand with disdain. He's tired, and that means his nerves are ratcheting up the misfiring muscles.

When Molly returns and tries to pass the small glass bottle containing the reagent to him, he thrusts it towards John and says. "You do the honours."

John uses the eyedropper in the bottle cork to add the reagent, and three sets of eyes then intently watch the colours start to shift.

"Oh! It’s purple. And then red-violet." Sherlock has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the spectrum colours, one advantage of his eidetic memory.

"So, not strychnine." Molly sounds disappointed.
Sherlock isn't even trying to suppress a huge grin. He isn't disappointed at all. "Nope. But it’s not too far off. Apart from strychnine, violet or violet-blue colours are obtained with apomorphine and papaverine. But this is far better than that — these colours only match one very specific indole - that would be gelsemine. Also known as heartbreak grass. We have found the murder weapon!"
After the revelation about the toxin, Molly’s weariness starts to show.

"Why don’t we tackle the rest of this tomorrow? By now Toby will be screaming for his supper so loud that the neighbours will complain," Molly says, as she finishes typing up notes of their discovery into the evidence database.

John collects up the printed chromatography sheets into a folder.

Sherlock is trying to ignore them both as he sits in front of a computer, reading the fine print of an article he has dragged up from some journal or other.

John peers over his shoulder to read the title:

*Confirmation of Gelsemium Poisoning by Targeted Analysis of Toxic Gelsemium Alkaloids in Urine by Chi-Kong Lai and Yan-Wo Chan
Department of Pathology, Princess Margaret Hospital, Hong Kong*

"Do you really need to read that right now, since we already did exactly that? Bring it home with you. You could read it tomorrow while we wait for your appointment at the hospital. You always complain that the sorts of magazines they provide in waiting rooms rot people's brains."

Sherlock looks up at John, frowning.

"Appointment...?" It's a rare moment when Sherlock looks completely confused, his mind clearly attempting to leapfrog from chemistry to whatever John is talking about, but drawing a blank. "John, what---"

John stares at him for a moment, then blinks and snorts. "You deleted it, didn't you? Your follow-up appointment at the National's post-ITU discharge clinic," he reminds Sherlock.

"There's finally a break in the case, and this is what's on your mind right now? Priorities!" Sherlock berates him, and continues reading. "Too busy; I'll reschedule. The case is finally approaching fascinating." Sherlock hums briefly, as if the nervous energy released by the breakthrough has got to escape somehow. "This paper is based on nine cases of accidental gelsemium poisonings. In China, it's called *Gou-men*; that means 'Lethal Kiss'."

Molly is almost out of the door, carrying the remaining sample vials John had created from the urine - the ones they hadn't needed, after all.

Sherlock's head snaps up to look at her. "If you're going back to the mortuary, can you bring me his stomach contents? Apparently, ingestion is the usual method of delivery for the poison, at least in accidental cases."

Molly's shoulders slump. "No, I am not going to bring you the stomach contents. I am going home."
"But I need to know how the poison got into him." Sherlock insists, looking perplexed at her decision.

John decides to intervene, to tell Sherlock that they all need to go home, get something to eat and get some sleep, but before he can get the words out, Molly turns to face them both.

"The simple answer is no, and it also happens to be the truth, because there were no stomach contents, apart from the smallest amount of bile and stomach acids. No evidence of any food at all in the stomach. Also, no vomit was found at either the mill where the body was dumped, or at the victim’s house. The only thing that was noteworthy about the GI tract was that there were signs of long-term reflux in the oesophagus, even the start of a Barret lesion, but that isn't rare, or caused by any sort of poisoning. I checked all of this last week. Now, good night."

Sherlock’s frown is still on his face long after the lab door has swung shut behind her.

"She has a point. We need to get home. I’m starving and you need to eat, too." John looks at his watch. "You’re also four hours late for your evening meds. And we are going to talk about that appointment, because you are going, even if I have to frog-march you there myself."

Perhaps it's the lateness of the hour that keeps Sherlock from arguing. John realises that if he and Molly are tired, Sherlock must be utterly spent, even though his brain must still be going a million miles an hour.

In the cab on the way home, Sherlock still has enough energy to lecture John from the article that he's now reading on his phone.

"Of course, now that we know what to look for, it’s easy to see what technique would have worked best. We were on the right track, but the Chinese used American equipment - a real beauty: an API 2000 LC–MS–MS triple-quadruple mass spect with a TurboIonSpray ionisation probe."

Even as tired as he is, John can hear the envy in Sherlock's tone. He has no idea what such a machine does and makes a mental note to tell Mycroft sternly not to get them one, no matter how much Sherlock pesters him about it. Lord knows there is enough of his chemistry equipment cluttering up the flat already.

As the taxi rounds the corner onto Baker Street, Sherlock’s enthusiasm is undaunted. "No wonder they could do it all in a fifteen-minute transit time, what would have taken us hours. They did the chromatographic separation and ended up with five of our seven unknowns: gelsemine, obviously, but then koumine, gelsenicine, humantenidine, and humantenine."

John is so tired that his brain cannot tell the difference between the words, since they all sound somewhat alike. "If you say so, Sherlock."

He gets a puzzled look in reply. "I did just say so, John; aren’t you listening?"

As soon as they get through the door, John brings Sherlock’s medicine into the kitchen from the bathroom. By the time he gets the tablets and a glass of water to the living room, Sherlock is on the phone.
"Yes, I am perfectly aware that it is after midnight. You are the Emergency Scientific and Medical Services helpline for the Guy's and St Thomas's Medical Toxicology Information Services, are you not, and the last time I checked it is listed as operating 24/7?"

While Sherlock listens to someone on the other end of the phone, John holds out the tablets and gives him a stern glare.

Without a word, Sherlock takes the pills, shoves them into his mouth and then grabs the glass of water. He takes a sip and tosses his head back in an accentuated manner to get them down.

John collects the glass, and heads into the kitchen to try to get some food going. In the background, he can hear Sherlock cough slightly and then begin to pace.

In a moment, he launches off again, "Yes, I want the ChiMas service. Obviously. No, as I told your colleague, who is probably sitting right across from you, I am not a medical service provider or a patient; I have not ingested something suspicious, nor am I suffering any side effects from some Chinese herbal medicine. However, I do need to know right now how long it takes for a lethal dose of *Gelsemium elegans* to take effect? It's for a murder investigation and the Coroner needs the evidence. I can't find it in any database that I have access to, but I assumed you might have better sources."

There's a pause, at the end of which Sherlock stops in his tracks. "What do you mean, 'there's no data available'? Surely at least one idiot in the history of British toxicology has accidentally taken it, or more preferably, tried to off someone with it!"

Sherlock drums the mantelpiece with his fingertips as he listens to what the person at the other end of the line is saying. Judging by Sherlock's expression they're not providing the answers he wants. "Then surely you would know who to call in China to find out, if your databases failed to deliver?"

John gets the frying pan out, heads for the fridge to fetch eggs and butter, grabbing a bowl and whisk on the way. The kitchen clatter drowns out whatever conversation Sherlock might still be having. John decides that an omelette will have to do; he has neither the energy nor the ingredients to whip out anything resembling a salad to accompany it. The main goal here is to get something hot and nutritious into Sherlock before the man falls over.

Two minutes later, Sherlock comes into the kitchen, and slaps his phone and keys down on the counter, clearly annoyed.

"No luck?" John asks, cracking the last of six eggs into the bowl. Sherlock peers into it, disinterested.

"No. Apparently, these idiots offer a 24/7 service without having access to anything useful, and their actual toxicologists work on a nine-to-five basis on weekdays. They told me to call back tomorrow morning, when they can find out who I should talk to at Kew Gardens' Sustainable Uses Group, whatever that is. There's someone specialising on plant toxins there. Finding out how fast gelsemine works could crack the timeline wide open."

Sherlock is then off on a march route back to the sitting room, muttering about alkaloids and Chinese medicine under his breath. Every step seems to semaphore irritability.

"Anything other than the useless poison helpline bugging you?"

Sherlock stops to stare out of the window onto Baker Street, quiet now, devoid of traffic. "What we found out tonight is all well and good, but it doesn't yet give us the connection to Watford, to any
of his coworkers, to Aiden Cole - or any of the other trainers. There's something, there must be, it’s just…. Stuck." He plants his palm on the back of his head. "I can’t make the pieces fit together. I am so stupid these days." He lowers his hand but John sees that it forms a fist of frustration.

"Maybe if you gave yourself a chance to eat and sleep, then it would come to you. Sometimes we process stuff in our sleep." John leaves out the fact that the memories his own brain still keeps processing at night don't seem to be doing him any good. It would be logical to assume Sherlock would want to avoid sleeping in order to forgo the nightmares.

Sherlock resumes pacing. "Never worked before; in fact, both slowed me down. Now, I seem pathetically unable to put even the simplest things together, regardless of whether I've done your tedious routines, which pretty much debunks your theory."

John smells the butter in the pan starting to brown, and he has to hurry back into the kitchen to turn the gas down.

He had long ago become accustomed to Sherlock’s restless, seemingly aimless flitting about the flat when he's trying to think. Usually, John just gives him space, but now he's left wondering which part of the restless ghost act consists of drug cravings, and how much of it is due to Sherlock's new default state of barely contained anxiety. This is not Sherlock's old-fashioned, positive giddiness at a good case, but a whole new emotional entity that feels malignant and contagious.

John has to admit that the man seems almost manic, gesturing to himself as he wanders around, muttering as though he's having an argument.

Suddenly Sherlock starts firing off questions. "How long does it take for food to exit the stomach?"

John ponders whether that is rhetorical, or if Sherlock actually wants him to provide the answer. He shoves two rounds of bread into the toaster. "About five hours. Depends on age and gender a bit. Not everyone is the same."

"How long does transit through the small intestine take?"

John lifts the edge of the cooked egg and allows the runny bits to flow under it. He then starts to grate cheese into one side of the pan. "We’re about a minute or two from eating, so maybe another topic?"

"How can that possibly make you squeamish? You’re a doctor; just answer the question. It’s for the case,” he explains in a tone usually reserved for the word 'obvious'.

In Sherlock's books, the fact that there's a case on justifies pretty much anything. Even getting arrested. Or ignoring everything one should do to keep happy, healthy and sane.

John is finding it hard to focus on the Work right now - he's preoccupied with trying to rack his brain how to manoeuvre Sherlock into actually attending his appointment tomorrow. Sherlock could well get by without going there, and even John is sceptical whether it will achieve much - even if they offered further rehabilitation services, he'd most likely dismiss those suggestions. Still, this is about principle. Clearly, when there's a case on, which used to be most of the time, someone needs to make sure Sherlock doesn't run himself to the ground. In a perfect world, he would have learned those skills himself, but John isn't holding on to a lot of hope of that ever happening. He clearly needs to be the one to remind the man where the rails are to keep from going off them, and going to that damned appointment is a part of that process. Perhaps Sherlock will listen more to other doctors telling him how important good nutrition and rest are to his recovery. John also hopes
it might offer some perspective to how well Sherlock has done in many respects.

He remembers the Harwich physician's words which fit Mycroft's statements: Sherlock can easily put on a show of dealing with things, when in reality he really isn't. The thought of returning to the National is a bit worrisome – how will Sherlock react? The fact that he seems completely preoccupied with the case could be a sign that he isn't bothered enough by the thought to pay it much mind. Or, it could be a distraction he's desperately clinging onto.

His train of thought is interrupted by Sherlock poking him in the arm with a fork. He doesn’t need one right now, but he has a tendency to pick up things and use them as a sort of a conductor's baton to his one man show. The bow is his usual choice. "Stop ignoring me. Small intestine! How long?"

John sighs and scrapes the edge of the pan to keep the mixture from sticking to it. "It depends. Given a standard diet and a healthy gut, it can take two and a half hours to empty half of your small intestine, or it can take upward of ten hours for the whole lot to move on. People who eat lots of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains tend to have shorter transit times than people who eat mostly sugars and starches."

Behind him, he can hear the toaster popping up. "Butter your toast while it's warm. My hands are occupied." John flips one-half of the omelette over the cheese and slides the half-moon shape into the centre of the pan.

To his relief, Sherlock obeys. John can hear the knife being scraped across the crunchy surface of toasted bread before the next, inevitable question is fired off.

"Watford was a health fanatic; you heard his colleagues say that at the bank," Sherlock muses, "How long before the food exits the large intestine?" This question is mumbled around a mouthful of toast.

"That also depends – on the type of food and the state of health. But at least twenty-four hours before the bulk passes on. Traces will hang about longer."

John is relieved to find two clean plates in the cupboard. He uses the spatula to cut the omelette in uneven halves. Sliding the bigger one onto one plate, he turns and puts it down in front of what has become known as Sherlock’s chair. John has deduced that he favours that particular one, because it faces the oven, and whenever he does an experiment that requires putting things in it, he likes to watch what happens in real time.

As he sits down to his own plate, he mutters, "Can we choose another topic of conversation, please? You're putting me off my food."

This isn't even remotely true – John has had many a more graphic conversation with medical school mates over meals, but he likes to think he should perhaps use these opportunities to stealthily educate Sherlock on how to value the experience of eating as something more than just the intake of fuel, and how not to ruin dinner parties and alienate people. Someday, he might even get Sherlock to realise that this is 'John time' – the chance to simply be together and enjoy each other’s company. It's certainly not his job to school or mother a Cambridge-educated genius who has walked this Earth for over thirty years, so maybe it could just be described as an experiment of John's - to see if any of it ever rubs off on Sherlock.

He gets ignored. "We need to dissect the entire gastrointestinal tract. According to what you just said and what the post mortem could tell about time of death, the gelsemium would have been still been going through his small intestine when he died, assuming he ingested it in the presence of the killer. I need to know how long it takes to for the poisoning symptoms to take full effect when
someone ingests a bit of the *Gelsemium elegans* plant, how much toxin the plant contains per gram, and at what levels of toxicity it's going to kill him. The GI tract could well confirm ingestion as the method of delivery, since digestion stops at death. I'll phone Molly to see if she kept the bowels…” Sherlock starts to get up, hand already reaching for his phone on the counter behind him.

"*SIT DOWN.*"

Startled, Sherlock freezes halfway out of his chair.

"You will eat. *NOW.* And let poor Molly get some sleep."

Sherlock folds himself back into the chair and surveys the omelette as though it were something hazardous. He picks up a fork, pokes at it, then takes an experimental bite.

John breathes a sigh of relief when Sherlock continues eating, and silence reigns for the next seven minutes as the two of them demolish the food. Sherlock eats almost half of his portion, which John considers a great triumph.

After quietly attending to bathroom routines, Sherlock retreats to bed without any further monologues on the case. Such behaviour might have once lulled John into thinking that all it takes to calm Sherlock down is to be firm with him, but he has recently learned to take everything that Sherlock does with a pinch of salt, especially the things which, on a surface level, appear to be wholesome.

While Sherlock had been brushing his teeth, John had quickly made himself a cup of instant coffee. It will wreck his sleep tonight, but that is precisely the point. He means to be ready if Sherlock leaves the bed, as John suspects he may well do, as worked up by the case as he now is. What worries John the most is not Sherlock spending the half the night thinking about the case, but what would happen if frustration with the case tips over into looking for shortcuts. It wouldn't be beyond reason to think Sherlock might actually try to slip out into the night to buy himself a new dose of whatever he is convinced his brain requires to function at maximal capacity. He has relapsed once already, and John is certainly not going to let it happen again. The risk must be exceptionally high – relatively little time has passed from his last fix.

John knows that the brain cells of an addict can be permanently altered by the substances used. Maybe that's what lies behind Sherlock’s belief that he needs cocaine to feel normal. The idea still shocks John. It's not just the biochemical truth in the notion that he finds hard to stomach but the conviction with which Sherlock clings to that excuse – that he needs it to function the way he used to. In that notion, there is a disturbing undercurrent: the assumption that he is, somehow, flawed and damaged to start with, something in need of fixing.

That notion is clearly not something that the GBS has introduced. If Mycroft is right, Sherlock has believed for years that he needs chemical stimulation to realise his potential. Had someone put that idea in his head, or had it been the result of a chemistry student's curiosity to find out what the effects of narcotics felt like? Still, how it had started is irrelevant, and John doubts Sherlock would be very forthcoming if he tried to discuss it. If anything, Sherlock seems motivated to hide from him everything relating to his drug use.
John had finished every drop of that coffee, because he wants to stop Sherlock from leaving their lovely, warm bed and escaping somewhere to wallow alone. That must be what he's still doing, and it's got to stop. At the least, John is going to try and convince him to stay in the bedroom. If leaving Sherlock alone with his worries results in acts of blatant self-destruction, then John can no longer respect his wish for solitude.

John burrows under his duvet, giving Sherlock space after patting him on a sheet-covered hip. It isn't the only fabric separating them - since they had begun sharing a bed, Sherlock has taken to wearing significantly more clothes at night than he ever had before he'd become ill. At Dartmoor, when forced to make do with a king-sized double, he'd respected John's boundaries by leaving his pants on, but at home, when they each slept in their own bedrooms, he often wore just a sheet to breakfast, or even less, if he assumed John wasn't up yet. Nowadays he carefully armours himself in silk pyjamas that cling to his torso in a manner that somehow seems to give him an air of regal detachment that John doesn't feel comfortable breaching. The effect might be calculated, coming from a man who owns a closetful of disguises.

John tries his damnedest not to let it upset him. Sherlock still does elect to share this bed, even if he acts strangely in it.

Eyes closed, John lies still in the darkness, listening to Sherlock's quiet, even breaths and making note of every movement. Sherlock isn't tossing and turning like someone trying to find just the right position to fall asleep in. No, he's waiting, making the atmosphere in the room feel like the air is holding its breath in anticipation of something.

After what must be at least half an hour, Sherlock whispers his name in a tentative manner. John doesn't reply.

A few minutes more pass in silence. Then the bedding shifts and Sherlock starts getting out.

John's arm flies out to where he's sure the electric cord and the attached light switch to his bedside cabinet lamp are. His muscle memory does not fail: the room is soon flooded with yellowish light.

Sherlock, now sitting, freezes on the spot.

John turns to his side under the duvet to face him, tucking his hand under his pillow. "Going somewhere?"

Sherlock squints in the light that isn't all that bright, but after the darkness both their eyes need an adjustment period. "Can't you turn that off?" he asks, sounding displeased.

"You'll stay if I do?" John asks bluntly.

Sherlock grunts in frustration, and drops back onto his back on the bed.

John kills the light.

"Nightmare?" He hadn't seen any evidence of it before Sherlock got out of bed, but he felt he needed to ask, just in case.

“No.”

"Is it the waking up in here that bothers you?" It's a shot in the dark, based on what Sherlock had said about the ceiling, but John needs to start somewhere. Sherlock himself has said that a good way to get people to talk is to claim something they'd be tempted to debunk.
Night-time is a strange thing. Somehow, it acts like a shroud of safety, making truths revealed within it feel less threatening. There's a reassuring intimacy to it that allows a kind of plausible deniability the next morning as to what had happened.

Even talking feels so much more intimate, when done in bed at one in the morning.

"No," Sherlock's voices floats into John's ears from somewhere in the darkness. It sounds as though they might be face to face, but he can't be sure. "That's been... A bit better, recently."

"I'm glad," John says, hoping his tone carries the smile he has on. He'll take any improvement nowadays, just as they had rejoiced at even the smallest things at the hospital when Sherlock had finally begun to get better. How could Sherlock not see the staggering difference between then and now – why won't he see how well he's done?

"Must we go to that thing tomorrow?" Sherlock asks all of a sudden, and John can practically hear the frown.

'That thing', as in the appointment at the National's Post-Intensive Care Clinic, with the purpose of assessing late outcome after discharge from hospital. Sherlock hasn't raised the subject before, apart from once, at Harwich, when he'd said that he didn't really see the point of such an assessment. John had pointed out that the hospital would probably see his performance level as very impressive, and that the information gathered at such appointments might help the ITU develop their services. This had earned him a full-on sulk from Sherlock.

"Is that what's been keeping you awake lately?" John asks.

"Of course not, don't be ridiculous."

"Look, it’s not like a court appearance, you don’t absolutely have to go, but I think it's a good idea. They want to know how you're doing, and you get to air your grievances."

"Grievances? And what might those be? What could I possibly say that they could somehow change, or assist with? It's not their fault that I got it, and they couldn't fix it."

'It'. Another euphemism. John suddenly realises Sherlock never says the words of his diagnosis out loud. "You never call it by name," John points out. "The Guillain-Barré," he adds, slowing down his speech lightly to emphasise the name.

"It's hardly a magic word, John. Saying it, or not saying it, doesn't change a thing."

"Trying to avoid saying it means that you're giving a word much more power than it deserves."


"Maybe the people who write those books know something."

"They don't know me."

John grits his teeth. "You're special, and I don't mean that in a bad way. You're probably using 99% of your brain cells, when the rest of us have to make do with much less. That doesn't mean that everything about you defies everything that we know about how the human body works - including the brain."

There's a pregnant silence, and John wonders if Sherlock is still appalled at the suggestion that he is, in fact, not entirely exceptional. Then, he shifts slightly closer, as though John had piqued his
If nothing more, at least Sherlock probably thinks he can create a nice little argument from this that will give him something to do.

John decides to rise to the occasion. "At the hospital, we used what we know about the physiology of an average human to keep you alive, and it worked. Is it really all conjecture, then, to claim that some other things we know about what could be good for you at this point, might be true? Or that things we know might benefit any functioning human being, ill or otherwise, could work for you?"

"I'm not anyone… There are differences between me and the norm."

John sighs, "Granted, modern medicine operates on averages, because it isn't yet capable of catering to individual differences in drug metabolism, or other physiological functions."

"I've been telling you for weeks that my reactions to drugs are different." There is something in his tone of voice that makes John think he is smirking, even though in the dark, he can't see it.

John stifles a snort. "There's obviously a lot of room for improvement over the current cookie-cutter approach, but that's not an excuse."

Sherlock takes up the challenge. "Isn't it? Take an opiate like codeine. The amount of codeine O-demethylated to morphine by a single individual varies between zero to fifteen percent of the drug ingested, yet the same doses are prescribed for everyone. Who knows, maybe I need a different tramadol dose because I'm not actually metabolising even a tenth of it."

Typical of Sherlock to try and trip him with science.

"Twenty years from now, we'll probably be laughing at how doctors could ever have been prescribing drugs without testing the patient's genetic makeup, but right now I know that genetic differences are not being taken into account," Sherlock's tone is heavy with disapproval.

"And you think those differences we'll discover will be big enough that we'll find humans who don't need any sleep or food to function?"

"Unlikely." It's said a bit grudgingly, "I can hope, can't I?"

"No, impossible. I just don't get it. Some things that they recommended you do, you almost overdid, and some you completely dismissed as pointless, and there doesn't seem to be any logic in your choices. Whatever you might believe about your genetic makeup, you need to sleep, and you need to eat. Otherwise, the exercise isn't going to work. You aren't going to build any muscle if there are no materials from which to build it, or rest during which to construct it. You're not going to be able to do your job, or get back to your old shape, if you don't give your body what it needs."


"Jesus," John says before he has even realised doing so. "Please tell me you're joking. You can't punish yourself for what happened, that's crazy!" he blurts out, still reeling from what he has just heard. He feels distressed – this had never occurred to him, at least not in this level of pathologic thinking. A part of him wants desperately to believe that this is just Sherlock being his typical, grandiose, melodramatic self, but he can't shake the feeling that it would be only half the truth. John had simply thought that Sherlock had reverted back to his old ways, where the needs of the Transport, as he detachedly calls his body, were something he kept forgetting about, because there were much more interesting things going on. It's like a whippet chasing a rabbit, until it collapses from exhaustion.
'Crazy?' Sherlock asks in a venomous tone, 'I'm glad we established that.' He grabs the edge of his sheet, raises it and begins twisting his torso, clearly with the intention of making a dramatic turn on the bed to face away from John.

Either John's eyes have re-adjusted to the dark, or clouds have parted to let more of the moonlight in through the window, because John can now see enough to make out where on the bed they both are. He quickly lowers his arm on top of both Sherlock and the sheet. Sherlock could easily still finish turning away, but he doesn't. Instead, he settles on his back, not facing John, but rather staring at the ceiling with what in the dim light looks like an angry frown.

"If I'm not insane, then… What am I?" Sherlock asks.

There should be a defiant challenge in these words, the verbal equivalent of a slap in the face with the glove of armour. There isn't. Instead, it's a genuine question, presented in wide-eyed confusion, one that sounds as though Sherlock might be slightly afraid of the answer.

When John doesn't immediately offer an answer, Sherlock turns his head and their eyes meet. “Tell me.”

There is an urgency in his plea that confounds John. He is amazed at the sudden honesty – Sherlock genuinely doesn't seem to have an answer of his own to offer; instead, he lies there quietly, waiting for John’s verdict, looking as though braced for impact.

The last time John had seen this precise expression had been in the winter garden. Carefully hidden between moments of determination, there had been this - a complicated mixture of fear and uncertainty that makes John want to pull him into his arms, to reassure that he doesn't need to feel like that, ever again.

"What are you thinking?" Sherlock demands, a more steely, distant expression setting in.

John realises he should have answered more quickly. Sherlock has probably already cooked up all sorts of conspiracy theories in his head. "You. At the hospital---" John starts, but he trails off when a sudden, unexpected flash of rage flickers on Sherlock's expression.

"Is that all you see, now, when you look at me?" Sherlock asks with what must've been an attempt an venom, but his voice breaks the slightest bit at the end.

"Of course it isn't---"

"It's a wonder you never seemed to get fed up of watching such a thing - can't have been pleasant."

"I like looking at you," John says, "always have," he tries, but Sherlock sits up and flings away his sheet, obviously planning on leaving the bed.

John scrambles to a sitting position under his own duvet and manages to snatch Sherlock's wrist right before he's about to start sliding his legs towards the edge of the mattress. "Wait. Stay. Please. I'll stay awake with you if you want to. We don't even have to talk."

"Let me go, John. Please," Sherlock adds, and that please breaks John's heart.

He can't let Sherlock retreat to wherever he goes to get away from the bedroom, to get away from him. Not anymore. It shouldn't be like this. This was supposed to be the easy part, once they'd struggled past the difficult bit of saying out loud what they both wanted. This was supposed to be the beautiful afterburn of a destiny realised, not this bloody purgatory they're stuck in.
John lets go of Sherlock's hand, scrambles to turn on the light again, and practically tears his own T-shirt off himself. He pushes his left shoulder forward and frames his bullet wound scar with his thumb and forefinger. "Is this all you see, when you look at me?"

Sherlock's momentum off the bed stops, and he leans slightly closer. John knows he's always been curious about the scar, in that slightly creepy scientist way of his. He'd asked to see it once, a few months after they'd met, and John had declined. He knew, of course, that Sherlock was going to see it eventually. He had hoped it would be in a situation very different to this, when it wouldn't be the main talking point. But, if he's to prove a point to Sherlock right now, he needs to meet the man half way. He needs to prove that there are things they shouldn't be hiding from each other, even if they are hard to talk about.

Sherlock reaches out his palm and places it on the scar, then gathers his fingers together to match its rim. The skin has remained over-sensitised after the scar had healed, but this still doesn't feel unpleasant at all to John. Sherlock's forefinger tickles a little as he runs it across the crater-like indent in the middle, but John forces himself to be still. Sherlock is being very gentle, very appreciating in a way that lessens John's sense of unease over being scrutinized in such detail.

"I didn't know you when that happened," Sherlock says slightly dismissively when he finally removes his hand. "It doesn't affect what I think about you, because you've always had it. I haven't watched you change because of it."

While it is true, it's not the point. "I thought exactly like you back then," John says, "That this damage was all I was, all I'd ever be -- that what happened took away the life I'd built. I thought that what I couldn't do, defined me. Then this strange guy I met at a lab who wanted to borrow my phone and share a flat took one look at me and saw something completely different."

"Saw you."

John smiles. "Exactly. I did know you before the Guillain-Barré, but that just means I know who you really are, and I know that a setback like this isn't going to knock you down for good, if you don't let it."

"Is that what you call this? A setback? Yet you insist that I'm the one resorting to euphemisms and avoidance."

"What would you call this, then?"

"Hell," Sherlock says bluntly, and despite the extreme nature of the claim, his expression betrays worriedly little emotion, as though this notion is something he's already made his peace with.

"Fuck no," John snaps back. "This isn't it. You can't think---"

"STOP TELLING ME WHAT I'M ALLOWED TO THINK!" Sherlock yells, looking as though he might be getting out of bed, but instead, he plants his palms on the duvet and leans forward to fix John with his eyes, blazing with anger.

John had flinched at the sudden outburst – Sherlock rarely manages to intimidate him, even when he really attempts to do so, but the raw fury emanating from him, mixed with something frighteningly broken, is making John feel like they're both at the edge of a cliff. "You misguidedly think you have some sort of a right to define whose bad days and sulks and depression are or are not equal to what you had after you were discharged," Sherlock seethes. "You've only flirted with hell, John. I've been in it, since---" he theatrically glances at an imaginary
watch on his wrist, "the twenty-seventh of March this year at around half-past ten in the morning."

John is familiar with the date. That's when Sherlock had fallen ill. It hadn't properly registered with John back then that Sherlock had noticed something had been wrong that early in the morning, but at the moment it's all irrelevant.

Sherlock crosses his arms defensively. "I assure you I have a very good idea of how I feel or don't, and you have no right to tell me what that is. I know you think hell is what it's like to sleep with a gun under your pillow, hoping that you had the guts to use it. What you haven't considered is how it would feel if there was no guarantee that you'd even be able to fire that gun, and everyone else knows it, and they look at you with a much more malignant sort of pity than they look at a decorated army hero who took a shot in the shoulder, because they're not exactly sure who you are anymore. You came back only with your physical limitations, I lost----" he trails out, suddenly blinking and staring at the wall as though he has suddenly, willfully disconnected from the conversation because what he'd been about to say had been too much, somehow. He brings his knees up and wraps his arms around them.

John reaches out and curls his fingers around Sherlock's bicep, but Sherlock doesn't turn to face him. "You know, I don't think you really do," John tells him as gently as he can, "understand how you feel, I mean. I think you're--- that we are both still trying to see the big picture here. What I don't get is why you insist on doing it all alone – why you won't talk to me."

"I'm not like anyone else. What good would it do, then, to talk about any of it?"

"What I was trying to tell you, before you blew a bloody gasket, is that hell is what I had before I met you, before you changed everything." He swallows. "If I can't be that to you, now, even just a little bit, then we've got a problem." He breathes out, shocked at the bluntness of his own words. Sherlock is not the only one under pressure or the only one fearing failure.

Sherlock slides back under his sheet, tucking even his arms underneath.

"Cold?" John asks.

Sherlock nods and turns onto his side again to face John, shifting slightly closer.

"If you don't want this, as I mean, then tell me," John says, "Because trying to force yourself into something that you're not is going to wreck you, especially combined with everything else that's on your plate right now."

He waits with bated breath, expecting an execution, fearing that Sherlock will say it: tell him that it's all been a mistake, that he doesn't want this, that the experiment is over and they should go back to sleeping on different floors.

The thought is so sad, somehow – if Sherlock doesn't want him, does he want anyone? Does he even know how, or is this just an unexpected incompatibility issue, and one day Sherlock will meet someone he truly falls in love with, at a time when there's no distorting baggage of tragedy hanging over the whole thing?

"This is the---" the rest of Sherlock's answer is just mumbling under the duvet, which John lifts a bit.

Something tells him he needs to switch off the light again, so he does.

The darkness envelops them once again. They aren't touching, but somehow there's a connection there, and it feels as though it's practically vibrating with tension, like a violin string pulled taut.
Sherlock draws a ragged breath. "I have never been anything but honest with you when it comes to my intentions. I don't like the way you keep questioning them."

Guilt hits John like a punch into the solar plexus. He shouldn't be the one demanding reassurances. He should be the one offering them. He feels like apologizing, but he doubts that would help all that much. "I'm not questioning you, I'm just trying to keep up with what's going on." It comes out slightly more defensive than John had intended.

"This is the only thing that's ever been worth wanting, but I don't know what to do with it, now," Sherlock says quietly but pointedly.

"And you think that's something you're supposed to work it out all by yourself?" John asks, feeling almost giddy with relief. "There's two of us in this, you know."

Sherlock doesn't reply.

"You think too much with that brain of yours. Just be. That's what I do."

"I don't know what your expectations are."

"Fuck expectations. My expectations are what made us wait for too long until we faced what's going on here. I'm not going anywhere, and nothing you say, or do, or don't say or don't do will change that."

Emboldened by what they've both just declared, John inches closer and plants a kiss on Sherlock's cheek. It ends up half on the lips, since it's hard to aim in the dark. Sherlock reciprocates a little, cupid's bow curling up as he gently pressed back against John's lips. Then he leans back, seeking distance once again.

John is quite certain both of them are now thinking of a different kiss: their first one, which had almost led to disaster. Its aftermath had found John storming off from the hospital, convinced he'd fucked everything up, that he was a travesty of a doctor, a destroyer of friendships and Sherlock couldn't possibly want this with him.

This, meaning the notion of something sexual occurring between them. In terms of intimacy, their friendship had already rivaled the most intense romantic partnership John could imagine, so there was only one direction left to deepen what they already had. Unlike his relations to the women he'd dated while trying to pretend that he didn’t feel what he did about Sherlock, John knows that this relationship was founded on love first and foremost. On the first few times that sex and Sherlock had occurred to John within the same thought and he'd been half-willing to accept that he wasn't as straight as he'd always believed, the notion of the two of them together had felt deluded. Just look at the man, John had berated himself, convinced that most likely it would be someone like James Moriarty, all perfect angles and bespoke tailoring, who got to bed Sherlock Holmes.

Those months at the National had nearly killed John, too, and exposed his priorities. Watching Sherlock lose basically everything, slipping away into nothing but an astonishing mind inside a wax figure, had been so devastating to witness that he'd nearly lost it several times. Being at the hospital was exhausting, but going home had been even worse. The guilt of not being at Sherlock's bedside ate away at him, and he couldn't have worked even if he had tried. He hadn't slept much during those months, and when he did, he had recurring nightmares of returning to the hospital and finding an empty bed with crisp sheets, a teary-eyed nurse showing up to tell him that there had been a complication.

His timing of their first kiss had been wrong, but nothing that has happened since changes one iota
of how he feels about Sherlock. What he should have realised during his ill-fated dating attempts during their flatmateship was that sex is sex, and love is love, and trying to compartmentalize those things to be associated with different people is impossible for him.

And love is so much more important.

As far as John is concerned, those months of, yes, hell watching Sherlock fight the GBS had proven, once and for all, the nature of their connection. He trusts it, and he thinks that maybe, just maybe, Sherlock might be starting to do so again.

"Talk to me?" John asks, hoping that the way he'd become lost in his thoughts hasn't left Sherlock alone too long.

"We could do better," Sherlock says.

John doesn't ask for clarification. There are a great many ways in which he agrees that yes, they could do better. Especially himself.

Sherlock doesn't offer any further explanations, either. Instead, he shifts closer to John and presses his lips on John's again. Sherlock tastes like tea, minty toothpaste, and something that could only be called the very essence of him, quite indescribable. This one, too, is all quite chaste, as kisses go - no tongue, and instead of hungry and demanding, it's languid and gentle. Still, there's no mistaking that this is no polite peck among friends. John rather thinks he'd like to avoid hearing that word for a while. There's no hesitation in the kiss, nor is there the urgency of preparation for more. It's a reassurance, a confirmation. Right before he pulls back, they both melt into smiles while their lips are still joined. John snakes a hand behind the small of Sherlock's back and tugs him closer so that their foreheads lean against one another. Sherlock closes his eyes and slithers a hand onto John's hip.

"Yeah," John answers, "I think we could do a lot better. And I know we will."

Chapter End Notes

Sherlock is dismissive of the idea that not even one idiot in the history of British toxicology would have ingested gelsemine, and he's absolutely right. A British doctor has experimented with gelsemine - on himself - and he was none other than Arthur Conan Doyle! 7Percent shares the full tale in the comments section.
"Sherlock, will you please get a move on! We have to be there in forty minutes!" John shouts through the bathroom door, loud enough to be heard over the running water.

They're due to leave for Sherlock's follow-up appointment at the hospital, which is ridiculous, really, because there are more important things he needs to be doing right now. Things that don't fill him with a sense of unease.

He had tried to argue this very point over breakfast, saying that he had been discharged, from the MITU and the ward and Harwich, which clearly means that those places have nothing further to offer him, but John had been adamant in not letting him off the hook. Why?

His memory of the hospital is too precise, and too well-preserved in the halls of the Palace to be ever rendered harmless and unable to rattle the core of his sense of security. The most potent recollections of that place can completely unravel his concentration and slither into his nightmares, filling them with the sense of drowning, choking and being forgotten somewhere. Try as he might, he doubts he could delete those recollections, or amend them into something that doesn't make him feel as though he's standing on a trapdoor. Besides, trying to alter them would entail acknowledging them, which he'd prefer to avoid.

He'd much rather think about the case. As soon as he had got up, while John made breakfast, his mind had gone running back to what he is now tempted to call the Chinese connection: there has to be some link between Mark Watford’s death by gelsemium elegans poisoning, and the personal trainer, Aiden Cole. Once he finds that link, the case will be closed. Just one small step.

John had made him wait until after breakfast to call Molly about the intestines. She’d sounded tired when she took his call, and her response was not encouraging either: "No, nothing at all in either of his intestines that could be remotely suspicious. In fact, so little contents could be found there that it made me wonder if he was on some sort of fasting diet."

Sherlock’s next call was to the ChiMas number.

"Oh, yes. Mister Holmes. I got a message first thing this morning. You want to know about gelsemium elegans. In China, it is called 断肠草. The person you need to speak to is Dr Christine Leon at the Kew Gardens Jodrell Laboratory, but she’s actually in China at the moment. Beijing is eight hours ahead of us now, so there won’t be anyone still at the Institute of Medicinal Plant Development at this hour, which is part of the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences. They are the only ones who can tell me how to reach her; I gather she is in the upper reaches of the Yunnan province in the south, where mobile connections are patchy at best. I will call you back when I know how to contact her."

At least Sherlock now has enough evidence to phone Lestrade and tell him that the murder weapon has been identified, although there is no certainty about how it was administered.

His news isn’t greeted with enthusiasm by the DI.

"Bugger. If the Watford investigation continues, I’ll have to hand off the new case I picked up just
last night. The desk’s already packed full with everything else we’ve got going."

This confirms, in a way, Sherlock's suspicion that at least part of the reason why Lestrade had still been trying to crack the case had to do with Sherlock and not the victim. Maybe John had put him up to it.

The thought had made Sherlock irritable, and he hadn't been able to resist snarking back: "So sorry if the truth is inconveniencing for you, Detective Inspector, but console yourself that it did much worse for the murder victim. Any particular reason why you'd be reluctant to let the new case off your hands? Anything that might interest me?" He knows he’s fishing, but if he can convince John that there is another new case that needs his urgent attention, then he might get away with postponing the hospital appointment indefinitely. Not that a second case feels like a good idea at the moment.

"Really sad, but by your definition, boring. Domestic abuse gone bad," Lestrade explains. "Good for the clear-up rate, though. I could pass it off to Sergeant Donovan."

"Be my guest." Sherlock then sighs. "I’ve asked Molly to send you the results and the related notes by noon today. They should be enough to make the Coroner re-consider a natural causes ruling. That should keep the investigation alive."

"But you said you haven't been able to work out the connection to Cole? If it even is him?"

"No, but---"

"Any other leads to follow up? Why not come into the Yard at some point today and we can try to figure out how to take it all forward?"

He accepts the invitation, although from Lestrade's still reluctant tone, there rises a nagging suspicion that this is more charity than belief in that it will benefit the case.

Once Sherlock gets off the phone with Lestrade, he tries to paint the invitation into an urgent summons to the Yard without delay, but John just gives him a knowing smile. "Nice try, Sherlock. You're not wriggling out of this. Just one check-up, but it really is important. I don’t want to be your doctor and you don’t want me to be your doctor, so you are going to have to be seen by someone. Maybe you will actually believe them more than you seem to believe me."

The clock is ticking; twenty-one days after the death is a long time in his experience of case work. Sherlock hasn’t been able to keep up the usual frenetic pace that his work before the illness, and his slowness—both mental and physical—annoys him intensely. He needs to catch up, and role-playing a patient at the National is hardly going to benefit anyone, least of all Mark Watford.

He detests the thought of being poked and prodded, assessed and measured so that someone can tick off boxes in some undoubtedly uselessly complex database of MITU admissions and "patient outcomes." He hates being thought of as an "outcome"; how could anyone other than him really know whether he had recovered, especially since the definitions others seem to be using for that word clearly differ from his own? "Pointless," he’d muttered over his breakfast tea.

"No, important," John had argued back at him. "You need to be seen, because it’s the only way to get through that thick skull of yours that you are actually getting better. Plus, them hearing about your experiences might help them help others better." It was said with an exasperated fondness, and for some reason that Sherlock can’t really explain, that takes the sting out of it.

Sherlock doubts whether whoever mans these post-discharge appointments would really want to
They would not be flattering towards the medical establishment. Even though some of the staff had been bearable, and they had managed to keep him alive while every part of him, one after another, ceased to function, the whole experience had been humiliating, condescending, uncomfortable, painful, mortifying, frightening and deeply unsettling. He'd been spoken of as though he was not there, and the rest of his entire medical history and current sobriety were, without fail, ignored right away, once the barest hint of his heroin and cocaine habits got mentioned. What he'd expressed as his wishes prior to the intubation, and the things he'd wanted to communicate after it had mostly been ignored, even when he'd been at his most desperate, by everyone except John.

John, who is likely already wearing his coat and standing by the door, is waiting for him.

He quickly brushes his teeth by the sink.

Footsteps echo outside the bathroom door. "We need to leave in five," John shouts through it. Sherlock answers with a noncommittal grunt that John probably doesn't even hear.

John wants him to do this, to subject himself to something he'd very much prefer to avoid. What is he looking to prove, and to whom?

Something had happened in their exchange last night, lying in the darkness. For Sherlock, it wasn’t so much the kiss or the other manifestations of closeness, but rather the implicit reassurance that John had forgiven his relapse, that he wasn’t going to leave, no matter what. Most of all, Sherlock had appreciated the fact that at least John wasn’t going to stop believing that things would get better between them, that he was prepared to wait. It had all diluted a bit of the anxiety that has been eating away at him. If John’s not prepared to give up, then how could he? He owes that much to John, doesn't he?

He hadn’t been able to sleep after their conversation, but he had been willing to be held by John. No, it had been more than that - he'd allowed himself to want it. The arms enfolding him kept him warm, and he had been grateful that the embrace had not triggered any sensory discomfort. He knew that his own reluctance to initiate that kind of physical intimacy was, in part, due to the fear that contact would set something off again, and he’d have to stop. The thought of seeing John hurt by that withdrawal fills him with cold dread, but he also knows that he is still scared of the miscommunication that is happening between his body’s senses and his mind. Just another thing neither he nor anyone else could fix, no matter how many pills he swallowed or how many doctor appointments he attended. His nerves have their own pace of fixing or not fixing themselves, and the risk of a relapse hangs above like the sword of Damocles. He’s just going to have to get used to not knowing if or when it might come back.

That’s easier said than done.

He surveys his look in the mirror. He can still see the ravages of the illness in the sharp lines, and the lack of sleep is visible in the dark smudges under his eyes. He rinses a bit of toothpaste off his thumb, wishing his reflection could change into someone who could actually get through today's appointment without getting anxious about it.

In the back of the taxi, he has to keep his eyes firmly on his phone, digging about in medical
journals for data about gelsemium. The sight of London going by the window somehow distorts his vision and kicks off a sense of vertigo. It seems only to plague him when he worries about things.

He decides that Mycroft might be of some use in his attempts to cut through the red tape in the case.

The call is picked up on the third ring. "What is it?"

That terseness surprises Sherlock, but he presses on regardless. "Oh, so the meeting you are late for is tedious, is it? Traffic is such a nuisance these days."

"Make it short, Sherlock. I have things to do, as do you - I seem to recall you having a doctor's appointment today?"

"I need a favour. Lean on someone at the Home Office to get the Border Agency to cough up the details on Mark Watford’s possible recent trips to China."

"Who is he?"

"Recently deceased. I told you about him when we spoke in your kitchen."

"Good lord. You still haven’t solved that one?"

The man’s criticism stings, but Sherlock stifles the urge to rise to it. "Perhaps, if the British Government could oblige me with the information I need, I could make better progress."

There is a slight sigh at the other end of the phone. "Why you are bothering with something as mundane as this is beyond me. Very well; I'll ask my PA to get back to you when she has time. Shouldn't you be focusing on your appointment?" The connection is then broken, leaving Sherlock staring down at the phone. There was the condescension that he had been expecting. Clearly Mycroft thinks he is off his game, but willing to pander to his weaknesses to keep him busy. The whole exchange sours his mood even further.

And it doesn’t get any better at all, when they turn up at the hospital on Queen’s Square after a short walk from Russell Square station. As soon as they walk into the Victorian red brick building’s reception, he feels his stomach tighten. The familiar scents and sounds assault him, threatening to flood his head with memories, and he has to close his eyes for a moment while John asks the receptionist where the appointment is to be conducted. At least it won’t be at the Harris Medical Intensive Therapy Unit where he'd been treated. Apparently, all follow up appointments are held in outpatient consulting rooms, which are dotted all over the building. It should make Sherlock relax more, but he’s finding the practice harder than the theory of it.

They are directed to the waiting area on the fifth floor of the Cleveland Wing, where he sits and tries not to fidget. He knows that the MITU is three floors down, but the distance between him and it is still too close for his liking.

He gets out his phone and tries to read an article on gelsemium elegans. The Natural Products Journal from America has published the results of a study by Professor Xu Youkai, a lead scientist at the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden, in Yunnan Province. His study identified two compounds that have been isolated and proved to be highly effective against tumour cells linked to leukaemia and various other cancers. The article quotes the scientist as saying that "Sometimes the treasure is hidden in the most dangerous place. We have to be bold."

The article includes a bit of history, too, which he decides to share with John. "Listen to this;
according to Chinese legend, gelsemium is so fast acting that a Chinese deity, famous for his knowledge of cures for all poisons, died after ingesting it before he could even reach into his medicine bag."

John smirks. "Somehow, I don’t see the Coroner being persuaded by a Chinese fairy tale."

Sherlock scrolls down the page on his phone. "Apparently, the Chinese have been studying the toxin for years. In lethal doses, it’s known to cause convulsions, paralysis, and death from organ failure. In Watford’s case, given the cardiomyopathy, it could well have given him a heart attack, before any of the other organs could be damaged that acutely."

His eye is then caught by another line in the article, which he reads out. "Previous case studies in Yunnan and other Chinese provinces over the last few decades show that people who consumed honey containing traces of gelsemium were dead within hours."

"Death by honey?" John sounds sceptical. "I thought you were convinced that someone injected Watford with the poison, instead of putting it in his food?"

"The Chinese didn't put it there - it ended up in the honey through gelsemium pollen carried in by bees," Sherlock corrects in a disapproving tone. His eye is drawn to yet another quote: 'Previous studies unlocked some of its secrets, such as its ability to relieve pain in a manner similar to morphine, but without the resulting addiction.' Sherlock decides not to mention this particular fact to John.

Before he gets to the end of the article, the clinic nurse calls out his name and the two of them are escorted into a small consulting room.

Sherlock recognises one of the two men present as the consultant he'd been assigned to at the MITU, Doctor Graham Perwit; he'd signed the hospital discharge paperwork when Sherlock left for Harwich.

He greets Sherlock with a smile and an outstretched hand, which Sherlock shakes firmly. He suspects the move might be deliberate, since many doctors seem to forgo shaking hands nowadays, based on a risk of germ transmission. Is it designed to test his grip and fluidity? Are they already making a survey of him?

If he has to act like a fully recovered person, he is going to throw everything he has at it.

"Doctor Watson, good to see you again under more pleasant circumstances. And Mister Holmes, it is a pleasure to see you looking so much better. This is my colleague, Doctor Serhat Gul. He’s a consultant neurologist leading our post-Guillain-Barré recovery research. Please take a seat, we're going to be joined shortly by a third person - part of the final discharge assessment team."

John grabs a seat by the door while Sherlock descends into the chair in the middle, from where he can't really see John. Feeling shoved into the limelight, he opens the knot in his scarf but makes no move to remove his coat. He'd kept it on the waiting room, despite John's offer to hang it on a coat rack.

"Well, I won’t beat about the bush," Perwit starts, taking a seat himself, "this is the point at which we look at your recovery and officially sign you off as discharged. If there are any residual issues that need addressing, before we return you to the care of your GP practice, this is where they need to be brought up and dealt with. We’ve had a look at the records forwarded by Harwich Manor, and your rehabilitation seems to be really progressing. Am I correct in thinking that your balance issues have resolved?"
Sherlock is certain he can feel John’s scrutiny, but chooses to ignore it. "None that I can’t manage, and they are improving." The less he opens up and the more concise and satisfactory his answers, the sooner he will be let out.

"Your A&E admission form reports double vision?"

Sherlock shakes his head. "That resolved before I was even admitted to the MITU. No problems since."

"The sensory component of your case was quite widespread, more than we usually see with this subtype. Have those symptoms persisted?"

"I'm taking what was prescribed for that," Sherlock says dismissively and attempts to stare Dr Perwit down to keep him from elaborating. It seems more successful than it had been when he couldn't really move, couldn't straighten his spine and lift his chin so that he's looking down towards the doctor, who is significantly shorter than him.

Perwit leafs through some printed sheets on his desk, until he finds a copy of the list Sherlock had been given when leaving Harwich. It lists the details of his prescriptions.

"Have they helped? Any side effects?"

"We can't know what the situation would be, if I hadn't taken them, can we?" Sherlock counters. "As for potential side effects, I suggest you study the package inserts."

The other doctor remains standing beside the desk, as all chairs have already been taken. Sherlock thinks it rather impractical to choose such a small room for an appointment with several doctors, unless the desired effect is to make the patient feel crowded and uncomfortable.

The Turkish-born doctor looks stern as he inspects the patient records he has grabbed from the desk. Sherlock's records. "We have no reports of you attending any physiotherapy sessions at the outpatient clinic across the square where we usually refer patients; did you make private arrangements?"

"Yes," Sherlock answers, hoping this will be enough. He tries to scrutinize Gul, but his nerves are too shot to focus on gleaning a lot of facts from the man. Baby at home, left-handed - that's all. His head feels split in two, stagnant and slow. He makes a fist of his shaking right hand.

Perwit clearly isn't satisfied, raising his brows inquisitively. Sherlock doesn't even bother to try and glean any deductions out of him - that well had been drained during his hospitalisation.

"Besides a residential period at Harwich, I have resumed playing the violin, and have also taken up rock climbing. I find both to be more... interesting than standard physical rehabilitation. Both have served their purpose."

"Would you agree, Dr Watson?" Perwit asks, his line of sight now directed behind Sherlock.

Sherlock is aware that Perwit and John had discussed his case several times during the long months he'd spent at the MITU. He tries not to be overtly annoyed at this line of inquiry, even though he could well interpret it as a sign that his own opinion is considered unreliable and subjective, and John's more balanced.

He twists in his seat to watch John, who looks slightly apprehensive. "There was a break in all that after you came home, before you took up those things."
"Since I obviously saw the error of my ways, the point you're raising is largely academic," Sherlock concludes sarcastically, and turn his back on John, hoping that no further questions will be posed to anyone other than himself.

"Have you any questions that you’d like answered?"

"Only two. Most up-to-date consensus on long term prognosis, and likelihood of recurrence."

Perwit nods. "Fair questions. About 30 percent of those with Guillain-Barré will still have some level of residual weakness after 3 years. About 3 percent suffer a relapse of some kind, but it's often not as severe as the original episode."

"How long before it’s possible to say that it won’t come back?" He hadn't really wanted to ask anything further, but this is something he hasn't been able to glean from his extensive online research on the subject.

Gul answers, "I have patients who have experienced this kind of setback many, many years after the initial attack."

_How consoling._

"How many patients do you---" John begins asking, but trails off when there's a knock on the door.

Before anyone answers, it opens and Sherlock shifts in his seat just in time to see a woman in her mid-fifties, wearing a blazer suit, walk in with an apologetic smile. "Sorry I’m late, Graham. I hope I haven’t kept you waiting."

Recognition of who she is dawns quickly, as does the chilling realisation of why she is here. His heart leaps into a frantic staccato as though attempting to escape from behind his ribcage. He's only seen pictures of her, and a video from a conference, but there's no doubt at all in his mind as to her identity.

Perwit stands up behind his desk, smiling. "This is Doctor Eileen…"

"---Johnston," Sherlock concludes out loud without even realizing he's doing so. He's so shocked that he can hardly get the name out except as a whisper.

Perwit has clearly sensed his unease, because the look he gives Sherlock is worried.

Behind him, he can hear the chair scrape on the floor as John does the polite thing and stands up to acknowledge her presence.

Perwit is still looking at Sherlock, confounded. "Oh, I didn’t realise? You’ve met before? Doctor Johnston is joining us as the psychiatrist," he then explains, now directing his words at John. Sherlock tries to read his tone, to make out if there are signs there that John isn't as surprised by the presence of the neuropsychiatrist as he is. Naturally John isn't aware of her precise identity, but did John know such a doctor was going to be present?

Suddenly, he remembers Mycroft's innocuous words from less than an hour ago: 'I seem to recall you having a doctor's appointment today?'

Is it possible that----- of all the people… Here… Now?

It cannot be a coincidence. This is Mycroft's doing. _That bastard._ It's obvious he's brought John in on the little conspiracy. John's insistence that he waste his time with this appointment seems rather
logical in hindsight.

Sherlock decides that all that talk last night must have just been a smokescreen to lull him into a false sense of security. He can feel the panic rising and stiffens his muscles, getting ready for the fight.

Mycroft’s motive he could understand; this is what the man does, plays people like pawns and bulldozes over him whenever he sees fit. But, he would not have expected this from John. Not after last night. Not after the past few weeks. Not after the past two years.

"No, I don’t think we’ve met," Dr Johnston says, "at least not at the MITU, as I am not directly involved in patient care there". She extends her hand, which Sherlock does not take. She doesn't seem upset by it.

Perwit moves away from the desk, offering her his seat there. She takes it without hesitation. Now the other doctors are standing to the side, making Sherlock feel as though he's in front of a jury.

The woman gives Sherlock a reassuring smile that he recognised as a professional expression, probably handed out to every one of her patients, no matter what their diagnosis. "Guillain-Barré patients with a long stay at the MITU can have some issues dealing with the emotional repercussions," Dr Johnston says.

Sherlock's fingers curl into the dark wool of the coat on his lap. His heart is still pounding and he blinks and bites his lip so hard he draws blood. Focus.

"As part of the discharge process, we always ask Guillain-Barré syndrome patients how they’ve managed to come to terms with the illness. That's what I'm here for."

Sherlock doesn't believe a word of it. It's hardly credible that someone with Johnston's credentials would attend every such outpatient appointment.

"It isn’t easy. You’ve had to face not only physical difficulties, but emotionally painful periods as well. It is often extremely difficult for patients to adjust to sudden paralysis and dependence on others for help with routine daily activities." She aims another professional smile, this time past Sherlock, in John's direction. "It’s good to see you have a strong support network in place. But, now is the point where we can also help you continue that progress by referring you to therapy. Many patients need psychological counselling to help them adapt to their changed circumstances."

There it is. Plain and simple. The whole end point of this subterfuge. This is how it starts. Mycroft has clearly learned something - in 2007 he'd simply been dragged against his will to an A&E. This time, it's more insidious. More… clever.

Still, Mycroft is clearly the idiot here, if he thinks Sherlock is going to fall for this ruse. Or go down without a fight.

He would have expected more of John than to be such a willing pawn. Or could the initiative have come from John? That doesn't bear thinking about.

"Patients with a particularly long stay at the MITU, especially if they've required extended mechanical ventilation, can have even more difficulty in coming to terms with such an experience," Dr Johnston continues. She seems completely insensitive to Sherlock's growing unease, trying to maintain a sunny disposition. It all feels rather grotesque in the face of what it is they're discussing.

He steals a look at John, who seems to be listening very eagerly. He snaps his gaze back to Johnston. "Wasn't the point of this session to declare me fit to be discharged from the services of
this unit, instead of digging around for more issues?" Sherlock asks spitefully.

She carries on with the charade: "Of course, many patients will never recover fully, so there can be further difficulty of coming to terms with that fact, but in your case, it’s early days yet. So, as long as you feel that you are making progress, then that is encouraging."

Sherlock finds it most distasteful, this harpy prattling on about how patients such as him feel and act. "You used the words 'further difficulty'… What is that supposed to mean?" There is an edge of steel in his voice because he can now only barely control his need to flee.

Dr Johnston is watching his face now, finally having picked up on his discomfort. It would be useless to try and hide it any longer, since he feels his control slipping anyway. The tension in the room is becoming palpable, and he hears even John shifting in his chair.

She continues, a little less confidently. "Paralysis in an ICU over an extended period can cause symptoms very similar to PTSD. How have you been sleeping? Have you had any nightmares or particularly intrusive memories?" This time she grinds to a halt as she sees the look on Sherlock’s face.

Nightmares. Memories.

She's been talking to John. She must have. Or Mycroft has, then passing the information onwards.

They're all in on it.

He can't even look at John right now. He may never want to, again. The most frightening thing about it all is, that right now, his anger is so overpowering that it easily overshadows the boundless misery in that statement.

He stands up, slowly, because he fears his legs might be shaking as badly as his hands now are. He wishes he could hide them by shoving them into his coat pockets, but he can't bring himself to do that. Too restless. He's running his thumbnails along his fingertips, a nervous tic he wishes John won't spot.

He has two options. Go on the offence, or leave. The last time someone tried to do this to him, he tried leaving, which landed him in restraints. "Doctor Johnston. You are technically correct in that we’ve not met, not professionally or socially. In 2008, you co-authored an article with Leeson, Barnes and Mutsafa, in The Journal of Neuropathology. The title was 'The relationship between IQ, memory, executive function, and processing speed in recent-onset psychosis.' Do you recall it?"

Johnston now looks startled. "Yes, yes, I was a co-author of that. A pooled study—the four of us brought in twenty-five subjects. Why?"

Sherlock had had enough of mental health professionals years ago. The games they play, the labels they apply. He had his fill of them in 2007, and he's not going there again. Ever.

John had said that this meeting would be an opportunity to vent his frustrations, to ask for information on things he's struggling with. He has plenty enough information already, the most important piece is that Guillain-Barré can relapse, and today has given him very little good news. But, more importantly, he now knows that he has got to get out of this room right now.

He steps closer to Doctor Johnston, leaning slightly forward as he lets his fury have free rein. "As you must be well aware, I was Subject Nine."

He then marches out without sparing a single glance at anyone else in the room. He half expects
the door to be locked, and the surge of relief, when he finds that it isn’t, is so visceral that black dots dance before his eyes momentarily.

He heads for where he thinks the lifts were, trying desperately not to break into a run.

Chapter End Notes

Would you like to see the sights?
Wrong Turns

As Sherlock arrives in the foyer, he takes in the size of the crowd waiting for the lifts. He needs to get away from people, not be trapped in a box with them, so he bolts through the door to the stairs instead. He runs down, as fast as his legs will carry him, using the panic to overcome any clumsiness. He nearly collides with a wall on a landing between floors, vertigo messing up his ability to evaluate his momentum.

Amidst the buzzing in his ears and the thudding of his heart which he can hear as well as feel, his thoughts stutter like exploding fireworks.

Now, he knows.

He knows that there's no hope of him ever putting the Guillain-Barré out of his mind. It may never relinquish the last vestiges of its control over him, and it can return at any time, and the worst thing is that everyone else seems convinced that all this is going drive him right over the brink of sanity. What a victory for his traitorous body - the Transport will finally drive his mind crazy. The house always wins.

Mycroft must think he has it all worked out, that he's going to be unable to deal with it, and now he's managed to convince even John. All the assistance rendered, and the encouragement expressed now looks like a front. Mycroft has clearly been planning this contingency for a while, possibly right from the start of his hospital stay.

This 'assessment' was never going to be objective; putting Doctor Johnston into the frame would make sure of that. She would have been perfectly aware of Sherlock's identity when she walked into that appointment room.

As for why do this now - the answer seems rather obvious, now that the scales have fallen from his eyes. Mycroft knows about the cocaine - John had freely admitted to having a related discussion with the man. Sherlock realises he must have failed in his attempts to evade CCTV.

The game is being rigged against him. This time, it would have started with therapy and ended up just where it had years ago. John would happily, naively agree that therapy is the right thing to do here, because he hardly knows what had happened in 2007. John would easily believe that Mycroft's intentions are noble - that there's nothing major going on here, just some harmless counselling. When John finally realises what is going on, he will have been already stripped of his power of attorney, sidelined, and Sherlock's fate put in the hands of psychiatrists handpicked by Mycroft. How convenient for the man it would be, no longer having to fear any scandals or having to suffer the inconvenience of having a brother like Sherlock.

No one is on his side. Not any more. He needs to save himself.

Alone protects me.

Sherlock comes barrelling out of the stairwell onto the ground floor corridor at speed and nearly collides with a trolley being pushed by a porter toward the adjacent lift.

"Hey, careful! Slow down."
He painstakingly forces his brain to stop, throws a wrench in its proceedings. When he’s starting to go off the rails, the deductions pour into his mind whether he wants them there or not. Useless.

He whirls around, disoriented and alarmed, and right then a set of hasty footsteps and an unfamiliar rolling sound begins approaching.

EMTs are transporting an unconscious patient lying on a trolley past him in the corridor. The patient is intubated, hooked up to a portable ventilator, and the sound of it makes a deluge of memories come flooding back, unencumbered, as though someone had stormed his brain and released, at once, everything he’s been trying to keep contained. For a moment he swears he sees his own face there, before he can manage to focus on the fact that the patient is female.

He stumbles backwards, and the wall he makes contact with grounds him for a second.

He hears himself breathing hard, gasping as if he’s out of oxygen. Is he on a ventilator again, is he back at the-— No. That thought needs to be kept where it belongs, behind lock and key, but it's hard, so hard, when there's a smell of antiseptic assaulting his nose, triggering associations intensely etched into his memory in this very place.

He tears his eyes away from the patient, who is now disappearing behind a set of double doors.

He needs to get out. He knows for certain what is coming, and it must not happen here, where people will see him and draw the wrong conclusion - that he belongs here, somehow.

His day-to-day ability to function is a balance between the input and his ability to process it. And the tipping point is right there in front of him now, as he realises he's been pushed into the abyss by his brother’s meddling and John's betrayal.

He can stand up to Mycroft with most things, but not this. He has already lost this battle once. And, with a doctor on his side, one who knows Sherlock dangerously well, Mycroft's opinion might just turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Guillain-Barré had always threatened to drain all his coping reserves, and now, finally, there seems nothing left to ward off a freefall.

He just about manages to keep himself from running again. Mustn’t attract attention.

In his rising panic, he takes a wrong turn, and finds himself in some place he's never seen before.

Suddenly he's unsure what's going on. Where is he? Why is he in a hospital? Is he being discharged? Has he just arrived? Where's John?

He spots signs on the wall. Arrowed to the left is Stroke unit. He stares at the words, the shapes of the letters, but nothing makes sense. To the right is Neurosurgery administration. The letters in the words blur, becoming symbols that might as well be an alien language.

He swings around on his heels again, dizzyingly confused and lost.

Everything feels sharp, crystalline, cold, incomprehensible and dangerous. His hands are shaking worse than when he'd left the appointment room.

There are people walking past, but they seem unreal as though they were projections from somewhere.
Reality is splitting in two, the other half trying to drag him back into this world, where he nearly lost his life along with everything else important. There's another world somewhere, where everyone else moves on with their lives, but it suddenly seems impossible to reach. This one, in the hospital, where he had been trapped and left behind, is threatening to swallow him whole.

There's a tightness in his chest, a constriction in his throat that makes it hard to breathe.

The lights are too bright, making him feel as though his skull is being drilled into through his eye sockets. He hums to drown out the noise he hears. His heart is pounding, the rhythm erratic, blood is ringing in his ears and suddenly he's drowning in everything he doesn't know, can't categorise, can't recognise---

He sags against the corridor wall, but he doesn't fall. Something, someone with a pair of strong hands catches hold of him. At least he thinks they're hands. This has happened before, and last time what followed had been--- No. Not going there.

A voice is too loud; he can't make any sense of what it is saying, but the hands are holding his arms too hard. He tries to struggle free, but the fight is gone, along with the rest of his willpower to try to hold onto whatever reality this is. Is he even awake? Is this a nightmare? If yes, then where will he be when he wakes up?

If it's the last thing he does, he's going to escape, before whatever horrifying reality he's going to have to face hits so hard that he can't tune it out no matter much effort he puts into it.

He turns to the darkness in his mind that surrounds the Palace, disappears into the shadows, sinks deeper until he can't hear or see anything. He can't even feel himself breathing anymore.

The silence is blissful, like a blanket, and he lets himself fall.

John plunges his fingers into his pocket, frantically fumbling around for his phone. He fires off a quick text to tell Sherlock to meet him at the main entrance of the hospital in five minutes, hoping he'll receive the communication. They had both put their phones on silent before the appointment.

He looks up, slipping the phone back into his pocket, and comes face to face with three of his fellow doctors, all in various degrees of confusion. Johnston seems the most perplexed, but John feels no sympathy for her. "What's in that article?" John asks bluntly. "What did you do?"

"Nothing!" she says defensively. "I hadn't even met Mr Holmes in person before today, though I was aware of his enrolment. I certainly didn't expect the study to come up. It was a cross-sectional, non-interventional study that didn't impact the treatment of those enrolled in any way. Consent was obtained from both the subjects and their immediate family members. I assure you, mister--"

"Doctor Watson," John corrects brusquely.

"Doctor Watson, let me assure you that the highest of care was taken in adhering to the regulations concerning research ethics, since nearly all of these patients had been admitted against their will."

"I'm sorry," Dr Perwit interjects, "I'm having trouble grasping the relevance of this."
"So am, but it's obvious that it's pretty damned relevant right now. I was told all the post-MITU clinic appointments include a psychiatrist?" John asks. He's not sure whether Sherlock had been aware of this. If he had, he probably would have declined. He seems very much not fond of that particular medical specialty.

"They do," Dr Gul answers, "Two physicians: a neurologist and a psychiatrist. I'm here due to our current research interests."

"You never treated him?" John asks Johnston.

"No. It was a multi-center study; I enrolled patients from Maudsley, and ours were numbered from nineteen to twenty-five. I think Ben Barnes was in charge of recruitment at Bethlem Royal. We carried out extensive cognitive testing, and MRIs were taken. As I said, nothing that would have caused the patients any discomfort, and no medications were involved. Most subjects were happy to participate, since it at least gave them something to pass the time."

John glances at the wall clock. It's been five minutes already since Sherlock had stormed out. His phone shows no received messages, and his text hasn't been read.

There's something amiss here, something he can't put his finger on. So what, if Sherlock did participate in a research project years ago? It even sounded like something that may have been of interest to him. He hasn't personally met Johnston, hasn't been treated by her. John can understand that he would be reluctant to interact with a psychiatrist, but why would he object to Johnston in particular? Is it just because she's peripherally connected to 2007?

Sherlock would probably tell him he's asking the wrong questions. Unfortunately, John doesn't really have time to analyse this further right now. If Sherlock is upset, then his greatest duty lies in finding him and defusing this disaster. "Could you please forward me a copy of that article?" John asks Johnston. "My email address is on my blog. Just google me. Or him."

He grabs his coat and walks out, after saying a hasty farewell to the rest of the group. Had he time, he would have made some sort of an apology on Sherlock's behalf - a task that often falls to him when Sherlock manages to piss people off. Is one warranted now, or not? It's getting very frustrating, this constant deciphering of Sherlock's volatile whims.

Heading for the elevators, he tries calling Sherlock. The calls gets through, but there's no answer before it goes to voicemail, which Sherlock never even checks.

"Where are you," John mutters to himself while hitting the elevator button twice. He could do a walk around of the same floor, but he doubts Sherlock would have lingered in the building. Should he head straight home under the assumption that it's what Sherlock would do? As he gets into the lift, John wonders why he is even worried. Sherlock never saw the point of this appointment anyway, so it's not exactly surprising that he would cut it short.

It's the start of lunchtime, and the smallish entrance hall on the ground floor is busier than when they'd arrived. It still takes John little time to survey it. Sherlock isn't there. It's now fifteen minutes after John had been left behind at the appointment.

John strides out of the main entrance. Looking north and south, as well as across the green space of Queen Square, he sees no sign of Sherlock. An ambulance is arriving, blue lights flashing, and turns a corner, probably to deposit a patient through the back entrance on a side street designed for that purpose. Standing on the pavement, John tries to call Sherlock again. No answer, and no received messages. Should he be alarmed, or not? Most likely Sherlock has marched off to sulk somewhere, probably not feeling up to talking to any doctors right now, possibly even including
Still, before he leaves the hospital, John would like some reassurance that he's not missing anything obvious, so he returns to the foyer. The reception desk is currently busy with patrons, so he walks up to the security guard and asks if he might have seen someone matching Sherlock's description - 'tall guy, long dark coat, curly hair, looking really pissed off' - going past. Receiving a no for an answer doesn't actually tell him much. They could have just missed him - or Sherlock, a master of subterfuge, could have simply walked out of a staff entrance to avoid attention. There's no plausible reason for him to still be in the building.

John does one more circuit of the ground floor main halls, and just as he's about to leave through the ambulance entrance, a couple of EMTs come through the automatic doors, pushing an empty trolley. One of them calls out to a nurse walking past: "Where’s the Neuro-psych ward? Got a call out."

"Up in the lift to the second floor, turn left when you come out and then it’s the third left along. Follow the signs. Is someone waiting for you? The doors to the ward are secured," she says.

John steps around them and heads out to the courtyard. Which direction would Sherlock have gone? More important, where would he be headed? Baker Street? Maybe his frustration at being interrupted on the case means he'd head off to New Scotland Yard? Even fuelled by anger, Sherlock would probably decide it was too far to walk, given his current level of stamina, so he’d probably head for a street likeliest to have a steady flow of taxis.

John cuts through Queen Square to reach Guilford Street, then walks west to the intersection with Russell Square. The tourist hotels clustered around the eastern side should ensure a taxi. He stops in front of the Hotel Russell, a huge mouldering Victorian pile, and asks the doorman if he’d seen a tall man with dark wavy hair wearing a long dark coat hailing a taxi about fifteen to twenty minutes ago, but gets a negative shake of the head. "Can’t help you there - I only just started my shift, sir."

John decides that he'd better enlist some help. He swipes his phone unlocked and makes a call. "Hello, John. What’s up?" John doesn't ring Lestrade that often, so the DI doesn't need Sherlock’s skills of deduction to know that if he's calling, then it's probably about something serious.

"Sherlock’s not with you? Or contacted you just now about the case?" John tries to keep his concern under control; no need to start other people getting anxious.

"Nope; not heard from him since yesterday’s news about the poison. I’ve been at the Coroner’s office this morning with the evidence, getting his okay to keep the investigation open, although I can't say he was very happy about it. What’s going on?"

"He walked out of a hospital appointment, and now he won’t answer his phone."

"Hmm. Pissed off with it all, I expect. Have you tried Molly yet? Might have gone back to Barts to carry on the work. He said he wanted to know more about the guy’s intestines or something."

John finds himself agreeing. "Yeah, that’s the logical thing." Sherlock had been so preoccupied with the case last night and this morning, that he might well decide to channel his frustrations into work in that way. "If he gets in touch with you, give me a call, will you?" When the DI agrees, he rings off.

Barts is within Sherlock’s current walking range. Annoyed with himself for not realising the option
himself, John flags a cab of his own and tells the driver to head for St Bartholomew’s Hospital.

Once on the back seat and heading south, John scrolls to Molly’s number on his phone.

The call goes straight to voicemail. "You've reached zero triple seven four seven one four one. Leave a message after the beep. If I am at work, it may be some time before I can return your call." Professional, clear and exactly in line with the recommendations of security for women medical professionals - no names and no identification of one’s current location.

After the beep, he says, "It’s John. I’m after Sherlock. Is he with you? I need to talk with him and he isn’t answering texts or calls at the minute. Give me a call, even if he isn’t there."

John sighs. This is turning into a Wild Sherlock Chase, and it promises to be far harder to locate a man who does not want to be found, than it would be to find a goose in the whole of London.

For a moment, he considers alerting Mycroft and seeing if the man’s access to CCTV and traffic cameras could offer a shortcut. But, that would mean alerting big brother to the situation. The conversation the two brothers had had in the morning comes to mind; John had heard Sherlock’s side of it, and it seemed obvious that Big Brother was rather busy. Mycroft would probably be annoyingly amused if John begged him for surveillance data just because he'd misplaced Sherlock for twenty minutes, as though it was John's job to keep the man constantly within earshot. Sherlock used to sometimes disappear for days, and it never used to bother John, until he got sick - and until they stopped hiding behind such woefully inadequate words as 'friend'.

John is not sure he wants to explain to Mycroft why he is worried about Sherlock. No need to add fuel to the fire. Right now, he's is only acting on a hunch, but he has an instinct that says Doctor Johnston’s involvement with the follow-up appointment bears all the hallmarks of Mycroft’s interference. She is too senior for her presence to be a coincidence; her knowledge of Sherlock from 2007 is more than a tad too convenient. John finds himself, to some extent, in sympathy with Sherlock’s reaction. If he’d been suddenly confronted with the doctor who had done the surgery on his shoulder and with whom he'd had some colourful conversations, John isn’t sure he’d have been able to act entirely neutral. Even though the surgeon had done nothing wrong, John had certainly taken out his frustration and grief on the hospital staff, especially his trauma surgeon colleague.

With Sherlock’s mood already on edge and volatile, this just might be the worst possible thing to have happened. What should have been a routine appointment - one that was designed to help Sherlock accept that he’d made huge strides towards a full recovery - has now become something rather different; a reminder of a past he is probably adamant not to discuss, and John still can't quite grasp why whatever had gone on in 2007 has such a huge relevance in Mycroft's opinion. What the hell could be the point of deliberately testing Sherlock's nerves like this?

John finds himself getting very, very angry with Mycroft. How dare he?

He decides that he needs to take a belt and braces approach, and reaches for his phone again as the taxi takes the right-hand fork off Theobald's Road, onto Clerkenwell. The next call he makes is answered before the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Mrs Hudson, it’s John. Has Sherlock just got back?"

"No, dear. Is there something wrong?"

She must have picked up the anxiety in his tone of voice. Trying to get it under control, John asks
more soberly, "Not sure. Sherlock walked out in a huff from his hospital appointment, and I’m trying to track him down."

"Oh dear. I hope he doesn’t do anything silly like the other day."

There. She’d put her finger on exactly what is worrying John. Might Sherlock be so angry and on edge about the whole thing, that it might be seen as an excuse to relapse again? A two fingered gesture of rebellion to anyone and everyone who might want him to be following a steady recovery plan?

The words Mycroft had used the very first time John had met him come to mind: 'I worry about him. Constantly.' Even through his anger towards the older Holmes brother, John can certainly relate.

His intuition has usually served him well, when it comes to Sherlock. It allows him to tell a garden-variety, bored sulk apart from a serious issue, to push past walls Sherlock puts up. Maybe it's just for the sake of his own peace of mind, but he can't simply go home and not make a serious effort to find Sherlock right now.

The taxi is on Farringdon Street, waiting for the signal to turn left onto West Smithfield when his phone rings. A quick glance tells him it isn’t Sherlock; it’s Molly.

"Hello, John. Sorry about missing your call. I had the sternum saw going; I can never hear the ring tone above all that racket."

"Molly, is Sherlock with you? Have you spoken to him this morning?"

"Um… no. I thought he had that doctor’s appointment you mentioned yesterday?"

John’s stomach feels like it's twisting into a knot. "Yeah, well; it didn’t go so well. He walked out after it barely got started. I was hoping he’d be with you."

"Sorry. Not today. He usually texts before showing up here, because he knows that Doctor Ashraf isn’t keen on his being around the mortuary." The newly appointed head of the forensic toxicology laboratory had been known to call security on Sherlock if either of them were in a bad enough mood.

"Hang on a minute, will you?" John taps on the window and thumbs on the red button by the door to activate the microphone connecting him to the cabbie. "Sorry, mate - change of plan." He points to the phone so the driver can see it in the rearview mirror. "No need to get to Barts now. Have to head off to Baker Street, will you?" He switches the intercom off.

When he puts the phone back up to his ear, John cannot control his sigh this time. Wearily, he says to Molly, "Well, if he does show up, give me call. He’s not responding to my texts."

The taxi does an abrupt right turn onto West Poultry Avenue, heading south and then onto Smithfield Street.

"Oh. Are you two okay?" It’s said a little tentatively, as if Molly is hesitating about whether she should ask about something so personal. But she does know about their relationship, and when Sherlock was at the National, she’d been the one and only person that John felt able to really talk to. She seems to have an uncanny ability to decipher Sherlock.

"Yeah. It’s not me. And not us, if you’re asking about that. Just he got pissed off at the hospital and I can’t help but think I’d like to…" To what? Now that it’s out on the table, he’s not sure what
he really would be able to do to fix this. Or, what he actually wants Sherlock to do. Is there a point to booking another appointment, or giving Mycroft an earful?

Molly fills the gap. "…To help him talk about it? Yes, I understand. But you need to realise that he’s not used to having anyone he can turn to when he’s upset. You shouldn’t take it personally. Before you came along, he used to come to the lab to just sit and think, when he was like that. That's what he does - goes someplace where he won't be bothered."

John's dry laugh sums it up. "Yeah, I know that. I really do. But it doesn’t stop me from wanting to be there for him. And being alone, trying to process things, clearly hasn't been working for him lately."

It's all a bit like a case Sherlock can't solve - he ends up trapped between not wanting to quit but getting disheartened at the lack of progress.

"Well, if he shows up here, he’ll get told by me to call you straight away," Molly promises. "I hope he realises that he doesn’t have to be alone like that anymore."

John's phone beeps. "Molly - got to go; there’s an incoming call." He closes the connection with her line and pulls up the number. Disappointment takes over when he sees that it isn't Sherlock’s number or any other one he could recognise. He still answers with a hurried hello.

"Hello, is that John Watson? This is nurse Sheila Kirby, phoning from the Accidents and Emergency Department of University College Hospital. We understand you are the emergency contact for a person we have here with us, a Mister Sherlock Holmes. Our records also note a lasting power of attorney order?"

"Yes, what’s happened? Is he alright?" John tries not to let the panic intrude, but can’t really stop it from adding an edge to his voice. "How did he get there? Was there an accident?" John's head instantly begins leaping into possible conclusions. Had Sherlock stormed out and got hit by a car? Has he overdosed? Or has Moriarty----

"No, not that I know of, but he was brought in by ambulance from the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery. They don’t have an A&E there, so he was transported to our unit."

John closes his eyes momentarily when the realisation hits. The ambulance arriving at the main entrance. That had been for--- "But what happened?"

"I'm afraid I don't have all the details. Perhaps if you could come in, we could tell you more."

"How is he? Is he stable? Is he conscious?"

"Yes, now he is, but he was found collapsed---"

"Collapsed? What do you mean, 'collapsed'?" John demands harshly and incredulously. That expression could mean just about anything, from fainting to full cardiac arrest.

There's a pregnant pause at the other end. The nurse is probably hesitating to divulge so much information on the phone, but John had asked a specific question. "Judging by eyewitness reports, he seemed to have lost consciousness briefly, and when he was being assessed by the EMTs he woke up, very disoriented and combative, complaining of chest pain. We’ve had to sedate him, whilst investigating some cardiac irregularities."

John bangs on the window separating him from the cabbie, and fumbles for the intercom button. "University College Hospital A&E, NOW - it’s an emergency."
"Make your bloody mind up, will you?" the cabbie grumbles.

John ignores the man, his mind desperately scrambling to comprehend how Sherlock could have ended up in such a state so quickly.
"Sherlock? Come on, eyes open."

Slowly, sensations begin creeping in. Gentle tapping on his face, fingers curling into his shoulder. He hears his name being called out again by a familiar voice. It's the one voice that will always get through, because how else would he know when it's safe to return? All other sounds are still distorted, muted.

He doesn't want to open his eyes. There's a good chance that what he'll see is a white ceiling, which would mean that everything he thinks has happened lately is just a figment of his overactive imagination, launched into overdrive by a lack of an outlet for all his restless energy. If it's a white ceiling, it means he's still at the mercy of the medical hell of the MITU at the National. Fluorescent light and a white ceiling are the last things he remembers before a desperate retreat into the Mind Palace - what could possibly have changed since? He remembers nothing about what had happened between that and wherever - and whenever - he is now. The smells and the sounds and the feeling of coarse sheets underneath him are terrifyingly familiar. The idea of fighting back, of trying to escape the hands grabbing hold of him - had that been a hopeful fantasy born of weeks of lying inert on this wretched hospital bed? Must have been.

Keeping his eyes closed, Sherlock realises that some things actually are suspiciously different now: he feels a familiar, unobtrusive touch of someone's hand on his face and on his finger. A visceral relief flows in when he realises it must be John, who soon begins pushing one of his nail beds to the point where it hurts. Reflexes take over to make him pull his hand away. He's quite certain he can move his hand and has just done so. This is not how it had felt when he'd been completely unable to move. Nerves are firing, muscles are moving. _Am I getting better?_

There's no tube down his throat as far as he can tell, but it could just be that they've numbed his throat with lidocaine again.

There's not enough evidence to rule out the terrible fear of still being paralysed at the MITU - not until he opens his eyes. The thought is terrifying, but the act paramount. His fingers curl into fists, and John suddenly stops mauling his nail. He begins opening his eyes slowly because he wants to prolong the hope that he won't see what he's scared of. It takes a moment to focus since there are still black dots dancing in his visual field.

"There you are, finally," John's voice chides half-heartedly, bleeding relief. "How are you feeling?"

Sherlock decides to risk trying to look at something other than the slightly dimmed fluorescent strip on the ceiling, directly overhead. He tries to turn his head to make sense of what's going on and is thrilled that he can actually do that. _More evidence._

He's lying on a hospital trolley, and this isn't the MITU. The ceiling is mint green, not white.

It's _mint green_. He tells this to John, but it comes out as some sort of an incoherent mumble. Relief washes over again like a tidal wave, but it doesn't dissipate all the adrenaline - this could still be a
relapse of the GBS, his brain helpfully supplies, one that hasn't advanced very far yet?

Sherlock sees a smile on John’s face that he tries to match. Things are coming better into focus now, and he feels reoriented to the world. He starts to sit up, but John plants an arm across his chest. Straining against it suddenly brings a crushing, heavy, dull, widespread pain on his chest that crushes and burns, and he begins gasping for air. A cold sweat breaks out as he lets his head fall back on the rustling pillow. The sound of synthetic pillow case rubbing against waterproof plastic is familiar and irritating - this is how all the MITU pillows had sounded and felt. The auditory assault somehow seems to scrape something raw in his head, making him gasp with abrupt panic. He tries to concentrate on another sound instead; ambient noise is starting to get through his defensive barriers with full force. There's a muffled conversation happening on the other side of the curtain. A huge clatter of metal that sounds like a tank is coming down the hall, and he stifles the urge to wince. Sherlock sees through the split in the curtains that it is an empty trolley rolling by. Keeping time to the sound of his own pulse pounding with a wet echo in his ears is the piercing beep of a monitor somewhere near.

"Sherlock, do you know where you are?"

He tries to find words. Eventually, something sensible comes out of his mouth. "Hospital. Not neurology. Where?" He hopes he manages to convey both his annoyance and his confusion at the situation.

John snorts. "Well, that’s a passable deduction. Yeah, not the National. Up the road, at UCL again. You’re in A&E. Do you remember what happened?" John's tone is alarmed and hasty, as though he's asking for information he doesn't yet possess.

More recent memories come pouring in, whether he wants them to or not. A room, with that hateful woman, Doctor Johnston, pretending to be there just out of coincidence. John, being a poster boy of mock innocence. Mycroft, pointedly reminding him of his appointment on the phone, mentioning it twice in the course of a short conversation.

Deduction flows back into use again, come out of hiding somewhere. Sherlock is convinced he had fled the scene of a crime in progress. He had no real choice because he should have realised sooner knew what the master plan behind it was, and how he was expected to react. He should have been able to control himself, should have managed to cope better to prove them all wrong, to prevent himself from ending up in a situation exactly like this, but like so many times lately, both his mind and his body have decided to leave him stranded at the mercy of emotion.

He had tried his damnedest to flee the scene, to find a quiet spot to calm down, but then he'd got lost and the sensory storm had hit and he’d just done what he always did in such circumstances - tried to get people to leave him alone, tried to find a place where he could limit incoming data before it totally overwhelmed him. Only, in their misguided attempts to help, they wouldn’t let him leave, wouldn't leave him alone, so they made things worse, touched him, grabbed him, shouted things at him that he didn’t understand in order to get him to communicate. There's a vague memory of lashing out, trying to keep others away. When it didn’t work, he had simply run for cover into his Mind Palace.

He'd walked right into a trap, like an idiot. He feels hideously embarrassed, shamed into such an impossible situation. "Why are you here?" he asks John brusquely. He has grasped the big picture again, and part of that is the crushing realisation of John's betrayal of his trust and the man's obvious loss of faith in his abilities. The fact that he's sitting by a hospital bed Sherlock has yet again effectively landed himself in will only add insult to injury.

"Why wouldn't I be?" John asks, sounding genuinely confused. "They called me, since they
practically had to, due to that power of attorney thing, and thank fuck they did. You were in no state to contact me. What happened?" John asks again.

Sherlock closes his eyes again. The lights overhead in the curtained area are fizzing and too bright even when dimmed, giving him a splitting headache. The sound of the monitor beeping behind him is like Chinese water torture. A near whisper is all he will give the word: "Meltdown."

"Sorry?" Judging by how his voice changes and his chair creaks, John is leaning closer to hear better.

Sherlock doesn't repeat the word. Hasn't he been humiliated enough today?

"You bolted from the meeting room, and wouldn't answer your phone. Did you have a panic attack? What was it that set you off? Or was it a mel----"

"No," Sherlock denies, now regretting saying anything at all. He won't allow that word to become a part of John's permanent vocabulary. It's enough for one of them to worry that the meltdowns might be coming back. Allowing John to fuss over him, to doctor him, to try and fix him, will only add to the pressure, and this is a tendency of his no one can ever fix. He usually keeps all of it locked up in the basement of the Palace, but lately, things are escaping, slithering out from under doors, crawling out of ventilation shafts, and it's like trying to catch a noxious mist with his bare hands.

"You and Mycroft... You think I need a psychiatrist." He tries to accuse, but it probably ends up sounding more distressed than in control. It takes a while for language to return after something like this happens. At first, the words that escape his head either make no sense at all or tell others far too much about what is going on in his head. In either case, it tends to lead to disaster - it may have happened in 2007, too, but his memories of that time are mostly very vague, and heavily tinged with panic, so he wants to avoid thinking about that now. If only others would do him the same courtesy, then he might not be where he is right now.

"It's standard procedure, Sherlock." John's voice is calm. "There's always a psychiatrist present at the post-ITU discharge appointment to see if there are any after-effects from the experience that need assessing. You went through prolonged intubation and paralysis, both of which can lead to... " John hesitates, probably trying to weigh different words in his head, attempting to decide which one would offend Sherlock the least "Persistent and disturbing memories. Doctor Johnson explained this to you, but I guess you weren't listening," John's tone betrays that he's not exactly surprised. "Anyone would be affected after going through what you did, and there may be reasons why it would be particularly hard on you of all people."

It's John talking, but those last words could easily have come from Mycroft. John really ought to be more dismissive of him needing a psychiatrist if he's to throw suspicion off himself. Then again, John has never been talented at lying. 'Of course you don't, you're fine' is what John should be saying unless a certain treacherously malevolent tongue has whispered dangerous ideas into his ear. Sherlock desperately wants to believe that John didn’t know about Johnston, that this is all Mycroft’s doing, but his mind won’t stop chasing its tail and telling him he's being stupidly gullible. John was the one who had insisted on adhering to the appointment.

"I guess you just got overwhelmed," John says and Sherlock finds he's grateful for the charitable choice of words. It's marginally better than a condescending 'worked up', that's for sure.

He's had blackouts like this before during more severe sensory storms, but only when he'd been much younger and before he had learned to control all the information constantly battering his brain. He had learned to retreat, to seek solitude, to calm himself down to prevent it happening - or,
if the meltdown did hit, escape somewhere where no one important would witness it. The GBS seems to have damaged his capacity to handle his own panic and sensory overload, and apparently, he now has a much shorter fuse for it all than ever before, if recent experiences are anything to go by.

Consciousness is a complex process, not only regulated by many different networks in the brain but also requiring countless connections between different cortical and thalamic neural centres. When one area of brain becomes overloaded with information, it might lead to an imbalance, disturbing the coordination of information processing required to maintain the mind's connection to its surroundings, even awareness ----

He remembers reading this from an article in *The Lancet* that John had brought home. Why must he always remember everything? What is wrong with him now, apart from what has always been wrong with him - the brain he had been born with?

"You really think I need a psychiatrist," Sherlock asks again, but this time makes it more of a statement, to see if John might contradict if he's still on Sherlock's side. He desperately wants confirmation of his own level of denial or a sign that the walls aren't closing in on his freedom. Of all people, he doesn't want John to become his jailer this time, instead of or in league with Mycroft.

"You do need something, some way to shake loose what's bothering you," John says carefully, with the tone of a man plucking up the courage to jump off a burning building. "I wish you'd agree that we can't go on like this," he admits.

"I have you," Sherlock says pointedly.

"Yes, you do," John says and slides a hand on top of his.

Sherlock pulls his own hand away because he can't bear to be touched right now. His skin has become a weathervane to his moods - he can barely tolerate the stupid whims of his messed-up sensory system when everything is fine, but when he's nervous it all becomes too much of a strain on his concentration. What should be consoling becomes anything but. It makes him wonder if he will ever be able to tolerate it, and that starts another train of thought running out of control, hurtling down the tracks. When John finally realises just how defective he is, how the GBS has made things worse, he'll give up.

"I've never seen you like this - like you were at Barts and the Vault, I mean," John admits.

"I assure you it's nothing new, and I can control it. I will," Sherlock tells him. Even if he can't convince himself of that at all right now, he hopes that John won't pick up on his doubts. Mycroft would see right through him, of course.

John clearly isn't done yet. "Apparently, you blacked out in the corridor outside the Neuropsych unit, and someone there called the ambulance. You woke up during the transport. Do you remember that?"

Words escape his mouth without permission. Again, things are ducking under the barriers, slipping through the cracks, out where others can see them and judge him by them. "Noise…. Too much light. Shouting. They wouldn’t stop shouting at me. Everything hurt… Couldn’t breathe."

Beside the bed, that blasted monitor is changing pace with its incessant beeping, which annoys Sherlock even more than before. He shifts on the bed, trying to turn away from the noise, but suddenly the crushing pain on his chest comes back. He presses his palm on his ribcage, but it doesn't help at all. The noise of the monitor is threatening to start a vicious cycle - it stresses him,
his heart rate climbs up, the ensuing noise stresses him even more. He tries to focus on breathing, pinching his eyes closed for a moment until the pain begins abating. It's making even his left arm feel sore, putting a chokehold on his throat. What is this?

"Shhhh… it’s over. No need to get worked up now," John tells him.

Sherlock would be irate at this condescending tone if the pain didn't feel so… Frightening is the only word that fits.

"It's only a six-minute journey, but you managed to freak out the EMTs no end," John says with slight humour, "They gave you oxygen but you kept fighting with the mask and yelling. You were in a right state by the time they wheeled you in and the staff had to sedate you because they were worried you were going to hurt yourself. Are you sure you couldn't use some of that oxygen now?"

Sherlock shakes his head. He feels out of breath, but it's mostly from the pain, which has blessedly now released the firmest part of its grip on him. He can breathe again, at least a little. The thought of having an oxygen mask on his face right now would be beyond claustrophobic.

What John is saying makes him wonder. He isn't feeling the way he usually does after a full-scale meltdown. Normally, every nerve would be screaming at the sensory overload, but he's never experienced chest pain like this before, and the feeling of sluggish confusion, his memory shorting out and no control over his emotions isn't what he has associated with the meltdowns before. He mumbles, "Sedated with what? I already feel weird."

"Yep. Apparently, you don't do what most people do when they get a heavy shot of diazepam. Instead of quieting down, you went even more ballistic."

Sherlock opens his eyes again and glares at John. He manages to spit out, "Paradoxical reaction to diazepam; in fact, to a lot of benzos." It should be on his chart, but then again, thanks no doubt to Mycroft, there are no charts of his stay at the National, because Big Brother had been paranoid enough to expunge Sherlock's electronic NHS records, at least those relating to the GBS, for fear of them falling into Moriarty’s hands. The lilies delivered to Baker Street show how useless that effort had been.

Sherlock hates the fire of rage he feels towards John right now. Why is it easier to talk about things when I am angry? The scientist in him gets vaguely interested, but his head is too fuzzy to be able to chase the idea anywhere. He's angry at himself for ending up in here, he's angry at John for not knowing these things, for not being there but also for maybe knowing too much, and naturally, obviously angry at Mycroft for being Mycroft.

In a way, anger is good, of course. He's had enough with feeling paralysed with indecision and sadness.

John looks unperturbed by his outburst. "They found all that out the hard way, after giving you a second dose. That was after you started yelling that you were having a heart attack. Which hasn't been ruled out, you know? Could have been an arrhythmia that knocked you out," he adds, and for a moment his guarded expression painfully reminds Sherlock of how he’d looked at the National every morning when he was forced to survey the advancing devastation of the GBS.

He has a sudden impulse to dig his fingernails into his brain and rip out these memories by hand since no other method seems to be working in keeping them in check.

The fact that that blasted vitals monitor won't shut up is making things worse. "Is that the reason why that bloody thing is beeping behind you? Turn it off," Sherlock commands.
John winces a bit. "You need to be monitored because you collapsed for an unknown reason, you've been complaining of chest pain, and your blood pressure is sky high. And, you're still tachycardic, to boot." John crosses his arms defensively before adding, "They're doing a tox screen. Had they not decided on it already, I would have told them to."

Without thinking, Sherlock shouts, "I'M CLEAN!" and takes two quick breaths in because the noise of his own yelling nearly splits his head in two. "Unless those blasted tablets you make me take have interacted with something I've been given. Without my permission, I might add." He's almost hyperventilating and he knows he has to calm himself down before he no longer can, so he starts to rub his face with his hands. Something snags on his nose, so he stops to stare at the plastic thing pinching his left index finger. A pulse ox - the machine that had helped chart his GBS-induced decline and eventual fall into respiratory failure, and then intubation. He hates that machine with a visceral contempt that makes him take a deep breath just to keep himself from screaming at it.

"Don't start on that. I've told them what medication you're on; there shouldn't be any interactions. I also told them that the last time you used was days ago. Unless you want to tell me something different?"

There is something so awful in those words that Sherlock has to gulp another deep breath to keep the anger from taking over completely. "You don't believe me?" Despair squeezes his chest again - or is it something else? "Get me something for this," he barks out another command.

"The chest pain?" John asks.

He nods. It seems to be coming and going according to how on edge he feels. At its worst, he has to admit it continues to carry a very fresh and terrifying tinge of mortality. The cocaine had sometimes given him mild chest pain, but nothing like this.

"Can you describe it for me?"

"Crushing. Aching. Radiates down my left arm."

"Alright. Your A&E consultant needs to hear that. They did a 12-lead ECG, a cardiac ultrasound and took some blood while you were out cold. They haven't come back with the results yet."

John steps out of the curtained-off area they're in for a moment, presumably to find a staff member.

Sherlock would have thought being left alone for a moment would be a relief, but it turns out to be the opposite. Without John present, there's no one to challenge the theories his head is now cooking up. What if this is something new and irreparable? What if some of the panic and the return of the meltdowns are caused by something that could be fixed, but he's being misdiagnosed? What if this is the Guillain-Barré coming back? Sherlock desperately needs to know, so he can prepare. He'll happily consent to be stripped half naked, poked and prodded if it helps prove to Mycroft and John that it isn't the drugs, and he isn't going crazy, even if it turns out to be the Transport failing him. Again.

This could well be something new, something benign, something that can be fixed, he tries to convince himself, but it's pointless. The pain begins building again, a constant, dull burning weight on him that makes it hard to concentrate on anything else.

John finally returns with a nurse in tow. They give him a dose of glycercyl nitrate mouth spray and a shot of morphine, which makes John frown but he doesn't protest. He seems increasingly annoyed that whichever A&E doctor he's expecting, hasn't shown up yet with the test results.
After a second dose, the morphine finally kicks in and Sherlock’s pain eases. It's hardly a large enough dose to do anything to his anxiety, but somehow the thought of being given at least something is consoling. Even his blood pressure is down somewhat, probably due to the nitrate.

John, on the other hand, seems to be getting more impatient with each passing minute.

Sherlock declines the oxygen again, still convinced that having a mask on his face won't help with the sense of unease and claustrophobia he's already battling.

"I haven't used," Sherlock tells John again, once the nurse has left.

"I want to believe that, I really do, but they have to look at the differential diagnostic options here. You are a known addict who recently relapsed. I know how worked up you were about the appointment in the first place. You went into the bathroom just before we left… And you reacted so strangely at the National that you can hardly blame me for not knowing what to think."

"During all the time I've known you, when have I ever used, apart from the one time?" Sherlock asks, but he knows better than to assume that such feeble arguments by a known addict will hardly erase John's nagging suspicions. It's the same as with Mycroft - an easy explanation that always occurs to them first. *Sherlock's acting strangely - must be on the drugs again.*

The morphine has eased the pain just enough to set his mind free to wander down dark corridors of doubt. Until the tox screen comes back, Sherlock realises he'll have to put up with this level of scepticism from John, and it's his own fault for being so careless that he'd allowed Mycroft to get wind of what had been going on. It's his own carelessness that has led to that snake managing to convince even John of his imbecilic theories of what he thinks is going on and how all this is going to end. The more Sherlock thinks about it all, the more anxious he gets. That bloody beating rhythm in his ear and on the machine is driving him right round the bend.

Finally, his patience snaps and he rips off the pulse ox clip on his finger. He fights hard to combat his outrage when the noise doesn’t stop. He glances down at his chest, and his muscles tighten up with anxiety when he takes in the sight of wires with little electrodes, exactly the same sort he'd had at the National. His heartbeat feels off, somehow, and the ECG monitor has picked up on it, showing a complicated rhythm dotted with longer pauses and then grouped beats. He rips one of the chest electrodes off his skin, just as John's hand tries to grab his. An alarm goes off on the machine, and the sound of it cuts through Sherlock’s ear like a scalpel, making him gasp.

"Stop that. You need to calm down."

"No. I’m discharging myself. I can’t… I won’t be held here against my will. Mycroft thinks I need a psychiatrist, and you think I’m on drugs. You’re both wrong, but there's nothing I can do to convince you otherwise. There is nothing wrong with me that I can’t solve on my own!" He pulls off another ECG lead just as the curtain is pulled aside and a nurse comes in.

"What’s the trouble here? Have the ECG leads come loose? That can easily set off an alarm." Her helpful smile fades as she takes in the scene. Sherlock is now sitting up and starting to move the thin blanket aside so he can get off the trolley.

"Sherlock, lie back down and let us work out what’s going on." John has put his hands on Sherlock's shoulders to stop his forward momentum off the bed.

"*LEAVE ME ALONE!*"

For a split second, he wants to strike out, but the fact that it is John who is trying to restrain him
diverts the aggression. He slams his palm on the bed rail, fingers curling around it like a vice before his hands fly up to his head, fingernails pressing down on his scalp so hard he's close to drawing blood. His vision tunnels and the crushing weight is on his chest again, as though someone is sitting on him. Then something or someone grabs his upper left arm in an ever-tightening grip, and he nearly succumbs to the panic, trying to rip off what seems to be the blood pressure cuff that has got him in its clutches again. It hurts as he wrestles with the Velcro, eventually winning and flinging it away from him.

"Sherlock, you need to stop fighting and let us find out what’s going on. This isn’t like what happened the other day at Barts, is it?" John has now raised his voice to the level of a command.

"I’m leaving and you can't stop me. You can’t do this to me again. I won’t let you," Sherlock announces, his voice sounding as though it's coming from a distance, wavering a bit and lacking the adamant tone he'd been hoping for.

It naturally fails to intimidate John, and even the nurse looks unperturbed, although she does put her hands up in a placating gesture. "Just calm down; no need to shout or get yourself worked up," she says, and then glances at John, as if looking to him to provide advice on how to handle this.

Rage rips through Sherlock again, offering a moment of clarity from the gathering storm in his head. "Look at ME - not him! I’m the one discharging myself. Bring me whatever form I have to sign, so your bloody hospital is off the hook." He flings himself off the trolley with enough force that John has to let go and step backwards from the bed. There's a twinge on his forearm as the IV cannula rips off. It'll probably start bleeding, but he's beyond caring.

On his feet now, Sherlock bends over to the cabinet beside the bed, wrenching it open and grabs his clothes. Edging back onto the bed, he shoves his legs into his trousers and stands again, tucking the hospital gown straight into them. He can't be bothered with the buttons on his dress shirt. In the background, he knows that John is speaking, but he filters it all out. The need to flee is too strong to ignore. "Where’s my coat?" he bellows, just as the room begins to spin. He feels lightheaded. Who needs a blasted monitor when he can count his own frantic heartbeat right here in his head since it's practically drowning out all other sounds?

This is not unexpected. He'd been pushed to the limit. They won't believe him, and they're not listening to him. He's been here before, and he fucking well knows where it leads.

It's their fault he’s falling over the edge again, and again, and again. His own thoughts are echoing in his head, bouncing around endlessly like a marble in a tin can.

He manages to get his shoes on but doesn't bother with the laces. His hands are shaking too hard, and he knows that if he asks John for help, the answer will be a stern refusal and a command to get back on the trolley.

Sherlock stands up and rips aside the curtain, shrugging on his suit jacket over the wretched hospital gown, as he starts out of the curtained area towards freedom. Behind him, he hopes that John will follow in his wake and that the nurse has decided not to even try and stop him.

He knows his rights. He can discharge himself if he bloody well wants.

Anger propels him halfway down the corridor before gravity plays a mean trick: he steps on his own shoelace and then trips. Adrenaline spikes as he tries to stop himself from falling and then rips through his chest in one agonising cramp. He cries out, losing all the air that is in his lungs in the process. As he crumples to the floor, his last conscious thought is wondering whether this really is what a heart attack feels like.
When Sherlock trips and then falls against the wall, John is only a few steps behind him. There is something in the guttural cry of pain that tells him this is not a simple fall; he’s heard enough agonal pain in his time as a doctor to know this is something else entirely.

He manages to catch hold of Sherlock at the nick of time: his right arm carries the unconscious weight down, protecting the taller man’s head from smacking onto the floor as he falls. His fingertips find Sherlock’s carotid artery and find a frantic but regular, and most importantly, existing pulse there.

"Get a trolley. NOW!" John puts enough of a command in his voice that the nurse does not hesitate or stop to check Sherlock out herself.

The next seventeen minutes pass in a blur. Sherlock is wheeled into a resuscitation room, where monitoring is re-attached and a second twelve-lead ECG taken. Unconscious, he cannot argue with the oxygen mask, and his vital signs start to return to some semblance of normality. John watches as a junior doctor begins trying to find a new vein to insert a cannula to replace the one Sherlock had ripped out.

John busies himself stealthily trying to read over the shoulder of a nurse who has brought up Sherlock's laboratory results onto a computer screen at the edge of the room but gets startled when there's a loud yelp from across the room.

The cause turns out to be Sherlock's arm gripping the junior doctor's fingers like a vice, threatening to break them. His eyes are open, and his glare could probably drill a hole through concrete if he could only focus it on something for more than a split second.

During the next ten minutes, John barely has time to register everything that's going on. He ends up practically sitting on Sherlock while attempting to keep him from falling head-first off the trolley as he attempts to wrestle everyone who even attempts to come near him, screaming colourful death threats with no internal logic whatsoever. It requires the help of a few passer-by EMTs to keep him in place long enough to manage to sedate him again - this time with something that must've been different to what he'd been given before since it actually does make him drowsy and complacent. He keeps talking, but John suspects the words that keep coming out of his mouth might not be the ones he thinks he's saying. It all makes even less sense than what he sometimes says in his sleep. Eventually, John gives up trying to make heads or tails of it, finding consolation in the fact that at least Sherlock is no longer a threat to the staff or himself.

Finally, the resuscitation room becomes peaceful enough for John to get to actually talk to the consultant who has arrived on the scene. It's a different one from who had done the initial assessment - this new doctor introduces himself as a cardiologist.

John glances at Sherlock before gripping and shaking the hand offered by his colleague. Sherlock is staring at his own hand, frowning at the pulse ox again, but at least he isn't trying to take it off.

"You're his partner?" the cardiologist asks expectantly.

Before, John would have perhaps countered that assumption with 'friend' or 'colleague', and out of habit he opens his mouth to correct the man before his head catches up to what he's about to do.
"Yeah," he says, trying to sound as though owning up to it doesn't feel as odd as it does. They still haven't told a lot of people. He hasn't told his mother. What about Sherlock's parents-----

Not the time or the place for that train of thought. John introduces himself properly.

"I understand you could shed some light on Mr Holmes' previous medical history?" the doctor asks.

"What do you need to know?" John hopes he won't ask about what has just happened because John feels as clueless as anyone. It's very much understandable that Sherlock would not be willing to spend any more time in hospitals than he absolutely must, but there's still a huge gaping hole in John's understanding of why they have actually ended up here. What the hell had happened at the National? Another meltdown? They're not supposed to feature this sort of chest pain, are they?

"You have already provided information on his current medications and his narcotics history. What about risk factors for cardiovascular disease?"

"He quit smoking a few months ago. You're not thinking he's about to have an MI?" John knows it wouldn't be unheard of, but Sherlock still seems the wrong age to get a clot in his coronary arteries.

"Judging by what we've been able to ask him, he seems to be complaining of chest pain that very closely resembles classical ischaemic angina. Coupled with high blood pressure, cholesterol levels that leave a bit to be desired - they're low, but since especially the high-density is lacking, it could pose a heightened risk. Add to that a history of smoking, it isn't that far-fetched even at his age. The cardiac ultrasound I did was normal, and his enzymes are clear so far," the cardiologist says, clearly trying to signal that he wouldn't be surprised if the situation would change once they were taken again. "There are no overt changes in the ECG, apart from some prominent T-waves and the persistent sinus tachycardia, but I still think we need to admit him to the Acute Medical Unit upstairs where he can be monitored and assessed further."

The consultant looks like calm personified, while John feels deflated and confused. "Could it be a panic attack?" John finally asks.

"His arterial blood gases didn't point to hyperventilation, and once the initial sedative dose wore off, he seemed quite co-operative, his chief complaint remaining the chest pain. I assume you're asking because he's exhibited such symptoms before. Has he been under a lot of stress lately?"

"You have no idea," John laments and shifts on his heels to be able to better keep an eye on Sherlock. He seems to have fallen asleep while all the monitoring equipment is being reattached. The nurses act slightly wary around him, for good reason. John considers whether he should bring up the ASD but bites his tongue. It would probably lead precisely to what Sherlock wants to avoid by not being very forthcoming about it - people assuming most things wrong with him being the result of it.

There are two things, however, that really need to be said, in order for the cardiologists to have all the knowledge they really need. "He's recovering from severe Guillain-Barré."

"Oh," the cardiologist says, perking up from his notes.

John grits his teeth. "And, he used cocaine a few days ago. Could that be---" John lets his question trail out, suddenly feeling so tired he'd like to close his eyes for a moment, too.

"Usually only acute intoxication or long-term use and the following withdrawal are capable of causing significant cardiac complications. There are other differential diagnostic options, of course."
It's unlikely that it would exhibit as just this, but we do need to consider a relapse of what you just mentioned about Guillain——"

John's gaze narrows. "Whatever you do, don't say that out loud to him. Not unless everything else has been ruled out, and a relapse is explicitly confirmed."

The cardiologist's eyebrows shoot up. "Why do you say that?"

"He wouldn't take kindly to that kind of speculation afterwards if it turned out to be wrong," John supplies. That's putting it very mildly. At first, Sherlock would undoubtedly be devastated, all the progress he'd made about coming to terms with even the first hospitalisation likely flung out the window the minute the word 'relapse' would be mentioned. If he, later on, found out that it had all been a mistake, he'd go absolutely ballistic. Of this John is absolutely certain, as he is about the notion that he'd probably be the one to catch the worst of it.

"It could also be myocarditis, or, for instance, an undiagnosed conduction issue, although the tachycardia being of sinus origin seems to speak against it. Cardiac structural causes are unlikely since his ultrasound was normal. A stenotic aortic valve could have well explained the temporary loss of consciousness, as would endocarditis creating a large leak in the mitral valve. Sometimes endocarditis is only visible in a cardiac ultrasound done with an oesophageal probe, which we don't have available at A&E. Has he had any fever or other symptoms that could point to infection?"

"No, and the cocaine was too recent for endocarditis to have developed," John adds, aware that intravenous drug use is a common source of bacteria in the bloodstream, leading to endocardial infection among other things. "What about---" John finds himself at a loss for words. He doesn't want to give cardiologist reason to believe this is all some sort of a psychosomatic issue. Such a notion would not be accepted by Sherlock, and it would wreck whatever rapport he might find with the staff. "He's under a lot of stress," he repeats sheepishly. "He works himself to the ground."

"Does he have any history of cardiac rhythm disturbances?"

"Not that I know of." That's God's honest truth because he's no longer sure at all how much - or little - he actually knows about Sherlock. He knows as much as Sherlock allows him, governing the flow of information with the iron grip of a war general. There's no way to push past those barriers, or so it feels at the moment.

John realises he should call Mycroft. He really ought to, but he hasn't done so yet, stalled by what Sherlock had managed to scream at him borderline coherently at one point - a most imaginative threat of bodily harm if John dares to contact the older brother. It's hardly surprising, considering the venomous reception Sherlock had given the man at the National months and months ago when he'd fallen ill, but there had been such an edge of rage, conviction and finality in Sherlock's statement this time, that John found himself unconvinced that this was just the sedatives combined with a long-term dislike of Mycroft seeing him when he's under the weather.

"What about vasospastic angina? That could be caused by stress, couldn't it?" John suggests. He'd seen a few shell-shocked soldiers in Afghanistan with what had sounded like and looked like some sort of a heart attack, but nothing worrying was ever found in further examinations. It had all been eventually chalked up to battle stress.

"That would be rare, and often in such cases, we do still find an underlying condition. Patients with panic attacks do often experience or at least report chest pain. Admittedly coronary artery spasms can be caused by stress, narcotics and smoking. In most cases, we find nothing worrying, but better err on the side of caution. He did seem to even have lost consciousness briefly."
For a moment, John considers sharing his theory of what that blackout could also have been, but the notion that a cardiologist might have as little to offer in help as John himself does when it comes to a meltdown halts his tongue.

"There are reports of Takotsubo-type cardiomyopathy in the acute stages of Guillain-Barré, which looks like an acute coronary issue up to the point of ventricular wall movement impairments but without any abnormalities in the coronary arteries. That's why I felt obligated to mention the possibility of a relapse," the cardiologist explains. "Did he have heart involvement with the GBS?"

"Some heart rate and blood pressure abnormalities, but they told me it was nothing they don't see almost invariably as part of autonomic nerve dysfunction in severe cases. All of the abnormalities resolved sometime before he was discharged," John explains.

"Takotsubo isn't thought to be caused by the autonomic dysfunction - it's more of a stress cardiomyopathy, and even when there are significant ECG changes and ventricular dysfunction, it can be asymptomatic. Could it have been missed? That level of cardiac involvement could cause after-effects long past discharge, and sedation during respirator treatment could have masked whatever symptoms he may have had."

"I doubt it - he had expert care. He wasn't even sedated all that much, not even on the respirator. I'm pretty sure they did a cardiac ultrasound - twice, in fact, if my memory serves me. There was nothing that would point to significant heart involvement."

A nagging thing at the back of John's mind rears its ugly head again: if this turns out to be the fucking cocaine after all, due to continued use, he's going to wring Sherlock's neck. He'd tried to be supportive, they'd talked, he'd stomped down on the residual anger in order to try and not judge Sherlock for what must've been a desperate act at a desperate time, but if he's used again, now, simply to get through the appointment, without coming to John about how he was feeling, then they're neck-deep in trouble.

Still, John will gladly take even a second cocaine relapse, as long as it's not the Guillain-Barré coming back. Anything but that. He's having a hard time trying to help Sherlock keep it together now. If the word 'relapse' was uttered, he truly fears what Sherlock would do.

The cardiologist alerts the nurses after glancing at the ECG monitor and tells them to start an intravenous beta blocker. Sherlock's heart rate is still higher than normal but slightly lowered by what must be the sedation. His blood pressure echoes the same trend - still high, but getting better.

The cardiologist returns his attention to John. "Dr Watson - where was he hospitalised? There are records of a visit here for an undefined muscle weakness issue months ago, but he seems to have been discharged that evening with a clean bill of health."

John curses in his head. How does he explain this so it wouldn't sound profoundly strange? "There are no electronic records. Computer issue," he hastens to explain, aware of how ridiculous it sounds. "I've got copies of his discharge papers at home. They treated him at the National."

"I don't understand. There's no A&E there - that's why he was brought here today. Where did they do his initial assessment, if it didn't happen on that A&E visit I mentioned?"

"There are special circumstances. Those records have been altered," John finds himself forced to admit.

The cardiologist looks aghast. "Who'd do that? Why? I didn't know it's even possible."
John gives him a nervous smile. "The less you know, the better, honestly. So," John asks, rather relieved to hear a familiar snoring coming from somewhere behind his back, "Observation, then?"

He calls Mycroft. It goes exactly as John would have predicted. Barely concealed worry and resignation, a most unsubtle accusation that John has totally failed in his duty to protect Sherlock. He makes the call brief, preferring to postpone the inevitable, and take on the ire of Mycroft Holmes face-to-face when he gets to the hospital.

He shoves his phone back into his trouser pocket, and a shaky laugh escapes when suddenly the image of the usually graceful Sherlock tripping on his own shoelaces hits his brain. Oh, Jesus Christ, this day. He shouldn't be laughing at it, and he really isn't, it's more of an acknowledgement of the universe's thoroughly messed-up sense of humour.

John is getting exhausted by all this: Sherlock in denial whenever something upsets him or someone tries to get him to accept that something has happened to him that might warrant some introspection, and him having to be the one to try to shake some sense into the man. Would it kill Sherlock to just once meet him halfway? What could be so bad, so terrifying to face, that it's worth risking everything they've tried to build?

He knows he shouldn't be thinking like this. Sherlock has never been in the habit of doing things deliberately to spite him or hurt him. Things happen, but mostly it's because he fails to realise the more abstract consequences. Maybe trying to evade everything he perceives as a possible threat to his sanity and his health, instead of meeting the issue head-on, like he does with all other sorts of problems, is the only way he knows how to cope. Still, John can't help wanting to shake a proverbial fist at the unfairness of it all. Where is the honesty, the emotional connection that they had forged in the winter garden? Was last night’s conversation just a flicker of his imagination, an exercise in wishful thinking? If he can't get Sherlock to trust him and to really open up, then Mycroft is going to take action. That would mean that John will have failed to make a difference. Not for the first time since Sherlock had first felt the pins and needles that led to the GBS diagnosis, John begins to wonder how limited his abilities at helping Sherlock get better actually are.

Something's got to give.

Chapter End Notes

Comment: Chapter title borrowed from a MS MR song.
John sits with Sherlock at A&E while admission procedures are undertaken. He has been moved from the resuscitation room to a curtained-off normal trolley space to make room for an ambulance arrival. He's still mostly out of it, stirring and muttering without opening his eyes when touched, but not responding when someone simply talks to him. John holds his listless hand because he can't come up with anything else to do.

The cardiologist had returned one more time, assuring John that none of what they could find seemed very alarming. The mild ECG changes could be caused by many different things, the vast majority of them benign, sinus tachycardia has plenty of physiological explanations, and so does acutely high blood pressure. A head CT has been taken, and the results are reassuringly normal, and even an abdominal tumour producing stress hormones had been mostly ruled out by the bloodwork. This offers no answers as to what's going on, but at least it'll spare Sherlock from having to go through coronary angiography or some other more invasive procedure.

After a spot at the UCLH Acute Medical Unit has been arranged, John follows the trolley to the lift, keeping his eye on the portable cardiac monitor.

"Hey. Still with me?" He pats Sherlock on the shoulder.

A noncommittal hum is the only reply. The lift doors open and an elderly couple slowly and deliberately make their way out, while John tries to stifle his impatience.

Once in the lift, John comes back alongside the head of the bed, which has been elevated slightly. The clanging noise the trolley makes as it is pushed into the lift has made Sherlock open his eyes.

John leans over him and says quietly, "We're in the lift. Nothing to worry about."

Sherlock musters up a cross-eyed attempt at glare, but his lids drift shut again. "Mnotstupid, John," he manages.

"Good. That’s good. Everyone can be a bit less objective when it’s their own health." The wait at A&E has been long enough for the worst edge of his frustration to dissipate. He can, again, focus on the fact that Sherlock isn't well and he needs to do something about it instead of wallowing in bitterness over the turns their life has taken recently.

He doubts Sherlock had heard a word of what he'd just said, since he seems to have settled back into sedated stupor.

The doors open on the first floor and the trolley is pushed slowly out and then turned to the right. It’s a corridor surprisingly busy with people coming from both directions even outside office hours, and several have to move out of the way to avoid the transport. Sherlock stirs again, muttering something about stations and the Oyster Card.

They get moving again, but due to another influx on people down the hall, they are forced to make a jerky stop. John digs out his phone to check if there are messages from Mycroft, when suddenly Sherlock grabs a handful of his jumper sleeve and calls out his name urgently.

Startled, John nearly drops his phone, his head snapping up to meet Sherlock's slightly unfocused gaze.
Sherlock tries to sit, reaching over the raised sidebars of the trolley, attempting to grab John by the wrist but missing, even with repeated tries. "Look! It's HIM!" he exclaims loudly. His voice is surprisingly clear and precise as if something had broken through the fog that had clouded his earlier responses. His movements are still wholly uncoordinated.

"Who?"

"Cole. It's Cole! He made that door!" He points to the end of the corridor, back where they've just vacated the lift. The entrance foyer leads to several different wards.

When John draws a blank, Sherlock’s expression turns to exasperation. "The murderspect--- SUSPECT, John! Go after him!"

John turns to have a look around, and even the orderly pushing the trolley stops and takes a quick glance. The corridor continues to be busy. John sees a number of people going into the lifts: medical staff, a mother with a toddler in her arms, some other visitors, but no one who even remotely looks like the personal trainer they’d interviewed at the Vault. More importantly, John doesn't care if a suspect or the bloody Pope just walked down the hall. There are more important things going on.

Still, he glances back at Sherlock with a question in his eyes. If he humours Sherlock for a moment, maybe he won't put up a full strop once they get to the Acute Medical Unit.

"He’s lifting! Quick, follow him. Find out what he that why he's why here! Come on! GO!"

For a moment, John is torn. Is Sherlock hallucinating? Or is this a ruse to get him to leave, so an attempt a daring escape from the hospital can be made? Even if he genuinely believed Sherlock had seen what he's claiming to have seen, he couldn't leave Sherlock's side right now. He needs to go with him to the Acute Medical Unit, get him safely tucked into a bed and get this whole mess sorted.

"JOHN, MOVE!" Sherlock exclaims desperately, gesturing wildly again towards the general direction of the lifts they've left behind. The orderly shakes his head and raises his brows to John before he determinedly begins pushing the trolley forward again.

Sherlock is peering at the signs on the wall. Then he tries to scramble over the bed rails but even in his currently rather hazy state he manages to realise that it's pointless. He drops his head against the pillow with a frustrated grunt.

"No. I'm sticking with you, and you are going into that ward if I have to drag you there myself," John tells him sternly.

Sherlock looks outraged. The anger seems to have cleared his head a bit. "Don't be absurd! We need to find out what he’s doing here. He came out of the other ward. John, PLEASE!"

They've arrived at the double doors leading into the Acute Medical Unit. John presses the automatic door button and they open by themselves. The porter thanks him cheerily as he wheels Sherlock in.

"Nope, you are the crucial bit here," John tells Sherlock. "I have no intention of leaving you alone right now," he tells Sherlock in a tone that invites no arguments. It very rarely actually works with Sherlock, of course.

Sherlock tries to sit again, but he's unable to stop his momentum, so he ends up half-leaning over the bed rail.
John shoves him back into the middle of the trolley. "You’re my priority now."

Sherlock's anger and irritation have not abated just yet. "You just lead a lost." He slams his palm on the trolley railing in frustration. "Not good, John."

As they arrive at the nurses' station, John watches Sherlock's eyes drift shut again. He hopes it's from the sedation drugs still in his system instead of a petulant trip into the Mind Palace where he might elect to stay God knows how long just to spite everyone.

John runs his fingers through his hair and sticks his hands in his pockets while glancing around the ward. It's painted in the same bland white tones as the Neuromedical Intensive Therapy Unit at the National. The sense of déjà vu is nothing short of crushing.

An hour later, several staff members are hurrying around the entrance lobby of the Acute Medical Unit when Mycroft walks in and surveys the scene in order to find what passes for a reception desk.

He had left Vauxhall in the middle of a Defence and Security Media Advisory Committee meeting – not what he would consider an unmissable appointment, but it would have been nice to finish his day the way he'd intended, and then head home with plenty of time to freshen up before a charity fundraiser. All that will have to be put aside for now, as on too many occasions before. Traffic had been a nightmare – it had taken him over forty-five minutes to make the relatively short distance from Westminster to Camden.

They keep happening, these sorts of days, when a phone call forces him to abandon work in lieu of hurrying to the bedside of his younger brother. He had understood long ago that this was his lot in life - to act as a buffer between Sherlock's constant troubles and the rest of the human race, their parents included, whose understanding of Sherlock is clearly limited, despite even their mother's considerable intelligence.

Mycroft had once hoped, naturally with a healthy dose of scepticism, that one day he might pass the baton to someone else; that Sherlock might be capable of finding that someone else for himself, and connecting with them.

After decades of worrying, a constant concern is not an easy habit for Mycroft to break. It hardly helps that John Watson, the best, and so far the only candidate for the post of Sherlock's significant other, doesn't seem to be taking seriously Mycroft's attempts to educate him about the man he has chosen to become involved with. In all novel undertakings, a learning curve should be allowed, of course, but when it comes to Sherlock's well-being, Mycroft must demand that John learns the ropes quite promptly. The necessity of attending to a hospitalised Sherlock yet again is ample proof that Mycroft's assistance is still very much called for.

There's a desk by the start of a hallway, lined with numbered patient room doors. A fifty-something woman with smoker's hands, possible early-stage Parkinson's, a failed marriage, a knitting habit leading to finger arthrosis, and Irish lineage, stands behind it, discussing something on the phone. When Mycroft approaches the desk, she covers the receiver with her palm and regards him with a put-upon expression. "Yes?"
"Sherlock Holmes, please?" He assumes neither Sherlock nor John would have had the sense or the wherewithal to check him in under a false identity. That will have to be fixed quickly, lest things be made even easier for Moriarty.

She glances at a printed sheet in front of her on the desk. "Room 16," she answers and returns to her phone conversation, turning slightly away from Mycroft.

He isn't done, yet, so he pointedly clears his throat.

The woman ends the conversation and grabs a stack of papers from behind the desk, clearly planning on leaving. "Can I help you?" she asks, her tone signalling that she'd rather prefer not to.

Mycroft makes a mental note to look into suitable private hospital units, once he has found out what's going on. He had, of course, already tried to obtain the necessary information via alternative routes, but the hospital administrator is on leave, and the current Chair of NHS's Specialised Services Commissioning Committee has already been trying to leverage favours from him in order to get a certain medication export order accepted. Mycroft would prefer a pharmaceutical company the man is associated with not to start selling execution drugs to Iran, which is why he really wouldn't want to owe the man a favour. All this means that for the first time, he had been unable to obtain a copy of Sherlock's A&E records before arriving at the hospital in person. He doesn't like to be ill-informed, and Sherlock is unlikely to freely offer an objective report. He'd have to rely on conventional means and John Watson for information, if the text message he'd fired off to Anthea to continue trying through other avenues does not deliver results.

Judging by John's earlier reactions, the doctor might not be willing to divulge much, if he assumes Sherlock wouldn't want him to. A perfect example of how a faulty interpretation of loyalty and misguided trust can be deeply detrimental.

Mycroft slides a Moleskine notebook out of his jacket pocket. "I'd like the name of his consultant, please."

The woman slides her glasses down her nose and nods slightly to glance at him from above the rim of them. "And you are?"

"His brother."

She leans over the counter to peer at the same piece of paper from which she had gleaned the room number. "That would be Mr Arnold."

"I'd like a word with him."

"Now?"

"Yes."

"He's in the angiography suite. Will be for a while. Afternoon rounds are at two, you can probably catch him then. Unless you'd like to speak to his registrar?"

"No, that is fine," Mycroft replies curtly.

It's far from fine. He knows nothing about this Doctor Arnold. Speaking to the man's trainee would hardly help. He begins typing a quick note to Anthea to do a background check.

Having noticed Mycroft's sudden preoccupation with his Blackberry, the woman makes her way towards the end of the corridor, leaving behind a distinctive whiff of tobacco.
A craving hits and then is ignored as Mycroft stiffens with resolve. He had allowed himself a few weeks of nerve-calming occasional cigarettes during Sherlock's hospitalisation, but hasn't touched a single cigarette since his discharge. He has wondered if Sherlock had been able to tell.

Sherlock rarely manages to shock him anymore with anything he gets mixed up in, but months ago, Mycroft's hasty online search for the words 'Guillain-Barré syndrome' in the car, en-route to the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, after being summoned there by a call from John Watson, had unsettled him deeply. He had naturally hoped Sherlock's case would prove mild, but he should have known better – Sherlock never does anything by halves. Mycroft had been forced to watch powerlessly from the sidelines the rapid progress of the disease, painfully aware that his brother, of all people, would be the worst affected by it. Mycroft never operated on the concepts of fate, karmic justice or luck, but this time the universe had truly seemed to want to punish Sherlock – and, by extension, everyone who cared about him – worse than ever.

The encouraging prognosis of the syndrome did offer some consolation, but only until it became clear that it would progress to respiratory compromise. That meant a greatly heightened risk of complications, even a significant risk of death. At that point, Mycroft had contacted their parents. Once, years ago, he had respected Sherlock's wishes not to do so out of guilt, which had left him as the only advocate Sherlock had. The experience had been… devastating. He'd lost control of the situation, and as a result control over Sherlock's fate and care had been torn out of his hands by the police and the NHS. It is the only occasion to date when he had requested a leave of absence from his duties due to a family emergency. He'd spent four days at home, smoking, drinking forty-year old Glenlivet and trying to convince himself he had done the right thing by supporting the continued sectioning.

Due to the hard lessons of 2007, Mycroft had been convinced that the Guillain-Barré could lead to nothing but disaster, even if the prophecy of a favourable prognosis fulfilled itself. Yet somehow, against all odds, John Watson had not only managed to keep Sherlock as sane as he'd ever been during those days, but he had somehow even encouraged Sherlock to seek out a relationship in the process. A formidable mystery indeed.

Mycroft had breathed a sigh of relief, once Sherlock had left the hospital for Harwich. It meant that they were out of the physical danger zone, and that he'd be spared seeing Sherlock in a hospital for a while, at least until he took up work again and begun to amass his usual collection of work-related injuries.

Still, it seems that Mycroft had been right, after all – some things cannot be buried without repercussions. His visits to Harwich and to Baker Street since Sherlock’s release demonstrate that all is not well with his brother. Are those repercussions materialising now?

John had been hasty and to-the-point when he'd called this time, only taking a moment to reassure him the situation was not critical, but that he'd likely want to come. The man should have contacted him earlier. They could have arranged for assessment somewhere where information could be more easily obtained, where Sherlock would have been more comfortable, where doctors were available when required, and where Mycroft could more easily control who had access to Sherlock and his records. As cavalier as Sherlock acted about Moriarty, the fact remains that any illness and any injury would offer a prime opportunity for taking him out permanently. Before Mycroft becomes convinced that Sherlock is in a stable enough condition, both mentally and physically, to take on who he now gleefully refers to as his new archenemy, precautions need to be taken – such as allowing as little information about Sherlock's health as possible to seep into electronic NHS records.

Mycroft removes his coat, drapes it across his arm, grabs his briefcase where he'd put it down on
the floor next to the desk, and heads towards room 16. En route, he quickly flips through the
details of six missed calls and reads a message from his tailor that his outfit for tonight's function is
ready. There's no point in sending Anthea to collect it, since in all likelihood he will not be able to
attend.

He steps into the room without knocking. It's designed for two patients, but the bed closer to the
door is empty, neatly made with hospital corners.

In the other bed lies Sherlock – pale, hair a mess, but very much alive and conscious and frantically
typing away on his phone. Or, trying to do so, at least.

John Watson is standing by the bed, and when he looks up and takes in Mycroft's visage in the
doorway, he circles the bed to meet the visitor, or possibly to act as some sort of a buffer between
Sherlock and whoever is arriving. His body language is stiff in a protective manner, alert.

Sherlock's chin snaps up defiantly as he, too, takes in the sight of Mycroft in the doorway. "Get
out," Sherlock commands, and there's none of his usual habitual melodrama there – just scathing
anger.

John doesn't exactly look pleased to see him, either. It doesn't matter. He needs to be here.

Sherlock grabs the call button and tries to push it, but his coordination is even further confirmed to
be oddly off, and he looks slightly cross-eyed trying to focus his gaze on what he's doing.

Are the drugs, under the influence of which he clearly is, self-administered or hospital issue?
Mycroft decides that if his staff have failed yet again to track Sherlock visiting a dealer, some
heads are going to roll.

John pries his fingers off the call button. Sherlock bristles, and then pushes away the tray table that
extends above the bed, flings away the bedsheet, clearly with the intention of getting out of bed.

John leans over the bed rail and extends an arm over his torso. "Stop right there."

"Could someone please explain what is going on," Mycroft says, placing his briefcase and coat on
a side table.

Sherlock crosses his arms, eyelids fluttering as he suddenly seems to be battling the onslaught of
sleep.

Mycroft decides that he's most likely under hospital-administered medication. Sherlock's alertness
level or his motor functions do not usually suffer anywhere near as badly as this when he self-
medicates, unless this is the long tail of a significant overdose. That scenario seems unlikely, since
he's on a regular ward instead of an intensive treatment unit. Watson had mentioned something
about a possible cardiac event – Mycroft doesn't remember anything narcotics-related even landing
Sherlock at a hospital with such a thing. John had not gone into details on the phone, but an
investigation into heart-related symptoms had been explicitly mentioned.

"All your visiting is vastly confiscated," Sherlock explains carefully, looking completely convinced
he's making sense. "I told you I don't need to help you," he then tells John, who is clearly taking
such protestations with a grain of salt as he re-attaches an electrocardiogram lead onto an electrode
near Sherlock's collarbone, and then replaces the duvet on top of him.

Mycroft glances at the monitors. He has a general sense of what to expect from someone
Sherlock's age in terms of vital signs. Blood pressure on the high side, and so is the heart rate, but it
looks regular.
"You're not welcome. Ever. So piss off!" Sherlock announces, waving his hand in Mycroft's general direction.

Sherlock has never really welcomed the sight of him in his hospital room, unless there are practicalities to discuss, or he wishes that Mycroft would help him escape his predicament. But, even through the fumbling haze of whatever he's been sedated with, Mycroft is increasingly convinced that the edge of anger in his words points to something having happened recently to increase his fraternal ire. In addition, the way he's trying to dismiss even John is most curious.

"Cole was here, well not here, but there; I need to find out who was visiting him or him was visited by Cole," Sherlock demands from John, thankfully no longer attempting to get out of bed, since John is effectively still blocking him from doing so, standing right by.

Mycroft lifts a brow. "Who is this Cole?"

"Our murder suspect," John explains.

"Is this about a case?" Mycroft asks, irritation bubbling up. If Sherlock needed information, he could have simply contacted Mycroft again. No need for theatrics, or completely messing up his work schedule. "Are you undercover, somehow?"

Sherlock shifts the ECG wires he's hooked up to, looking like he has no idea what to make of them. "Hardly. Although I could use this---" he trails off, eyes unfocused, and he discards his sheet and duvet again. He begins fingering the set of coloured wires nervously.

The cardiac monitor emits a disgruntled sound as the graph on the monitor screen turns chaotic from the interference.

John leans over the bed railing and rescues the wiring from his ministrations. "Stop fiddling with it."

Sherlock slams his head back against the pillow and groans in frustration.

John presses the call button hanging from the IV pole where it has been hung out of Sherlock’s reach. "Let's have a word in the hall. I don't want to leave him alone, so we'll have to wait for a nurse."

"Stop talking as though I'm in the room," Sherlock says indignantly. "And stop the--- the--- the corridor confederacy," he finally manages to get out. "You can't fool me. Not much anymore."

No nurse materialises, cementing Mycroft's decision to find a medical unit of a higher standard to address whatever the issue here is, and to get Sherlock transferred there, post haste. "I repeat: what is going on here?" he asks, directing his words at John.

"They want to rule out a heart attack."

"He's had a heart attack?" Mycroft asks. This is new.

"I've not had a heart attack!" Sherlock protests. "It's simply that these idiots," he says pointedly, glancing at John to include even him in that description, "Insist on observation, when I can do that perfectly well at home."

John looks most unimpressed with his current capability to do anything of the sort.

"What makes them think he's had a heart attack?" Mycroft asks.
"I have not had a----"

John silences Sherlock with a glare. Sherlock grabs his phone again from the bedside cabinet and starts prodding the screen with his forefinger. He's making frequent mistakes, and keeps having to use the erase button.

"He described having chest pain that very much sounds like classic coronary angina," John says. "And, before that, he apparently told half of London, too, with his yelling."

"I find that hard to believe," Mycroft dismisses. Clearly, this is some childish ploy to get access to this hospital for a case. What Mycroft doesn't understand is the need for the drugs. Maybe they are self-administered, after all, and his dropped weight has somehow affected his tolerance, leading to his current state? Or, perhaps a dealer has been cutting his chemicals with something new that doesn’t agree with Sherlock. Had he continued using after the relapse, relying on some old stash at Baker Street? If yes, why hasn't John noticed, or if he has, why has he not involved the necessary parties in addressing this? Mycroft makes a note to ask Anthea to send a clean-up team to the flat.

"That's also what he told an A&E consultant before I got here," John insists with a shrug.

"In what words?"

"I think I'm having a heart attack."

It doesn't make any sense. Sherlock looks fine. He'd never say such a thing unless it's a ruse to obtain information or access somewhere.

"Since you think you're all doctor experts now, check that annoying thing," Sherlock flicks his hands towards the monitors. "I'm fine." He is slurring his words now even more, and his eyelids have slid down.

"You don't see a logical discrepancy between that statement and the fact that you have been hospitalised? Again, I might add?" Mycroft asks, but Sherlock seems to have slipped into profound enough oblivion that he's unlikely to offer an answer. Not that one would have likely made much sense.

"It might be stress-related," John admits. "Finally," he breathes out in relief, as Sherlock seems to advance further into what looks like genuine sleep.

Mycroft walks close to the bed and takes in the sight. There's a deduction to be confirmed here, a rather obvious one, really. Sherlock's behaviour had not been that off, but this is his brother, after all, and he knows what to look for. The difference had been subtle, but the petulant indignation, ill-fittingly paired with an odd sort of complacency, are something he has seen before in Sherlock.

"Aside from whatever he's been sedated with, is it cocaine, heroin, or both, or something else?" he asks, fighting to keep resignation out of his voice.

"Neither," John says. "I'm leaning towards stress, too."

"They've obviously given him something that's not beneficial," Mycroft points out.

"Diazepam at A&E, followed by lorazepam and pentothal. Some more lorazepam about ten minutes ago."

"He reacts paradoxically to diazepam. It can make him more anxious and aggressive."

"We noticed," John concludes, glancing at Sherlock, whose head is now drooping forward since
alerted the head of the bed is raised to an almost sitting position. John lowers it. Sherlock doesn't stir. "That's why they swapped to lorazepam after that, and a bit of pentothal. Plus Haldol."

"You would not have had to learn about the ill fit of diazepam after the fact, had you read his records."

"We've been through this," John says. "And my answer is still no. In any case, I wasn’t here when it was administered. He ended up in A&E on his own."

"Why the benzodiazepine? No, wait…” Mycroft raises a hand as if to forestall John's answer. "Better to start at the beginning, please."

"We had a follow-up appointment at the National, which he was worried about beforehand. Walked out of the appointment, had what was likely a panic attack, which must've lead to a meltdown he won't admit to. Actually passed out. Woke up with chest pain that sounded a lot like coronary angina, and that scared even him. Enzymes were negative, but they want to take another sample at least eight hours after it started. ECG uninformative, and everything else normal. He really wasn't happy about being admitted, but rather incoherent about it, hence the benzos."

Everything in John's demeanour is telling Mycroft that he's downplaying just how unwilling Sherlock had been to be treated. There had likely been quite a scene. "He's got a high tolerance," Mycroft says.

"High enough to be still texting Lestrade after repeated doses."

"I'm surprised you couldn't keep him calm," Mycroft tells John. Throughout this GBS ordeal, the doctor has managed that admirably.

John crosses his arms, and the anger Mycroft had read on his face before is returning: there's a quiet sort of pressure building in his posture and his expression. "That's just the thing. He now thinks we’re both 'in on it', whatever the hell he means by that. He no longer wants to allow either of us access to his current medical records."

Mycroft finds himself very surprised at Sherlock's change of heart regarding John, but it wouldn't be beneficial to show it. "In on what?"

"I'd say you've got a better chance of figuring out what it means than me."

There's a definite sense of déjà vu here, one that contains no schadenfreude whatsoever. "Had you surveyed his records from 2007, you would be equally suited to the task. Ah," he exclaims when his phone chimes with an email alert. He opens the message to find that Anthea has succeeded in obtaining Sherlock's latest A&E notes, which are attached to the email. He opens them and briefly shows the screen to John, whose eyes widen in rage.

John takes steps back, eyes snapping to the ceiling in frustration. "You're a fucking piece of work, you are," he snaps.

"Drug screen positive for cocaine," Mycroft remarks dryly. "We already knew as much. Would it show after a couple of days, or does this point to repeated doses?"

John takes a moment before he answers, clearly trying to decide if he wants to share any information at all with Mycroft. "It would probably still be positive. If it's from urine, they test for metabolites, not the plain drug, and those show usually for at least three days."

"No opiates," Mycroft points out.
John frowns until he looks as though he's remembered something. "He's on tramadol, but I don't think it would show up on a standard screen," John says. "They gave him morphine at A&E, but those blood samples had already been taken by then."

"Under the panel titled Toxi-Lab A, there's a line with the name tramadol, and that shows a negative result."

"What?" John frowns, not concealing his surprise. Reluctantly, he takes a step closer, and Mycroft shows him the pertinent item on the document on his phone. His confusion doesn't seem to abate after this confirmation of what Mycroft had said.

"Still, this hardly erases the fact that he did relapse recently, and if he hasn't used today, that casts an even more suspicious light on his behaviour," Mycroft comments after browsing through the rest of the laboratory results, locking his Blackberry and sliding it into his jacket pocket.

"Despite the racket he made, I managed to convince the A&E staff that he's just had bad hospital experiences lately. They were talking about doing a psych eval. I doubt that would have been received well," John explains, clearly looking for a positive reaction to these news.

Mycroft finds no joy in the army doctor's attempts at thwarting something Sherlock may well be in need of. "Is he hallucinating? He claims to have seen a murder suspect on the premises?"

"I didn't see the guy, but yeah, that's what he says. I have to give him the benefit of the doubt. There really is a case---"

"I'm aware of it. He shared the early developments of it with me on his visit."

"Really?" John seems taken aback, and Mycroft finds it somewhat insulting that he's surprised that Sherlock would discuss such things with him. The doctor seems adamant not to accept that the role he's currently fumbling around in – trying to look after Sherlock, that is - Mycroft has been doing that far longer.

"He made some progress with the case, probably found the murder weapon, but we haven't been able to link it to the suspect."

Why are they discussing Sherlock's work? Mycroft wonders if John is learning the art of deflection. After all, he keeps the company of a master craftsman of the technique. "Are you certain he should be working in the first place, if this is the result?" he nods towards Sherlock, who has now curled up onto his side. Mycroft wonders if he's shamming at sleeping, as usual, in order to eavesdrop.

John glances at Sherlock, possibly wondering the same thing. "He's been exercising, he may have cracked the case, he's following through with the violin lessons, he actually talked to me last night--" Despite these reassurances, John himself sound sceptical.

"Talked to you about what?"

John's gaze is defiant. "That's between us."

"Does ending up hospitalised with a suspected coronary event really constitute better in your opinion, Doctor Watson?" Mycroft asks, unintimidated by John's attempt at getting him to back off. Sherlock may have transferred power of attorney to the army doctor, but that doesn't mean Mycroft isn't going to interfere if that attorney's judgment seems to be severely clouded. "I'm far from certain this isn't blatant folie a deux. I'm curious: if my brother told you it was harmless to do so, would you leap off a cliff?" Fully aware of the level of provocation, Mycroft expects an
explosion, which would prove his point. "You may try to convince me otherwise," he offers in a deliberately superior tone.

Anger flashes through John's features again, but then he seems to compose himself, letting out a slow breath. "I think he's held himself together remarkably well, considering. Going back to the National was never going to be easy, and I think it brought back a lot. Like you said, he probably has very vivid memories of it all. Judging by what he said last night, and what happened today, I'd say it's a form of PTSD, not uncommon with patients who have spent a considerable amount of time at an ITU, particularly if they've been conscious throughout."

"It always seemed unlikely that he'd be unaffected by the experience," Mycroft agrees, "Though I must admit I was optimistic during the last weeks of his stay at the National."

"He had other things on his mind, and it was all still happening to him," John explains, "Soldiers don't often exhibit symptoms of PTSD during deployment, only after. In a way, it's worse for him, because he's clearly afraid it'll happen again."

"The GBS? The risk is marginal." It's very like Sherlock to get hung up on inconsequential details. He's never been much of a believer in probabilities and statistics.

"But it exists. And there's nothing anyone could say that will make him forget that. He needs to make some sort of peace with the idea."

"Let me reiterate: you don't think he's having a psychotic break?"

John looks at Sherlock again, as though seeking an answer in the contours of his sleeping form. "No. He's not alright, not by far, but it hasn't come to that."

"Overt depression, an addict's relapse, increasingly erratic behaviour, escalating to the point of requiring medical care and sedation, possibly hallucinating about murder suspects – ringing any bells, doctor? I hate repeating myself, but it seems you are not listening. No one in their right mind would think all that fits the definition of coping adequately."

John steps closer, glaring daggers again. Mycroft is used to such threats from Sherlock, but now even Watson is channelling a formidable level of defensiveness towards him. Sherlock has well and truly recruited the man on his side. It's tiresome, being subjected to this.

"Whatever he's going through right now, sending him away to another posh rehab or locking him up in some fucking secure psych ward isn't going to help him. But, it's not my job to convince you of anything, only to make sure he gets what's best for him. I think you've already made up your mind, and are only seeking proof that fits your views," Watson accuses, "You could actually try to convince me, and more importantly, him, that you had nothing to do with that very particular neuropsychiatrist showing up at the National. She was the reason Sherlock stormed out of there," John announces almost triumphantly.

"I've known Doctor Johnston for a long time, and the start of our acquaintance had nothing to do with Sherlock. I know of her work in 2007, as does Sherlock, of course. I met her in person by accident at a recent charity ball, and I may have mentioned the appointment Sherlock had coming, aware as I am that she is employed here. If she chose to make what was a friendly gesture from her to extend her expertise, that is her decision. After all, since the research project she'd led looked into a subject matter relevant to his situation in 2007, she might be in a unique position to evaluate his current state of mind. She is highly regarded in her field."

"And you accuse Sherlock of being paranoid?" John asks. "Jesus fuck. You just don't see it, do
you, how other people might see these things you do?"

"All I did was make a suggestion. As for Sherlock's sectioning, which you are still so reticent to
learn anything about, I did what was necessary back in 2007." Mycroft then asks calmly: "Will you
be willing to interfere when he can no longer function, and is incapable of recognising his
predicament himself?"

"I'll have to. I know you think I'm too close, and I told you as much at the National, but I do know
him. If push comes to shove, I'll do my damnedest to accept the signs and act on them, but only
after I've seen them. Not beforehand, just in case, or out of some vague sense of doom you seem to
be acting on."

"I will not have you endangering his well-being out of a desire not to inconvenience him. Your
disproportionate propensity for protectiveness may well backfire. He will take advantage of your
sentiment to delay the inevitable."

"I'm not letting you walk all over him without actual evidence that he's incapable of understanding
what's going on. He understands it perfectly well, as proven by how quickly he caught on why that
particular doctor was at the appointment. He's not alright, but clearly not certifiably crazy. I know
him, Mycroft. He hasn't lost the plot, just the way through."

Objectively, there are aspects of his brother's persona that John Watson may, indeed, have
witnessed that Mycroft himself hasn't. But, Mycroft knows things about Sherlock that not even
Sherlock knows, and those facts are what had necessitated the actions he had been forced to take in
2007. Watson's unwillingness to accept the burden of knowledge is compromising his decision-
making.

It is still quite the mystery to Mycroft how his brother has managed to construct an entirely adult
relationship with this man, whatever that now entails. Regardless of whether the doctor is actually
capable of interfering if Sherlock's situation turns undeniably disastrous, he must commend how
great a defender his brother has found for himself. Sometimes Sherlock does surprise him, and not
entirely negatively.

Looking down on the sleeping form of his brother, Mycroft can only hope that this time sentiment
will not prove lethal to anyone involved. "Very well," Mycroft says amicably. He will give John
Watson the benefit of the doubt, then – for now. He will still be keeping a very close eye on the
situation, and this will not be the last word on the subject if things do not start improving.

Maybe an olive branch extended at this point might assist in helping the good doctor see reason
later? "Let's pretend we believe he truly has seen a murder suspect on these premises. Anything I
could be of assistance with regarding that?"

"I don't know. He claims to have seen Cole enter the neighbouring cardiac ward. It's unlikely he'd
go there for an appointment since they don't do outpatient stuff there. That means he's probably
visiting someone."

Mycroft considers this. "They won't permit you - or, God forbid, him wandering in and
interviewing patients. Perhaps I could obtain the pertinent records of the ward's current patient
roster?" Doing so would mean that he'd have to call that NHS board idiot Foster, after all, and call
in a big favour, but he does find it so hard not to give Sherlock what he thinks he wants, if it's
harmless and helps him along somehow.

"That's illegal," Watson says but it sounds like something he'd say out of habit and not because he's
genuinely appalled. Perhaps there are many things Sherlock does, which warrant a similar reaction
– a half-hearted slap on the wrist without an actual assumption that anything will change. "But I doubt Sherlock would care."

"He has always held onto the notion that ends justify the means."

Watson glances at Sherlock, as though making sure he's still there. Mycroft had made note long ago how he always seems to be keeping a close eye on his little brother, and some of those looks have always been about more than just convenience or worry – it's like the man's eyes are drawn there, like nothing else interests him much if Sherlock is present.

Not many people have looked at Sherlock like that. Mycroft just hopes that John will not let sentiment blind him to the dangers that lie ahead.
Trust – part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

John's heartbeat picks up when, in his peripheral vision, he spots Sherlock beginning to stir on the bed. He lets his hand, holding a John Le Carré novel, fall onto his knees, silently. He had mostly just been staring at the pages in a preoccupied manner, unable to recall any of the plot so far.

Sherlock opens his eyes, raises his hands from where they have lain on top of the coarse, dark green woollen blanket, and frowns at the pulse oximeter on his finger and the IV on his forearm. There are several plasters on his hands in spots where he'd pulled out previous venous cannulas. He then turns his head towards the window, seems to instantly recognise John, and a steely mask of disapproval sets on his features. "Oh. You."

John abandons the book on the window sill and takes to his feet to get to the bed. "Morning. Or should I say good evening," he teases gently.

Sherlock glances at the wall clock. It's 6:30 in the evening and twilight is setting in.

John reaches for a light switch on the wall but Sherlock raises his hand in protest. "Don't. Headache," he explains sharply and turns to his side away from John, closing his eyes again and pulling the blanket up to his shoulders.

John switches on a smaller lamp above the sink and traverses the room to the other side of the bed. "How are you?"

"I don't suppose you'd accept 'fine' as an answer?" Sherlock replies without opening his eyes.

"Not really."

Suddenly, Sherlock bolts up into a sitting position, eyes narrowed to slits and gaze homed in on John. "Where's Mycroft?" he demands, as though only now having remembered he has a brother in the first place.

"He's gone to talk to your cardiologist." Mycroft had insisted on waiting until the consultant was done with rounds and an emergency angiography. John doesn't envy his colleague - Mycroft is probably grilling the man to the maximum about what could be going on.

"Why?" Sherlock asks, now looking nothing short of furious, "Is it done, then? He's gone and done it, hasn't he, and you LET HIM!" he accuses, pointing at John with a pulse oximeter -adorned forefinger. Then his hand scrabbles around the bed for the call button and presses it with fervour.

"Done what?" John asks. "Sherlock?"

Sherlock presses the call button again, twice. "I'm not going down without a fight. If that's what the two of you want, then that's exactly what you're getting," he snarls from behind gritted teeth and straightens his back.

John can't remember Sherlock even being this angry at him. It's a terrifying feeling, seeing such pure venom in his eyes. It's not the composed ire he directs at people who aren't doing what he
wants at crime scenes – there's something only barely contained and very volatile here, tinged with desperation and panic.

The staggering realisation hits: Sherlock is afraid of him. Not just scared of Mycroft - for whatever reason – but *him* as well. *What the hell is going on?*

"Sherlock, no one has done anything to you. Calm down," John tries, reluctant to even approach the bed. He feels ridiculous standing in the middle of the room, being stared down like this. "Why are you calling the staff?"

Sherlock dangles the call button from its cord as though to taunt him, and presses the button yet again. "I'm rescinding both of your visiting rights, and your access to my medical records. Unless it's too late already."

"I understand if you don't want Mycroft to see them after meddling with your appointment. I told him off, for it, if it's any consolation. I'll talk to him some more if you want."

"I'm sure the two of you have already talked *plenty enough* behind my back," Sherlock snaps. "Of course – he signs the papers while you make sure I don't leave. This is what he does, you know, delegates all the dirty work to his *subordinates*."

John throws up his hands in frustration. "Nothing's going on! I really don't follow what you're getting at, honestly! They're only keeping you for observation until tomorrow – they could probably have discharged you later today if you hadn't been so out of it after the sedatives, assuming the chest pain is gone."

Sherlock blinks, in that distracted manner which is his tell for something having caught him off guard. "Discharged?" he asks quietly, his tone having done a complete U-turn from livid to uncertain.

"Yeah. Your cardiac enzymes have repeatedly come back clean, your cardiac ultrasound was normal and there's nothing specific on your ECG that would point to an infarction or even myocarditis. Which is why I need to ask you something." John had meant to raise the subject at some point, and he would have preferred to do so when both of them were feeling more level-headed, but he needs to distract Sherlock from whatever is riling him up.

He gets a glare as his answer.

John takes that as an opportunity to get a word in before Sherlock can go off again. "The case – the poison you found, I mean – if you've done some sort of an experiment, you need to tell me now."

"Excuse me?"

"We find that thing, and it can trigger a heart attack, and then *this* happens - it's not much of a stretch of the imagination."

"We haven't even discovered the source of the gelsemine. When could I have possibly obtained any, since *the two of you have been watching my every move*?!"

*Back to square one.* John takes a deep breath, trying to decide how to continue.

The door opens, and a nurse slips in carrying a small plastic cup. "Sorry for the delay. Here you go, those should be your evening medication."

Sherlock receives the cup, peering into it. Then he looks at the nurse with confusion.
"It's why you used the button, isn't it?" she asks. "We're a bit short-staffed tonight, so that's why they're late. You've got your tramadol, and naproxen and pregabalin, isn't that right? We hadn't been able to verify from you until now if those are the correct ones. A&E got the information from your emergency contact." She glances at John, as if unsure whether he is that person or just a visitor.

Sherlock puts the cup on the table next to a jug of water. "I'm not on pregabalin. Haven't been for weeks." He seems to be avoiding looking John in the eye.

John intervenes, "I know you haven't taken any tramadol lately, which is fine if you don't need it but you should have told me. I thought you were just skipping doses with the pregabalin, but instead, you've quit taking it altogether? When?"

"Five days after coming home."

Realisation dawns. John wonders if this is how Sherlock feels when he's right on the cusp of solving a case. "That's less than a week before what happened in the lab! It didn't occur to you it might be connected?"

The nurse looks apprehensive, unsure of what to do now that she has landed herself in the middle of an argument. She starts to reach out for the medication cup but then retracts her hand. "I'll leave you two to talk." She heads to the door, Sherlock's glance following her carefully.

John wonders if it's because Sherlock would prefer not to be left alone with him. "You were on 450 milligrammes a day. Close to the maximum daily dose," he reminds Sherlock.

"And a lot of nothing it was doing."

"You know you can't be sure how things would have been without the meds."

"The pain could have lessened on its own and the sensory issues are still there, so clearly, it was utterly useless."

John leans on the back of a chair. "Pregabalin can also be prescribed for anxiety."

"I'm aware," Sherlock replies, scathingly.

"That means that quitting cold turkey could have affected your mood.

"You are conveniently proving my point why I'd prefer not to be forced to ingest such things."

John huffs and glances at the ceiling. "You bloody idiot. You quit without tapering off in your current state and then started getting meltdowns, which you'd lived free of for years. No connection there?" John asks, gesturing in the air by waving his finger back and forth to emphasise his point.

"What state?" Sherlock asks indignantly.

"The state you're in. The state the Guillain-Barré left you in. The state bloody Harwich still left you in. Of course quitting it like that would have consequences, when you were already pretty bloody stressed out. It might not have affected your mood much when you were on it, but stopping like that, off a significant dose, could well have been an exacerbating factor for what's been going on, along with the fact that you've pushed yourself too far."

Sherlock had practically flinched at his use of the word 'meltdown' but John is determined not to back away. Not this time. He's done enough dancing around these issues, and that has ended up
with Sherlock in a hospital again.

He gives Sherlock a moment to process his statement.

Once he’s got those eyes locked back onto him, John lays it on the line. "We need to start talking about this stuff. I know you don't want to, and Lord knows I’m no good at it, but ignoring it hasn't done either of us much good. You're falling apart, and if what happened today won't make you realise that, then I don't know what will."

Sherlock swallows. "I don't want to do this now."

"You never want to do this, and no one can blame you, but I need to understand what's going on! I know you need rest, but it can’t wait until we get home tomorrow."

Sherlock’s brows knit together as he tries to process this. "Tomorrow? What happens tomorrow?" he asks.

"I told you – you’re most likely going to be discharged."

"But you said---- Mycroft's here," he then insists, and it's clearly some sort of an argument.

John wonders if he should bury this for now – the sedatives might still be affecting Sherlock's thinking, but then another thought comes on, one he doesn't really like, but can't dismiss, either. In this state, would Sherlock be more likely to reveal something to him, something important he has been adamant to keep secret? Is it be a breach of trust to be asking these questions right now?

"If you're lying to me---" Sherlock starts, but then lets out a ragged, panicky breath and buries his face in his hands. He's shaking.

John lowers the bed rail and sits down next to him, placing his palms on Sherlock's shoulders. "Hey?" he tries gently, and but gets no answer. "If we go home like this, we’re both likely to slip back into our usual pattern of ignoring stuff. We’ve been avoiding this conversation for too long."

"What conversation?" Sherlock asks in a half-whisper, finally looking up at him, hands dropping to his sides. He looks tense as a violin string, his eyes glassy.

"Why are you so worked up? What do you think Mycroft is doing?"

Sherlock breaks eye contact and swallows; his breathing becomes shallower. It's as though a shadow has passed over his face and John can't at first decipher his expression until he realises that it's because it's something he doesn't like remembering. He'd seen Sherlock like this, during the early days of the Guillain-Barré, when his anger had run out of steam.

It's fear – barely controlled, and perhaps one of the most heartbreaking things John has seen. The worst part of it is that some of it seem to be directed – or be caused – by him, as though he suddenly has some power over Sherlock he hasn't ever sought or wanted. He slides his palms down Sherlock's arms and takes his hands in his. "I'm not in on anything. I called him and told him you were here, nothing more. Listen to me," he shakes their joined hands gently for impact. "I'm not lying to you. I'm not trying to trick you. You have to believe me."

Sherlock shifts slightly and glances down but doesn't break the hold John has his hands in. He then returns his eyes to John and then subjects him to downright forensic scrutiny, studying his face, inch by inch, frown line by frown line, and after a moment, something he finds there seems to abate some of the tension emanating from him. He slumps against the raised head of the bed, and John lets go of his hands.
Sherlock presses the heels of his palms on his closed eyes. He lets out a shaky, shallow breath that ends in an incredulous, hollow half-laugh. It sounds deeply relieved, yet rattled. His hands are still shaking, badly. He curls his fingers in his hairs, eyes still hidden by his hands.

As John watches him, a sense of protectiveness surges in like a tide. "Come here," he says, fearing his own voice might break a little, and pulls Sherlock tightly against him, arms circling his torso.

Sherlock is surprisingly pliant, listless even, as he lets his head rest on John's shoulder. "I thought he'd turned you," he mutters against John's neck.

John can't see his face, just an unruly mop of dark curls, which he suspects is deliberate. "Turned me into what?" he asks with a ghost of a nervous smirk – a bad habit easily misunderstood by others.

"A condescending know-it-all bastard like himself," Sherlock answers, "who thinks he can lock me up when I don’t conform to his expectations of behaviour." He extricates himself from John's arms, pale and his eyes red-rimmed. "He thinks I am unwell. And that I can’t make decisions for myself."

"He’s wrong, and I told him so, but that doesn’t mean he’s acting out of malice. I think you scared him a little." John surprises himself by saying this. "You scare me, a little."

John wonders why he feels the need to defend Mycroft after being so angry at him only hours earlier, but even though Mycroft's methods may appear unsympathetic, John knows from personal experience with Harry that issues with siblings always hit hard, yet the associated emotions are not something one would want to show very openly. A lifetime of baggage is hard to discard, no matter how benignly intentioned. "He means well."

"So did Stalin."

John's smirk finds a faint echo on Sherlock's features, in which John spots an opportunity. "Neither of you has ever really said why you seem to hate his guts most of the time. He's not exactly secretive about things he knows about you, but clearly, something happened that even he doesn't like talking about. He tried to get me to read your medical files when he could have just told me the important stuff himself."

"I'm not surprised he would have tried to get you to study them. I'd love to think he's trying to alleviate whatever guilt he should have for abusing my privacy by conning you into sharing the load, but I doubt he respects my wishes enough to care."

"What do you think he's been trying to do?"

"It's obvious." Sherlock pushes gently away from John and sets his shoulders, raising his chin as his anger seems to have been reawakened. "He’s trying to get you to believe what he does. He decided from day one that the Guillain-Barré was going to be the thing that breaks me. Permanently. So he started planning for it. Having that neuropsychiatrist at the appointment was a test, which I, embarrassingly enough, failed. This would have given him reason enough to move ahead with a sectioning order. Again."

John realises Sherlock is clearly expecting some sort of a reaction from him, but he finds himself not shocked at all. He had parsed together as much from what he'd heard before, and his glance at the files Mycroft had tried to force him to examine. "No one is sectioning you," John tells him. "Things haven't been good, but you're clearly aware of that. You're not losing the plot here; you're just under a lot of stress. Nothing I've seen would make me consider such an option, and I live with
you, unlike Mycroft."

This doesn’t seem to console Sherlock at all. He looks out the window, probably to avoid having to face John. "You don’t know what happened back then. Whatever you might suspect, you can’t know all of it. Nobody does, not Mycroft or the doctors back then. They wouldn’t listen to me; my views didn’t count. That’s the whole point of sectioning."

John realises that whatever happened in 2007 must have deeply scarred both brothers. There had been hints of this before, but the full impact of it is only beginning to dawn. "Then tell me. Get an outsider’s perspective."

Sherlock’s attention is fixed on the sheet, which he is crumpling in his grip. "There’s no point. It only gets worse if it’s discussed, because people, normal people, get upset by things I say, because they can’t deal with such things, or because I can’t explain myself properly. How can I? I am not like them. They then decide that they have to try to fix things because they know better. Never mind what happens to me in the process."

"Try me?" John suggests, placing his palm of Sherlock’s knee on top of the bedding. Sherlock isn’t looking at him. "I’m not trying to fix you, just trying to understand."

John realises he’s somehow going to have to find the right words, that he isn’t getting through just yet. He’s so terrible at talking about these things, but it seems that, when push comes to shove and it’s about Sherlock, he can do this. Maybe. He needs to do this. "I know it’s no small thing to trust someone with those things when you’ve been hurt over and over by people, even your own family. You are afraid that telling me will somehow change things. Nothing can – I will always love you. You’re stuck with me, not going anywhere if it isn’t by your side." He pauses to take a breath.

"Do you trust me, Sherlock?"

As if he can’t trust himself enough, even to speak, Sherlock just nods quickly, his eyes studying the darkness that has set in outside the window.

"Then let me help. Tell me what happened in 2007 that has you so scared now."

"It wasn’t the drugs. He’s always misunderstood that part."

"Begin at the beginning. And I don’t care what Mycroft thinks; I just want to know what happened from you, not from him or some damned medical file."

The conversation that follows is, for John, as revealing as it is harrowing. Sherlock claims that it all started because he used, rather than abused drugs, ‘to alleviate boredom and to sharpen thinking processes’. "I’m not an addict, John, whatever Mycroft might tell you." He’d self-medicated, and Mycroft had interfered, threatening to tell the parents, so he’d agreed to a rehab programme.

John has known about the drugs ever since Lestrade’s "pretend drugs bust". It had been obvious, even then, that Sherlock is reluctant to broach the subject. John bites his tongue to prevent himself from arguing whether anyone’s mental fortitude could prevent addiction to the sort of stuff Sherlock has used. "So, how did you get from being clean to being hospitalised?"

"The doctors involved with the rehab programme didn’t understand my sensory processing issues and misdiagnosed a generalised anxiety disorder. They made me take antidepressants, and other drugs – none of which agreed with me."

With a lot of coaxing, gentle pushing and asking specific questions, John gets Sherlock to tell him what must’ve still been an abbreviated version of what happened next.
The antidepressants made things worse. The more Sherlock took them, the more depressed he became. An old friend had contacted him about some potential work – it would have effectively been his first case as a detective, but something had happened and the whole thing had fizzled out. He seems reluctant to offer details about the case, but John gleans from his scarce explanation that it had not exactly been a great triumph.

After that, Sherlock had fallen back into what he described as a pointless, purposeless existence, living in Mycroft's house. No one understood, and he retreated further and further into himself. John can’t help but remember being told on their very first meeting, 'Sometimes I don’t talk for days; would that bother you?’ and 'flatmates should know the worst of each other'. He hadn’t needed to say a word to Sherlock about his own depression; the consulting detective would have spotted that along with the answer to just about everything in addition to 'Afghanistan or Iraq'.

"I tried to stop taking the medications. Mycroft said he'd tell our parents if I did because it would mean I wasn't taking responsibility for my actions. It was emotional blackmail. I hated him for it, almost as much as I hated what the drugs were doing to me. He made me live with him, wouldn’t let me have a moment’s peace. Finally, it got too much and I left."

"Left? Where did you go?"

Sherlock sighs. "The streets. Where do you think I got my Homeless Network, John? And I spent those days being more and more paranoid about Mycroft trying to find me."

John thinks it through. "You went cold turkey then, too, I suppose? Just stopped taking the meds."

"They were killing me. I had to try to do something to take control."

John mentally stamps on an urge to point out that swapping legitimate medications for class A drugs is hardly conducive to wanting to regain control over one's life, but this is not the time to judge. "How did that work for you?" He asks instead.

At this point, Sherlock decides to stop talking. "I can't tell you because if I do, you won't ever trust me again. You'll see me differently."

"Sherlock. You know why I had a gun when I first met you. If you could work out my psychosomatic limp you sure as hell couldn’t miss the depression, and yet you trusted me with it, then and now. This is just different sort of ammunition, and I've never hesitated a minute to trust you. Nothing you could say will change how I see you now. The GBS is not what I see when I look at you, nor will this be."

That makes Sherlock look up and stare at John again. Then he snorts, "Yes, well; you didn’t need your gun anymore, except to save my life with it."

"Well, then. If I’m ready to kill someone within days of meeting you, don’t you think you can trust me now?"

Sherlock glances away, looking distracted.

John prays silently that he can find the words to keep this conversation going. "Nothing you did then, or now, will possibly frighten me off. Tell me what happened."

"You'll think it was all my fault."

"Not all the choices you made were probably good, but being depressed is not anybody's fault. Does Mycroft think it's your fault somehow?"
Sherlock seems to consider this for a moment. "He probably thinks it's my fault for existing."

This doesn't fit with what John has witnessed, but he doesn't want to antagonise Sherlock in any way right now. Whatever this grudge stems from, it can hardly be remedied in the course of one conversation. Besides, whatever Mycroft thinks is hardly the point here. John has heard quite enough from the man. What he wants now is the truth as Sherlock sees it. "I'm not stepping down from this. Tell me, not because Mycroft thinks I should know about this, but because something is upsetting you and making you keep things from me and it's not doing either of us any good."

Sherlock pulls back his shoulders slightly, narrowing his gaze. He looks more focused, now, as though preparing for one of his lectures. "Life on the streets was exactly as you'd assume – hard – yet still a hell of a lot better than living under Mycroft's thumb and being force-fed drugs that only made the depression worse. But, I didn’t like hiding out there either. I didn’t see any future worth fighting for, so I stopped caring what happened. Like I said, I went back on the drugs with very little self-restraint."

I thought you went back on them because you wanted control. John only thinks it, instead of saying it out loud. "And then?" he prompts instead.

Sherlock evades his gaze. "Mycroft is nothing if not efficient in his techniques. I was finding it harder and harder to avoid being seen. There was an incident, an overdose," he adds, almost through gritted teeth.

John swallows and says tentatively. "Did you intend suicide?"

Sherlock doesn’t answer, and in that silence, John hears a truth. He closes his eyes at the thought of nearly losing Sherlock even before he’d had the chance to meet him. Whatever else he might think of Mycroft, if he’d been the one to stop Sherlock from dying in 2007, then John is going to thank him, personally.

John waits patiently while the silence lengthens, but eventually, in a very subdued tone, Sherlock continues. "The first thing I remember after that was that I was in a secure unit. Restrained. Sectioned under Article 2 of the 1983 Mental Health Act, as the medical staff informed me. I have no memory of what the doctors described as a psychotic break. I still don’t know how Mycroft found me. All I could do was tell anyone who bothered to ask that I would do it again as soon as I could get out."

"Sherlock, can you tell me the criteria for an adult being sectioned under the mental health act?" John asks him.

"The nearest designated relative becomes convinced the person is mentally incompetent and poses a threat to others or to themselves, and this is confirmed by two medical professionals. When that designated relative is my idiot brother, have a guess whose opinion wins."

"That's it? You're saying it's all Mycroft's fault?"

"Mycroft is outstanding at making people believe what he wants," Sherlock answers. "I'm sure he made a persuasive case."

"Was he present during your interviews with the doctors?"

"No, I wouldn't have him there. The doctors said he didn't try to influence them. At least that's what they told me afterwards. I didn't believe a word."

"Did you ever attempt to challenge the sectioning?"
"I had a tribunal. It was the law that I was allowed one."

"And?"

"Useless. Mycroft must've got to them. The order was extended, monthly."

"Sherlock, I doubt he'd be able to twist every single person involved in your care or hospital management under his finger."

"You underestimate him."

"What about your parents? You could have challenged his being the designated relative."

This provokes a wry laugh from Sherlock, who shakes his head. "That's the 2007 Act; it didn't come into force until the end of 2008. I had to put up with him. Our parents were away in the USA when it all came to the decision. I had kept everything from them before then, and telling them would have changed nothing, except for an even bigger load of guilt and disappointment being poured onto me. Why wouldn't they have sided with him? Finding out about what Mycroft mockingly called my 'lifestyle choices', the shock was a convenient way in which to make them believe he'd been protecting me all these years. They hadn't seen me in over a year. Mycroft could have fed them whatever stories he wanted. They've always believed him. He's always been the sensible one, as far as they are concerned." Sherlock lets out a hollow laugh. "'Patient exhibits extremely paranoid thinking towards older brother and is resistant to treatment,'" he parrots as though quoting someone. "Well, at least they got that right."

"They must have understood that depression is no one's fault, that you didn't bring it on yourself deliberately? Mycroft must understand that, too."

"Oh, I'm sure he does. It's just that he is doubtful that the steady, anthropomorphised hand of depression shot me up with a seven percent solution."

"So you're convinced he'd like nothing more now than to have you swept away for the rest of your life to a mental institution?"

"No risk of bad PR for his career. I, out of sight, means out of trouble in his book." Sherlock's bitterness is clear from the slump in his shoulders. John realises that revealing all this has cost Sherlock a lot.

"I don't think so. I don't think that at all," John tells him. "The first time I met Mycroft, he told me that he worries about you constantly. If he didn't care, then he would ignore you. I saw him truly terrified at what was happening to you during the Guillain-Barré. He's as good at hiding things as you are. When you two are together, he acts like you're a huge pain in the arse but you didn't see him when you got sick. I did, and frankly, I'm having a really hard time believing that same man would want to make you disappear from his life."

Sherlock looks very sceptical about this.

John needs to get his point across. Saying these things out loud must have, for Sherlock, required such deeply distressed exposure that John wants nothing but to let him off the hook, but he can't, not just yet. The events of 2007 have been something Sherlock had kept from him because he'd assumed John would have been out of the door the minute the truth came to light. It's a heartbreakingly big and devastatingly misguided burden to carry. That needs to stop.

"It's not easy to get sectioned. You need to have a----" John hesitates, because saying it out loud is going to hurt, no matter how he phrases it, but it can't be helped, "--- Mental illness urgently
requiring assessment and treatment, an illness serious enough that you're a danger to others---"

"I never was," Sherlock barks, eyes blazing with fury already, prepared to argue his heart out over what John is trying to say.

John draws a deep breath. "---A danger to others or yourself. You also need to be in a state requiring hospitalisation, and unable or unwilling to agree to receive help."

Sherlock opens his mouth, probably preparing for an exhaustive dissection of the semantics of what John had just told him, but John holds up a hand. "If you can't remember what happened, did anyone tell you?"

A long silence follows.

"You don't remember even what happened before I assume someone took you to an A&E for the assessment?" John lets the issue linger, watching Sherlock avert his gaze and nervously fiddle with the edge of his sheet.

Sherlock shakes his head quickly, and John is certain it's a lie, an aversion, but it doesn't make him angry. The fact that Sherlock now wants to hide those facts proves that he can tell which part of it was real, and which wasn't. The reality distortion of what must have been a psychosis-level situation is defined by delusions and hallucinations. Depression, anxiety, cognitive dysfunction and self-harm are part of the picture, but there needs to be a profound issue with not perceiving reality correctly for that diagnosis to be placed. Being suicidal is not the same as being psychotic, but they can be connected.

John tries to console himself with the fact that this time around, it doesn't seem like Sherlock might have relapsed into taking drugs because he wanted out of his own life. His explanation had sounded more like self-medication because he wanted back in.

John decides not to press for further details. "I get it, you wanted to put the whole thing out of your mind, but it doesn't work like that. Getting sectioned is terrifying, it's one of the most traumatising experiences anyone could have, and I don't blame you for not wanting to think about it, but there are things you need to understand here."

Sherlock looks at him briefly, before tightening his lips to a half-heartedly angry frown. 'Do you trust me,' John had asked, and Sherlock's answer had been telling him the things he most wanted to hide. Yes, there was trust there, and John hoped it could carry over to Sherlock believing that what he is about to say is honest and accurate.

Sherlock starts studying his fingernails, feigning disinterest. He is likely to be at least a little angry and worried about how John is turning his carefully guarded secrets into argumentative ammunition.

"If someone told me about a patient like that, about someone who'd tried to take their own life and refused help, convinced that someone close to them was spearheading some massive conspiracy against them, I would be very worried that they were, indeed, suffering from drug-induced, or some other sort of psychosis. With a history of self-destructive behaviour and drug use, I would doubt that things could be resolved quickly. The conditions of the Mental Health Act would undoubtedly cross my mind."

"What is the point you are making here, John?" Sherlock asks, straightening his back and staring him right in the eyes. "That you think I'm crazy? That what they did to me was right, good, even useful or beneficial?" The last word is spat out venomously, and John wonders if that oddly
selected word had been something that had been used in 2007 and had particularly irritated Sherlock. There are several words he seems to hate nowadays, 'progress' definitely being at the top of the list.

John sidesteps Sherlock's attempt at provocation and continues. "Nothing about it was nice or good, but sometimes there are no other options. What I want you to understand is that, while Mycroft may have had a role in initiating the process, any doctor worth their salt could have come to the same conclusion as those who assessed you: that you desperately needed help, that you were unwilling to seek it or receive it, and left to your own devices, you would have been in danger, that you could have injured yourself either deliberately or accidentally."

"I wasn't psychotic. It was a misdiagnosis. They were inexperienced and incompetent and Mycroft walked all over them like he walks over everyone else," Sherlock suddenly announces petulantly. It's delivered in the same tone Sherlock uses when he's wrecked the flat and tries to deny all involvement despite all the evidence to the contrary. He's playing for time and they both know it.

John rubs his own forehead, trying to keep from getting frustrated. Sherlock has his reasons for denying these things, and he's had years to cement his beliefs. It feels like talking to a brick wall with a menacing stare. "The opinion of a close relative is heard when detainment under section three is considered, but they don't make that call, especially with section two. You said that's what they started with and they must've later on extended to three. I'm not going to start arguing with you over diagnostic criteria for psychosis. Delusions we've already covered. Hallucinations are common with psychosis triggered or exacerbated by drug use. I haven't read your files; I don't know your entire history---"

"You never will, if it's up to me."

"Fair enough," John says, "I don't want to, and I'm not even allowed if you don't want me to. As I was saying, there are things I don't know, but I suspect those things did point to you having issues that had been left unchecked for some time. Just tell me this: what were your primary diagnoses?"

There is no reply, and John worries that this means the conversation is over.

Chapter End Notes

Trust - part two has been posted together with part one. These two chapters cannot be separated.
John tries again. "It wasn't just the drugs, was it? What did they diagnose you with?"

"Apart from the diagnoses slapped on me before I even became of age?"

"Apart from them," John promises, not wanting to grill Sherlock beyond what is absolutely necessary.

"*Major depression with psychotic features. Mental and behavioural disorders due to multiple drug use and use of other psychoactive substances. Psychoactive substances dependence syndrome with active use.*" Sherlock recites in a detached manner.

"Take the first one. It doesn't manifest as a brief period of hallucinations and self-harm under the influence of cocaine."

Sherlock says something, but it's too quiet for John to make out. "Sorry?"

"Not just cocaine," Sherlock repeats resignedly.

"That diagnosis means that you must have been unwell for some time and that it continued well beyond the withdrawal in the hospital."

"That was then; this is now. I really wish you'd arrive at a point."

"I thought I did. You didn't just have a bad trip and get unlucky with a misdiagnosis. How long did they keep you in?"

"Six months."

"Sectioning can be cancelled practically any time, and it's very carefully regulated. If it had been a misdiagnosis, they would have noticed before they changed section 2 to section 3. It sounds to me that they may have done that once it was established that the psychotic symptoms weren't just due to active drug use."

"Semantics."

"What happened after you got discharged?"

"I walked out of there and didn't see Mycroft for a while," Sherlock says curtly.

"And?" John prompts.

"And what?"

"A bit of a gap there, I'm afraid. You left and did what? Were you all right by then?"

Sherlock scoffs. "I was, eventually," he spits out. "I got by, after I stopped taking the medications and found the Work. End of story."

"What are you not telling me?" John isn't sure Sherlock isn't just being economical in his explanations, but he decides to poke the hornet's nest.
"I went back on the streets. Used for a while. Then I started working with Lestrade who told me to get lost or get clean. I chose the latter. And I did it all by myself." He grimaces. "Well, I'll admit Lestrade did assist with some of the practicalities, but still. The difference was, there was a point to it all. I didn't have to crawl back to Mycroft, and I had a reason to get and stay clean. It was enough, and there wasn't enough time anyway for things to get as bad as they had before Bethlem."

"You admit you were doing pretty badly before you ended up at Bethlem, then?" John presses, "The fact that you managed by yourself afterwards could well have something to do with the depression being at least partly gone, or at least it wasn't anywhere close to a psychotic level anymore, and you found the Work to motivate you. Maybe Bethlem deserves some credit, after all?"

Sherlock looks wholly unconvinced.

"You don't agree with anything I've said so far, do you?"

"No. It was a misdiagnosis to start with, at least concerning the need for inpatient treatment, and later on, everything was bolstered by the medications they forced on me. Anyone would be depressed in such a situation."

John shoves aside his frustration. Somehow, it feels likely that this isn't exactly how Sherlock believes things have gone, but he's dismissing it all to save face and to end this conversation. "I can't change your mind about that, and you have a right to your own version of what happened. I'm also not saying that sectioning was the only way in the world in which to help you, but the system isn't perfect so it may have been the best of bad options available. But that's all a bit beside the point. What I can and will argue is that maybe you're being a bit unfair to Mycroft."

Sherlock glares at him.

"You were unwell, and since you tried to decline help even when you really needed it, someone had to intervene. I understand why you don't feel like trusting Mycroft after all that, but I don't think he did it out of spite. He did it because he didn't know what else to do. He's not a mental health professional, and when it comes to these sorts of things, being the Goddamned British Government doesn't help at all."

"If he were so bloody dedicated to my wellbeing, maybe he shouldn't have given up on me, then!" Sherlock suddenly exclaims in anger, flipping over to his side on the bed, facing away from John, who is left a bit dumbstruck.

He places a tentative hand on Sherlock's knee, fighting the impulse to retreat after such a reaction. Something is telling him this emotional outburst is more important than the more objective details of what had happened. "It doesn't seem like he's given up on you," John says softly. "He always shows up to help, especially when you don't want him to," he adds with a soft chuckle, hoping that a bit of a joke might prove disarming.

"You don't understand," Sherlock says, picking up a discarded ECG wire between his thumb and forefinger and inspecting it.

"I don't just yet, but I hope I will. Besides, Mycroft is hardly the point here. The point is that you're turning away from everyone who's trying to help, stubbornly trying to sort yourself out by ignoring everything that's going wrong, because you've been afraid of what would happen if you admitted things haven't been all right. But, that doesn't really explain why you stopped taking the meds---"

Sherlock looks over his shoulder at John. "I told you, they're useless. I was on pregabalin in 2007
before Bethlem, and it did nothing. I was on other things, too, and I couldn't think. All I wanted to
do was smoke and sleep. I can't live like that."

"You’re not in that position now, Sherlock. There is a difference between 2007 and today, and
you’re looking at him right now. I am not going to let anyone misdiagnose anything, but neither am
I going to allow you to do any of this alone. Not anymore. So, we have to keep talking. Frankly, I
don't even know how you've managed: you've been going through all this and you've had to work
so damned hard to hide everything. It has got to be pretty bloody exhausting."

John reaches over to take the ECG wire away from Sherlock and holds the man’s hand firmly in
his own, relieved that it doesn't get pulled away. "I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere. Neither
are you."

Some of the truculence seems to slip out of Sherlock’s shoulders. He pulls the blanket protectively
back up to his chest. "I'm tired. Anything more can wait until tomorrow."

John laces his fingers with Sherlock's. He’s knackered, they both are. "I mean it, Sherlock. You
can talk to me. And you have, tonight. It’s a start."

Mycroft slips into the room a little past eleven in the evening.

John raises his head from the television he had been watching on a very low volume. He's tired, but
too keyed up to sleep, and most of all, he doesn't feel like he could possibly leave Sherlock
unattended. There is always the chance of a flight risk, given how much Sherlock hates hospitals.
He could, of course, ask a nurse to step in, but since Sherlock had seemed lucid in the afternoon,
John knows the staff wouldn't stretch their likely scarce numbers even thinner by appointing
someone to merely sit around in the room.

John had even considered asking for Sherlock to be moved from the private room to the general
floor, where the beds are only separated by curtains and where it's easier to keep an eye on the
patients. In the end, he'd decided against it, thinking it likely that neither Sherlock nor his
neighbours would get much rest. Too much information, John remembers Sherlock explaining
when John had asked why he prefers cabs to the Tube. Sherlock has overexerted himself already
and judging by what John has now understood by putting together everything he's seen and learned
about the things Sherlock doesn't like discussing, being taxed physically dwindles his ability to
filter out external irritants such as other people, patients and the general clatter of hospital life.

John watches Mycroft approach the bed, where Sherlock lays curled under several blankets.
Mycroft glances at the monitors, which have been showing a reassuringly normal pattern of vital
signs for hours now. "Shamming or actually sleeping?" he asks John very quietly.

John is surprised until he realises that in the cold, hard logic of Mycroft Holmes, he must be the
expert of observing this in Sherlock since they now share a bedroom. "To my knowledge, he's
never faked snoring like that. He probably thinks it's beneath him," John replies in a whisper, a
smile creeping onto his lips. He's relieved to see Sherlock like this - gone are the frown lines, and
even the dark shadows under his eyes, caused by not sleeping as much as he should, seem lighter.
This is the rest that the man has been desperately needing.
Mycroft seems to accept his answer. "Let's talk outside."

John shuts off the television. The book he'd tried reading earlier still lies abandoned on the window sill, and he had decided to donate it to the ward's small collection in the relatives' room. It's unlikely he'll ever finish even the next chapter at this rate.

Once they get into the hallway, John steals one last glance into the room before letting the door click quietly shut behind them. Then he turns, expecting precise questions, but Mycroft simply raises his brows, clearly anticipating a freeform update.

John decides he has to play it with a straight bat. "I'm not sure I should be talking to you right now."

"Excuse me?"

"Things are… fragile. I don't want anyone to think we're plotting something here."

"Anyone?" Mycroft asks incredulously. "If you're referring to his distrust of me, that is hardly news."

John pinches the bridge of his nose. Why does his life have to be saddled with two stubborn Holmeses? One would be plenty enough, thank you. "Things are fragile because there's an actual chance here to repair some of the damage – provided you aren't going to be a prat about it."

If Mycroft is surprised by the criticism, he doesn't show it, but he does take a moment to reply. "What, pray tell, are you requiring of me?"

"As little as possible."

"Our parents attempted that kind of benign neglect in the past, but they didn't possess all the information. I'm partly to blame for that, wanting to spare them from some of Sherlock's more… unsavoury adventures. I don't have the luxury of turning a blind eye."

John's tired of beating around the bush, coaxing things out of people, struggling with his own desire to avoid difficult conversations and to hide things. A living example of how helpful not talking about things is sleeping in a hospital bed on the other side of the door. "He told me about 2007," John says bluntly.

Now, this finally brings apprehension and surprise even to the features of Mycroft Holmes. Then, the usual game face sets back in. "I'm sure it was a most sanitised version."

"No, it wasn't. But the details don't matter. For fucking years, he's been thinking you did all that, that it was your fault. All those months at Bethlem and they couldn't even make him understand why it happened." John shakes his head. "Bloody charlatans… And you let them get away with it."

He knows the statement is unfair, but maybe he wants to poke at this lunatic conspiracy theory a little, if only to illustrate to Mycroft what level of vintage misunderstandings they're dealing with.

"I had little jurisdiction over what happened once he had been admitted," Mycroft says, and there's defensiveness there, rippling just under the surface. "I did what I had to do."

"I know you did," John says pointedly. "You're his brother, not his doctor. You were not supposed to know what to do, so you sought outside help. No one should punish you for that, even though I understand why he still tries to do just that. He seems to think Bethlem was about you and your power games – and that means he’s dodged taking responsibility for what happened."
Mycroft swallows. "I have no regrets regarding my actions, but I find it distressing when he insinuates I did it because I enjoy doing such things to him, or that it was simply a power struggle between us."

John realises this is huge: Mycroft Holmes admitting Sherlock gets under his skin? Hold the bloody front page.

"He needs to face reality," John says. "About what's going on now, and what happened back then."

Mycroft nods almost eagerly. "I could not agree more."

"And, as cruel as it may sound, you need to get over the fact that he still carries that anger from 2007. However much he hurts you now, he was the one who went through it all, not you." John grits his teeth, aware of his own condescending tone and cold dismissal of Mycroft's admission of how affected he, too, has been by all this. They both need to focus on the one thing that's so much more important than their bruised egos or old grudges – and that's Sherlock.

John squares his shoulders and lets Mycroft have it. "You've allowed yourself to get used to him resenting you, of him assuming you're out to get him. If you want to stop him from fighting against everything that could possibly help him now, you need to start showing some fucking evidence to the contrary. Right now, he's more focused on fighting you, on proving that he can make it on his own than he is on getting better." John steps closer, unintimidated by the anger he sees brewing in Mycroft. He needs to put an end to this because it's clearly stopping Sherlock from moving forward. "You always expect he'll rebel anyway, so you don't even try to ask what he wants, how he feels; you just bulldoze over him. It's not so hopeless, you know. He still talks to you, comes to you when he's not all right. He was upset when they threw him out of NSY, and pissed off at me, and who did he turn to? You."

Mycroft's shoulders descend and he leans away slightly, which almost looks like a retreat.

It's an odd feeling at first for John, getting the upper hand in a conversation with him, but then he chides himself for giving the man more power in his head than he in actuality has. In this situation, he's Sherlock's brother, nothing less, nothing more. He might be the British Government, but he has no sovereign power over Sherlock, not before and especially not now.

"I explained to him how you really, probably, had no choice---" John starts but doesn't get to finish.

"I questioned that notion upon his sectioning, and continued to question it throughout those six months, but the necessity did seem obvious back then, especially when it came to his physical health."

"What do you mean?"

"There was a suicide attempt and some other…. distressing behaviour. A Mental Health act assessment could not be carried out right away, due to some additional complicating health issues requiring immediate attention." Mycroft tells him in a detached voice, and John is reminded of what Sherlock sounds like when he talks about uncomfortable things; as though they have nothing to do with him, as though they're just meaningless words.

*There was an... incident.* Sherlock's words.

“If the medical authorities had not taken things into their own hands, he wouldn’t be alive today to argue with me… Or you,” Mycroft says.

John sternly forces himself to sidestep the shock. This happened years ago. It was dealt with. Still,
every incident in which Sherlock could have died, preventing John from ever knowing what it would be like to get what they both wanted, is like a physical punch to the gut. He needs to focus instead of getting blindsided by fear.

They survived the GBS. Sherlock had survived… this. They have a chance.

Something about anaemia rings a bell. "He told me he had a bone marrow biopsy once."

"That was done while he was sectioned."

"He'd been using for some time before that, hadn't he? Should explain why his immune system was shot."

"Decimated. And yes, it was the result of his substance abuse, but not simply because his self-care had been abysmal at that time. More than half of cocaine in Britain at that time was diluted with what had originally been an anti-cancer drug, later used as a---" Suddenly, the pieces fit. "Anti-worming agent for pets. Levamisole. They test it now, the dealers, I mean, at least according to Sherlock."

"I find little consolation in that."

"Not what I meant."

"I'm told it also causes vasculitis. You've seen the state of his veins."

Mycroft looks away for a moment as though preparing for something unpleasant. "I did not originally inform our parents about his sectioning. I only told them what had happened after Sherlock was discharged and he made it abundantly clear that he wanted nothing to do with me, at least for a while. He began using again, and I was convinced it was the end of the road. I doubted he'd survive another of these… periods. He had to realise it himself. I realised nothing I could possibly do would bring forth that epiphany. I gave up, John, because there was nothing to be done. Thankfully, he appears to have come to the same conclusion, although the bitterness over my resignation still lingers, as does his grudge of the very fact that I was involved in his involuntary treatment. The animosity continued, although he did re-establish contact once he was on the mend."

"It sounds to me as though you didn't exactly give up on him."

"I know it must appear as though I wish to manage his life. What I am doing is helping ensure he does not put to waste that last chance he chose to take in 2007."

"I told him how preposterous it is to assume you bribed or blackmailed or in some other way got to everyone involved in the decision-making regarding his treatment and sectioning. I don't know and I don't care, if it's him being paranoid or if the world really is run by you, making it a much more messed-up place than I thought it was. What I do care about is him not seeing some grand conspiracy everywhere that even I could be a part of. I'd very much like to see the two of you bury the hatchet – preferably not in each other's backs. More importantly, I need to avoid getting tangled up in all that shit. He needs someone on his side, and due to your shared history, it might not be possible for it to ever be you. At least not for now, not when he fears failure and you, more than he fears what will happen to him if he doesn't accept any help. I can work around all that, but you need to stop fanning the flames."

"All I've heard is grandiose speech, doctor. Something more concrete would be more beneficial."
It's obvious from his tone that Mycroft is not yet convinced by John – who would be, after effectively been told off for doing something they have years of experience with? Still, Mycroft seems to be posing a genuine question, instead of doing what he does with Sherlock which is upping the ante.

"Take a step back," John says, crossing his arms.

"And what?"

"And nothing."

"Who, pray tell, will sort out this mess he's got himself in?"

"It's not a mess that needs sorting. He relapsed because he wasn't feeling well, and that, together with some other factors made him worse, so he was taken to A&E. There's nothing that you, in particular, could offer right now that the hospital or I can't provide. Your involvement in his past makes your presence problematic right now, so you have to agree you might not be the best person to sort out this mess."

"I've yet to hear the reason for this sequence of events, or what evidence you can offer that this won’t end where it already has once before, which is a need for psychiatric treatment against his will. Even you agree that has been an appropriate course of action once already."

John rolls his shoulders and shakes his head. "For Christ’s sake, Mycroft. This is not the same as what happened in 2007. He stopped his prescribed meds, and the GBS isn't anything he's experienced before. Give the man some slack and he just might be able to climb out of this mess on his own. No one knows what it's been like for him - not even us, because we're not like him, are we?"

Mycroft shifts his footing. "I'd say he had much less potent stressors in his life back then, and yet we both know where he still ended up. The fact that the meltdowns have already started is proof enough of a downward spiral."

"It's logical he'd be having a hard time right now, and the meltdowns are probably due to the fact that he stopped taking his medications abruptly, rather than tapering. You need to stop being so quick to see that as evidence of this being a replay of 2007. He understands what's going on, and he's willing to talk about it. He hasn't lost touch with reality."

"You think that happened just because he stopped taking his medications?" Mycroft asks, and he sounds as though he genuinely wants to hear John's opinion.

"Not just that. It could be that some things related to the GBS stress him beyond anything he's ever experienced before. He's been bottling it all up like a volcano, and that had to come out sooner or later, the meltdowns are probably a result of desperately trying to cope with all the stress, combined with what quitting the meds cold turkey did to his anxiety levels. He thinks not being well is a failure. Makes me wonder if that's a thought you've unintentionally put in his head."

"I doubt it." A downright scathing dismissal.

"That was his first thought - that he's messed up, so the inevitable consequence will be big brother swooping in to lock him up. Have you ever thought that this is exactly what makes it harder for him to reach out when he is stressed? How is he ever going to seek help, if he thinks that expressing any sort of difficulty will make you draw the wrong conclusion and call in the cavalry?"

Mycroft isn’t mollified. "You're contradicting yourself. If his involuntary admission in 2007 was
necessary, then how does that differ from seeing him like this and putting two and two together, and making the necessary contingency plans?"

John feels like he's been struck a blow. *Contingency plans?* No wonder Sherlock thinks Mycroft has had some grand scheme from day one of the GBS.

"You just proved my bloody point," John scoffs. "It's not paranoia if you were convinced he would be unable to deal with it right from the start."

"It's obvious this is the worst thing that could have ever happened to him in particular," Mycroft announces like it's a holy truth.

"But at least he understands the process of it, and that it wasn't anyone's fault!"

"Am I to deduce from such a statement that you'd absolve him completely of responsibility when it came to his sectioning? That it was the hand of fate, rather than his own, that injected the drugs into his bloodstream?" Mycroft asks in a preachy, mocking tone.

John tries his damnedest to keep calm. "No. What he described certainly sounds like the drugs played a damn big part in what sort of a state he ended up in. On the other hand, it is obvious that he is perfectly capable of abstinence, when he's doing well otherwise. He self-medicates, Mycroft. It's idiotic, the way he thinks cocaine will fix what legitimate, safer, actual medications won't, but the point of it is the same - he's trying to fix himself."

Mycroft's gaze seems to sharpen, and John is ominously reminded of how Sherlock looks when he's come up with something important. He almost feels like he needs to brace himself.

"Sherlock does many things to try and fix himself. Finding distractions is among his favourite defence mechanisms. I don't deny the genuine sentiment there, but it is unfortunate how his dreadful timing of starting something with you may have added to his troubles instead of lessening them. That makes me question whether you are any better a remedy at this time than you suppose I am."

John counts to ten in his head, and tries to remind himself this is what Mycroft and Sherlock do – offence is the best defence in their books.

"If I---- If we are a mistake, then we're a mistake he has the right to make, without you having any say in the matter. Sometimes there's no hard evidence to go by, there's just what you know without even knowing how. I sure as hell know that this didn't happen because he got GBS. This happened, *us* happened, because it's been there from the start, and it only began now because we were a right pair of idiots, pretending to ignore what almost everyone else could see. *Might we expect a happy announcement by the end of the week*? Hmm?"

Even though it had most likely only been a joke at that point, Mycroft seems to retreat when his own words are flung back at him. "I see you will not be easily persuaded to see this differently."

"I'm not trying to chase you away," John says more amicably, his anger having now been released. "It's not my intention to wreck your relationship with him ever further, and I'm not claiming to possess some amazing insight into what will fix all this, but I'm pretty damned sure that the way you've been handling it is not going to work this time around. I've been your great defender just this afternoon about 2007. That still doesn't give you licence to abuse the past to deal with the present. There are big differences between then and now – one would be that I think he's changed, that he has learned how to cope with certain things he's avoided before. A second is that he now has things he wants to get on with, such as The Work and us. Sounds like he didn't have very many
good things like that in his life in 2007."

"Very well, then. May I at least inquire as to what your plan is?" The haughty eyebrow is lifted to show Mycroft's still unwavering scepticism.

"That's just it," John says, "I'm not making one for him. I'm giving him the reins and the benefit of the doubt, and letting him do the talking, no matter how much or how little he's willing to reveal. I won't let you think that he's not trying. When something helps, he sticks with it, like the violin, and the exercise, not to mention the case, even if it has been a frustrating one. I want to try and show him that no longer hiding everything should be one of those things that really does help, and that not being alone is another."

Mycroft's gaze briefly follows a nurse walking by. "Am I to not contact him?" he sounds unsettled.

"Contact him by all means. Just---- Be his brother, not his bloody minder."

Mycroft runs his fingers along his jaw, looking rather tired. John realises it must be taxing to face Sherlock's disapproval and anger on a continuous basis. It's a testament to Mycroft's devotion, really, how much of it he's put up with, yet he still keeps trying. "It took a long time for me to accept the state in which he'd ended up in 2007, and to become convinced that he couldn't function on his own. Contrary to what you seem to believe, I am capable of leaving him to his own devices. It's just that I've seen where that can lead," Mycroft reminds him. "It nearly killed him."

"That all happened years ago. Don't you think anything could have changed in him or his life between then and now? He's done well, hasn't he, before the GBS? He's been working, not using---"

Mycroft raises up a hand to interrupt John. "As much stock as I'd like to put in his sobriety and his self-invented profession that seems to offer a passable antidote to tedium, I would agree the only truly significant change for the better in his life is standing in front of me, arguing his case." He nods. "Very well. On your head be it."

John wonders if Mycroft is surprised by the look of utter bafflement and awe that must have taken over his features. He's actually won an argument with Mycroft Holmes, not to mention some begrudging praise. Will wonders never cease?

Then again, even an idiot could see Sherlock is the man's weak spot.

To underscore his point, Mycroft shrugs. "I will not go against you in this. I merely want reassurances that if things get worse, not better, the appropriate steps will be taken."

"I'm not going to stand idly by if he becomes actively self-destructive, or psychotic. I took an oath, Mycroft, and that extends to him. Especially him. And you know as well as he does that I am not just his doctor, or flatmate or colleague anymore."

"Perhaps it's best I allow you some time with him, then."

John wants to thank some deity for turning Mycroft's head, because he can't possibly believe it's been his own doing. Or maybe he has become some sort of a Holmes-whisperer without even realising. Well, hardly, since most of the time he has no idea what to do with Sherlock. In many ways, Mycroft is the more sensible of the two.

John expects the man to go, but for some reason, he lingers, appearing almost hesitant.

"I argued against ECT when the subject was raised. In the end, he never had it, even though they
made that recommendation based on the rather modest results with the medications alone. I pressed the notion that the short-term memory issues would have devastated him."

Despite the sound logic in what he's just said, Mycroft sounds borderline apologetic. The whole statement had sounded like a question, a request for acceptance.

"It wasn't your responsibility to decide those things, but I'm sure he would have appreciated you bringing that to their attention," John reassures.

"I'd have told him this, but he refused to listen – refused to see me." Surprise. Dismay. *Hurt.* All there, still, in Mycroft's tone, after all these years.

"You did what you had to. And now you need to let it go."

It doesn't seem like Mycroft is trying to guilt-trip him into backpedalling over his demands that he take a step back. Instead, John gets the distinct feeling that as far as Mycroft and Sherlock are concerned, whatever battle of wills they had going in 2007, never ended.

"Will you at least pass these on?" Mycroft asks, squaring his shoulders and clearly preparing to leave. He digs out a thick dossier from his briefcase, passing it to John.

John flips the covers, leafs through the stack of papers for a moment until he realises these must be the neighbouring ward's NHS records they'd discussed earlier.

"Not very Hippocratically minded, your attitude toward using these to advance a case, and I might argue it's a little hypocritical to be criticised for sharing Sherlock's medical data with you and then be instructed to do the same for a stranger," Mycroft glances at the folder in John's hand. Trust him to want to get some sort of a revenge for being told off.

John slips the dossier under his arm. "Well, if it's to catch a killer and prevent a bunch of further deaths, I'd say Hippocrates is hardly turning in his grave."
A day and a half later, Sherlock changes into his own clothes, discarding the hospital gown on the bed, while John leafs through his discharge papers.


That's all. Bloody useless. John has no idea if Sherlock is even registered at a surgery. Why would he be? He has his own resident GP. Unfortunately, Medical Council restrictions against treating friends and family aside, this particular GP knows that Sherlock would rather endure stitches without anesthetic than actually talk to him about things on his own initiative or submit to a follow-up scrutiny of his health. Still, last night had been a good start, and one John is determined to build upon, despite old patterns of avoidance built into their routine at Baker Street.

John puts the papers down on a side table, grabs Sherlock's coat and helps him shrug into it. When the taller man doesn't put up the collar, John is almost tempted to do it for him.

"Ready?"

"Lead the way," Sherlock says, and they head out of the door and down the corridor.

Suddenly, the thought of going right back home, to the non-communicative status quo waiting there, feels so unpleasant that John grabs Sherlock's sleeve. "Could we go get a coffee? Breakfast? Anything you'd like."

"I thought I wasn't supposed to have coffee."

The cardiology consultant they had talked to an hour ago had issued a blanket statement to avoid caffeine and excitement. John had thought that doctor clearly had no idea what sort of a man he was instructing.

"They did rule out all the actually worrisome causes of tachycardia. Plus they have invented this marvelous thing called decaffeinated coffee," John points out.

Sherlock snorts in derision. "As far as I'm concerned, coffee as a beverage is merely a liquid suspension of caffeine. No point to it otherwise. What I could do with, is a decent mug of tea."

They're now outside, in front of the hospital's main entrance. Sherlock seems to vacillate for a moment, torn between heading for the taxi rank and continuing down the road. He stops by a bike stand and turns to look at John. "Patisserie Valerie at Euston serves passable croissants. We need to talk. Might as well do it there."

For a moment, John is startled. Could last night have been a breakthrough? Does Sherlock actually want to discuss further what he had revealed?

His surprise gets an exasperated eyeroll. "About the case, John. There have been developments."
While you were getting to the hospital this morning, I texted Molly. She’s confirmed that there is no trace of the gelsemine in what she has left of the contents of Watford’s digestive system. She also passed on an article she’d found. I read it while you were playing bureaucracy with the hospital to get me discharged. Very interesting. I’ll tell you about it once you’ve got us breakfast.”

"I get us breakfast?" John says with a mock scowl.

Sherlock raises his brows as though he hasn't understood the financial insinuation, turns and starts leading the way towards Gordon Street. John sighs.

The light turns green. John realises he no longer has to slow down his walking pace in order for Sherlock to keep up with him, but he still does it on occasion when he forgets to remind himself how much some things have improved. The result is that Sherlock gets across first, weaving his way deftly through the stream of pedestrians heading south from Euston Station. His pace only slows down when John sees him dig out his phone and stop under the awning of a newsagent’s.

Sherlock rarely answers his phone, even if he knows the caller, preferring to let it go to voicemail to be ignored, or to text back. John stops beside him, sticking his hands in his pockets to shield them from the brisk wind.

"---I'm very sorry for the inconvenience," Sherlock says and sounds flabbergastingly genuine.

John reasons he's probably trying to flatter his way into gaining some favour that would benefit the case.

"John should have called you," Sherlock tells whoever he's talking to.

John taps Sherlock's arm, points at himself, and mouths, "Me?!" while putting on his finest scowl. Sherlock shakes his head briefly and turns to face the wall nearby.

"Yes, I've been… in hospital. No, nothing to worry about. That's fine. Friday would be perfect, thank you."

Why would Sherlock ever share such a fact with someone work-related? The overall politeness is downright frightening.

Sherlock ends the call and turns to face John, looking slightly wary. "I could have done without the pantomime."

"Well, you'll have to put up with it if you blame me for things I don't know anything about!"

"That was Helen," Sherlock explains, now looking indignant. "She waited an hour in the downstairs foyer two days ago. You should have called to spare her the wasted journey. At least Mrs Hudson gave her cake and told her that we weren’t home yet."

John realises he hadn't even told the landlady where they'd disappeared off to until a day later.

"Right. Yeah, didn't occur to me at the time. We had other things on our minds."

"Thankfully, she understood."

"Good, then," John says and starts walking. He's aware of the slight edge in his voice, one he wishes Sherlock won't pick up on, but it's probably a fool's hope.

Sherlock hurries after him to match his now much brisker pace. "John?"
"Mm."

"You're annoyed. Why? Because I told her you should have informed her while I was… indisposed that we wouldn't make the appointment?"

"It's fine, Sherlock. Drop it."

"You tend to say that when there is something needing to be discussed, but you’re too pissed off at me to do it."

John stops and faces him, trying to force himself to get over this bit of irritation. It's pointless. Addressing it would demand from Sherlock a level of social finesse he will never possess. They do need to talk, but poking around this minor thing will benefit no one, when there are bigger things being ignored.

"I'd prefer you didn't look at me like that," Sherlock says. He breaks eye contact.

"Like what." John's remark is not a question, but an acknowledgment of the inevitable: Sherlock's curiosity has been piqued, and John doubts he's willing to drop the subject.

"It’s that look; the one that says it's pointless to try to explain something to me because I couldn't possibly understand. I have been looked at like that all my life, and before, I would put up with it even from you, but now it’s different. With you it's----" he runs out of steam.

Now John is curious, too. "Finish that sentence, please."

"Before, all that mattered was that I didn’t do something that made you leave, because I valued your contribution, assisting me with the Work. Now, there’s… more at stake. This should be an equal partnership. I don't like you thinking I'm useless and letting us down because I don’t always understand things." He looks down at himself with a tinge of disgust. “Like not being able to control things and ending up in hospital. I feel like damaged goods.”

Suddenly, John's anger is gone. This is one of those bigger, more important things. He'd been irritated by the lingering thought that Sherlock was willing to take advice and help from Helen, from Jonathan, from everyone else, but when it came to John all he got was dismissal and denial. Now, he accepts that this isn't about his own confidence or pride.

"Sherlock, nobody wants to be in a position of needing help – nobody puts themselves in it voluntarily. It feels pretty fucking depressing when things don't go the way you want them to. I think I know a bit about that. I never told this to anyone before: the second day after I came back to London some schoolkid saw my cane and offered to help me across the road. What I did after that was buy a bottle of scotch and not leave that shitty flat I had back then for a week. I know it was a daft reaction, Sherlock, but it doesn't change the fact that I did need a bit of help back then, and I hated it. I hated the military hospital. I hated rehab."

"I hated Harwich," Sherlock offers.

John snorts. "I could tell. But it did you a world of good." He looks up. It might rain soon. "Let's get going."

It's a short walk, but by the time they get to the café, even John's mild residual annoyance has completely dissipated. The fact that Sherlock had made an effort to be polite to Helen means that on some level, he does accept help and feel a modicum of gratitude for it when he sees it as beneficial. Still, John makes a mental note to jokingly ask the woman what the hell she has done to Sherlock Holmes.
Sherlock throws open the door of the steamy coffee shop and they escape the worsening wind. Old habits are still in evidence, as Sherlock slips straight into a booth – his usual choice, as far away from the counter as he can physically get. John joins the queue and ponders for the umpteenth time why he always ends up getting their orders. At that moment, the barista bangs the filter holder twice against the drawer with a sharp metallic clang that cuts straight through the chatter of the early morning crowd. That must be the reason. The sharp noise of the steam, and the machine itself is probably enough to grate on Sherlock’s nerves.

"I’ll have a medium Americano with a hot milk on the side, and then a double espresso, but make those shots decaf. Plus a glass of water." Sherlock had been willing to accept tea, but John will compromise as a peace offering.

"Here, or to go?" The bored cashier taking the order doesn’t even bother to look up from where she is punching the till.

"Eat in. And add two of the almond croissants. I hear they’re good here."

That gets eye contact followed by a smile. "Just fresh out of the oven. We get them out earlier than the rest of the shops in the area." She takes his money and he drops the spare change into the little dish for tips.

Leave it to Sherlock to know the schedules of every coffee shop in London. John glances over to the booth where Sherlock is absorbed reading something on his phone. The door to the café keeps opening; early morning commuters stream in and out, intent on grabbing something on their way to work. He notes that a number of the women, and even a few of the men run an appreciative eye over an oblivious Sherlock on their way past.

That’s when the second epiphany of the morning hits John: Sherlock is actually looking much better. The overnight in the hospital and whatever had actually happened at the National has not left any lasting marks on him. John has spent so many months worrying about the man’s health from such a constant scrutiny that he hasn’t really seen the gradual improvement. He’s still too skinny, but that sickly pallor is gone and his face is starting to fill out.

John’s eyes prickle a bit; he loves Sherlock with an ache that makes his chest constrict. Mine, he can't help thinking in awe – not in a way that would want to malignantly possess or neurotically control, but in a way that says he wants to belong where they are, relationship-wise.

"Here you go." The barista passes the loaded tray across the counter. John collects the two brown sugar packets that Sherlock will insist on having, and a couple of teaspoons, then makes his way through the crowded café to slide in alongside Sherlock. Where he might once have sat across from him, today John really wants the proximity.

Without a word, Sherlock adds the sugar, gives the cup a quick stir and throws the whole lot down his throat in one great slurp. He hasn’t moved his eyes off the phone screen.

John starts to laugh. "I swear you’d mainline coffee, if it were an option."

That earns him a quirk of the lip, then a sniff. "As my dealer, you should know better than to adulterate the content. Obviously decaf, even though I told you I wanted the real thing or tea."

John sighs. "How can you tell?"

"The shop uses dark Italian Lavazza for their espresso, and Swiss water processed Columbian beans for their decaf. Are you saying you can’t tell what beans are used in your coffee? How dull
your taste buds must be. No wonder you keep buying that ready-ground, cheap, bitter, light-roasted abomination from Tesco."

John ignores the insult, and tears a chunk of the flakey pastry off his croissant, popping it into his mouth. "What are you reading?"

"The article from Molly. It's in the Journal of Analytical Toxicology, January 2009 issue. Two pathologists in Hong Kong ran a series of tests based on clinical cases, but they tested their analysis of the toxins by preparing an extract of gelsemium elegans. And in the article is a detailed description of how to make it - perfect, if you want to create an injectable version. It would be virtually undetectable, apart from the urine. Having the process detailed in a journal means that the information is widely available."

John thinks it through. "So, you think Cole may have injected it into Watford, instead of the insulin?"

Sherlock nods. "It fits the facts. However, we still don't have a motive. Why would Cole want to kill his client?" He looks up from the screen, sees the croissant and tears off half. Munching his way through it, Sherlock mumbles around the powdered sugar that drifts down in a mini-snowstorm. "And why would that send Cole to visit the Cardiac Unit at a hospital?"

"You're sure you saw him?" John can't help thinking what he had learned about 2007. Sherlock hadn't exactly been himself then, nor had he been in his right mind two days ago at A&E. "And even so, how can you be certain his visits have anything to do with Watford's murder? He could just as easily have a poorly gran or something."

Sherlock frowns. "There is nothing wrong with my eyesight, John." He then finishes the second half of his croissant in three bites. "As for a connection to the case, I confirmed it this morning.

John's mouth is full but his eyebrows ask the question, and Sherlock smirks, swiping at his phone. "I went walk-about at five this morning, and showed them this to see if they recognised him." He turns the phone, and shows John a photo of Cole - one he must have stealthily snapped of the man at The Vault.

"One of the cardiac nurses recognised him, called him Mister Creepy. She wouldn't tell me who he was visiting - patient confidentiality is such a bore, honestly - but it doesn't matter, since Mycroft managed to finagle us the cardiac ward's patient list. We'll cross-check it against Cole's client list and get a match, of that I am sure. Or, we find how his dear old gran's doing, if your alternate theory is correct. Which it won't be," he announces with what to John sounds like reassuringly old-fashioned Sherlockian overconfidence.

John finds himself amazed at one thing already: "you just waltzed in and they talked to you?"

Sherlock shrugs. "Told them that my doctor said I should get ambulatory in preparation for this morning's discharge. It's not surprising that a nurse was willing to gossip – night shifts are excruciatingly boring unless someone codes, and I managed to convince her I knew the same patient. Annoyingly enough, she never mentioned the patient's name. She was quite willing to talk, since I already knew Cole had been around. Apparently, the patient doesn't have any relatives who kept in touch, and he himself was hardly in a state to complain about breach of confidence; the patient had a severe heart attack sometime after admission, leading to a lengthy cardiac arrest, and has been in a coma ever since. I needed to do little more than drop vague hints, knowing all about his health issues, which I naturally didn't, but most people are easy to lead on. As it turns out, Cole comes to visit, mostly to find out if the patient has regained consciousness yet, said the nurse. He claims to be the guy's best friend. She even said he's tried sweet talking the nurses into phoning
him the minute the man wakes up."

John takes a swallow of his coffee. "That’s the sort of thing a friend would do. Why the creepy label?"

"Cole visited several times before the patient went into cardiac arrest. He’d been originally admitted for cardiac irregularities. I dropped some hints about doping use, and the nurse said the patient was about to talk to the police about the steroids that had likely caused his heart condition. The nurse had heard Cole and the patient arguing about it, and she thought Cole was trying to convince him to go through with it."

"When was that?"

"The 3rd. A day before Watford died. The police interview was supposed to be a few days later."

John considers what he’s just heard - the police delay meant that they had missed the chance. He’s still having trouble seeing any connection between this and the Watford death.

"Under-the-counter steroid trade is hardly a number one priority for narcotics units," Sherlock says. "But their delay is unfortunate." The mention of narcotics breaks John’s concentration, and his thoughts return to what had happened to Sherlock over the past two days.

Something has changed in Sherlock’s behaviour. He seems less withdrawn, and is now clearly back at The Work. John doesn't know what to make of his behaviour - is he going to ignore what they talked about, finding a welcome distraction in the case now that he may have managed to inch it closer to resolution? He can't help wondering if Sherlock might be regretting talking about what happened in 2007, and is trying to distract him by sharing case data. "Hmm?" John asks, mouth full of coffee. His best plan is to keep Sherlock talking, even if it's still just about the case.

"Due to the length of the arrest and the subsequent coma, the nurse was convinced the patient’s prognosis has been ruled as dire. They haven’t told Cole, because he isn’t family. The night nurse said it’s not the thing to tell a friend before relatives. I don't see the relevance of such a priority order."

John isn't surprised. Sherlock is capable of empathy, but his is just a very peculiar sort, one that certainly does not extend to the inner workings of strangers.

"The nurse says she won’t damn Cole for his loyalty, even if the guy is creepy." Sherlock picks up the glass of water and takes a long sip. "It would be handy if this John Doe would wake up. Then we might actually get somewhere."

John wipes crumbs off his mouth. "It depends on the diagnosis. We don’t know how long he was down without getting his heart re-started. If it was a long time, then they’d be pretty certain of severe hypoxic brain damage after a day or two."

The space between Sherlock’s brows wrinkles. "How could they tell?"

"NSE levels would be through the roof at 20 hours after the arrest."

"NSE…." Sherlock digs out his phone and types feverishly. "'Neuron-specific enolase,'" he reads out loud, "'Levels are often elevated in diseases which result in relatively rapid neuronal destruction'."

"I don't think the lab marker is diagnostic on its own, but depending on how long it took for the resus to be succesful, and how his CT or MRI looked in a few days, they might have ruled the
situation hopeless pretty quickly,” John confirms.

"Then it will be up to us to put the pieces together," Sherlock says, eyes narrowed.

John recognizes this look. Sherlock thinks he's on to something. He gets that faraway look in his eyes, and his hands come together in a steeple below his chin. Thinking, deducing, putting pieces of data together where no one else can see a connection. An old spark crackles in John's head – moments like this have often lead to the very best moments they've shared: the thrill of the hunt, the triumph of a culprit apprehended. "So, you think Cole somehow caused the cardiac arrest?" John asks to verify.

"No, but that's just the thing! I'm certain Cole did nothing whatsoever to the patient, assuming he coded before he was due for a visit from a narcotics officer."

John puts down his coffee mug. "WHAT? You no longer believe he's a killer?"

Sherlock gives him a condescending look that has 'idiot' painted all over it. "He killed Watford by accident, because this other guy didn’t die."

"I don't follow. Why would he have wanted to kill a friend?"

Sherlock leans closer – not because he wants to prevent the other patrons from hearing, but because there's a lecture to be made here – and he wants John's full attention. "As usual, you are ignoring all the important things because of your second-hand inane sentimental assumptions. If the nurse heard Cole and this guy arguing, they may not have been friends, after all. Cole could have very different reasons for visiting him - such as being his steroid dealer and trying to prevent the guy from talking to the police. Hence his scheming at getting the nurses to alert him the minute the patient woke up. When Cole became certain his persuasive skills fell short of convincing our patient X from talking to the police, Cole could have seen murder as the only potential means to save his hide. He's not a criminal mastermind, nor has he likely killed anyone before, so we can safely assume he was rather nervous about the whole business. There was no indication Watford was about to blow the whistle on him. After all, he must've been still buying from Cole, which is why I'd say this guy was his intended target, not Watford. This is one of two possibilities, once everything else has been eliminated."

He breaks the steeple and leaves one finger up. "First, it could have been an accident. We know the poison was in injected form, so Cole could have mixed up the syringes in his nervousness. He was working with insulin and likely injectable steroids on a regular basis for Watford, so could have grabbed the wrong syringe – in all likelihood, he used the same equipment for both the gelsemine and what he normally sold. As a result, Watford dies and Cole panics and then tries to stage it as a shooting. Rather amaturish, to say the least, despite what the idiot forensic team first concluded."

Sherlock raises the second finger. "Or, it wasn't an accident. The alternative is that Watford is a guinea-pig, used to test whether Cole's mixture would actually kill the intended target. Still, the haphazard manner of the murder would point to it not being premeditated."

"Is that why he’s hanging around wanting to see the patient again? He still wants to murder this guy?" John asks.

This gets a tentative nod. "Timing, John! This man coded before Cole had the chance to inject him. It doesn’t really matter if it was an accident or whether Watford was just a trial run – once the real target ended up in an ITU, Cole’s not going to easily get in to get his chance to inject him. He doesn’t know that the man’s not likely to wake up. In his eyes, he’s got to get to him before the police do."
"But could they both have been intended targets from the start?"

"I doubt it. As I said, there's no motive for killing Watford, and the obvious hastiness with which the killer tried to throw a wrench into the police investigation that would follow doesn't exactly point to Watford's killer having much of a plan of action."

John can't help smiling. "That makes sense."

Sherlock rolls his eyes. "Of course it does." But then his shoulders slump. "For all the good that it does." He gets up. "I need more water."

John’s confused. Where is the elation? Where is the whirling around in delight at having probably cracked the case? He watches Sherlock refill his water glass from a jug at the cashier counter and then return to their table. This time he slides into the booth opposite John, who can't help but see that as a way of putting distance between them.

He doesn’t like it. "Well, aren't you going to call Lestrade?" he practically commands.

Sherlock pushes his phone away from him along the table surface. "Pointless," he says quietly. "I can't prove any of it. Not unless Cole carries through with an attempt to kill him, or we find an irrefutable connection to the gelsemine. Cole was this man's trainer – it will be easy for him to just claim he is being a caring friend. When he finds out that the target is going to die anyway, without needing to be killed, then there will be nothing in this patient's tox screen or his future post mortem to point to Cole's plan if and when he dies. He’ll be off the hook, because he never gave any of the gelsemine to the man at the hospital. Dead end."

"There's always something, like you tend to say. Some angle you haven't looked at, some lead you could follow up," John tries.

Sherlock's gaze snaps up to meet his. He looks frustrated, angry even. "There's NOTHING! At least nothing I've been able to deduce. Because I can't manage to link Cole to the poison, it's the end of the road. I can only circumstantially attempt to prove that Watford was murdered, but not by whom," Sherlock says in a defeated tone. "The police would have been able to do as much, maybe even if they stuck to their ridiculous idea of a gang shooting. I’ve been useless."

John has known that solving the case is important to Sherlock, but usually when the Work hits a dead end he gets frustrated and angry and more driven. Instead of those things there now seems to be just upset and defeat. What little joy Sherlock had gleaned from the revelation Molly's article had offered, has now waned. John actually wonders if this is what Sherlock had actually wanted to address this morning – his dismay over what he sees as a profound failure.

John wants to tell him there'll be other cases, better ones, ones they can solve, and that it's not a reflection of his intellect if there simply are too many pieces missing, but he doubts such consolation would be well-received. Instead of pointless placations, he reaches across the table and encloses Sherlock's hand in his. "You've been anything but useless. They wouldn't have found the truth without you. You worked out the steroids. You called it murder. You found the murder weapon. You solved the puzzle of how personal trainers could be identified, after all, when they were working. You realized Cole had some sort of a thing going with Jason. You spotted Cole---"

"Stroke of luck," Sherlock points out. He turns his hand around so that their palms are against each other, inspecting John's hand with mild curiosity as though he doesn't quite know what to do with it. At least he doesn't withdraw his own.

"You solved it, Sherlock. You did. That should matter, at least a little, even if Cole walks."
"Motive, modus operandi and sequence of events are just tools, not an end in itself. The real puzzle, the only one that matters, is coming up with a way to catch the person responsible. Contrary to what some people believe, it's not just about solving the mystery. Even I enjoy a bit of justice being served."

John suddenly realizes this new defeatist attitude of Sherlock's isn't just about this particular case. It's might not even be about the Work in general. It's something else.

Sherlock has now openly admitted to defeat, and he never does that. That, together with the momentum from their conversation about 2007 could lead to something. Perhaps Sherlock would be amenable to trying to analyze why they've ended up here.

"Hey," John says to get Sherlock to look at him. "What's going on? You're attaching an awful lot of importance to this one thing. I know it's your first case after the GBS, but still. I know you, and this isn't like you."

Something shifts in Sherlock's expression with these words. John expects him to clam up, to deny everything, to get angry, to resort to the already familiar 'there's nothing wrong with me', but instead, Sherlock just looks tired, deflated and downright miserable.

"I don't think I am going to be able to do the Work to the same level I did before," he finally admits. "And I don't know what I am without it."

John doesn't even know how to begin to react to such a statement, but he knows he needs to – and quickly.

Sherlock finds it hard to focus when John is holding his hand and staring at him like this. He shifts his gaze to the view outside the window. Raindrops meander down the glass, distorting the sight of pedestrians going past.

The way John had coaxed that confession out of him had been clever. He fears that if he doesn't continue on the forced path of disclosure John had set them on two days prior, something terrible will happen. He can't get the thought out of his head now that somehow John's willingness to put up with him in this state is now coloured by the revelations of what happened in 2007, and that he has to keep talking about that for some reason that he cannot fathom.

"You are more than the Work, Sherlock. You have always been more than that, are now and always will be."

From the edge of his visual field, Sherlock can tell John is trying to get him to look at him. When this proves fruitless, John seems to glance out of the window as well, clearly frustrated at the turn this conversation has taken.

Sherlock can only mumble, "It's the same with the violin, now the case work. I'm less than I was. And I hate that. I'm trying to accept I will never return to what I once was, but it's difficult."

A quick, discreet glance shows that John looks to have gone speechless.
To have something to do to dissipate the pain he is feeling, Sherlock begins flicking his thumb across his fingertips, nervous, anxious, lost, trying to harden his heart not to feel like this, like he's broken something that neither of them can ever fix, like the bridge he has just crossed had crumbled, its pieces tossed down the walls of a ravine.

This fear hasn't been real before now, not like this, because he hasn't given it the power of words.

After sharing with John his experiences of 2007, Sherlock suspects that any further revelations about his current mental landscape might well be the final straw, and it's probably best not to delay the inevitable. John now knows the depths to which he has descended. John will leave, and Mycroft’s prophecy will come true. The scariest part is that Sherlock knows that if John goes, he won't even care anymore what happens to him.

John stands up, and for a terrifying moment Sherlock thinks he's actually going to leave, right now. He holds his breath, and the whole world seems to come to a standstill.

*It was good while it lasted.*

He prepares for the killing blow.

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Chapter End Notes

The chapter title comes from an Alice In Chains song called *Would?*
Having been brave enough to finally tell the truth, Sherlock waits for John to acknowledge that there is no hope for a return to what they had enjoyed before his illness. There will be no equal partnership; he will never be able to pull his own weight.

He waits for the world to end.

It doesn't.

John doesn't leave.

Instead, he slides onto the same bench next to Sherlock and lays a hand on his bicep.

Sherlock closes his eyes momentarily at the grounding sensation, adrenaline and relief making his fingertips tingle and his heart drum erratically in his chest.

He doesn't allow himself to build any lasting hope on John's gesture, however, because as a doctor, John has been trained to offer consolation. He's doing his duty, until he will retreat to consider his options. It's expected. It's logical.

Somehow, knowing how it all works makes it hurt more.

"You are not less or more than the Sherlock I love. I'm not sitting here waiting for some other version of you to come and solve the case, because you already have. I don't expect you to believe me, or believe this fixes anything, but you've got to stop assuming I'm sitting here disappointed, waiting for you to return to what you were before you got sick. You have never stopped being you. Not for a second. You were the one who reminded me of it, when everything had gone to hell. You told me at the MITU: 'still me'. I believed you then, and I still do."

Sherlock turns slightly away, towards the window again. Sherlock keeps his eyes firmly focused on the people passing by the café. He has to do this, for John's sake. He can't let his weakness be the cause of hurting or destroying the one person he has ever cared about. As pathetic he has become, he's not going to allow that, too, on his conscience, on his list of failures. "I don't want to discuss any of that. My weakness threatens you, John. What you need to do is leave, before others realise that I am not able to protect you. Some of them already have."

John leans slightly away, a gesture instantly recognizable as being caused by disbelief. "You're afraid of Moriarty," he says. "You're afraid of Moriarty," he says. "I found the photos, remember? Is that what tipped you over the edge with the cocaine?"

"You know what's at stake," Sherlock says coldly.

The cocaine is irrelevant. The cases are irrelevant. Even Moriarty is irrelevant, except when it touches upon the continued survival of John. "You have to do the sensible thing. Protect yourself, because I clearly can't," Sherlock says. He's certain John can read between the lines what he means, and hopes that if John is going to heed his advice he'll do it swiftly because he can't sit here like this for long, breaking into smaller and smaller pieces.

John leans in and addresses him through almost clenched teeth. "You just listen to me for one minute. Your ability to beat Moriarty has always been about what you can do with your brain, not
your abilities in a physical fight. You outsmart each other, play those wretched mind games," John reminds him. "What I don't get about the cocaine is that it doesn't really help with the physical side of things---" suddenly, realisation seems to hit and John shuts his mouth.

Sherlock can practically hear the cogs turning.

John's hand on his bicep tightens its grip. "What aren't you telling me? You said you can't do the Work like you used to – fucking hell, you didn't even mean the physical stuff, did you?" he demands. "Look at me, please."

He does. It's easier to face John like this – angry, determined, hell bent on proving a point – than it is when he's practically emanating what could well be pity. Sherlock can't tell exactly what is going through John's head when he looks at him with soft eyes, like he wants to shield him from everything. He shouldn't like it. He needs it to be pity, so he can hate how much he actually wants that from John right now.

"If I knew, and wanted to hear your opinion, I would probably have already asked for it!" Sherlock exclaims and peels the now distracting fingers off his arm. "I just want this over with." Sherlock says to no one in particular, "but it never will be. I'm not going to get better. It's going to happen again."

John frowns. "The GBS? That's just a marginal, no – a tiny – risk. You're more likely to be hit by a bus."

"Statistics are bloody lies!" Sherlock exclaims, loud enough for a man in the next table give them a startled glance. "You tell me! List all and every bloody possibility that will ruin everything because one day, something will! You should know it, you went to medical school because you thought it all so very fascinating, what an opportunity, really, to make yourself useful at the expense of those actually doomed to suffer!" he mocks with a sting in his heart because he knows this is not what he'd meant to say – he hadn't meant to insult John of all people, it's just that he doesn't know how to rip out the blackness swallowing him whole, doesn't know where to find the courage to look it in the eye, to shatter it with words, because it isn't something outside of him. It's a hell he carries inside, a darkness he has somehow created but doesn't know how to banish. He's never known how. Sometimes it takes over, and he loses himself. That might happen again, and it would be much worse than a relapse of the GBS.

He desperately searches John's face for clues, for confirmation that he's seen past this unfortunate outburst, that he hasn't just heard the words and taken them at face value. He wants John to understand why he needs to go, for them to part over a mutual agreement, not because of something insulting Sherlock had said in a fit of pique.

If anything, John looks a bit amused. "That was--- wow. Let's back up a bit, yeah? When I joined the army--" John starts.


"Stop rolling your eyes, you berk. When I joined, of course I knew what could potentially happen. But I didn't think about it when I was in Afghanistan, you know? None of us did, because nobody can live like that. Then, when something does happen, it hits you like a brick in the face, and you realise the self-deception you've been living in because you have to. We imagine nothing will touch us, ever, and when we get reminded that it isn't like that, reality hits like a sucker punch. Some people skirt the danger, like you and me, but it's not because we're extraordinarily at peace with the idea that we might get injured or sick or die. It's quite the opposite, really. You in
particular operate on a massive immortality assumption. It's just that sometimes life turns out to be a bit more real than we'd like it to be."

"So I deserved this, somehow?" Sherlock says incredulously.

"No one deserves anything. I don't believe in fate, or karma or whatever. Things just happen. There's no justice to it. You, of all people, should understand that – you're a scientist. This happened to you, because of bum luck and maybe some genetic disposition we don't even understand yet, but you need to stop blaming the universe for being what it is – random, and assuming it's out to get you any more than it's out to get anybody else in it."

"So I should rejoice that life is like walking through a rain of arrows, hoping that none of them will hit?" Sherlock mocks.

"And what's the alternative? Languish on the sofa until kingdom come and waste every remaining minute of it? If it's all random, why not get off your arse and do whatever it is you want to do? Even if you can't affect or predict the outcome, you can still enjoy the game."

"The outcome can be predicted. We all die eventually."

John shrugs. "True, so why waste the time before it? It isn't how long your life is; it's what you do with how much of it you've got. Why waste another bloody minute worrying? You can't live like that, by not even trying, because it might all go to hell."

"What's the point of trying, if it means risking the good things?"

"There's no guarantee, ever, Sherlock! There never has been! It could have all ended with a bullet or a knife at any point, any chase, any case, Afghanistan for me, back when you were still using! It could have ended before I realised you loved me, it could have ended before you kissed me. Every day is a fucking miracle when I get to keep you, and that's why I need you to trust the universe a tiny bit more than you do right now."

"You can't trust it, that's absurd, and you're contradicting yourself," Sherlock says petulantly to hide how big a somersault his heart had made at some of those words.

"Then just give it the benefit of the doubt, instead of assuming everything WILL end badly. You build these fail safes, these alternate realities where you go when it gets too tough, the mind palace and the way you sort of step out of yourself. You deny everything or quit when things get too tough in order to avoid facing reality. You never used to be like that. I know you can't stop the panic, or the meltdowns if it gets too much, but one thing you can change is to stop assuming that you can't handle it, any of it, anymore. You might be surprised. I've seen you face stuff anyone else would end up in a padded cell for, and walk away with a smile on your face and a suggestion for which Chinese we should get for dinner."

There's so much information here, floating around, unorganized, that Sherlock finds himself rather bewildered by it all.

"Come here," John adds softly and slides a hand around his waist. Sherlock would not have expected such a gesture from John in public, but right now he certainly isn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. John tugs him closer, holding on with a conviction that somehow feels as though it's seeping a bit of strength into Sherlock, too.

"It's like Helen says with the violin: you can keep comparing yourself to how things were before and drive yourself nuts, or just enjoy it for what it is. When you want to play it, just play it and
stop beating yourself up about some piece you can't play at the moment that you used to be able to. You used to be so bloody *carpe diem*, which I think was the thing that helped me the most when I met you. I needed that. I've been where you are. I didn't see the point, either. If I could get shot, then just as well I could get hit by lightning on the way to Tesco, so why bother? I thought I had it all worked out, but then I met someone who forced me to think differently," John suggests gently.

"I'm not going to talk to a therapist, John," Sherlock counters, downing the last of his water while wiggling his hips so John's fingers won't dig into his side too much. He's still holding on rather tightly, which Sherlock finds he doesn't really mind. Quite the contrary.

John snorts. "I meant that I met *you*, you great idiot, not some therapist. You didn't seem to have a care in the world about actual problems that people have, so I sort of forgot about mine. No, you were all about relishing the moment, which is the most important thing I think you've sort of forgot how to do, being stuck in that bed for months."

"At the hospital I didn't have much else *than* the moment," Sherlock points out, "No guarantees as to the outcome, despite all your unfounded reassurances."

His frustration builds again, like an approaching wave gathering momentum. "Thousands of people go through GBS, and then move on. I seem to be defective in my capacity to do that."

"You shouldn't generalize like that. Plenty of people find themselves reeling from it even years later. Patients are all different. It doesn't have anything to do with being smart or being strong - maybe clever people understand more about the illness, which might mean that it could actually be worse for them. All I know that it's normal to be *affected*," John says, using a word Sherlock has used himself many times in a disgusted tone to berate other humans for getting emotional. "Let me guess: you get reminded of things that happened, triggered by small things and it drives you nuts. You want to avoid going to places and talking to people related to what happened. You probably have nightmares. I still do, too. Sometimes. It will get easier, but I guarantee that wallowing in it won't help.

"I don't wallow. It all just happens, and I can't control it."

According to John, it's normal to feel altered, defective and rudderless, but normal is dull and average and forgettable and boring and useless. His intellect should place him well above the manner in which normal people are traumatized by things such as ending up in hospitals – things like that happen to lots of people all the time. Why is he so rattled by it, instead of the cold scientific reason, that has always offered him a very good anchor, prevailing?

"It takes time. I know you hate people telling you that, but that's how it works. Time helps, and so does stopping avoiding everything that could remind you of it. Talking about it desensitizes you, that's why everyone keeps insisting you should do that. It will get easier."

Sherlock wonders if maybe there *could* be some comfort in that. Maybe.

"Do you know in advance when the stress starts getting too much for you?" John asks. "Is there anything I could look out for, something that could tell me I need to get you somewhere less… distracting, so we don't have to go through this again?"

*This*...? Ah, John is likely referring to the events of the past two days. A diagnosis seems to have been made by Dr Watson, after all, regarding why Sherlock had ended up on that acute ward in the first place. This line of inquiry is highly unpleasant and embarrassing, and it needs to be terminated. "Why do you always insist on this?"
"This? What is 'this'?"

"Putting me on the spot, interrogating me about things I find difficult to discuss," Sherlock spits the word out as though it were something unpleasant that had flown into his mouth. "I will accept that talking might have some benefit in certain, limited contexts, but what benefit could it possibly have to discuss things that can't be changed? If the other person cannot profess any solutions to the problems discussed, and such conversations can easily be used as material or as evidence of mental---"

"Sherlock."

"It's not as though there's proof of the efficacy of talk therapy to match the requirements of Cochrane meta-analyses---"

"Sherlock."

"Stop interrupting!"

"No, I won't, when you're just trying to distract me. Talking helps, not because it always solves problems or erases things that may have always been in your life, but because it can at least make you and that other person feel a little less alone. If together we can stop the train of thought that always rolls to a crash, then talking about it is not an option; it’s a necessity. Lord knows, I’m not one who practices what I’m preaching here, but that's my problem. I want you to be smarter about this than I ever was about my issues."

"You don't have my problems," Sherlock dismisses.

John draws a deep breath. If he wants to get Sherlock to talk some more, then he's going to have to give an example. "I feel really alone, when you shut me out. Either you get vicious and turn the focus on me, or you're here, but not present."

"It works."

John appears taken aback. "I'm not going to use what you tell me against you. Or leave. I wish you'd trust that, and stop your pre-emptive strikes."

"People always leave, so best not risk it."

"You should be convinced by now that I'm not collecting evidence for Mycroft to use against you."

"I never said it was for Mycroft."

"Just answer the question. Think of it as just medical data, if it helps. Did you get a warning before the panic attacks, meltdowns, or whatever you want to call them, at Bart's, and then at the Vault? What about at the National?" John itemizes in a no-nonsense tone.

"I may have," Sherlock circumvents. "You think I'm defective," he says, and it's more of a question than a statement but he dare not phrase it as one.

"Never," John answers quickly and sternly. "I don't know who put that word in your head, but I'm pretty sure I'd like to rip them a new one."

"It always changes how people see me, if they know---" Sherlock abruptly cuts the sentence off, because he's revealing too much, making this about more than just the Guillain-Barré. That's a dangerous road to go down. It permanently changes how people see him.
"Know what? That you're not a sociopath? That you're not deliberately an arrogant arsehole around people just because you like it? That there might or might not be some better diagnosis you were given way before I met you? Sherlock--- someone taught you how to control the meltdowns, didn't they? What else did they teach you?"

It's obvious that John has talked to Mycroft at some point about these things. Sherlock finds he isn't upset by this, since it's hardly surprising. He only hopes John will refrain from saying the words out loud: the diagnoses, the labels. He should be over this, he shouldn't give words such power, but once they're out, floating in the air, they tend to be all he's reduced to.

"They tried to teach me things that I couldn't do but other people could, effortlessly, even Mycroft. Especially Mycroft," Sherlock says bitterly, "which is why he sees it as his right to tell people things about me, private things, just to underline his own superiority." There's an accusatory edge to his voice which he does nothing to curb.

John takes a moment. "It has to take a lot out of you, using those skills."

"'Fake it 'till you make it.' The fact that most normal people are idiots makes it possible to sham being one, but not easy," Sherlock admits.

He hates that word, 'normal', but he loathes the more politically correct alternative as well, 'neurotypical', because using it tends to immediately betray the ways in which he doesn't belong in that group.

"Over my dead body is that boy going to a school with normal children! You know what children are like, they'll eat him alive!" Mummy had told their father in a heated argument Sherlock remembers painfully well. It was a conversation that had happened at least once a year, always with the same outcome: Mummy won. It wasn't until he was eleven and Mummy got a major award grant to found her own permanent research group in the States, that she finally caved in.

When Sherlock had been eight, he had protested. "Mycroft goes to a normal school," he'd pointed out from where he'd been hiding behind an armchair with his books.

Mummy had been startled, since no one had even known he was in the living room. She knealt down, lifted the cover of the book on insects Sherlock was reading and hummed appreciatively. "Don't you worry about Mycroft," she said, "He'll be fine. He'll always be fine."

Indeed.

"I hope you know that you don't have to do that with me," John tells him, and the remains of the memory evaporate. "Sham being someone else."

"I do it less with you than with everyone else. And you've now seen the worst," Sherlock says, trying to soften things with a hollow laugh.

"I'm sorry I've been pressing you to talk – pressuring you with a lot of things. I guess talking is not the thing with you. Would writing things down be easier, when you're upset?"

This makes Sherlock suspicious of whether John has been reading some sorts of self-help books. His parents had a shelf full of them: 'A Parent's Guide to High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder, Second Edition: How to Meet the Challenges and Help Your Child Thrive.' 'Decreasing Behaviors of Persons With Severe Retardation and Autism.' 'The Kid-Friendly ADHD & Autism Cookbook.' 'School Success for Kids with High-Functioning Autism.'

If John ever brings home a book like that, Sherlock can't be held accountable for his actions. "I
find it easier to talk when I can't see you. It levels out the playing field."

Body language is all Greek to him, has always been. Not even his therapists had made much progress with it. Being able to focus on interpreting words and the tone they're spoken in levels out the playing field.

A sudden twinge of an old sort of frustration hits. No one understands. Not even John. Any words Sherlock could put in a line to describe what his life is like isn't going to convey the reality of it. "I heard you back at the National, you and Mycroft. You thought I'd be the last person to be able to handle the GBS."

John is looking at him intently. "And you proved us wrong at every turn, especially Mycroft. Every time I thought you were losing it, every time I thought there was no more fight left in you, every time I thought you were taking on too much by declining sedation, by working yourself to exhaustion at Harwich and after coming home, you still pulled through somehow. I don't know if I could have done it like that – after Afghanistan I didn't have anyone I would have bothered to do anything for. I'd have wanted the sedation if I were you, and I would have made a mess of rehab. Do you have any idea how much it means that you wanted to be aware through that hell, because you wanted to be with me, somehow? The cocaine is the only exception to how fucking brave you were, but afterwards I realised that it shouldn't have surprised me. It made me really fucking angry, it really did, but I should have understood how high a risk level for a relapse you were on. I suppose I just didn't want to."

"I thought you’d leave if you found out," Sherlock dares to admit. He doesn't specify whether he means the drugs or the rest of this mess. The mess that is him, that has always been him.

John smiles. "If I were ever going to leave, I think it would have been around the time of the severed head in the fridge."  

Sherlock resorts to an eyeroll, but it's only a little one. Something tells him John had meant the drugs and the rest.

He wipes his mouth with a napkin, mostly out of habit and a longing to escape the limelight John has put him in.

John stands up, extends his arm and Sherlock takes it to more easily maneuver himself off the bench. It seems that the interrogation is over.

He should have been ashamed of the truths he has revealed, but he isn't. Somehow, he finds he believes John's claim that nothing has changed. Even if it's just because he needs to do so in order to preserve his flimsy sanity, it's something.

"It's a start." He gets up, unable to sit still for a moment longer.

The small bells on a chain hung on the door grate on Sherlock's nerves as they leave the cafe. They set to walking towards the Euston Square tube station.

"Thank you," Sherlock says quietly after they've rounded the corner to another street where pedestrian traffic is lighter. It needs saying, and it's not the most awkward thing he has uttered lately, so it's fine.

John blinks and strides faster for a moment to bring himself closer to Sherlock as they walk. He looks as though he's not entirely sure what he's just heard. "Sorry?"

Sherlock keeps his gaze on the road. "Thank you, for not siding with Mycroft."
"Like I said, I have no reason to do that." John comes up beside him, and they both stare at the traffic, looking for a taxi with a yellow light on top while standing in front of the tube station. "I know you don't put much stock in psychology – quit the eyeroll, please, you'll sprain something at this rate – but there's a term that might apply here, especially concerning what you said worries you about the Work," John tells him. "This is what I meant to tell you earlier, but I got sidetracked."

Sherlock leans away from the passing traffic, and stops trying to look for a cab for a moment, his curiosity piqued.

"It's been studied in scuba divers, at least – people who get into stressful situations. Their performance level in even the simplest, most intuitive tasks suffers a lot when their mind is too occupied by something that makes them anxious. When the stress level rises, filtering through information that normally gives them no trouble becomes a lot harder. I don't think the GBS has messed up your brain. I think your anxiety and what I think we need to start finally calling depression does, in a way that may have been avoidable, and what definitely can be changed. You put yourself on a collision course. You're running yourself to the ground by making assumptions about how you assume you have to perform. On top of all that, as always with relationships and social stuff, your timing sucks."

John is a marvel. A conundrum. A formidable mystery. How is it that he can reassure with criticism and comfort by not resorting to cliched, saccharine mollycoddling? "I'd hardly blame my timing. It wasn’t my choice to get ill. Nor was it in any way due to my influence that you decided to chase some woman when I couldn't be there to ensure your failure."

John laughs, and raises his right arm trying to flag a passing taxi which ignores them, stopping for someone else who's standing closer to the station entrance.

"Bugger. Not easy getting a taxi during rush hour." John sighs. "We don’t get to choose when or whether we get ill. Of course not. And we sure as hell don't get to choose when the right person comes along. In sickness and in health, Sherlock. And we did all right, in the end. What’s come as a result has been the best part of my life so far in some ways, even if it's been such a huge challenge."

Sherlock's eyes widen. "You call this success?!"

"If neither of us has called it quits yet, and we're sharing a bed, it's hardly a failure, is it?" John says with a knowing smile.

"I find your criteria of success odd. We haven't actually consummated---"

John downright cringes at the word, which makes Sherlock cut the sentence. He should have remembered that John seems to prefer vague, imprecise and sentimental vocabulary when talking about relationships, which is confusing to say the least. On the other hand, when it comes to sex, however, he has heard John use quite lewd language at pertinent times, whispered into a receptive ear.

"This isn't a race to some finish line dictated by others, or a list of boxes to tick," John says. "We do what we're comfortable with. I have zero expectations, but I am interested to see what might happen."

The edge of Sherlock's mouth quirks up. "Really? That sounds like an oxymoron - great anticipation with no expectations."

"With you, I've learned to expect anything and everything, especially the unexpected."
"Even the bad things?"

"I will gladly take the bad things, if they come with you. For better or for worse, Sherlock."

A taxi finally pulls up to the kerb, and further conversation stops, because Sherlock finds he'll happily spend the rest of the afternoon analysing what he's just heard.
John is jostled awake. He fumbles around for the button on the alarm clock, his first instinct thinking it has gone off. It lights the screen, the digital numbers reading 02:40 am. That means he's been asleep for less than three hours, and he thinks Sherlock might well have been asleep for even less.

After a moment of confusion as to why he'd woken up, he makes note of the mattress shifting: Sherlock is twitching in his sleep. Both of them toss and turn on occasion, of course, but something about this particular instance of Sherlock's nocturnal motion must have been out of the ordinary, bringing John to full consciousness.

After sharing a bed for weeks now, John has started to acclimatise to the experience. He can actually get to sleep now if Sherlock is still awake, regardless of whether he's in the bed or somewhere else in the flat, and manage to sleep through the night because his subconscious mind has accommodated the random movements of another body. If he is woken up by Sherlock wrestling with the bedding, he scoots closer and usually the rest of the night passes quietly. He has grown rather fond of waking up with his nose buried in Sherlock's hair, as long as an errant curl isn't sticking into his nostril.

On some mornings, the proximity has been a little too inspiring, leading to a need to slip quietly into the bathroom. John hasn't tried to find out if his presence in bed has been having the same effect on Sherlock. At this point, even though they've discussed it, sex seems a rather distant destination, with several stops en route they still haven't quite explored.

The bed is still for a moment. John is facing away from Sherlock, and doesn't want to risk waking him up by tossing and turning himself. John is now curious as to what may have tipped his senses off, so he waits. Since he's not in contact with any part of the taller man, the movement must have been substantial enough to shake the bed itself. John is now convinced that whatever is going on is not the whatever REM disorder he'd diagnosed earlier - when that starts, it seems constant and much more dramatic than this.

After what must be a few minutes, John begins to hear rapid, uneven breathing from across the bed. A nightmare? There is another twitch – this one more violent, as if Sherlock is kicking at something. John starts to turn over to see what the matter is, but before he finished flipping himself over, a bloodcurdling scream shatters the quiet night.

John's military instincts take over, and he throws himself off the bed and scrambles for cover before he even has time to think the plan through. After the reflex response releases its hold, he suspects for a moment that his eardrums may have blown, because silence has fallen again. Once some of the alarm raising the hairs on his arms abates, he manages to convince himself that no one is shooting at him in the flat, so he crawls to the bureau and reaches up to turn on the lamp there.

Sherlock is sitting bolt upright in bed, his eyes wide open, pupils blown. He is sweating, gasping for air. The look of terror on his face is unmistakable, and he is muttering something in a language that John does not understand – assuming it is a language at all, and not gibberish.

Not a nightmare, then. This looks worse, yet familiar - a night terror? A colleague of John's at Camp Bastion had suffered a run of them, and been sent home in the end, with a diagnosis of
PTSD. In all of John’s struggles with his own demons when he had been shot, the worst he’d ever had to deal with at night was insomnia and nightmares. Harry had been a sleepwalker when they'd shared a bedroom as kids, but that was a much more benign habit. She had rarely even managed to wake John up. Usually they found her sleeping in the walk-in-clothes closet in the hall in the morning.

"Sherlock..." John pitches it loud enough to be easily heard, but gentle so as not to startle. He doesn’t really expect an answer. Assuming his assumption of a night terror is correct, although Sherlock looks wide-eyed, John knows that he is not actually awake.

Sherlock offers no acknowledgement of having company, just a further stream of words that make no sense to John, aimed toward the other side of the room, between the wardrobe and the window. Following the line of Sherlock’s shocked stare, John can see nothing there, just the wallpaper.

Sherlock is quite obviously terrified, and the pleading in his voice is evident, even if the words are not. He is practically begging his invisible foe for something, hands outstretched as though trying to ward off an attack.

For a moment, John is torn. He hates seeing Sherlock so distressed, yet he knows that medically speaking, there is little he can do. Parasomnias are not easy to treat, and this, also known as pavor nocturnus, is one of the more difficult. The surgical nurse who had suffered from such incidents was a strapping lad, six feet four inches of muscle who had been almost impossible to wake. In part, the medical discharge had been due to fear of him hurting himself or the others, who had tried to restrain him from tearing outside the building and even trying to get out of the camp. Had the man wandered off into the desert, he really would have been in danger.

Sherlock’s breathing is becoming even more ragged and the words are coming out between panting gasps. John starts to worry even more: is it possible to have a panic attack or a meltdown while not actually awake? He has no idea. There is so much of Sherlock that is uncharted territory; here be dragons.

The terror that has seized hold of Sherlock makes him now scramble backwards on the bed, until he hits the headboard with a thump, the sudden sharp sound making even John jump. Another scream, this one likely mostly of pain, erupts and then Sherlock is in motion, tearing himself off the bed. He's halfway through the door into the hallway, before John manages to get around the bed to stop him.

Survival instincts momentarily compensating for lacking strength, Sherlock sprints down the hall, past the bathroom and into the kitchen and then towards the door that leads outside the flat to the stairs. John knows he has only seconds to catch him before Sherlock's longer legs take him out of John's reach and into the night barefoot, clad in nothing but pyjamas.

John reaches the door to the stairwell just as Sherlock has got it open a few inches, and he throws his arm out to slam the door shut. He knows better than to grab Sherlock; adults in the grip of a night terror can turn violent. Judging by what little John can see in the faint light cast by the digital clock on the microwave, Sherlock has not even recognised the fact that he's there. He's still pulling at the door, clearly confused by why it won’t open. John tries to squeeze in between Sherlock and the door, and that’s when Sherlock crashes into him.

The physical contact brings Sherlock to a halt, but only for a split second until he explodes into action again. John has just enough time to duck the first blow before the second connects with his solar plexus, forcing him to double down as the wind is completely knocked out of him. Even asleep and in recovery, Sherlock's martial arts training shows, and John's legs are promptly swept out from under him. Adrenaline is lending back the strength he's been missing for the past few
months.

John falls hard, collapsing in a heap on the floor against the door.

Oddly, once he's down, Sherlock seems to forget he's even there, and just keeps trying to open the door, but John's weight against it blocks his efforts. Sherlock doesn't seem to realise that just by going out of the kitchen into the living room, he'd find another door to the stairwell.

In the dim light coming through the living room windows, John is just getting his breath back when he sees Sherlock suddenly glance over his shoulder and then flinch. He backs away from the kitchen, his eyes open wide in fear at whatever apparition his imagination has conjured. Shuffling backwards, he ends up catching his legs on his chair, and then losing his balance to fall into it.

By the time John has scrambled back onto his feet and manages to get over to the fireplace, he realises that Sherlock has fallen properly asleep in the chair. He's now effectively spread across it, curls dangling over an armrest, snoring slightly. The night terror has ended as suddenly as it began.

John heaves a sigh of relief. He double-checks that the doors to the stairwell are closed, although he knows it's somewhat unlikely there'd be another incident during a single night. Or is it?

He stands in hesitation in the middle of the sitting room for a moment, but then returns to the bedroom and grabs their duvet from the bed.

He returns to where Sherlock has now curled up into the chair. He covers Sherlock with a duvet, then grabs the blanket off the back of his chair and settles onto the sofa.

Morning light is streaming in through the sitting room windows at a very irritating angle.

Sherlock tries adjusting his microscope again, but an aching pain erupts in his right middle finger when he tries to turn the fine focus again. He doesn't really have any slides to look at, but the machine had been there, and he'd felt like having something to tinker with while waiting for John to organise breakfast. He frowns at the offending digit. The finger is certainly not broken, but one of its joints is slightly swollen. He doesn't remember hitting it on anything.

A brief worry over a relapse of the GBS comes and goes, until he can convince himself that this is not a known early symptom of the disease.

For some reason, John doesn't seem surprised when he wonders out loud what has caused such a thing. Then, John seems to hesitate before opening his mouth as though carefully considering whether it's a good idea to discuss this.

Sherlock is immediately as curious as he is alarmed. How could he have contracted an injury without noticing, and more importantly, why does John look as though he might be aware of what has happened to create it?

"How much of last night do you remember?" John asks him, delivering a cup of tea to the kitchen table next to the microscope.

"Why?"
Sherlock listens incredulously while John recounts a rather odd tale of what had transpired. At first, he's well inclined to think John is the one who had had a nightmare in which he was trying to chase Sherlock around the flat. Then again, Sherlock's neck is hurting from waking up in his usual armchair. He has no memory of getting there, but it's not the first time he's fallen asleep in a strange position in the sitting room.

Despite the contradicting evidence, he argues in his head that John must be a bit delusional.

Without a word, John lifts up his T-shirt and reveals a set of bruises starting to come out on his abdomen. It's difficult to argue against such concrete evidence. Sherlock is stunned at the sight, the black and blue marks silencing his power of speech. He'd hurt John.

"Maybe it was going back to the National for the appointment that was a bit too much? Or maybe the result of the panic attack that put you in overnight?" John suggests as bites into the toast. People always look for easy explanations, and for simplistic theories of human behaviour.

Sherlock says nothing, because he doesn't want to imply he'd be so weak as to be traumatized by a place, or by the nuisance of being admitted again. He is mortified by the fact that he can not remember what he's done to cause such damage. He's been worried for weeks that he cannot protect John from Moriarty, and now it turns out that he's an even greater threat to John than the Irishman.

He feels an urgent need to do something, to fix it, to run his hands across those bruises in a way that would erase the memory of them being created, but he doesn't know how to approach John like that, whether he'd be welcome. He doesn't know how to do such things, so it's better to focus on solving the issue behind it.

He doesn't remember what he'd dreamt about, but he does have nightmares these days, much more than he had ever done. The idea that he would hurt John during one of those is not something he'd ever considered.

John is trying to discuss the subject with the same sort of slightly amicable curiosity he has always exuded when there has been an opportunity to learn something about Sherlock he wouldn't volunteer to share. How can he be so blasé about Sherlock assaulting him? How can it not terrify John that Sherlock has no memory, no control over what had happened last night? This just adds a further level of shame to the past few days. Being admitted to a hospital ward for what turned out to be nothing but a medical red herring had been plenty enough humiliation for now. But the thought that he had done this to John, and has no memory of it is, quite frankly, terrifying.

John must've read something on his face, because he looks upset now, too. "Sherlock – it's alright. You didn't do it deliberately, none of it. Remember when I punched you in the face that one night?"

The instance that first comes to mind is when he'd explicitly provoked John to do so during the Irene Adler debacle, but when he racks his brain he is able to recall one instance about a month after they'd moved in, when he'd hurried upstairs during one of John's PTSD-fueled nightmares, and attempted to intervene. He'd received a black eye as a reward for his efforts, and the next morning John couldn't stop apologising. Sherlock hadn't been angry at all – as John had just said, not a deliberate act of violence.

He calms down, at least a bit.

"What did you dream about?" John asks, "Assuming you remember?"

Sherlock knows he had lost the plot at the National. It's just a hospital, he tries to tell himself, but
since such an attempt at self-reassurance had hardly worked in that very place, it's also unlikely to
work now. He is thoroughly embarrassed by the whole episode, and having to rely on John's highly
subjective recollections is irritating. And what does that even have to do with whatever vivid
nightmare he'd had last night? He has gleaned from the few discussions they've had of John's
PTSD that he usually remembers his own nightmares about Afghanistan very well. For Sherlock,
memory has always been a much more unreliable entity.

Still, John's question stings. If Sherlock is honest with himself, The National is not just a hospital.
He'd prefer not to think about the months he had spent there, because such memories have no right
to fill him with the dread they are currently capable of doing. They have no right whatsoever to be
able to decimate his defences like this. Seeing Doctor Johnston in that place had set off a series of
even earlier, unrelated memories, and all that had just overwhelmed him.

To put it simply, the National had ruined his life. He obviously knows that the place is only bricks
and mortar, doctors and equipment; but he can’t shake the malevolence it all seems to add up to. It
had stolen his independence, robbed him of his self-worth. Every time he thinks about it, all he can
feel is a crushing fear that nothing will ever be the same again; that due to what happened there,
watchful eyes will observe his every step, ready to pounce when he falls, because nobody believes
that he can function after going through something like that.

It's superstitious poppycock, but somehow it feels as though that place still has power over him.

"Talk to me, Sherlock. Was it the hospital?" John presses on, a piece of toast in hand.

"I don’t know what happened last night!" Sherlock snaps at him. "I can hardly be blamed for
disliking hospitals, having spent entirely too much of my life in them."

He goes through the last twenty-four hours in his head, trying to find a clue as to what could have
triggered the nightly events John had described.

After they’d left the café after his discharge from the UCLH Acute Medical unit, Sherlock had
spent the rest of the day quietly, trying to put this latest hospital debacle out of his mind. A little
violin practice had eased the tedium a bit. Under John's instructions he’d eaten a proper meal and
they’d gone to bed relatively early. Sherlock had read a forensic journal that had arrived the
previous day in the post; there was an interesting article on the ACE-V method of fingerprint
analysis in comparison to computer generated match analysis.

John was asleep by the time Sherlock turned off the light at just past midnight and settled down to
sleep. He remembers nothing else until waking up with a terrible crick in his neck, sitting in his
chair with their duvet from the bedroom thrown over him. John had been asleep on the sofa, and
somehow both their duvets had been transported to the sitting room.

"No hospital based nightmares last night that you can remember?"

Sherlock shakes his head again. "No," he replies dutifully. Couldn't John just lay off the topic?

"Did you get night terrors as a kid?" John asks, and Sherlock suspects he's fishing for some
revelation here, some grand explanation as to why, and more importantly, why now?

This is partly what Sherlock had been trying to avoid by not divulging to John his medical history –
every question now makes him suspicious that John is looking for easy answers in old diagnoses.

John probably doesn't know that he’d heard it, loud and clear, the half-joke, half-admission of
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John's, directed at Lestrade in Dartmoor, containing the word 'Asperger'.
That had only been one of labels slapped on him, only one of the things they'd tried to make fit, and it hadn't been the final one. In the end, they'd decided on the pathetically unspecific jumble of letters PDD-NOS. *Pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified.* Part of the autism spectrum, but too strange and singular to fit the usual patterns. And even that wasn't enough for the medical establishment hell bent on fitting him into neat little boxes. More labels: *selective mutism.* *Major depressive disorder of childhood with dissociative features.* Once he became a young adult, the list grew longer still.

Despite so many words written on stacks upon stacks of hospital and outpatient records, Sherlock has no answers to offer John regarding this nighttime mystery. He doesn't even remember for certain when the last time he'd had an occurrence of what may have been a night terror. At the National, he'd had some very vivid and disturbing dreams, and according to the ITU doctors he hadn't even been asleep during some of them, but how could they even tell, since he hadn't been able to move a muscle, nor had he been hooked up to an EEG?

"You were talking in some foreign language – and absolutely terrified," John muses out loud.

Sherlock dearly wants to stop talking about this. Couldn't John have latched onto some other source of potential nightmares?

Sherlock can't help worrying that not remembering what had happened, might be yet another sign that there is something seriously adrift with his cognitive function. All very unsettling, to be so unable to remember anything about what had clearly been an eventful night. One factor in why it scares him is that his memory of the early stages of 2007 is full of blackouts, not all of them caused by drugs as far as he could tell. He'd wanted to tune out of the world, to dissipate into thin air, to mute his overworked senses. He'd allowed himself to drift away to the Mind Palace, into blissful nothingness when things got too much. At some point, he'd even misplaced the Palace. During the blackouts, more time had passed than he had intended, or he found himself on the opposite side of London from where he'd set off.

John must be seeing his discomfort, because he leans across the kitchen table and takes Sherlock’s left hand in his. "It’s okay not to remember. A lot of people don’t. Just like most people don’t wake up during a night terror. It’s scary for the people around them, but it’s not an indication of mental illness. And whatever it was that had you freaked out, it was a person, not the GBS, if that's what you're worried about."

"Well, thank goodness for that," Sherlock says, letting sarcasm infuse into his voice. "I certainly have enemies queuing up for the privilege of terrifying me. I wonder which one is responsible for this little debacle? Was I speaking Irish Gaelic, by any chance?"


Fear is an oversimplification. Healthy sense of respect might be more like it. Using the word *fear* would entail the assumption that he's somehow inferior in power and skill to the man. In all honesty, he can't be entirely sure of the outcome if and when some sort of an endgame between him and Moriarty happens, but that's part of the fascination, really. Or at least it used to be, when he was still on top of his game. Now, he is forced to admit a very unsettling sort of apprehension chilling his bones when he thinks of Moriarty.

The man knows of his current state, yet he's done nothing to exploit it except for a melodramatic taunt. Sherlock had interpreted the gesture as a sign of giving up on him, but had he been wrong? Maybe Moriarty is waiting until he's back in the proverbial saddle, so that they could have some proper fun on a more equal footing?
Will that ever happen? How long is James Moriarty willing to wait until he gets bored and finds a new archenemy?

It's all pointless conjecture, and Sherlock knows that if he continues this line of thinking, he'll just get frustrated. He should get back to the more recent issue. Whatever happened last night, he does feels oddly unsettled, as if death had touched him with an icy finger and left behind an aching print somewhere he can't even see. He has no idea what to do. His shoulders are too sore to play the violin, and even if he could ignore that fact, climbing is definitely out, given his likely slightly sprained finger and the bruises John is sporting.

"Even if there aren't any specific nightmares, what about unpleasant memories? Flashbacks? Any of those?"

"What are you trying to get at?" Sherlock asks irritably.

He doesn't want to hear an answer, so to shut the conversation down he goes to lie on the sofa,. Closing his eyes, he racks his brain to come up with something to do that would be remotely interesting, but it's likely that an empty, idle, boring day looms ahead of him; he can feel the dark shadows of what must be depression amassing in the corners of the room.

John must have somehow sensed the threat, too, since he tries to distract Sherlock by returning to the case. "What have you been able to deduce from the files that Mycroft got?" An armchair creaks as John settles into it, tapping the balls of his bare feet on the floor.

Without opening his eyes, Sherlock intones, "Cross-correlating the Cardiac Unit patient list with Cole’s client list shows that the intended victim’s name is Christian Whitehead. For all the good that does, the gossip is confirmed. The man is in a terminal coma; just a matter of time before the machines are switched off, so Cole is in the clear. Knowing who he intended to kill makes absolutely no difference, because I cannot prove a thing. Not his connection to the poison, or the motive for his visitations of Whitehead." The fact adds to his gloom, and he pronounces, "The case is dead in the water."

"No, it isn't. Not when you're on it," John says sunnily.

His naïve optimism grates on Sherlock's nerves. "I can't solve it, because I can’t prove it. I told you, in some way or other, I’m not as good at it as I once was," Sherlock tries, but John doesn’t take the hint to stop talking.

"You've been good at this since the day you learned to spell 'murder'. Some cases are bound to be harder than others, especially when you're a little distracted and out of practice," John dismisses almost cheerfully.

*Condescending*. Frustration erupts and Sherlock finds he wants to wipe that smile off John's face, wants him to feel just an ounce of the crushing darkness he knows he'll have to start fighting soon if something doesn't change. What would that even be? There's no miracle cure, and it's unlikely some other case would bring back what months of rehabilitation has failed to recover – the missing piece in him, whatever that is.

"What if..." Sherlock starts and then snaps his mouth shut. He has put this into words once already, which had been terrifying, but maybe reminding John of his worry would at least stop these irritating, disheartening pep talks that serve no purpose because they're founded on aspiration rather than the hard data. Truth will out, sooner than later. After the scenes at the hospital and the confessions that have been wrung out of him, Sherlock reasons that he probably can't damage his image in John’s eyes any more than he already has. So, now just might be the time to lay it out in
black and white again. He's not entirely convinced John had taken him seriously enough at the café.

"What if… what?" John prompts.

"What if I can't ever do it again? What if there's something missing?" Sherlock practically whispers.

A silence falls as John seems to be racking his brain to understand, or to figure out what to say.

Sherlock finds himself practically holding his breath. He hadn't been certain John had taken him seriously enough the last time he'd voiced this fear. The damage has already been done, a secret unearthed, and John is still here, so he feels emboldened to talk about it again.

"That's ridiculous," John dismisses yet again. "Like I already told you, you solved it. Your chemistry isolated the murder weapon and you figured out what Cole must have done. You've done perfectly fine so far with this case. What is it that you think can't do?"

Sherlock opens his eyes and stares at the wall. "It’s all guesswork about what happened. I can only speculate on the how. How did Cole get his hands on the _gelsemium elegans_ in the first place? It’s not exactly easy to get a hold of… How did a personal trainer know enough about chemistry to extract the toxins and prepare the injections? All I’ve figured out is that Watford is either an accident or a guinea pig, and that Cole actually wants to kill a man who is already as good as dead. Most of all, I don’t know _WHY_, and that's the most important thing! There has to be a _motive_. I’m missing something so blindingly obvious that an idiot should be able to see it – but I can’t."

He sinks back onto the sofa. There it is. There's the thought that has been keeping him up along with the nightmares and the old anxieties that have always been there with him, now merely amplified by whatever this is that's been dragging his mood down lately.

He's not sure if telling John about this has been helpful at all.

Sherlock had hoped that this bit of honesty would get John off his back, but the effect seems to be the opposite.

"I know it sounds stupid but even if you lost half of those overgrown brain cells of yours, I think you'd still beat the rest of us," John says with unwavering conviction.

Sherlock just snorts.

That makes John retort, "I told you that stress and depression can chip away at concentration and cognitive skills. I know you don't put much stock in psychology, but you are aware that depression can mimic some things? Even symptoms commonly associated with severe cognitive problems?"

Sherlock stifles the urge to dismiss the insinuation that he's depressed, even if it might be true. It's pointless. A rose by any other name… "I'm aware."

"And it might not be just that, if you really do think something's wrong. They talked to you about post-intensive care syndrome at the National, didn't they? That you were in the highest risk group? Depression, concentration and memory problems and disturbing memories can be a part of that."

"Syndromes are just clusters of symptoms with a label slapped on. They don't mean anything." ASD, Guillain-Barré - it's all different for different people despite a common name. Someone had simply decided to call it that, as long as they could tick all the relevant boxes. It's the start of a flowchart that leads to prescriptions, therapy, all those things that are supposed to work but don't,
because his brain always has to be the exception.

"They offer neuropsychological testing to all patients whose ITU stay has exceeded two weeks. That's why they have a psychiatrist present at those follow-up appointments, even though it usually isn't the chief of neuropsychiatry. If you'd stayed through the appointment, they would have told you this. Actually, I'm pretty sure they covered this in your discharge discussions but you hardly seemed to be listening. I don't suppose you'd go in for that sort of testing, if only to prove that nothing's changed?"

"Hardly," Sherlock says dismissively.

"But you'd want to know, right? Because if there's something that you think is making you off your game, I haven't seen it yet. But, if the idea of that risk is bringing you down, I'm sure something can be done to fix it. There are therapists---"

Again, that word. "Do not mention therapy or treatment to me again. Ever," Sherlock says icily.

A silence falls in the sitting room.

It reigns for almost ten minutes before John speaks again. "Well, I don't know about you, but I haven't thrown in the towel, and I'm not going to let you either. I have an idea," John says. "How about we lay some ghosts? I think we both could use a bit of that."

Sherlock is vaguely alarmed at the idea, without even having heard any details. John can probably read it on his face, but he doesn't say anything.

Suspicion flares. "What have you got in mind?"

"Trust me?"

Given what he has been willing to share with John over the past two days, Sherlock wonders how the man can even ask that question. And quite frankly, lying on the sofa in a sulk is not going to make things any better. So, he gets dressed, hoping that the sense of anxiety in the pit of his stomach will ease once he finds out the details of John's grand plan.
Once they're out on the kerb on Baker Street, Sherlock asks again, "Where are we going?"

"A crime scene, of sorts." John flags the taxi down and they get in.

"Why?"

"To maybe prove a point."

Sherlock is tempted to tell John that's his line, usually. He's not sure why he doesn't. There seems to be so much going on in his head, so many what-ifs and analyses of where they might be going, and the nervousness is taking up at least half of his brain cells. *Hateful.* Unexpected things and surprises and mysteries never used to have this effect on him. Yet another thing that has been lost somewhere along the way. He doubts that wherever they're going, any of it is going to be found. He also hopes that John isn't planning on taking up a habit of dragging him to mystery locations. First Ascent had been one thing, but…

"Queen Square, please," John tells the driver.

Sherlock is momentarily confused as to why they'd want to head into the city, but then he remembers what lies next to the square – the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery.

He leans forward to order their cabbie to stop, but John puts a hand on his knee. "You said you trust me. Can you just hold onto that thought?"

"I trust you more than anyone else in my life, but there are limits, John," Sherlock argues. John just holds his gaze until Sherlock gives in, and leans back against the seat.

Sherlock finds he doesn't remember much about the National outside the general neurology ward and the MITU. He had paid uncharacteristically little attention to his surroundings when he'd first been brought in to be admitted, too distracted and distressed. Two days ago, when they’d returned for the follow-up appointment, he’d been so keyed up that every sensation was so heightened that he could hardly make any sense of the building. Most of his recollections from that visit consist of nothing but the overwhelming anxiety he'd felt following John down the corridors.

This time, the place at least feels slightly different. No one is expecting them. He isn't here to stay, or even to be examined. John hasn't revealed the details of whatever his plan here is, but maybe they're just here to take a walk around. That probably wouldn't alarm him too much. More accurately, it *shouldn't* alarm him.

They take the lift up to the seventh floor in the east wing. When it stops and the doors open, John
takes his hand and begins walking towards the westward-facing corridor.

There's something familiar about it. Sherlock is quite certain they're headed back to where his appointment had been held, but in the end John makes a right turn when Sherlock thought they should have gone left.

They arrive at a pair of plexi-glass doors. A sign glued to the wall above them says MITU.

Sherlock tries to wrench away his hand from John's grip, but John isn't letting him.

Why are they---- why would John do this to him? Had he not heard a single word Sherlock had just told him over breakfast?

His heart rate is already picking up. He knows that he's not being admitted again, he's not returning, that whatever John has in mind he isn't going to strand him here, but Sherlock still feels as though he's losing his footing.

Their eyes meet. "I think you need to do this," John says.

"I don't need to do anything," Sherlock dismisses, and his own voice sounds strange in his ears.

"When we walk through those doors it's on your terms. Yours, and yours alone. You can walk in, and walk out, on your own two feet. You are not here as a patient."

"This is a pointless exercise," Sherlock says petulantly, grabbing the lapels of his anger for support.

John smiles. "The fact that you look like you've just seen a ghost proves otherwise. How about we put that ghost to rest, yeah? Maybe it would visit you less at night." There's a bit of humour in John's tone, but no mockery at all.

Sherlock has faced terrorists, assassins, serial killers, wild animals and Moriarty. Surely he can walk through a door? Why is John so convinced that it's this place and not something else that's wrecking his sleep?

John doesn't wait for his answer before buzzing the doorbell. John is still holding his hand, thumb making gentle circles on his wrist. Sherlock tries to focus on that instead of the letters above the door, tries to let the repeating movement ground him. It doesn't seem to be working.

The doors unlock and swing open. A nurse he realises he vaguely remembers can be seen from the doorway, sitting in front of a reception desk.

He doesn't really remember this area. It's some sort of a main corridor. John clearly does, judging by the determination with which he's already traversing it, pulling Sherlock along.

He should put a stop to this, walk out, leave John here to converse with the past all he wants. Isn't this the opposite of what they're supposed to be doing, trying to put it all behind them? Trying to forget about it all?

"Doctor Watson, hi!" the nurse says, and seems to only then realize who else is facing her. "Wow. Sherlock?"

Sherlock swallows. "Afternoon."

"Josie, could I have a word?" John asks, and she nods.
Sherlock hates the easy, familiar way in which John was and is interacting with these people. It makes him feel like they're the enemy, somehow. A conspiracy of fake kindness, designed to blackmail patients into submission, to enforce arbitrary rules that are designed to make their working shifts easier instead of making the patients' lives more bearable.

Medical science is fine. It's the practical part Sherlock has had enough of, especially when applied to him.

An overwhelming urge to walk out and throw a lit match over his shoulder to torch it all in a glorious inferno of destruction comes on. He turns back toward the doors, gazing at them in alarm and longing.

The sudden movement makes John turn slightly to see what he's up to. He gives Sherlock's fingers a little squeeze. "Wait here," he instructs, then extricates his hand. He then follows Josie out of the area to an adjoining room, the doors of which close with a metallic click behind them.

The noise feels sharp in Sherlock's ears, and seems to echo even when it couldn't have. He runs a shaky hand through his curls and loosens his scarf. He can't decide whether being left alone in the small waiting area makes him feel better or worse. He lets his gaze wander around it. The ghastly plastic chairs that seem to clutter every NHS facility are empty – most visitors to MITU patients come after office hours, after a work or school day has finished.

He tells himself he feels fine, trying to repeat it like a mantra. He should be fine. This is just a hospital ward. Just a rather boring, pastel-coloured, anonymous waiting room. Nothing to it.

John returns in a moment. "We're in luck. Your old room is empty at the moment," he tells Sherlock, pointing towards a room with the number seven on the door. "They're not expecting a new admission until late this afternoon."

Luck isn't the word Sherlock would have used to describe any of this. It actually takes a moment to parse what John has just said. It's not a good sign. Not being able to process such messages as quickly as he normally does means that he's getting overwhelmed.

He fingers his scarf, not even sure if he's trying to take it off and retie it. He's not entirely sure what----

There's a sudden pressure on his arms. His head snaps up, and his finds himself looking straight into John's bright, blue eyes.

"Talk to me," John says, or at least Sherlock is almost sure those had been the words. Everything sounds distorted, as though trying to speak underwater.

He's vaguely aware he needs to breathe, but he isn't quite sure how to go about doing that. The panic is coming, it's waiting for him, like a shadow at the edge of his vision, and he's determined not to let it in. He'll do anything to stop it this time. There's not going to be a repeat of what had happened four days ago. How is it that he can remember that, but not the last five minutes?

What was he supposed to do just now? John wanted him to do something, and he needs to do it, if he could just remember where he is. He feels strangely light, and distant, and unreal.

"Stay. No Mind Palace. Look at me." John's words are a little clearer this time. "You don't have to disappear. We can do this."

Sherlock blinks, and draws a breath. John's gaze feels sharp, piercing, but not in a threatening way. It feels like something to hold on to. A fixed point in a spinning, distorting universe.
"You're not all right, but you don't have to be. It's fine. You'll be fine," John says, and shakes him gently where he's gripped Sherlock by his biceps. That's what the pressure had been. "Words, please," John commands.

"I want to go," Sherlock hears himself saying. It feels like listening to a tape recording of himself. There's a white emptiness waiting for him, and it must be better than wherever John is trying to take him. The panic isn't here yet. There's still time.

"No, because if we leave now, you'll spend the rest of your life on that same runner."

There could be anything behind that door, Sherlock realizes, and a hysterical laugh escapes and evaporates into the air. Anyone could be in there. Moriarty. Himself, lying in a hospital bed. Maybe he is still there, and this is just a dream he's having. It's not a very nice one. What's the point of dreaming about a place where he still is? It's the most logical explanation, really.

"Sherlock, you're scaring me a little."

John somehow gets him to sit in a chair. He leans his head between his knees, and after a moment, the thin mist that seems to have descended on everything begins to dissipate. He doesn't remember feeling like this before. Usually, when he steps outside himself, it ends with the fear and the darkness taking over anyway, and then his memory gets cut, and he wakes up God-knows-where, most often in restraints on a trolley in some emergency room.

He looks up. There's no darkness here. Just John, looking expectant with his frown lines and ready-for-action posture.

"Do you know where you are?"

Of course he does. There's nothing wrong with him, or is there? "The National."

John sits down next to him, patting his knee. "Exactly. Care to share what happened just now?"

Sherlock doesn't know how to explain it, he never has. It's like two halves of him trying to best one another. The other one usually wins, takes over, wrenches control from him and that never leads to anything good. This time, it's like he'd hopped off the train before it collided with anything. Something had drawn him back before he lost control. Maybe he had believed, just for a fraction of a second, that he could swim against the overwhelming tide, that he could fight. That he wasn't helpless like that.

Sherlock glances around the corridor they're in, taking in the boring art, the skirting boards scraped by endless hits from industrial vacuum cleaners, the antiseptic smell and the distant sounds of monitors going off in the distance. The MITU.

"It hardly matters what you call it," he tells John.

"But it's passed?"

To Sherlock's astonishing, it has. He nods.

John stands up. "Ready, then?" he extends an arm, which Sherlock doesn't take. He does rise from the chair onto slightly unsteady legs.

He follows John wordlessly down the short stretch of corridor to room number seven. It doesn't look familiar, standing in front of its door, since Sherlock had mostly looked out from inside of it, instead of looking in from the corridor.
John opens the door and they slip in.

Sherlock draws a deep breath, expecting a barrage of memories to hit him, to knock down his precarious equilibrium with a sensory firestorm.

Nothing happens.

It's just an empty hospital room.

There's an MITU bed with crisp, polyester hospital sheets and a folded-up NHS blanket at the foot of it. A respirator with its monitor dark sits behind it, only a small green blinking LED light marking that it's in standby mode.

It's quiet and dim, since John hasn't turned on the lights.

"This is it?" Sherlock asks, almost disappointed. He glances up at the ceiling.

It's just a white ceiling. Nothing more. It could be any white ceiling. There's nothing significant or memorable about it. It's preposterous, really, how many moments he'd spent reliving the memory of looking at it.

This is not his room anymore. It had once been a room in which he had existed, but it is no longer relevant to him. He isn't coming back here. Even if the GBS did relapse, he'd in all likelihood be somewhere else, some other ward. It wouldn't, couldn't be the same, because he would have already gone through it once. He'd be different, changed by the fact that he now knows what it's like. That makes him better prepared.

"It's---" he says, and frowns, unsure of what adjective could possibly convey everything that's going through his head.

He doesn't inspect the room more closely, doesn't walk up to the bed, doesn't look in the wardrobe. He doesn't need to. There's nothing important to be found there. There are no pieces of him hidden under the floorboards, etched onto the wall or hidden between the sheets. Nothing of him remains here. Not even the memories – it's he who's preserving them, not this anonymous space.

"The same?" John suggests.

"No, it's--- yes, the same, but different." It isn't a room that belongs to anyone, least of all him. It's waiting for another patient, a space in between, a blank canvas for other people's stories. Not his story, not now.

"It's not mine anymore," he says, and John nods.

He'd been carrying this place in his dreams, dragging it around like a chain around his ankle – for no reason at all.

"Not yours; not mine. It wasn't easy," John says, "being here with you."

Sherlock lets his gaze linger in the empty bed. He tries to imagine what John would have seen, all those weeks of watching him. "No, I imagine it wasn't."

"I know I kept telling you it was going to be fine, but I thought that maybe---" suddenly John's voice breaks a little, and he pauses. "You were still on the respirator. We couldn't know what was going to---- If I told you, if I let the truth out, let it happen, and then you left me, I don't know what I would have done." John's words are imprecise, and rather confusing.
"Tell me what?" Sherlock breathes out. He thinks he knows what John is talking about, but he can't be sure. He isn't very good at reading between the lines, never has been. He tends to misinterpret, get things wrong. And how could he have left the room in that state? To go where? Or does John mean---- yes, he does.

"If I had been the one who told you what I think you were trying to tell me; what you've been trying to tell me for a long time. What you did tell me, in the winter garden. If I let us happen, and you----" John’s voice trails off, now breaking completely. He turns his face away from Sherlock.

Sherlock is speechless. He hadn't realized that not all of the ghosts lingering here would be his own. Some of them belong to John. Or Mycroft, even. He'd been so wrapped up in his own fear that he'd failed to realise coming back here wouldn't be easy for John, either.

"You can say it. It's not like I wasn't thinking about it," Sherlock points out. He feels strangely calm, which makes it doubly odd that he's the one consoling John, now.

"I wasn't going to tell you, and then watch you die. I couldn't, I'm sorry, I----" John inhales sharply, clearly fighting against an intense onslaught of emotion.

"I told you, because I couldn't lose you," Sherlock says. John gives him a smile, relief lighting his eyes now, but Sherlock raises his hand in protest. "I didn't tell you because it was the right moment to do so, I told you because I had to. Because eventually, you'd leave, unless I did something about it."

"I don't understand."

Sherlock gives him a half-hearted eyeroll with a smirk. "You rarely do."

John is clearly expecting him to explain further, so he continues. "I never believed us would happen. At the National, I thought I had nothing to lose anymore, if you disappeared, too. Molly caught on, unfortunately."

John's face falls and Sherlock realizes that last word may have been an unfortunate choice. "Well, not unfortunately, but she did force my hand. I didn't want to have that discussion at a point when it wasn't really a discussion."

"Are you saying that we'd never have got together if it weren't for the GBS?" John looks wary, as though anticipating a blow.

"No. What I'm saying is that if it hadn't been for the GBS, I'd have let fear keep me from telling you what I wanted. Maybe indefinitely. I don't like the timing, but the sentiment--- what?"

John laughs. It's a bit hollow, but genuine. "Sentiment. You're an arse, you know, with your word choices. You make it sound like a disease."

"I'm sure Mycroft would agree that the human condition is just that, an unfortunate byproduct of evolution, but it is what we must put up with." He sighs theatrically. "What I was saying was that it's real. It always was. Long before the GBS."

"I know. I think I've known for a long time already," John says, looking at the empty bed before them.

Sherlock grabs John's hand and entwines his fingers with John's. "We can go now," he says.

"We're not leaving on my account. We'll stay as long as you need to," John says. He slides his
fingers out of Sherlock's hand, steps closer to the bed and runs his fingers along the backrest of the chair next to the bed as though idly checking for dust.

*John's chair,* Sherlock's memory provides. It might not be the same one, but if there's a chair placed next to this particular bed in this particular room, in some it will always be John's chair.

John leans on the backrest, eyes locked onto the bed like they had been so many times before.

John lets out a disturbing sort of a chuckle, almost a distorted sob. "Jesus. I thought I was over it. Sorry. This isn't about me. Looks like we could both use a bit of whatever that timeout was that you had in the hall."

The choice of word is odd. Sherlock remembers times when he has welcomed, even hoped for such a state – a chance to opt out of where he was, of a situation that threatened to plunge him into a meltdown. As a child, he'd even become rather good at stepping out of himself when the world got too much, but then the adults began sternly telling him he shouldn't use that escape hatch, that it wasn't good or healthy. But staying wasn't, either. He did as he was told, and it got bad. Bad enough for the first round of psychiatrists and therapists and neurologists and assessments and tests.

He had learned to control it later, with the help of some of the only mental health professionals he has any respect for, but he hasn't needed those skills for years. He'd forgot how to do it. Somehow, John had reminded him. *Concentrate. Find a safe, steady, stable thing in a spinning universe. Focus on it.* He'd reached a crux, a dead point, and he knew he had to move forward, backtracking was not an option and falling was failure, so he let the momentum take him forward, knowing that John would always be there, belaying.

Here, in that bed, there had been no escape from himself. No way to let off steam, no way to channel his anxiety into physical things. It kept gathering, he kept pushing it away. When it was all still happening, it was easy to hold onto fight-or-flight, survival instincts triumphing over anxiety. After he began to get better, he got worse in other ways. Maybe what they had been prescribing him had helped, maybe not – they certainly hadn't helped with the paralyzing feeling of loss that coloured everything dull and grey. It was either that, or the anxiety, that ruled his days at Harwich. Then, he had come home, and something had snapped. Be it the medication withdrawal, or simply his anger at having been robbed of the life he'd painstakingly constructed, the end result had been the same – it had been too much. And he didn't know how to tell anyone about it. He didn't want to, because his earlier attempts of trying to communicate such things had led to his own personal versions of hell.

It's no use trying to pretend the GBS never happened. It did, but it's over now. It wasn't the illness that almost broke him, *he* did, by assuming that there were no other options besides ruin and perfection. He hadn't made any deliberate mistakes, he'd simply tried to keep up with his tailspinning brain.

The GBS happened, nothing about it can be changed now, but he needs to stop thinking he never left this room, or that this room doesn't even exist.

"If we second-guess everything we've ever done, that's all we'll be doing," Sherlock says. "And I, for one, do not want to waste a single minute more of time on that."

John pushes himself up a little stiffly, squaring his shoulders. He steps close, wraps his arms around Sherlock's shoulders and presses the two of them together. "I love you," he tells Sherlock's half-upturned collar where he has buried his face, and the words seem to create a knot somewhere in Sherlock's solar plexus.
They stay there, holding each other, for what probably is a long time but feels like seconds compared to how much time they’ve wasted denying this was what they’d wanted.

Eventually, they separate, but the connection is still there even when their bodies pull apart, always has been and always will be.

They walk out of the door, neither stealing so much as a glance behind as they head out of the MITU to the lifts. While they wait for one to arrive, Sherlock thinks about what he had expected to see when he opened the hospital room, and for some reason that takes him off on a tangent about what Aiden Cole would think when they finally let him see his intended victim, Christian Whitehead – in a permanent coma and unable to reveal his secret. He imagines the man’s relief.

"OH!"

John takes another step before he realises that Sherlock has stopped dead in his tracks.

"John." He breathes out the name, his mind racing with the brilliance of what has just occurred to him.

There's instant alarm in John’s eyes, which Sherlock banishes with a shake of his head. "No, there's nothing wrong. In fact, something very, very right," he announces.

Their eyes meet, the connection there electric with a familiar sort of giddy anticipation.

It's a glorious sort of déjà vu. Oh, he's missed this.

"I know how to really solve the case."

Chapter End Notes

Due to Seven's much-deserved holiday trip, there will be a slight hiatus in new chapters. You should expect the next chapter at around the 14th April.

J. Baillier will stay put here to listen to all laments and to offer virtual cookies and support to those suffering from acute rack withdrawal (she herself will probably suffer from it, too, since a 7PercentSolution is a hard habit to kick). *grin*
"Are you sure this isn’t bothering you?" John asks quietly, keeping a careful eye on Sherlock.

Even though he feels that something positive had certainly been gained from their visit to the MITU at the National, John can't shake the worry that after the intense events of the past few days, sitting in yet another hospital room in the dark, listening to the sound of a respirator breathing for someone, could well trigger unpleasant memories.

"Not a problem." Even though he's whispering as well, Sherlock sounds focused, sharp, like a hound on the scent of his prey.

John is surprised yet again by how the man is able to put so much of what should annoy or distress him aside when a case demands it. That sort of a single-minded, tunnel-vision-like extreme focus isn't alien to John himself – it's a vital ingredient to being able to function as a battle surgeon and a soldier, but Sherlock's control had been slipping so much lately. They might have laid a ghost or two to rest at the National Hospital for Neurology & Neurosurgery this afternoon, but the current situation might well be a test to destruction for the focus Sherlock appears to have regained.

Listening to the pneumatic thumps and hisses of the ventilator and the occasional beeps of the monitors above the head of the bed of Christian Whitehead, John has to fight off his own sense of déjà vu. He had sat through far too many long nights like this beside Sherlock's bed not to feel uncomfortable about this scenario, too. Mere days ago, John had endured yet another hospital night next door at the Acute Care Unit.

As counterintuitive as it might seem, after telling Mycroft to do the very opposite, John has decided he needs to keep a closer eye on certain things involving Sherlock's recovery. He can't exactly control all the stressors, but he can and will make sure that the issue with quitting the medications cold turkey is remedied. It had actually been John’s sole condition for this little expedition: "You will take these, or it isn’t happening," he had told Sherlock at home, blister sheet of pregabalin in his outstretched hand, while they waited for word from Lestrade whether Sherlock's plan would be approved.

John's insistence had earned him a glare and a huff, but Sherlock had acquiesced after John had reminded him that the medication was a logical risk factor to what had been going on. Then he had told Sherlock in no uncertain terms that Lestrade would be updated on the situation, because there was a potential inbuilt risk for the plan going bust, if Sherlock couldn't keep it together. John doubts going back on the lowered dose of pregabalin would impact Sherlock's performance much in just two days. He'd been put back on it at the hospital.

"I'm not telling this to Lestrade because I want to embarrass you. He needs to know that I might have to pull the plug if this turns out to be a disaster and you won't agree to abort."

Sherlock had thrown the tablets back with half a glass of water that John had run him from the tap. "Anything to get you off my back while we have work to do."

John would have expected a lot more anger inbuilt into the statement, but Sherlock's determined focus on the Work had come to his rescue. That, or Sherlock is finally willing to work with him on this. On getting better. On getting back on track. On finding out together, what would grow out of the seeds they had planted in the winter garden.
Eventually, Lestrade managed to pull the necessary strings. It had taken him some time to present
the new information concerning the murder weapon to his superiors, and the Coroner's ruling still
weighed against continuing with the Watford case, but the bargaining chip of trying to prevent
another death had such a promising PR angle that the higher-ups begrudgingly agreed in the end.

Now, an hour later, they were back at the UCLH, waiting patiently in one of the rooms at the
Cardiac Unit. It’s a two-bed isolation room, into which the hapless Christian Whitehead was
transferred at the request of the Metropolitan Police moments before the two of them had arrived.
The other bed is empty and curtained off, providing John and Sherlock with both a comfortable
seat and a perfect hiding place.

Lestrade had tried to convince Sherlock to let two officers handle the stakeout from inside the
room, but John knew this would be a pointless argument. No matter if the Met is involved, this is
Sherlock's case. He had brought it this far, so it's only fair that he be the one to trigger the
endgame. Usually Sherlock just darts off to confront suspects without asking for permission –
maybe Lestrade is happy that he is collaborating, for once.

The unit’s head nurse and duty doctor had been brought into the briefing that had happened some
twenty minutes earlier to make sure what was required did not endanger the life of the terminally
ill patient.

"A nurse who has preferably interacted with Cole before will make a call to him. She’s to tell him
that the patient has recovered consciousness, and that he wants to talk to the police as soon as
possible. The story is that the doctors want him to recover a bit before that happens, so an interview
has been set up for tomorrow morning at nine o’clock, which is when they will be here to take a
statement," Sherlock had announced.

Doctor Pennington, the head of the unit who had been dragged back in from home to oversee the
proceedings, had looked more than a bit sceptical. "A patient waking up from a coma is likely to be
incoherent for days, if not weeks. It’s not like on TV, you know, especially with irreparable
hypoxic brain damage. He wouldn’t be able to talk or make much sense even if he somehow
miraculously regained consciousness."

John had opened his mouth to agree, but Sherlock rolled his eyes. "That’s highly irrelevant. Aiden
Cole might be just barely able to tell the difference between a vial of steroids and a packet of
biscuits, but he's not a medical expert, nor is he much of a thinker in any sense of the word. He is
very likely to swallow the bait without a second thought, to think that this is his one chance to
make sure that Whitehead doesn’t ever get to talk to the police. At this point he’ll be convinced that
once he does this final thing, he's got himself off the hook, so the shock will be double, making
him potentially panic – even worse than he did with Watford. Precisely because he probably
watches the same inane soap operas that all idiots do, is why he will show up tonight with murder
on his mind, convinced that Whitehead has, in fact, woken up like some badly written fictional
character." This soliloquy was delivered in rapid fire, almost like a deduction, and John wondered
if it was a sign of how keyed up Sherlock is. Would this be an anxious sort of worked up, or the
better kind?

The hospital had not been keen on the idea in the first place, but they could hardly refuse the
police. Still, they had some level of power over the practicalities. Their duty of care to the patient
meant they were aghast at the idea of Whitehead being in the room where the trap was to be laid.
"Why not just put a police officer in an ITU bed? Or either one of you?" Dr Pennington had asked,
glancing at Sherlock and John. "He looks about the right height and hair colour," he had said,
nodding at Sherlock.
The suggestion had run a shiver down John's spine. John himself could easily have played that role, but even raising the suggestion that they'd put Sherlock in a position like that-----

Thankfully, Sherlock had only snorted, seemingly unaffected. "You’ve said that this patient is never going to recover consciousness, so the risk of further harm should be academic."

Dr Pennington gapes. "Even though we're about to withdraw care, it doesn't mean we could risk a criminal administering what constitutes as euthanasia!"

John steps between the doctor and Sherlock. "The murderer has known that his victim is on a respirator for the past three weeks. Christian Whitehead was his client – he'll know instantly if it's the right person in that bed. If he doesn't see the correct patient, and the respirator working like it should when he walks in the door, he'll simply make a run for it, and the whole thing unravels."

Dr Pennington hadn't been happy, but he couldn't argue against the logic in what John had told him. He had insisted on some precautions that would keep Cole from getting access to Whitehead's IV. After all that was done, the selected nurse was sent to make the call.

It was agreed that Lestrade and Sergeant Donovan would be sitting and waiting outside in the reception area alongside the nurses’ station, trying to pass as visitors about to be ushered in to some other room to see a patient.

"At least this is more comfortable than most of the stakeouts I’ve endured with him," Sally had commented, cocking her head towards the DI as she had sat down, grabbing a magazine from a small table nearby. "He usually seems to specialise in dark, wet and miserable abandoned warehouses. I've had to chuck at least three pairs of perfectly good trousers out because the sewer smell stuck."

CSE Anderson has been sent down to the cafeteria at Sherlock's insistence to wait, assuming that there will be evidence to recover. "Cole comes in and sees him, and the whole thing's blown," Sherlock had announced.

"I only just got here! What did I do this time?" Anderson had grumbled, only to be ignored.

Since they had been unable to otherwise prove Cole's connection to the toxin, the plan is to catch the murderer red-handed – with gelsemine in a syringe about to be injected into the patient’s IV port. They had to catch him in the act, so that they could extract a confession and get the proof they needed to convict him for Watford’s murder.

"When Cole knows that he will be convicted for attempted murder, it will be easier to get him to tell us the truth about Watford, too," Sherlock had declared. Evidence that was only circumstantial before, would become the basis of a conviction, if Cole showed up here carrying the murder weapon.

So, here they are, then: waiting for the personal trainer to show up. Unbeknownst to Cole, a small video camera has been installed in the curtain rail, connected to a laptop on the bedside cabinet next to the empty bed, giving John and Sherlock a perfect view of Whitehead. The only light in the room is a small reading light switched on beside the occupied bed. The trap is set.

Nurse Saunders had slipped into the room some time earlier to inform them that Cole had taken the bait, saying he’d be there for the evening visiting hours starting at 7.30. The night staff had come on shift, but Doctor Pennington had decided to stay, because he was worried that something might go wrong.
He isn’t the only one worried. The longer they sit in the dark, the more time there is for the adrenaline to be diluted by boredom and for them to acclimatise to the initial excitement. No longer being so on edge means that thoughts start to wander.

Sherlock is drumming his fingertips on the lowered side railing of the bed they’re sitting on.

John glances at the monitor again. Whitehead looks peaceful, lost to the world, but it is still a very close re-enactment of Sherlock’s worst fears, just behind the curtain. Sherlock must have realized that while he’d lain at the MITU, helpless under the grip of the Guillain-Barré, Moriarty or some other enemy could have simply slipped into the room and finished him off exactly like they're now expecting Cole to try to do. All it would have required was the push of a button, an injection into an IV port, or taking a knife to the intubation tube for Sherlock's life to end.

John forces himself to stop thinking about it, lest he get spooked enough to feel the need to get out of the room.

Sherlock seems fine. Maybe he has… acclimatised? After all, this is not the same ITU he'd been in, and he had mostly been able to control his nerves at the Acute Care unit. What is more, despite the rocky start, John thinks their visit to the National had gone rather well, considering. He had probably been the more emotional one, once they'd made their way into Sherlock's old room. John is determined not to be embarrassed by it. They both needed that visit, more than he’d realised.

He pats the knee next to his own, and sees Sherlock sharply look up at him, but then Sherlock’s phone vibrates, stealing his attention. He’d put it on top of the bedside cabinet, beside the laptop.

John leans closer to see the message, and Sherlock turns the screen so he can read it, too. It's from Lestrade.

[19.31] Cole is on his way in.

Sherlock switches the phone onto record mode. "Belt and braces, just in case something goes wrong with the video. Get the camera ready." John grabs the digital camera that he’d borrowed from the Forensic team and switches it on, selecting the flash mode and non-tripod setting from the programme. He obviously couldn't bring his gun, or any other sort of weapon, but they can use this to stun their suspect.

On the other side of the closed curtain, they hear the door to the room being opened, and footsteps enter. John's heart kicks into a frantic rhythm.

"Hey, Chris. Are you awake? The nurse said…" Cole’s voice is cheery, as if greeting an old friend, before the sentence is left unfinished. They hear Cole move about in the room, probably confused as to why Whitehead isn't acknowledging him in any way.

In a completely different tone, the personal trainer continues quietly. "Asleep, then. Sorry, mate, but I can't have you ruining everything," he mutters so quietly John can barely make out the words.

Sherlock is watching the laptop screen as intently as John is, since it now shows Cole approaching the side of the bed.

The IV tubing that actually does attach to Whitehead's central line has been carefully hidden out of sight, the infusor pumps placed in a basket underneath the bed. The regular drip hanging from a pole and taped to Whitehead's arm doesn't actually have a cannula - it's been cut off, leaving just a port taped to the skin. No connection to the vasculature. There's still the risk that Cole wouldn't even try to use a port, simply injecting into a muscle or subcutaneous tissue. After all, that's likely
how the poison had been administered to Watford. Still, using the IV would be easiest to hide. They are close enough to Whitehead to stop Cole either way, but they need to wait until the trainer actually tries to do the deed.

While they were creating this plan, John had raised the subject that instead of coming armed with another fatal injection, Cole might just try to smother his victim with something or just turn off the respirator, assuming he knew how it worked. Sherlock had agreed that it was possible, but that, too, would raise some unpleasant questions as to what had happened in the room during Cole’s visit. All in all, it did seem very likely he’d use what had already worked once in letting him off the hook; namely, the gelsemine.

Sherlock’s logic, as usual, turns out to be impeccable. Cole reaches into his pocket and pulls out a capped syringe, and then fumbles with a packaged needle. There is a moment when John can’t see clearly what is going on, but soon Sherlock stirs beside him, then nods once.

John lifts the camera, Sherlock quickly drags the curtain aside, and John starts shooting frame after frame, with the flash lighting up the room like a bolt of lightning. "Now!" John yells to signal Lestrade and Donovan.

Stunned, Cole freezes for a split second, and this gives just enough time for Sherlock to take two steps forward and grab the man’s wrist, shoving it well away in front of him before whipping his left arm up and across to get the man into a throat lock.

"DROP IT."

The baritone command is loud and firm, but instinct seems to kick in and Cole struggles against the choke hold, using his extra weight to slam Sherlock into the IV pole and then against the bed’s metal bars.

Another one of the fears that John has been playing with in his mind during their wait behind the curtain now seems to be coming true – that Cole would resist and Sherlock, still not up to his full strength, could end up hurt or worse: injected with the gelsemine.

John hardly stops to think and simply reacts: he wields the camera as a weapon, connecting with the side of Cole’s temple in a rather sickening crunch.

The man goes down as if pole-axed, and Sherlock lets him fall, keeping well clear of the syringe that clatters out of Cole’s now listless hand, rolling under the hospital bed.

The door to the corridor is thrown open and Lestrade charges in, with Donovan right behind him. The overhead fluorescent lights are flicked on and for a moment, John’s eyes are nearly blinded before he can blink them back into use. The camera flash had already burnt transient red shadows on his retinas.

"You alright?" he asks Sherlock, his voice slightly breathless.

"Of course. Lestrade: the murder weapon is under the bed. I’d say we have more than enough to convict him." He bends over the crumpled form of the personal trainer. "You might want to get Doctor Pennington in here, too. John might well have fractured his skull a bit with Anderson’s camera."

"A bit?" Lestrade asks incredulously.

Donovan goes back out the door and yells for medical assistance. "Man down in here – we need a doctor!"
Lestrade peers at Cole’s bloody temple and gives John a startled look, “What happened to the doctor’s motto, do no harm and all that?” he asks with the ghost of a grin.

John shakes his head. "Not when the guy’s waving a lethal weapon around." He’s not about to apologise for taking a man down – this isn't the first time for that in their line of work, and it won't be the last. Risking Sherlock is not on.

The crime scene takes a while to clear up. The central figure, Christian Whitehead, remains sadly oblivious to the whole thing.

John shares a cup of coffee with Doctor Pennington after Cole has been strapped to a trolley and carted off to A&E, now semi-conscious.

"You mentioned withdrawing care from Whitehead?" John asks.

"MRI shows catastrophic hypoxic-ischaemic damage that extends to the brain stem. We took our time with trying to find living relatives, but it turns out that he was originally a foster kid whose parents are dead, and there are no siblings. He doesn't keep in touch with any of his foster families. The only visitors he's had are Mr Cole and a neighbour looking after his dog. We have the medical grounds for going ahead, so tomorrow we'll do brain death tests."

"Organ donor?" John asks.

Dr Pennington's mouth tightens to a regretful line. "Hardly. He would have needed a new heart himself. He was being considered to be put on that transplant list, but he didn't pass the psych eval – they thought the steroids had made him too volatile, and the way he felt about modifying his physique wasn't thought to bode well for looking after a donor organ. Psych Reg who talked to him said that it still seemed more important for him to look ripped than to be healthy."

Pennington recounts further details of Whitehead's illness. Most of it John has already heard from Sherlock, but he's not going to admit to them illicitly obtaining Whitehead's medical records. As far as Doctor Pennington knows, they've been watching Cole's movements and that's how they began to suspect he might be after Whitehead, too.

The organ damage discovered in Whitehead mirrors that found in Watford's body.

The Crime Scene Examiners waste no time in bagging the syringe most likely containing gelsemine. One of them is discussing something with Sherlock, their interactions looking rather business-like. John reasons that they probably want to now know everything Sherlock can tell them about the poison.

Lestrade walks up to John and Pennington, phone in hand. He has found out from A&E that Cole has been diagnosed with a concussion. He's conscious, and his memory gap is negligible. The officer who had gone with Cole will shortly be formally arresting him. He will stay overnight under guard at UCLH, and once he is deemed to be well enough, he will be released into police custody to await questioning regarding the murder of Mark Watford and attempted murder of Christian Whitehead.

Sherlock returns to John's side, looking more unabashedly smug than John has seen him in months.
and months. Sherlock extracts a promise from Lestrade that both he and John will be permitted to attend the interrogation. The DI makes no attempt to argue. They wouldn't have a case, or a suspect, without Sherlock. John hopes even Sherlock will finally start to accept that as a fact and to find some encouragement in it.

Sherlock doesn't seem to be in a hurry to leave. John doesn't suggest doing so, either. He wants Sherlock to enjoy every possible minute he can to bask in the limelight of success. He deserves it. Once they get more cases and more triumphs will come along, he can start jibing the man for a bloated ego, but tonight, Sherlock needs such a confidence boost. It's been so long since he has probably felt like this, and it shows on his face.

Finally, they walk out of the UCL towards the queue waiting for a taxi.

"You really didn't need to hit him that hard, John. I was in control of the situation," Sherlock says in a composed tone, but there's a hint of a grin quirking up his lips.

John sniffs and crinkles his nose. "That's what you always say. I wasn't going to leave anything to chance. I've only just got you back, so I'm not risking a single fucking hair on your head ever again," he says, and perhaps his tone may have been a bit more possessive than necessary.

Sherlock doesn't seem to mind.

There is so much going on in John's head: giddiness from adrenaline, relief, pride, admiration, a bit of residual worry and most of all, the fact that they're fine, and he sure as hell doesn't want to see another hospital room for a while.

Sherlock seems amused when they get into the back of a taxi. John opens his mouth to give their address, but Sherlock cuts in with a sharp, superior baritone. When the cabbie acknowledges the order, Sherlock leans back and starts to chuckle. "Did you see the look on Anderson's face when you handed him back his camera in pieces?"

John is on the same adrenaline high that Sherlock is enjoying and can't help but let out an unabashed giggle, too. "He looked like he was going to cry when you told him that it would have to be used as evidence, given the blood and hair still on the lens."

"It's only fair – he already hates me, now you'll get to enjoy that, too."

John shakes his head, still chuckling.

"Still, jokes aside, there's still the issue of where Cole got the gelsemine," Sherlock muses.

John groans theatrically. "Not tonight, please. We caught him. He's going down, even if they never find any of that out. He's not going to sneak around killing anybody else. I know you want all the answers, but let's just enjoy this for a moment, yeah?"

Sherlock turns his gaze to the rain-distorted Westminster lights outside.

The silence that ensues is not oppressive in the least. Instead, John luxuriates in the familiarity and comfort of it, the way in which everything feels as though the GBS never happened; that this is what they've been doing all along. Having fun, solving crimes, blogging about it and yelling about boredom on the sofa in between.

As the taxi turns a corner, John asks, "Are you hungry? Should we go somewhere for a bite?"

Sherlock shakes his head, hiding his smile behind his palm as he leans his elbow on the car door.
Even though he doesn't reply, he doesn't seem to have descended into quiet contemplation. Instead, he seems…. John can't really pinpoint the right word, but it isn't anything worrying, that's for sure.

John can't remember the last time he'd felt so at ease with Sherlock. He could just stay here, in the back of this cab, watching London float by, Sherlock right by him after a job well done.

"I do love you," Sherlock suddenly says. He turns his gaze from the nightly city to John. "Regrettably, I have little aptitude at showing it."

John's heart constricts at such a statement. He takes Sherlock's hand, but it doesn't feel very intimate holding it when Sherlock is still wearing leather gloves. "I know. God, I do know, and it's fine, you're doing absolutely fine. I'm still here, you're still here, the case is cracked. Don't worry." John scrambles for something more to say, something that would erase the frown lines from Sherlock's expression.

Sherlock bites his lower lip, then a strange smile flits briefly on his lips before he averts his gaze again, leaving his hand where John has pressed it against the car seat, enclosed in his own.

The cab stops in front of 221B, and in mere seconds Sherlock is out of the back seat and walking to the front door.

John snorts. Some things never change. Sherlock leaving him to pay for the cab seems to be an enduring feature of their relationship. It's a bit like some people whine about their spouses squeezing the toothpaste wrong, or leaving the toilet seat up.

By the time John gets in through the front door, there is no sign of Sherlock, but Mrs Hudson is standing in the foyer with a big smile on her face and a wad of what must be her mail in her hand.

John raises an eyebrow.

She laughs. "He just went up the stairs, two at a time. Just like old times."

John matches her smile with one of his own before heading up himself. The adrenaline is still keeping him alert; sleep is still far away despite the lateness of the hour. What he wants now is tea, a shower and then a warm half of a bed with a snoring Sherlock on the opposite side. The giddiness will dissipate, eventually.

He's pretty certain Sherlock is already halfway there – probably trying to get to the shower before John does to hog most of the hot water.

John's theory turns out to be very wrong, because Sherlock is waiting for him at the top of the stairs, just inside the flat, leaning on the wall, his coat already hung on the rack.

He watches John takes off his coat with a strange, appraising expression, making no move to retreat deeper into the flat. John walks in, briefly turns his back to pull the door shut, but when he shifts on his heels to face the kitchen again, there's a flurry of movement and he finds himself pinned up against the door he'd just closed.

Sherlock crushes their lips together with a ferocity that leaves John breathless and gasping, a searing heat travelling down his spine from the intensity of it. There's no tentative start to it – Sherlock is going straight for tongue and teeth, hands in hair, neck, everywhere.

John tries to return the favour and to signal he's very much on board with this, so he starts fumbling at Sherlock’s shirt buttons, only to get his fingers pried off. He relents, snaking his arms around Sherlock's waist, but Sherlock fights against being pulled against him, leaning back to shove his
hands between them. John then feels those long fingers moving at his belt, opening it with sharp, precise, almost… *practiced* movements. Sherlock’s hands only halt once John's zip is open, and he launches into another frantic kiss. John manages to wrench a bit control over to himself, and Sherlock lets out half a sigh, half a groan when John trails nipping kisses down the side of his neck.

A moment later, John comes up for air, Sherlock quickly and stealthily hooks his fingers into John’s trousers at both hips and in one firm yank, pulls both trousers and pants down across his thighs. John finds himself laughing, trying desperately to keep up with what's going on, and he begins trying to do the same to Sherlock, but the man deftly slithers his hips out of John's grasp.

"You first."

This is said in a baritone husky with desire. The rumbling hoarseness of it matches – no, *exceeds* – every fantasy that John has ever had of this particular scenario. The fact that they're doing this, they're *actually* going forward with it, *finally*, is decimating John's concentration and logical reasoning, and things gets even further complicated by the sudden return of Sherlock’s tongue into his mouth. He thrusts his hips forward, and is rewarded by the feeling of a bulge matching his own attention-demanding erection pressing against the cloth of Sherlock’s trousers.

John tries to mutter, "Not fair; trousers off, you too," but it all gets muffled by the fact that his lips are too busy enjoying Sherlock’s to form the consonants properly. He closes his eyes and just goes with it. He feels practically drunk with arousal, and everything is going so fast it's hard to even properly register what's going on.

There *is* a tiny little voice in the back of his head that is wondering whether this is happening the way it should, but it's being drowned out by hurricane Sherlock. Shouldn’t they be doing this more slowly, making sure Sherlock isn't getting overwhelmed? Will it prove to be too much to handle? Maybe John should just take a minuscule timeout, just to gauge the weather here. He tries to break the kiss and let them both get themselves under control, but Sherlock has grabbed the back of his neck and is making sure no respite is given. A part of John thinks he needs to be sensible about this and not get carried away, but he can't bring himself to do anything about it, not with the delicious friction Sherlock is creating against his cock by pressing their torsos together and shifting ever so slightly when they continue the devouring kiss.

Finally, Sherlock’s lips do vanish, and John feels him pulling away.

Worried that his predictions of this being too much might be coming true, already preparing for damage control, John opens his eyes.

Sherlock is no longer in front of him.

His hormone-addled thoughts are only beginning to clear while he glances around frantically.

Suddenly, his cock is enveloped in what can't be anything other than the very mouth that had just been kissing him. He gasps loudly at the sudden sensation, not even sure if it had been a word he'd attempted.

Sherlock starts doing something with his tongue that eliminates all possibility for John to attempt anything other than moving his hips in eager response.

It finally occurs to John to actually look down. What he sees is a scene better than anything he'd dared to imagine in secret up in his old bedroom or lying next to a sleeping Sherlock in their shared bed, better than any pornographic video he’s watched of a scenario like this.
His sense of resolve evaporates, his thoughts grind to a halt. He's having a hard time resisting the urge to thrust wildly into the warmth enveloping him. Then, Sherlock changes the angle of his mouth and the next flex of John’s hips takes his cock right to the back of that throat. John pulls instinctively back, fearful that Sherlock might gag, but as he does, there is a baritone growl that vibrates right up through his cock straight to his brain and he can't help but groan. Sherlock won't allow him a moment's respite; he takes John back in, his hand now grasping the base in addition to working most of the length with his mouth.

Within moments, John knows he won’t last long.

The back of his head practically cracks against the wall behind them when the orgasm takes him. His vision is sparked by dancing lights, his knees buckling. Strong arms catch him as he slides down the wall, totally unable to do anything but gasp for breath. For a split second, he wonders if he is going to pass out completely.

He ends up in what feels like little more than a boneless heap on the floor, his back against the wall, arms and legs still trembling. He can feel Sherlock’s knees bracketing him, holding him up.

Once Sherlock seems to become convinced he has rediscovered muscle control, he rises and heads to the kitchen.

John manages to find his voice while he scrambles onto a kneeling position. "That was---- fucking amazing." His voice is broken, his hair a mess, his phone and wallet God-knows-where since they have apparently fallen out of his pockets, and his heart must be hitting 150 beats a minute. He ignores the plentiful extrasystolic beats that are making him feel as though his heart is somersaulting towards his throat.

"What the hell did I do to deserve that?" he asks while clambering up slowly, testing his legs because they'd been most unreliable only a moment ago. He pulls up his pants and trousers but leaves the belt unbuckled. His brain, overwhelmed and hung over on lust, can just about focus on the fact that there is no point, since they're going to bed anyway. It only occurs to him now to wonder what will happen, then.

Sherlock grabs an empty glass he'd left on the counter after taking his medication hours earlier, runs it half full and after sloshing some of it around in his mouth, he sips some more and downs the rest in one gulp.

John realizes it's probably to rinse out the taste of--- Oh sweet mother of God, he even swallowed.

A sudden pang of guilt and embarrassment hits. John has always tried to be the gentleman when it comes to this, always asking for a preference beforehand when a partner had offered to do this for him.

Sherlock observes his reaction with mild confusion for a moment before punching out a dose of pregabalin from the blister packet John had left on the kitchen counter. He downs it with some orange juice from the fridge. He looks composed and impeccably, enviably neat since he is still fully clothed.

In comparison, John feels like he's been hit by a bus and he probably looks the part, too.

Sherlock heads to the living room and lands on the sofa, pulling the laptop on the coffee table within his reach. "I will admit to having wanted to do that for quite a while. You may think of it as a belated thank you. You can have the first shower."
Something about his business-like tone bothers John, but his head is still spinning too blissfully to start picking at it.

He does head for the shower, thoughts racing. The surge of adrenaline and all the other lovely hormones which had just flooded his brain are starting to dissipate, but the languid contentment John always feels after sex isn't happening.

He'd just received what had, without a doubt, been the single most spectacular blowjob of his entire life, but it had been exactly that and nothing more – a very one-sided thing. He hadn't even managed to get a single garment off Sherlock, for Christ's sake!

He knows he shouldn't look a gift horse in the--- never mind. Yet he can't not wonder why Sherlock had labelled the whole thing some sort of a thank-you, of all things. A payment for services rendered?

No, John decides, he can't let this go. He finishes his evening routines, and then heads to the bedroom. Sherlock is already there, under the covers, typing away on his phone. He's wearing pyjamas again.

He finds a clean pair of pants and claims his side of the bed. Under the covers, he slides his hand onto Sherlock's concave stomach and simply leaves it there for a moment, awaiting some sort of a reaction.

Sherlock does not avert his eyes from the phone. "It's alright, John, I don't require anything right now." He doesn't sound dismissive, or anxious, but it's actually the neutrality of his tone that really makes John worry. He doesn't withdraw his hand.

"But you did enjoy what happened?" John asks, shifting closer and planting his chin on Sherlock's shoulder.

"I don't do things I don't enjoy. Since you seem to need further reassurances: yes, I'm glad that the Rubicon has been crossed." Sherlock continues running his forefinger along the phone screen, probably scrolling down a webpage.

John turns to his back again, letting his hand slide off Sherlock. "Well, I'd say that was a Rubicon, not the Rubicon, if you catch my drift. That was lovely, but---"

"As Julius Caesar would point out if he weren't a pile of bones in the ground, there's only one Rubicon, John." Sherlock comments, his tone making it obvious that he's not interested in discussing this further.

John doesn't know what that even means, but he's quite certain that whatever happened tonight, it has given him discouragingly little insight into what is going on in the curly head parked on the pillow next to his own.

Much later, after the lights have been switched off and Sherlock has turned to his side facing the opposite direction, John is still trying to work it all out.

Slowly, Sherlock's breathing begins to take on the rhythm of sleep. John quietly keeps watch until he's convinced that this is actual sleep and not trickery. He then inches closer, anchoring the two of them with an arm slung over Sherlock's torso. Even with the reassuring warmth of Sherlock's back against his chest, it takes John a long time to fall asleep.
"Can he *really* get away with this?" John asks, standing alongside Sherlock when he voices what Sherlock must be wondering as well, disbelief lending stress to his tone.

They are both observing through the one-way mirror as Lestrade and Donovan interrogate Aiden Cole. As promised, Sherlock and John have been summoned to join the proceedings.

Sherlock seems withdrawn.

John stifles a slight sigh of frustration. In fact, that has been his default mode ever since he'd woken up. John had hoped that the morning would give him a chance to ask the questions that had been on his mind ever since the extraordinary events of the previous night. But, the bed had been empty when he opened his eyes, and when he got into the living room, Sherlock was fully dressed in consulting detective armour plating as he talked to someone on the phone.

"Ah," Sherlock had acknowledged him and slid the phone into his jacket pocket. "Impeccable timing – that was Lestrade. They're ready to interrogate Cole."

It appeared that Sherlock had made himself a cup of coffee, but it seemed to have been forgotten on the kitchen table. John had downed it in two swift gulps, grimacing at the sweetness of it – two sugars, no milk is how Sherlock always had it. Then he went to find his clothes.

Sherlock remained deeply engrossed in whatever he was feverishly browsing on his phone during the cab ride to New Scotland Yard. The sliding window to the cabbie was open and John could hear the headlines on the news coming over the radio.

John has absolutely no idea how to even begin asking Sherlock about what had happened last night. Still, he decides to try, to poke at it a bit, at least, in a way that wouldn't make Sherlock instantly clam up.

"Well, it didn't make the headlines," he jokes, ending up sounding more tentative than humorous, but it's a start.

"What?" There is annoyance mixed in with distraction in Sherlock's counter-question. He doesn't lift his gaze from his phone.

"Nothing about Rubicons," John adds weakly. He was going to follow up that attempt at joke with a question that he found hard to ask without it sounding like 'how was it for you?', but before he can form the words, Sherlock finally looks up, studying his face.

"I'm not continuing *that* conversation now," he says and cocks his head towards the cab driver and the open window.

John can see how being overheard could bother Sherlock, but he could manage to keep the question general enough to avoid any embarrassment, so he tried again. "I just----"

A terse "no" from Sherlock cuts him off, followed by: "The case takes priority."

Sherlock resumes swiping his phone, his brows furrowed with a familiar intensity of focus.
John knows he has to back off. He wonders if Sherlock's *no eating and no sleeping during cases* -rule, which he has lately been forced to abandon due to the aftermath of the GBS necessitating doing so, would extend to sex. Could that be the explanation why he hadn't wanted… anything for himself?

Last night, they had both probably thought that the arrest had wrapped the case up, but Sherlock still has unanswered questions. For instance, they still don't know the origins of the plant toxin and as Sherlock has pointed out, the motive is still unclear.

John finds that he doesn't give a toss about the case right now. And he's actually a bit angry at Sherlock for still doing so at the expense of their relationship.

Is he being impatient again in a way that's insensitive to how much pressure Sherlock is under?

If he could only get through to Sherlock, to ask *why*…?

The cab pulls up at the NSY headquarters on the embankment. It'll all have to wait. Sherlock is still married to the work, it would appear.

*Damn the Work at a time like this.*

Lestrade greets them with an apology. "Sorry, but Cole’s brief is here. The lawyer is kicking up a fuss so we’re going to do this by the book. You can observe, but the first round of questions gets asked by us. I might be able to get you in at the end, if we're not getting anywhere."

Sherlock’s angry reaction shows on his face, dismaying John. Without a word, Sherlock spins on his heel and strides off. If the door to the observation area alongside the interview room were shut behind him with a little more ferocity than usual, well, John isn’t going to comment. This is Sherlock's case. Police procedure and a nuisance of a barrister aside, he deserves a crack at this. He's as brilliant at interrogation as he is with everything else, and John refuses to believe that he's lost any of it, except for his confidence.

He does take Sherlock's worries about his cognitive skills seriously, but it's hard to separate Sherlock's unfair expectations towards himself, the depression and the actual demands of a difficult case from one another.

There certainly had been *confidence* present yesterday, an intimidating amount of it, in fact.

Perhaps, naively, John had assumed they'd ease into anything sexual, take gradual steps, learn the ropes together. Instead, *that* had happened, and afterwards Sherlock had acted as though it was a project finished, almost a chore over and done with.

John does believe Sherlock when he’d said that he had wanted to do it, and he had seemed pleased at John’s willing response. Yet, none of it answers the question about what *Sherlock* wants.

He tries to concentrate on watching the interrogation, but as usual, ends up paying more attention to Sherlock than anyone else.

Ten minutes later, he starts getting seriously worried about Sherlock’s mood. He is focusing on Cole’s face, which shows nothing but confidence and innocence.
Through the audio system, they can both hear Donovan trying yet another angle: "You were caught red-handed, Cole. We have you on audio and video and there are two witnesses. You were trying to inject a lethal substance into your victim’s IV port."

Cole’s posture doesn't tense up an inch. There is a handcuff that is secured to the table, but otherwise, he looks like he’s having a normal conversation with two people, rather than being questioned about attempted murder. Alongside him sits a grey-haired lawyer, exuding the sort of moneyed privilege that comes from a top flight legal chamber. John wonders how Cole had recruited his services so quickly. Had he had need for a barrister recently, and already had someone he could contact?

It’s the lawyer who answers. "As my client has told you both, repeatedly, I might add, the substance you claim is a poison is, in fact, a Chinese herbal remedy, which Mister Whitehead had purchased months ago, and had been using to correct a heart condition. Mister Cole here was instructed by Whitehead to supply another dose as soon as the hospital would allow him access. He was fulfilling his client’s request. Nothing more."

Lestrade interjects. "The syringe contents are being analysed by our Forensic service. We have reason to believe that it contains a toxin called…” He looks down at his notepad, "…gelsemine."

This time, it's Cole who responds. "I have no idea what’s in the stuff. As I told you, Chris brought it back himself from his last trip to China. He knew he had developed some heart condition and wasn’t confident in Western medicine being able to fix it. The Chinese doctors he saw out there prescribed the stuff, and he brought back enough to see him through for a few months. He’d been taking the stuff only for a couple of days before he ended up in hospital. When I saw him here three weeks ago, he asked me to bring it in, because he didn’t trust the doctors at UCL Hospital to allow him to have it."

The trainer leans back in the chair, almost nonchalant. "Look, if you don’t believe me, go check out Christian's place. The rest of it is still there."

Lestrade’s face can’t be seen in the monitors, but the DI's growing annoyance is apparent in his tone. "A forensic team is already going through both your home and Whitehead’s house in Pimlico. A warrant came easy, given that you were caught in the act."

Cole just laughs. "In the act of what? Helping a friend out? I was doing what my client had asked me to do. Maybe if you’d have let me see him earlier, then he wouldn’t have ended up in such a bad way. Why wasn’t I allowed into the ITU earlier? He had no family, but they still wouldn't let me in even though I was the only one visiting him."

Donovan snorts. "As the nurse told you when she called, he’d been in a coma since his heart attack. And there is no record anywhere about his taking any alternative medicine. Nor were you listed as any sort of emergency contact."

She leans closer to Cole, effectively towering over him. "Whitehead was scheduled to talk to the police about the steroids. Given how serious the damage caused by his use of enhancement drugs was, wouldn't you think he'd have co-operated with them?"

Cole's eyes go wide in a way that to John seems a bit theatrical. "No, he wouldn’t. He knew that if he told them about the steroids, he wasn’t going to get on any heart transplant list. We discussed that the last time I saw him, when he revealed to me that he’d been using illegal stuff. I was shocked, and tried to convince him to go to the police. I told him I'd drop him as a client since I don't deal in that sort of business. Steroid abuse is serious, and I insisted that he really needed to help clean things up by reporting it. He agreed – said that he’d never have ended up with the heart
condition if he’d only listened to me. That’s when he begged me to get him the next dose of the medicine – it’s supposed to reverse the effects of the steroids. He said his life depended on it, because the doctors at UCLH were useless.”

"Where did he get the steroids?"

"He didn’t say and I didn't ask. I didn't want to get into trouble. I can't afford to risk my career by getting mix up in that shit."

"It's a bit late for that now," Lestrade points out dryly. "It never occurred to you that sneaking around hospital rooms emptying syringes into people that not even you know the contents of might look just a little weird?"

Cole leans back in his chair, unaffected by the insinuations.

John can’t help but shake his head. "Does he really think that a jury is going to fall for this?" he asks Sherlock in a low voice even though the audio connection only runs one way unless a call button is pressed and held down.

For the first time since the questioning began, Sherlock seems to be willing to hear him, turning away from the scene in the interrogation room to look at John. "Yes, he does. And there is a good chance they will believe him. Juries are composed of idiots. They want to believe that people are not murderers. It’s called the benefit of the doubt for a reason, John. That’s all he needs – to create a reasonable doubt that an alternate sequence of events could have taken place. A dedicated trainer, a good Samaritan helping out someone failed and abandoned by medical science – what a lovely story for the tabloids to spoon-feed to the public."

"I know; British justice and all. He’s still a bloody murderer!"

"It’s up to us to prove him guilty," Sherlock says but it doesn't sound like a call to battle at all. He shrugs. "Until we discover the motive, and the means by which he obtained the toxin, we won’t be able to convince any jury."

John looks back through the two-way mirror. "He’s killed the guy because he was going to go to the police and tell him about the illegal steroids being supplied. Why won’t they see that?"

Sherlock snaps out, "I'd say NSY is utterly willing to believe it, but it's still hearsay. No proof. And even worse, there is very little logic in killing a man over anabolic steroids, since they’re a Class C substance. The worst he’d get for a conviction under the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act is 3 months or a £2000 fine, in a Magistrates Court, which is where he’d end up on a first offense. Why risk a life sentence for murder?" He sighs and looks down, resting a palm against the glass. "I’ve failed." His eyes are closed, as if he cannot bear to watch the smug suspect on the other side of the table. "He's making a joke out of the whole thing."

John stifles an urge to put his arms around Sherlock's shoulders to try to console him, since they could get company at any moment. But, given his mood at the moment, John thinks a move like that might get rejected anyway. Given the fragile state of their relationship, and especially after last night, he’s reluctant to risk it.

Instead, John stiffens his shoulders and looks back into the brightly lit interview room. "Lestrade said you could – we could – have a try at questioning him about Watford. I’ve seen you easily turn a casual Q and A into a fully-fledged confession. If you confront him with what happened, won’t he crack?"
Opening his eyes again, Sherlock snorts. "Not a chance. Why would he?" He lifts his hand and raises his index finger. "One. We still don’t know for sure whether Watford's death was by accident or premeditated murderous intent carried out by an idiot." The second finger goes up. "Two, if it were intent, then we have no motive identified, unless Watford was just a guinea pig. Three, we have no idea why Watford’s dead body was shot and then dumped at the saw mill. Both of those are almost irrational decisions, if the man died by accident. You saw the post mortem – Molly was prepared to declare that he died of heart problems. Trying to disguise it as a drug related killing is just bizarre and even unnecessary, unless the killer was trying to hide something else. I suspect he chose the gelsemine in the first place, because most likely no foul play would be suspected after the body was found. Nothing in this case is explicable, unless we discover the motive."

Sherlock glares at the three fingers showing, and then raises his little finger, as well. "Let’s add in the fact that even if we could find out answers to those questions, we still have absolutely no idea how he got hold of the gelsemine in the first place or how he knew about such a toxin. He could easily argue that the average person would not have heard of it, let alone know or learn the means by which to grow or extract it."

While this stream of deductive frustration is emerging from Sherlock, the solicitor in the interrogation room is making the argument that the police have no case, and that the Crown Prosecution Service would, in all likelihood, not take the case any further. "You have access to Whitehead’s travel records; you can see from his passport that he did recently spend time in China. Whatever you might find in that syringe, there is more of it in his flat. If he brought it into the country illegally, my client was unaware of that fact, just as he has no idea what the herbal substance contains."

Lestrade isn’t giving up yet. "Well, how did you get into his flat to bring it to the hospital? How do we know that you haven’t planted more of it there to get yourself off the hook?"

Cole looks at him like he’s a moron. "Chris was a friend. He gave me his keys when they put him in hospital to get the medicine and to water his plants. Like I already said, he asked me to bring the stuff to him." Cole places his left hand palm down on the table, making the metal of the cuff clank. "You can check what was in my pockets, the contents that were removed and bagged when I was arrested. His keys should still be there."

Sherlock draws a resigned breath. "And there is his get out for any fingerprints in the victim’s flat. He could have stolen the keys from Whitehead's hospital room earlier, or simply suggested he bring in some personal belongings Whitehead wanted at his disposal. Cole is not as stupid as I first thought. Another example of my failure."

"Stop this," John pleads, getting worried. Sherlock is clearly taking this very badly – even after severe setbacks he never used to voice his self-flagellation in such an open manner. From yesterday’s promising high, Sherlock seems to have plunged into despair again.

John starts grasping at straws. "Maybe we just need to go to Whitehead’s flat and see if you can get something from it that will prove this man’s a killer."

"Why bother?" The resignation in the tone could not be clearer.

"Sherlock! I won’t let you give up. We need to get there before Anderson makes a mess of it, yeah?" He heads for the door. "Are you coming, or are you going to let the idiots win?"

John hopes there is enough challenge in his question that Sherlock will feel obliged to keep working the case. After a moment of hesitation, Sherlock follows him out of the door.
The taxi they pick up on Victoria Street manages to get snarled up in traffic trying to cross Vauxhall Bridge Road, but they still get to Whitehead’s home on Alderney Street twenty minutes after they leave New Scotland Yard. Sherlock is silent for the whole journey, and John soon gives up trying to entice anything out of him. Sherlock rarely does things just to humour him, but John suspects this might be one such occasion.

The police car and the white van parked on the corner of Alderney Street and Lupus give the location of Christian Whitehead's residence away. Here, at the slightly shabby chic end, the more mixed housing of council blocks, flats and small retail shops jostle for room with a few remnants of the Georgian buildings.

Whitehead's home is one of the more upmarket ones. It's a white terraced building, consisting of three floors and a basement level, at the end of a road that further north has been seriously gentrified. Number 149, owned by Whitehead, seems like a typical example, and despite its small size – narrow, two windows on the upper floors, likely a very small sitting room - John reasons that the price tag would be in well over a million and a half.

As they are nodded into the smart black and white tiled hallway by a police constable, John asks Sherlock, "What does Whitehead do for a living?"

"Did", Sherlock corrects, "since he’s not coming out of hospital unless it’s in a hearse. He was a barrister at one of the Lincoln’s Inns chambers. Top end corporate stuff, but property, not finance. Chinese investing in London property is what took him abroad so often." He waves a hand at the hallway. "And there’s family money, too. This is inherited. He’s probably got a pile somewhere in the country, too." He looks bored.

When they cross the threshold into the living room, John’s glance about the place is enough to know that it has probably felt the hand of a professional interior designer. The sight would not feel out of place as a double page spread in a magazine.

The only thing out of place in the tableau is Anderson, back turned to the entrance, busy using a fingerprint brush to dust a blue and white vase on the mantelpiece.

"I wouldn’t bother," Sherlock points out. "That’s a Qianlong vase. I doubt even Cole would have planted something in such a flashy item. You should be looking for sensible places to hide syringes, vials and needles, not coating every inch of the place like dusting a cake."

The blue-suited CS Examiner scowls as he turns. "Prints are needed for elimination purposes. The maid service will have picked this up to dust it, wouldn’t it?"

Sherlock starts to open his mouth, with what John assumes will be another of his usually barbed put-downs, but then he just sighs and turns away, as if he can’t be bothered.

Sherlock takes a further effete look around the dining room, and then they head upstairs. John is now beyond worried; Sherlock is obviously just going through the motions, humouring John who he probably feels has dragged him here needlessly.

"This is a farce," Sherlock mutters a few moments later when they're staring at the neat row of packaged hypodermic needles arranged onto the a shelf in a cupboard over the bathroom sink.
Sherlock scowls into the mirror, letting his frustration show in the reflection for John to see. He opens the medicine cabinet behind the mirror, revealing three little bottles, looking more like perfume or scent bottles than medical products. They are unlabelled.

Sherlock waves a dismissive hand at their discovery, more in surrender than in pleasure. "Tell Anderson that what he wants is up here. Lord knows why he'd start in the living room instead of the more obvious places. The toxin is disguised in the scent bottles, to look like they've been smuggled into the country, but most likely the bottles have been bought somewhere in London. He'll find Cole’s prints on one of them, to back up the alibi, but there will likely be no trace of Whitehead’s fingerprints. He’s a bloody amateur, but he could still claim they had been in a larger container, and Whitehead hadn't had time to open that before landing himself in hospital."

John has to agree that it stinks to high heaven of a ruse to find it all neatly arranged into the bathroom cabinet. "So, planted here by Cole?"

"Obviously, yet there is no way to prove it in a watertight manner, and he was practically goading Lestrade with that fact."

Sherlock wanders back down the stairs and out of the door, before John can finish speaking to Anderson about their discovery.

When John gets outside, Sherlock is already prowling the pavement alongside the Carra Pasta delicatessen, frustration oozing with every stride. He’s keeping an eye on the east bound traffic, eyes peeled for the tell-tale yellow light of an available taxi. When one obligingly stops at his outstretched hand, John has just enough time to go around the front and get in the other side of the back seat before the cab is in motion again.

"Number 5, Ayres Street, SE1."

John struggles to get his seat belt on, but manages to ask, "What’s there?" He would have assumed that they would go home. This could be a good sign. Is this a good sign?

Sherlock’s eyes are, again, fixed on the screen of his phone. "Cole’s place."

John decides that he’s done enough staring out of the window. Instead, he watches Sherlock’s face as he researches something. Within ten minutes, a wrinkle forms across the bridge of his nose.

"What?" John asks, urgency in his voice. He hates this, how rarely Sherlock lets him in on his thought processes, how he's just supposed to follow and take things at face value. He knows that this is frustration from last night bleeding into the proceedings, but he can't help it. He's only human, and in love with the most cryptic creature on the bloody planet.

John’s question at least makes Sherlock look up. "White Cross Cottages; number 5 is one of the Victorian houses that were originally built as a kind of social housing." He turns the screen so John can see his phone. A two-storey brick terraced house, very plain, with a door that opens directly onto the street.

John’s eyebrows rise. "Wow, why hasn’t that kind of hovel been knocked down and a high-rise luxury block of flats built already?"

"It’s listed. Part of the architectural heritage of Elijah Hoole, a follower of the Arts and Crafts movement. And that little row of houses was the result of the work of Olivia Hill, a social reformer. It's all very politically correct these days in Southwark."

"I guess they must be worth a bob or two then?"
Sherlock shakes his head. "Still in the social housing system owned by a charity, apparently. Before you ask: this is where Cole lives. He was happy with the police rummaging around Whitehead's place, but mentioned nothing about his own. I doubt we'll find anything blatantly incriminating there, but I'm not interested in physical evidence. I'm interested in why."

That, John can certainly identify with. He quirks a smile. "How do you find this stuff out? About the building, I mean?"

Sherlock shrugs. "You just have to know how to ask the right questions online, and know where to look for answers in physical archives. Land Registry Online often proves useful."

The phone now lying in his lap chirps a few bars of Rossini’s Thieving Magpie overture, signalling an incoming call. This gets the inevitable Sherlockian reaction of suspicion, because it comes without any of the various ringtones that he has assigned to the very few people that he is willing to always take a call from. John's tone is a beeping version of the Flight of The Bumblebee, whereas Mycroft has been assigned a ringtone version of the Ride of the Valkyries.

Sherlock doesn’t answer, and the music stops, so the call be going to voice-mail. John is reminded of his conversation with Mycroft about Sherlock's phone habits - unknown callers seem to put him very much on edge.

"Who is it?" John asks after a minute of watching as Sherlock does what he usually does with unsolicited calls: googles the number. Sherlock usually won’t even bother to listen to the voicemail until after he does the pertinent research.

As the taxi turns the corner onto the Cut by Southwark tube station, Sherlock’s "Oh!" is audible against the background traffic noise. "It’s the Kew Gardens Jodrell Laboratory. They must be finally getting back to me. "He scrolls back to find the number and thumbs the dial icon.

"Sherlock Holmes. I’m returning your call."

John wishes for the umpteenth time that Sherlock would learn to remember to put the phone on speaker so that he, too, could hear what the caller is saying. It’s yet another one of Sherlock’s little quirks. He so dislikes talking on the phone that the idea of having other people listening into the conversation must drive him to the point of distraction.

There is a pause, and then Sherlock responds with a somewhat tart, "No, I did not listen to your message; I have better things to do. So, now that I am actually here, tell me what you wanted to inform me about."

John watches a series of micro-expressions chase each other across Sherlock’s face. First the eye John can see closes in impatience; it’s a look that John has seen all too often, a look reserved for people who are telling Sherlock something he already knows.

"Yes, I left a message for Dr Christine Leon, because the ChiMAS service told me that she is the resident expert at Kew on *Gelsemium elegans*. That’s 断肠草 in Mandarin."

John doesn't speak it, but Sherlock apparently does, or at least he has to have memorized that particular word, since it's vocalized fluently with Sherlock's usual sharp intonation.

The brief pause that follows is interrupted by a huff from Sherlock. "Beijing is eight hours ahead of us. There won’t be anyone there to answer a call. And, if she is in the wilds of Yunnan down south, the Chinese Academy of Medicine won’t be able to help."

There is a longer silence. Escalating annoyance then peppers Sherlock’s response. "All I need to
know is whether she thinks it is feasible for a non-chemist to make an extract of 断肠草 here in the UK, and where such a person would get their hands on the raw ingredient."

There is a longer silence while the person at the other end is presumably attempting to answer Sherlock’s questions. As the taxi turns the corner onto Southwark Bridge Road heading south, Sherlock’s eyes widen. "Why would Kew have a supply?"

Whatever the person on the other end of the phone says, it makes Sherlock sit up straighter. "A past murder investigation? Who was the victim?"

The taxi driver swerves to overtake a bus that was pulling out into traffic just as the taxi begins to veer east onto Marshalsea Road.

"Fascinating. Have you any idea how much of the extract was made, and whether any of it has gone missing recently?"

A smile starts to form on Sherlock’s mouth and then broadens. "How very interesting. Please do check to see if any is missing, and get back to me as soon as possible." Sherlock glances over to John, looking as if he is just about to hang up. Then he thinks again, and whips the phone back up to his ear. "I may need to contact you again; to whom am I speaking?"

Brief pause, during which the person at the other end must’ve answered.

"OH?!"

John is startled at Sherlock's sudden amazed exclamation.

Sherlock then asks, almost breathless, "Doctor Cole, are you, by any chance, related to an Aiden Cole?"
In the taxi, Sherlock is still explaining to John that this particular Doctor Cole is Aiden’s youngest sister, apparently one of two siblings. "She’s a graduate of Imperial, in botany, and the Kew Jodrell Laboratory is her first job; she’s an assistant to the leading expert in Chinese medical herbs. Her boss was called to China as an independent authority in a case – to verify the presence of *gelsemium elegans* in the suspicious death of the billionaire Long Liyuan which happened a month ago in Guangdong. His family thinks that he was murdered because he was in a property dispute with the deputy head of the Agriculture department in Guangdong's Bajia township. After her court appearance, she took advantage of being there to do some research in the mountains of Yunnan."

According to what Sherlock has just learned, the lab at Kew had conducted experiments with gelsemine extract as a subcontractor for the forensic investigation of the case evidence.

Sherlock is almost fizzing with energy, and John can only shake his head at the transformation of the man. As soon as the answers begin coming in, Sherlock is back in the chase, his misery and lethargy gone in a flash. John knows that this sort of mercurial mood change is just the nature of the beast, and hopes that Sherlock's improved mood and a potential break in the case will give him another chance later to get some of answers to his own questions.

With every passing hour, John becomes more determined not to allow the events of last night slip away. He needs to know why Sherlock chose to initiate sexual intimacy in their relationship in the one-sided way that he did. On the one hand, the best blow job he’d ever had; on the other, a sense that the person delivering it was not interested in a sexual climax of his own. These were mixed signals he needs to sort out, before he ends up doing something seriously inappropriate such as initiating another encounter when Sherlock might not want that at all.

'Yes and no’ is the only related thing Sherlock has ever said to him, and that's hardly helpful, not to mention that the conversation had happened when they had been in a rather different place, relationship-wise. Or had they? John wants to think that the past week has changed things. At least he genuinely feels that it has, emotionally. Will the rest follow?

As the cab wends its way through the back streets of south London, John finds himself wondering what Sherlock would have done if their positions had been reversed, if he had been on the receiving end of that kind of attention.

"John…"

He wrenches his attention back to the here and now. "What?"

"Do pay attention. I need you to focus."

John replays the mini-lecture that Sherlock had just delivered, and manages to come back with a case-related question. "So, you think Aiden knew about this work of his sister to create the extract, and just helped himself to some?"

Sherlock nods. "Opportunism is in line with his amateur approach. His baby sister was probably regaling him with the story of how it was used. Once she checks the supplies, I am willing to bet that some will have gone missing. Cole could have easily visited her workplace and borrowed her pass card when she wasn't looking. Now, all we need is motive."
As the cab pulls up to Number 5 Ayres Road, John can see that it is very different from Whitehead’s house. Not quite tumbledown, but the old two-storey terrace has certainly seen better days. Even so, it must have been hardly prepossessing, even right after it had been built in the Victorian era.

Sherlock had texted Lestrade regarding where they were headed so that they'd be given access. The constable who greets them at the front door gives them a lecture: "Be careful what you touch. The forensic team won’t be here for another hour, and they’ll shout at me if anything gets compromised. The CSE in charge phoned to say that I was to tell you that before letting you in."

After rolling his eyes at such an announcement, Sherlock has to duck to get through the low doorway into a dark, narrow hallway. He snaps on his blue latex gloves as John is still fishing his pair out of his jacket pocket. Sherlock doesn't often bother with them, but accessing a crime scene before the tech team has finished with it has led to a few irritatingly complex processes when it had been necessary to rule both of them out as the culprit after Sherlock's prints had been found at the site. Neither of them wants to repeat the experience.

By the time he gets into the tiny sitting room, Sherlock is in rapid motion, looking closely at everything with his pocket magnifier. The small fireplace has an old grate in it, and it has clearly not been used in years – there’s a dusty, dried flower arrangement in the fire-basket rather than the coal that once must have been used to keep the place warm.

The dim light from the lamp hanging from the ceiling provides dreadfully little illumination. The two sash windows that look onto the one-way street are covered by a cheap, split bamboo roller blind that has been lowered. There is an ancient, sagging blue sofa and an old rocking chair. In the corner is a television that must be at least a decade old. The only remaining piece of furniture in the room is a display cabinet, with a tea service decorated by roses in a rather lurid shade of pink. On the top of the cabinet are a number of books - which Sherlock is now rapidly leafing through.

"Some from the library, some more recent purchases – all about law – some on estate and inheritance in particular, and a few on residential property and tenancy law. Interesting."

John swipes the little wooden mantelpiece above the defunct fireplace. His gloved finger comes up black with dust and grime. "Cole's not much of a housekeeper."

Sherlock is looking at a page that has a yellow stick-on tab attached to it. "Lives alone now, but this place belonged to his deceased mother." He glances around the room. "I'd estimate she died about six weeks ago."

John has no idea what has led Sherlock to such a precise timeline. "How did you work that out?"

Sherlock smirks. "Dirt on your finger, John. Cole is not much of a housekeeper, but his mother was of the generation that took cleaning much more seriously."

The kitchen confirms that fact. The fridge is virtually empty, and the rubbish bin is full of take-away cartons and foil containers - all single portion sizes. The window over the kitchen sink looks out onto a tiny paved yard; the house behind is three storeys high and keeps the back in almost perpetual shade.

Upstairs, they find two bedrooms. The one towards the front of the house is clearly Cole’s, because the floor is littered with exercise equipment – an assortment of weights, and a Swiss ball that looks very out of place among the 1950’s floral wallpaper.

The bathroom carries on the theme of squalor: a chipped white bath, a basin and toilet that bear the
rust and lime marks caused by decades of London’s hard water. The shelf under the mirror sports a line of dietary supplements, but no prescription drugs can be found.

Sherlock spends only a few seconds in the bathroom, prompting John to remark: "Putting whatever illegal stuff he might have in those bottles would be a good disguise."

"No. He’s moved everything to Whitehead’s place to provide him his alibi. We won’t find anything here, except the truth about why he’s done this."

John looks around the upper hall landing, trying to see what Sherlock must be seeing, if he could deduce a motive from the place. "What’s here, except a lot of poverty?"

"Precisely, John. Cole is – was – still living with his mother. At his age. And, he’s not telling the Housing Association which rents out this place that she died. Probably spun them a story that she’s away with relatives or something. That won’t work for much longer – the Council would have booted him out ages ago, but the White Cottages are run by a charitable foundation. That’s why he’s looking at tenancy law, judging by the tab-marked section about eviction of a sitting tenant."

The back bedroom is still furnished in the trappings of an elderly woman - a candlewick bedspread on the single bed, a beaten up wardrobe, a dressing table with an old bristle hairbrush and a few bottles of cheap perfume. It smells slightly mouldy and damp, probably because the sash window had been painted shut ages ago.

Sherlock descends onto his hands and knees, scrabbling around in the back of the wardrobe, shoving out the old woman’s shoes, even throwing a few over his shoulders which forces John to make a few evasive moves.

When the shower of footwear ceases, he peers over Sherlock’s shoulder into the dark space between the old dresses and hanging skirts. "Found something?"

Sherlock reverses out of the cupboard, carrying an old shoe box. "Maybe." He brings the box over to the bed and then dumps the contents onto the nubby counterpane, then starts to push the various bits of old paper about. John can see letters, what look to be receipts, newspaper cuttings, and a couple of photographs. Sherlock spreads them all out on the bed before snatching up two, and goes over to the window to have a better look at them with his pocket magnifier.

John picks up a faded newspaper cutting. It’s a crime report from the Southwark News, dated 1996, detailing a knife attack at the Peckham Library. Two school boys had been involved, but not named in the paper in order to protect their identities.

"Do you think Cole was a juvenile delinquent?" John asks. It would be an obvious reason for someone keeping the cutting.

"Possibly. He has a scar on his right forearm that is just the sort of injury you get from running with the wrong crowd." Sherlock sounds distracted, so John goes over to the window where the light is certainly better.

"What have you got?"

"Two interesting photographs." He hands one over to John. "Mother and a bunch of children. Father probably took the photo. Aiden must be the oldest. There’s a letter on the bed from Australia in that pile, from a Robert Cole – he emigrated some time ago. The toddler is bound to be the botanist."

In the photo, a small boy easily recognisable as Aiden is scowling at the person taking the picture.
Although John tries not to take people at face value, the teenager looking out at the photographer does not look like a happy child. The clothes on the children point to the family having been in financial dire straits long-term, and there is a tension on the face of the mother that could not be hidden by the kind of barely-there smile that people seem to slap on when they are trying to play happy families in a photograph. John knows such an exercise well enough; he’d seen it all too often on his own mother’s face in their family albums.

Sherlock is grinning. "But the real treasure is this one," he announces, retrieving the family portrait from John and giving him another photograph to view.

John peers at the black and white print. There is a substantial property in the background, a sort of rambling Victorian country house set against a dark backdrop of tall trees. Two small children – a boy and a girl – are standing side by side in front of a stone porch. What looks to be a nanny in a frilly uniform is beside them.

"What’s so exciting about this, then?"

"That’s Burrows Lea House, located between Peaslake and Shere in Surrey. Listed Grade Two. Owned by the Edwards family, although that may have changed over the past twenty years."

John sniggers. "And you just happen to recognise it? How is that even possible, Sherlock? Do you know all of the listed buildings in England?"

Sherlock shrugs. "No. Just the ones in the North Downs. It was a hobby. I liked maps and looking up what was on them. This is on Ordnance Survey map OL34. But never mind that – the more important question is: why did the departed Mrs Cole have an old photo of it?" his tone barely hides a tickle of triumph, as though the inquiry might be partly rhetorical because he thinks he’s onto something.

John looks back at the papers and photos on the bed. "Do you want to grab these before the forensic guys get here? That would give Anderson a fit afterwards," he says, chuckling.

"Apart from this photo, I don’t need anything else." Sherlock whirls away from the window and steps back to the bed. Sweeping the whole lot back into the cardboard box, he then shoves it back into the wardrobe where he found it.

"Come on, John; we have one more stop to make."

They manage to find a taxi on Southwark Bridge Road, and Sherlock tells the cabbie to get them to Clifton Street and Finsbury Market. He’s got that faraway look in his eyes that reveals that he’s thinking hard, but John won’t let this one go without asking yet another question. It seems to be all he is doing today. "Why are we going back to the Vault?"

No reply.

"Sherlock?" John lets his irritation at being ignored show, and to add emphasis, he reaches over and takes hold of the man’s arm.

The reaction is instantaneous. "What?!"
"Why the Vault?"

Sherlock rolls his eyes. "Do keep up. What was the one thing conspicuously absent from Cole’s place?"

John thinks it through as the taxi crosses the Thames on Southwark Bridge, and queues at the lights on the junction of Queens Street with Upper Thames Street. "Where’s his laptop? He must have had one to contact his clients and use the Vault's booking system."

As the traffic moves forward again, Sherlock smirks. "Bingo. Not on him when he was arrested, not found where he lives. Where else would he keep it, except in a place where he could lock it up safely?"

John finally has something to do to help, so he pulls his own phone out of his pocket. "Let me text Jonathan. If he’s on duty, maybe he could help us find it."

This time, Sherlock’s descent down the two flights of stairs is effortlessly rapid. Maybe the climbing has done its part, but John suspects it’s the case that has galvanised him in a way that all the physio in the world would not have been able to accomplish. But, even more importantly, getting somewhere with The Work means that Sherlock is no longer pathologically preoccupied with his recovery.

The same seems to apply to John himself: he realises he hasn’t worried about Sherlock's physical performance even once today.

He is still bemused by this realisation when they get to the reception desk, where Jason is staring at Sherlock with an almost hungry look. It seems that Sherlock's past transgressions have been completely forgiven and forgotten about.

John ignores the blonde, and faces Jonathan Baxter's sunny smile instead.

"Nice to see you two again. I gather from John’s text you’re here on business rather than for pleasure?" Jonathan asks, leaning on the counter.

Sherlock nods, ignoring Jason as well. "I need access to the staff locker room. I assume you could show us?"

Jason decides to interject. "I assume that warrant of yours is still valid? Actually, you don’t need it to convince me to co-operate. I’d just love to help you crack a crime."

Sherlock doesn’t even deign to reply. Jonathan circles the desk, and heads to a side door, showing John and Sherlock through it after he has swiped his access card in the lock.

This corridor is shorter than the one leading to the exercise rooms. Jonathan uses his swipe card again to open an anonymous oak door which leads into a small square room filled wall-to-wall with lockers. There's a bench down the middle.

Jonathan points at a glass door at the opposite end of the room. "Showers are in there. But, I have to warn you – I’ve absolutely no idea which one is Cole's locker. We don’t tend to be in here when
someone else is getting their gear on. Trainers can use any locker that's free, and leave their stuff overnight."

There are five floor-to-ceiling lockers on each wall - with just a number on the front. No padlocks – each locker has a keypad, in keeping with the profile of the Vault as an upmarket business. The occasional flash of a tiny red light shows that most are full.

John wonders how the hell they are going to be able to solve this bit, but Sherlock is wearing a rather wicked smile.

"Open yours. I need to know how they are laid out inside."

Amused by Sherlock’s demand, Jonathan complies, tapping the keypad of locker number seven with a four-digit code and then pulling the door open. Inside, they can now see a top shelf with what must be a wash bag, and then a couple of hooks with clothes hanging from them. On the floor of the locker, on top of a pair of trainers and street shoes, there is a coil of climbing rope. In the back, John can make out a rack of carabiners hanging from a sling, and a power drill hanging by a knot in its cord.

John can't help his curiosity. "What’s the drill for?"

Jonathan shrugs. "I create the routes on the wall, and that’s how you fix the hand- and footholds."

"Both of you, get out. You’re too distracting," Sherlock commands.

Jonathan is a bit nonplussed at the abrupt order, but John simply chuckles and moves back into the corridor. He keeps the door open, because he is curious to know what Sherlock is planning. Jonathan joins him, but keeps stealing glances towards the locker room.

Sherlock walks over to the first of the nineteen closed lockers and leans over to sniff the keypad. He draws in a very deep, slow breath through his nostrils. And then steps back, his eyes closed. The process of doing the same to each of the lockers takes him almost five minutes, and at some point, John begins to worry that Sherlock is going to hyperventilate because the breaths he's taking seem so deep. When the last one is done, he steps back into the centre and then announces, "It’s either locker number seventeen or number three. Both of the instructors use that disgusting deodorant and body wash produced by Unilever – Lynx. It’s cheap. Cole wears the one called Oud Wood and Dark Vanilla. It has top notes of mandarin, pepper and coriander. An exceptionally disgusting combination."

John remembers vaguely seeing a roll-on deodorant in the Ayres Street bathroom.

Jonathan is laughing. "Christ, Holmes; you’re a bloodhound."

Even if they've now narrowed the search down to two lockers, there's still the issue of not knowing the number codes for the keypads.

Sherlock twirls around so that he can take in the whole room. "No tap and sink," he mutters.

"So?" Jonathan asks, clearly confused as to what this has to do with anything.

Sherlock takes out his pocket magnifier and inspects the keypads of both suspect lockers. "Cole uses Lynx hair wax, too, which has a distinctive aroma as well. It will leave a residue on the keypad numbers if he doesn’t wash his hands after applying it." He stands back to snap on a fresh pair of blue forensic gloves fished out of his breast pocket. He then pokes carefully at the second
keypad. At the first attempt, the red light continues to flash. Undeterred, Sherlock tries again.

And again.

The third combination works, and they hear the sound of the lock release mechanism grinding away.

All three men peer into the locker, which turns out to be conspicuously empty of a lap-top.

Sherlock does not seem surprised, or even disappointed. "Right, he’s not quite as stupid as I first thought. Baxter, I am assuming that you have access with your swipe card to the clients' locker area, so let’s try there."

"Are you looking for a particular client? If so, Jason will have records of who uses which one - by number, not by name. He has to record it, in case there's a theft, and to make sure that the room is only used by one client at a time – confidentiality and all that."

Back they go to the reception desk, where Jonathan tells Jason what is needed.

The blond is not amused. "I don’t know client names; I mean, really. That’s the whole point of what we do here – complete confidentiality. We aren’t supposed to release that sort of information. Not even to you, Mister Sherlock Holmes." The flirt is even more blatant now.

Jason leans forward on the reception desk, displaying his bulging biceps and veined forearms to their best effect by putting his elbows onto the top and interlocking his fingers under his chin. "But I do have some interesting news to share with you. Could help your investigation..."

It’s designed to tempt a response, but John gets there before Sherlock can. "Then you’d better tell us now, or be faced with a charge of obstruction. I’m sure it wouldn’t do your career any good, but I can get the Detective Inspector in here to make sure you understand the letter and the spirit of a warrant." John is past trying to stop a little bit of protective jealousy from fuelling the intensity of his threat.

Jason straightens up. "Don’t get your knickers in a twist, Doc. What I meant to tell you is that Aiden Cole is planning on leaving us. In fact, he said he's getting out of personal training altogether. I heard him telling the Manager that he won’t be renewing his contract. He’s off to some new career apparently. Lots more money, or so he says."

"Interesting," comments a deep baritone next to John. "But wrong, at least in part. He is certainly going to be leaving the Vault, but where he's going is a prison cell."

John notices that Sherlock isn't making eye contact with the muscular man.

"Gossip aside, your help isn't required. You don’t even need to tell us a client name, merely which of Cole’s clients hasn’t been here for the past three and a half weeks. Surely your system is well capable of that," Sherlock remarks.

There is just an edge to the statement that makes Jason react to the rejection with a pout. "Don’t be such a bully. I’m just doing my job." He does turn to the computer screen, however, and after a few moments of keyboard work, announces "Client number 1375669. Hasn’t been in for twenty-seven days. Is that your man? Have I helped to solve your case, Consulting Detective?" There is an almost seductive tone in the man’s voice; he’s still attempting to get Sherlock to respond to him.

Jonathan catches John's eye roll and grins.
Sherlock is standing with his back to the reception desk. "Locker number?" he demands coldly.

"Seventy-three. I don’t know the code. That’s up to the client." Jason sighs, defeated. "You’re a hard man to please, Sherlock Holmes."

"Perhaps you're simply not up to the task," Sherlock says with a ghost of a smile. "Come on, John," he says pointedly.

John is still smiling as they head up the corridor. Jonathan slips into the clients' dressing room first to ensure that it's empty. Sherlock probably wouldn't have cared, but Jonathan had insisted and John had reminded Sherlock that he might want to preserve his job at the Vault even after the murder investigation is over and done with.

Standing in front of Locker 73 in the clients' dressing room, Sherlock doesn’t even hesitate. He taps in 1497 on the keypad, and the lock clicks open.

"How did you know the code?" John gets the question out while Jonathan is still standing there, open-mouthed in astonishment.

Sherlock reaches in and pulls out an old, rather dilapidated laptop. "Christian Whitehead, solicitor specialising in property. Only logical that his code would be an amalgam of his home at 149 Alderney Street and his work address — Thomas More Chambers, Number 7, Lincoln’s Inn. People are so predictable with their passwords and PINs."

There is triumph in Sherlock’s voice, and it is a sound that downright thrills John. It’s been too long since he's heard it, and now that it’s back, John just hopes he'll get to hear it a lot more often from now on.

"You’re amazing."

Even though it's Jonathan who says it out loud, when Sherlock turns, he locks eyes with John as if the two of them are the only ones in the room, and the unadulterated smile he allows to spread on his features is clearly for John, and John alone.
"It’s clean. All files seem to have been deleted from the hard drive."

Sherlock slams the laptop shut, and drops it on the seat between them in the back of the cab taking them back to Baker Street. He then whips out his phone and starts texting like a man possessed.

It had been bad enough that they’d absconded with crucial evidence. John had pointed out that Lestrade would be furious at them for taking it out of the locker in the first place without an officer present. Anderson would have kittens over a broken chain of evidence. Sherlock had not even bothered to reply to such concerns John had attempted to voice – instead he’d simply stuck the laptop under his arm and headed for the exit to the Vault. John had briefly lingered behind to thank Jonathan Baxter and to tell him that once the case was over, he’d be in touch about the next climbing lesson. He’s quite convinced that he has gathered enough evidence by now to discern that Sherlock does indeed enjoy the sport.

The news that the trouble they had gone to with the intent of finding the damned computer had not yielded the promised breakthrough, is now deflating John’s mood. "All that effort for nothing?"

Instead of the frustration John is expecting, Sherlock looks conspiratorial. "I didn’t say that, did I? As long as the hard drive is still intact, then nothing is ever truly removed from it. One simply needs to know how to recover the data. If Cole had known this and had wanted to properly make sure the files could not be recovered, he should have smashed the drive to smithereens, or thrown it into the Thames, as he most likely did with the gun." He leans forward and taps on the glass screen between them and the cabbie, and then presses the intercom connection. "We need a brief detour. Listen carefully."

What happens over the next twenty minutes is a bewildering series of stops and starts. First, the cab takes them to the NCP Carpark on Welbeck Street. They go in and drop Sherlock off before immediately exiting and heading back around the one-way system to go into the Q Place parking at Oxford Circus. The cabbie then drives around the second underground car park for the next ten minutes before Sherlock suddenly reappears, leaping back into his former seat next to John.

He shows John a plain brown envelope stashed into his jacket pocket, spreading it open just enough to show John that it contains a wodge of banknotes.

"Been to the ATM, then?" John is bemused by the cloak and dagger routine.

"And show up on camera? Hardly. If I want to keep Mycroft’s prying nose out of my business, I’m hardly going to make conventional withdrawals."

"So, where’s this come from? And why do you suddenly need cash?"

"I called in a debt. The cash is needed to procure what we need – everything recently deleted from the laptop, that is."

"Oh, and there I was thinking you were going to reveal being quite the hacker on top of all your other astonishing skills."

Sherlock looks a little put-out. "I likely could manage to dig what I needed out of this if I put in the
requisite hours – I doubt Cole used very sophisticated software to decrypt his files before deleting them – but I have other things to consider besides this. There are people I can outsource this to, who are faster…" he looks slightly embarrassed, but then shakes his head, "…fine, better at it than I am. Speed is of the essence here." He leans forward again and gives his next direction to the driver.

"The Coco Momo Café, 79 Marylebone High Street."

When the taxi pulls up on the corner of Paddington Street and Marylebone High Street, the chairs are empty around the small round tables on the pavement in front of the cafe. Inside is not much busier, containing only three customers. Lunchtime has passed but it's still hours before the evening bar crowd would arrive.

John and Sherlock slide into a tan leather banquette at the back of the room, up against the brick wall. Sherlock had stridden quite purposefully to this precise seat, and now he's drumming his fingers lightly on the laptop which is aligned very precisely to the edge of the wooden table. John watches him arrange the fat brown envelope on top, and raises his eyebrows in an unspoken question.

"Stop glancing around and looking nervous, and most importantly: don’t say anything." Sherlock picks up the paper menu and fixes his eyes on it. John assumes this is part of the play because Sherlock never reads a menu; if he gets to choose, he only eats at places he knows well and where the staff know him. He seems uneasy when faced with new restaurants, scrutinising menus and interrogating the staff about the food. The dishes and ingredients he abhors seem very randomly selected, mostly based on texture as far as John has been able to tell. Water chestnuts are the worst offenders, closely followed by lychees and shellfish. He also hates takeaway joints that don't put meal components into separate containers.

When John makes a move to pick up the other menu leaflet on the table, Sherlock just whispers, "Don’t. We’re not here to eat."

Confused, John looks around to see who might be the elusive hacker about to solve their problem, since that is presumably who they're here to see. None of the other customers seems to fit the bill but then again, Sherlock has taught him not to let surface impressions mislead. Sherlock isn't paying the other customers any attention, either, which much mean that John's instincts must be at least partly right.

After a few minutes of Sherlock menu-gazing and John feeling increasingly antsy about not knowing the plan, a waitress approaches their table. She's popping gum and carrying an order pad. John can see that she is very young – under sixteen for sure. She is also very blonde – her hair is almost white, and it doesn't appear dyed. Her brows are white and her complexion pale —albino, John realises. She’s wearing thick glasses, which probably means short-sighted, and the doctor in him wonders about the possibility of her suffering from something related to the albinism that causes impaired eyesight.

"Right. What can I get you?" She directs this uninterested inquiry to Sherlock as if John weren't even seated at the same table.
"A special order. Everything on this laptop that has been deleted in the last six months, on a USB stick. No fingerprints, no front-doors, can’t even be a trace of dust. No one can know you had a peek."

In the same bored voice, as if he’d just ordered a coffee, she asks: "How fast do you want it?"

"Express. Tonight."

This makes her look up from the pad she pretends to be scribbling something meaningful in, but she doesn’t look at Sherlock. Instead, she fixes her gaze on the laptop and the envelope on top of it. "Ooh – Mum will be cross. After I finish here, I’m supposed to be studying for exams."

Sherlock smirks. "We both know how pointless that is."

"Yeah, but nagging about that stuff makes her feel like a normal Mum, you know, so I don’t make a fuss. Speed depends on how much you’ve got on offer, though."

"The usual, plus twenty percent. There’s half now, half when I get it back with the USB."

She pops her gum and then shrugs. "Okay. I’ll send Griff; I think he’s on Deliveroo tonight and I can trust him to keep his gob shut for us for a fifty." She disappears into the kitchen, only to return a few minutes later with a black coffee in a takeaway cup she deposits in front of Sherlock and nods. Without further ceremony, he picks it up and stands up to leave.

John slides out of his chair as well, reaching for his wallet, which seems to amuse the waitress. "Don’t bother; the twenty-percent tip is more than sufficient. Shez insists on paying, but he knows I’d do it for him for free."

_Shez?_

Of course; some sort of street name from days gone by, the owner of which is already slipping out of the door. John realises Sherlock had left the laptop behind on his seat, out of sight, since the back of the chair was facing the front of the cafe.

John quickly buttons up his coat. The young woman then hands him a takeaway latte, while appearing to be giving him the kind of forensic once-over that John has come to recognise as Sherlock’s stock in trade.

"You’ll do," she announces curtly.

John is confused. "Do what?"

"Do for him. You. Used to talk about you. Nobody else. Nice to see he’s finally made the leap."

Wondering if the fact that he and Sherlock are now together is so obvious that even a stranger can see it, a self-conscious laugh escapes. On the other hand, people have been assuming the same right from the start. "How’d you work that out?"

"It’s obvious you’re good for him – he’s happy. I’ve never seen him happy. Keep up whatever you’re doing," she prompts. The statement should have sounded precocious, but something about her says she possesses the world-weariness required to make such an assessment.

He can’t help himself; he has to ask. "How old are you?"

"Fifteen. I’ve known him since I was ten."
He stares at the young girl and his bewilderment must have shown because she starts laughing again. "Better hurry, he won’t wait long for anyone."

When John reaches the pavement, the taxi has reappeared. Sherlock is already nestled into the back, immersed in looking at something on his phone again.

John gets in, takes a sip from what is an extremely good latte, and asks "Who is she?"

"Jax," Sherlock answers, his tone clearly pointing to an assumption that a single confusing syllable explains everything.

"Some kid who knows about computers?"

Sherlock gives him a disapproving glance. "That’s like saying Leonardo da Vinci knew about painting."

"She’s fifteen." He puts the incredulity he feels into that number.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Are you corrupting a minor? Asking a child to commit a crime?"

"She can take care of herself. And, more importantly, she never gets caught – at least not doing these sorts of things. She's lived in foster homes all her life, and been a street kid whenever they placed her somewhere bad. The latest place seems alright, so she's staying put," Sherlock explains in a low voice.

"A member of the Homeless Network, then."

"An elite one. She taught me how to work around the security system on Mycroft’s laptop, and how to keep a backdoor open in it. He still hasn't managed to work out how I keep gaining access to it, and he’s had the best minds at GCHQ on the case for the past two years."

"Did you tell her that we’re together?"

That makes Sherlock look up, confused. "No. Why would I have? You were present the whole time. Nothing to that effect was said. Why are you asking that?"

"She congratulated me. For…” John can’t quite put it into words. "She said I make you happy."

Sherlock's gaze is locked onto the phone screen since he's typing away at something. "Of course you do," he says, as though John has stated something rather obvious.

"Oh."

Nothing more is said for the rest of the journey.

Late that evening, John glances around the sitting room from his usual chair. There's a fire going, courtesy of Mrs Hudson. Sherlock is stretched out on the sofa. He has balanced his own laptop against his bent knees and is tapping away. Mere weeks ago, his typing had been slow, muscle
memory not yet regained. Now, John can't tell if there's a difference to his past performance anymore.

"What’s that you’re working on?"

"Research. Preparing for tomorrow’s interview, since Lestrade says he'll be bringing in Cole’s sister for formal questioning. In the meantime, while we wait for Jax’s verdict on the laptop, I’m trying to find the connection between Cole and Burrows Lea House. So far, I've surveyed the HM Land Registry and Ancestry dot com."

John probably shouldn't interrupt The Work, if he wants to keep The Peace, but they've had a good thing going with honesty lately, and if John's sixth sense is correct, Sherlock might be in a content enough mood for him to dig a little deeper about something that has been worrying him ever since the mind-blowing and baffling encounter in this very room a few days ago.

There is no right moment for the question he wants to ask. There will never be a right time for asking something this intrusive, embarrassing and potentially destructive, but John has made a vow not to let important issues fester unspoken anymore. Despite a comfortable moment never appearing, he has lately already managed to address some very difficult things with Sherlock. What he has in mind now is a concrete, even simple thing, one that should be comparatively easier to tackle than many of the issues they'd discussed at the hospital and immediately afterwards.

"Something on your mind?" Sherlock asks, frowning at something he's just read and then muttering ‘uneducated imbeciles' under his breath.

Of course, he has made note of something in John's posture, or the way his hair is parted, or the angle is which his knee points towards the window that have clued him into the fact that something's up. Damned detective.

John is convinced he needs to frame this with the positive. Sherlock does seem to value praise when it comes from him.

"That thing you did three days ago, that was--- good." Very eloquent, Watson. That'll get the talk going. He stifles a frustrated groan.

"You seemed sufficiently appreciative," Sherlock confirms.

John twists in his chair to face the sofa. "How’d you get so good at it?" he forces himself to ask out loud.

There, the detonator button has been pressed. Brace for impact.

Sherlock's head snaps up and he goes absolutely still, before slamming the laptop lid shut mid-typing. He pushes it against the backrest and sits up, turning to face John as he plants his soles firmly on the carpet. A decorative pillow flops to the floor, unnoticed by Sherlock. Shoulders are pushed back, chin snapped defiantly up. Eyes narrow, gaze sharpens, fingers curl into the lapels of his black dressing gown on the sofa.

"Why?" he demands, voice dripping with suspicion and dismissal.

"Just wondering. Not complaining!" John defends himself.

"I knew it. Trust you to be observant only when it comes to irrelevant rubbish, yet to be completely flummoxed at even the simplest---"
"Same without the insults, please," John interjects.

"I had no idea sex with you would involve so much utterly pointless post-event analysis. Did you also subject your lady friends to such scrutiny? No wonder they never stuck around."

In Sherlock's world, offence is the best defence. John is used to this but still tempted to repeat his request of not being disparaged. "They never stuck around, because some annoying dick always chased them off."

He can't help chuckling a little. Naturally, he had been furious at Sherlock's antics back in the day, but several of those schemes had been downright hilarious in hindsight. Some of Sherlock's most unsavoury anatomical experiments always happened to require attention when John was trying to serve breakfast to a partner who had stayed the night, and Sherlock had developed some rather odd ailments requiring immediate medical attention several times after John had escorted his dates upstairs. In hindsight, it probably hadn't been very polite, having women over while Sherlock was in the flat, but similar conduct hadn't been a problem at all at college. There was also the fact that John had had no idea at that point that the fantasies his head had begun to develop about his flatmate – daydreams which he'd cursed to high heaven – had reciprocal counterparts in Sherlock's head, let alone that they might actually turn into reality one day.

He's not asking because he wants to put Sherlock on the spot. He's asking, because there's a huge discrepancy between the walking on eggshells they're doing when it comes to anything reciprocal, and the effortless, business-like manner Sherlock had delivered his… favour. That's not precisely how he'd phrased it, but near enough: 'A belated thank-you'. To John, that sounds very much like a denial that whatever had happened in any way benefited Sherlock himself. He had informed John that it was something he'd wanted to do, and John could bring himself to believe it, but the whole experience had still left a lasting unease.

"I assume you're seeking confirmation for what you already know?" Sherlock demands.

John is taken aback. This is the worst part of discussing anything with Sherlock – he's always several steps ahead, often assuming telepathy. "No, I---- What are you talking about?"

"Don't insult me by claiming that Lestrade has been able to resist the temptation to spill the beans when inebriated enough in your company, or even sober. It seems to be London's favourite pastime nowadays, discussing me behind my back," Sherlock accuses.

John snorts. "People do have other important things to talk about than you, you know." He shouldn't latch onto this because he should be dragging Sherlock off from the tangent he's trying to distract John with, but maybe it's best to tread carefully. "No, whatever you're referring to, Greg has never gossiped about your sex life over a pint."

Sherlock seems to accept this. He leans back on the sofa and glances at his laptop as though trying to decide whether to continue what he was doing earlier since he has now established that whatever secret he had suspected may have already been revealed, is still safe.

John wonders if he should leave his chair and join Sherlock on the sofa, but he remembers Sherlock's words from earlier – 'it's easier to talk when I can't see you'.

John picks up a newspaper which cuts their line of sight, not quite sure how to proceed. He has asked his question, so it's up to Sherlock to decide if he'll deign to answer.

Suddenly, another angle occurs. "Why would Lestrade know about that stuff anyway?" John asks,
trying to keep his tone neutral. He knows this drives Sherlock a bit into a corner, but he can still clam up and ignore John if this goes beyond what he's willing to discuss.

"Lestrade, and likely a great majority of NSY," Sherlock says, fingers drumming the coffee table judging by the sound. He sounds wary. "Nothing salient stays secret there. I've found the police to be a hive of indiscretion."

John has to agree, by the conversations he's heard in the break room. He could probably quit the clinic for a while with the tip-off fees if he called the tabloids and revealed what he'd heard about celebrities' arrests by just popping in to get some tea. They'd pay handsomely. Not that he'd ever want to indulge the tabloids. They rip people apart, and Sherlock seems to share his disapproval of such publications.

"I'm referring to how I met Lestrade."

John smiles into the sports section. "Oh, that. He told me you wandered to a crime scene, high as a kite, solved the case and while doing it, insulted everybody up to the point of being such a prat that they put you in a cell overnight."

"I'd actually met Donovan once before, and I'm sure that incident did little to change what she already thought about me," Sherlock comments. "During my first meeting with Lestrade, I was a witness because I happened to be there, due to the second reason they arrested me. Wilful obstruction of police work was the first reason; solicitation the second." He pauses to draw a breath, possibly to gauge John's reaction, but then launches into further detail in a nervous tone: "It hardly mattered from their perspective that no money ever exchanged hands, everything was paid for in goods."

Silence reigns until John folds the newspaper and draws a breath before looking at Sherlock.

"There it is, then," Sherlock announces. "The look."

"What look?" John drops the newspaper on the floor and pulls one knee up onto the chair so he can turn properly towards the sofa.

"My funds were depleted. I had no incentive to be sober. I could hardly go to Mycroft or home since the two were synonymous at the time but not because I wanted it to be so. That hardly changes the fact that your face is doing that exact thing that people's faces always do when this is so much as alluded to. I rather suspect they desperately wish for hand sanitizer just for occupying the same space as me. I do find it surprising you were not made aware of this the minute you set foot in NSY in my company. I'm sure, as stories go, it's still an office favourite," Sherlock says resignedly and shoves his palm under his thighs, averting his gaze from John to the window.

"Sherlock…. That's not a thing people would talk about. It would make them un---"

"---comfortable? I make them uncomfortable, so why not use the facts of my past to take me down a peg? It's not as though anything else has been off the table. Did you know DS Harris has an official warning on his record for delightfully calling me, I quote: 'a fucking fairy'? Or, that the first time I had the pleasure of meeting DS Donovan, she lovingly called me a 'psycho freak'? Do remind me, John, how respectfully the finest of Britain's police forces always treat their affiliates."

John says nothing, having decided to wait for the worst of Sherlock's anger to dissipate first.

It takes almost five minutes of silence before Sherlock speaks again. "What happened three days ago is the single good thing to have come from those times, because I made it into one, and I'd
appreciate it if you didn't try to taint that by picking it all apart in the context of what you now know. It does show on your face, unfortunately, that whatever fantasies of my purported virtuosity in this activity you may have harboured, I have disappointed you with the manner in which I learned to do what I did for you."

John's brows rise with this statement, cursing whatever he may have done to signal such confusion and alarm. Against such a backdrop, no one could blame Sherlock for having misinterpreted even the slightest negative reaction as disgust. John has a strong urge to go to him, to do something reassuring—a hug, a hand on an arm. He's desperate to prove that however he assumes John's attitude towards him might change, he's wrong, but at this point doing something like that would likely just provoke Sherlock further, and make him question whether John is making such a gesture merely out of pity. So, he stays put in his chair, praying that Sherlock doesn't leave the scene.

As it turns out, Sherlock isn't done picking him apart just yet, because he rises to his feet and looms over John's chair, fingers curling in a vice-like grip over the backrest. "Oh, go on. Gather all your bourgeois disapproval of my lifestyle choices, as Mycroft likes to call them, question what sort of a person would stoop so low. I find it an odd double standard that men the likes of you are lauded for bedding as many partners as possible, their feelings completely extrinsic, whereas someone trying to make ends meet in the only manner available to them, someone who never wanted to do any of it in the first place, is the one whose reputation is ruined, a shadow cast over their judgment for all eternity."

"'Men the likes of me'?" John asks. Coming from Sherlock's mouth, voiced in high-and-mighty righteous disapproval, it had sounded quite funny, but John doesn't want to give the slightest inkling that he's not taking Sherlock's frustrations seriously.

Sherlock leans back and flaps his wrist dismissively, glancing towards the kitchen. He retreats until he's standing next to the dining table looking a little lost, as though he had forgotten what it was he had intended to do there. He begins to pace, eyes cast slightly upwards like he tends to do when delivering his case-related lecture. He also does it sometimes when he wants to distance himself from what's being talked about, such as Christmas plans suggested by Mycroft. "Promiscuity is admired in heterosexual men, looked down upon in women, and most people don't even want to think about what the likes of me do. You want to know about my level of experience. Ask, then. List whatever acts you deem pertinent. Or perhaps I should spare you the effort: what I made the obvious mistake of gifting you with, is the whole extent of my experience, and it's always been limited to giving, not receiving. The recipients were not in the slightest concerned with my pleasure, or lack thereof. Does that answer your question?" he demands venomously as he makes another round, hem flapping, around the kitchen.

"Sit down," John says pleadingly. "You're giving me whiplash."

Sherlock stops, dressing gown fluttering to a halt, but makes no move to return to his chair or retreat to the sofa. And there is absolutely no eye contact.

"I didn't ask because I wanted those kinds of details," John pleads. "What happened three days ago was, and still is, fantastic, but it was just for me. I'm asking you about this, because it made me wonder why you'd be so at ease----" John snaps his mouth shut momentarily, realising that was not the best word to use right now, "I mean, why doing that would be easy for you, but you seem really on the fence about everything that involves the both of us."

"I am quite certain I was present," Sherlock argues, retying his sash so that the dressing gown is wrapped tight around him.

"Not what I meant." John swallows, cursing Sherlock's habit of derailing conversations by
pretending he takes everything more literally than he actually does.

John knows that in order to make his point, he needs to be precise, and so unambiguous that Sherlock would have to make a complete fool of himself if he were going to try to pretend he hadn't understood. This is what he should have asked, first and foremost, instead of fumbling around the actual point: "Have you ever had sex with someone you liked, and because you wanted to?"

"Once." Sherlock picks up his violin and his bow from the table but makes no move to lift it to his collarbone.

John has a good guess on which occasion Sherlock might be referring to, but he needs to be absolutely sure. "As in….?"

"Three days ago. You were there, too," Sherlock replies petulantly, turns his back on John and starts playing.

John realises there is a multitude of answers wrapped up in all that, and everything that has been said makes him realise how precarious the situation is. But, he can't leave this be just yet, even though it's making Sherlock uncomfortable. He has to ask the next question, perhaps the most important one. Truth be told, this is all making them both uncomfortable, but for very different reasons, and John is quite certain Sherlock's interpretations of his hesitation are wrong.

He waits for Sherlock to finish playing. He clearly isn't practising – he had simply launched into an angry rendition of a fast-paced piece he had nearly perfected a week earlier. He must be just blowing off steam. John realises that it must be a good sign that he feels he can again use the violin for that.

After the last note stops sounding, a thin film of sweat glistens on Sherlock's forehead, and he looks drained of energy. "What?" he asks in a resigned tone.

John grips the ends of the armrests for fortification and faces Sherlock's annoyed and tired scrutiny. As soon as their gazes meet, Sherlock looks away.

"Sherlock, are you asexual?" John asks, trying to sound as calm possible.

To both his confusion and relief, Sherlock doesn't seem surprised or shocked at the question. Mostly he looks like he always does when people are talking about something he finds uninteresting. Is this an attempt to get John off his back, to clam up again, to pretend he's in control of the conversation and about to judge it unworthy of his time?

"You miss the point entirely," Sherlock says, placing the violin on the side table. He starts loosening the screw of the bow to release pressure from the horse hairs.

"Then explain, because I need to know. I need to know if any of it is enjoyable so that I can adjust or--- or--- stop."

Sherlock turns, leaning the backs of his thighs on the edge of the desk he has wandered to. He's swinging the bow slightly as it hangs from the tip of his forefinger, regarding John with a difficult-to-read expression. Mostly he just looks thoughtful. "Anything worth doing, worth pursuing, requires motive, motivation, enjoyment and aptitude. I've been told that people like me don't always know how to cope with sexual attraction and can confuse social cues. Practice can, to some extent, compensate for lack of natural talent or skill, but people don't tend to enjoy doing things they're bad at. Motive, or lack thereof, is key. Biological urges can be relieved in many ways, ways
less entangled in emotional baggage. Wanting to create or maintain a relationship is an admirable enough motive, but might prove too difficult to sustain and that would not offer enough in terms of continued motivation to ensure---"

John blinks. He's not even going to try to follow that. Trust Sherlock to have over-analysed it all for years in order to plaster over with quasi-scientific data what must be a heap of apprehension simply too huge for him to deal with.

Sherlock must've lectured on after John had leapt out of his train of thought, because in a moment he is startled to find Sherlock staring at him, mouth now snapped shut into an angry line. "You asked. I answered, yet you won't even dignify my efforts with listening."

"John. As I no longer have to do what I did for practical reasons, this should be a deduction of which even you are capable: what happened was something I wanted to do. I rarely do anything I don't like doing. But, I find it infuriatingly tiresome to have to keep deducing your intentions, and where it's all going to go."

"It's not going to go anywhere you don't want it to." John has a distinct sense of going around in circles. "It's just that 'I don't require anything right now' is all I've had to go on since then, in terms of trying to bloody deduce what you're thinking. It's not about requiring things; it's about wanting or not wanting to do them." All sorts of cliches such as going where the mood takes them and going with the flow come to mind, but John seriously doubts Sherlock would appreciate them.

Sherlock picks up the end of the sash of his dressing gown, frowning at it momentarily until he faces John again. "I do want to have sex with you. Have, for a significant amount of time. Have, I think, since the early days," he admits, sounding more than a little embarrassed, as though he's done something wrong. "But I had no reason to think any of it was reciprocated."

Sherlock is looking at his own hands, splaying the fingers and bending them upwards as though inspecting his fingertips. This leads John to briefly wonder how the wear and tear of climbing are impacting his violin playing, for which he berates himself because it's highly irrelevant right now. He also has a sudden urge to apologise for everything he's ever done to give Sherlock the idea that he'd be horrified at finding out his mad flatmate had been harbouring romantic feelings for him. Granted, he'd made a show out of his own orientation because people kept making false assumptions, but it should have occurred to him earlier to think how those fervent denials would have sounded in Sherlock's ears if he weren't quite as married to The Work as he'd claimed. He should have looked deeper, instead of being so damned hung up on his own identity issues that he'd inadvertently hurt Sherlock.

"It wasn't exactly on your radar, was it? Three Continents Watson and all that – it's not been up to me," Sherlock says. He slumps bonelessly down into his usual chair and starts watching the flames flicker in the fireplace. He looks sad, and John wonders if the same thought is crossing both their minds – how much time they'd wasted hiding behind excuses and assumptions.

"It wasn't exactly on your radar, was it? Three Continents Watson and all that – it's not been up to me," Sherlock says. He slumps bonelessly down into his usual chair and starts watching the flames flicker in the fireplace. He looks sad, and John wonders if the same thought is crossing both their minds – how much time they'd wasted hiding behind excuses and assumptions.

John winces. "Yeah, I get the point. Pot and kettle. I've spent a lot of time thinking about what people might say about me. They certainly do talk about you, and it's understandable that lately, you've been thinking a lot about how they see you at the moment. Maybe we've both got to stop thinking about all those people, and really start thinking about us." The look he gives Sherlock is as honest an invitation as he can muster. "I'm willing to start now, by telling you nothing you've
told me tonight has changed what I see, or what I want, when I look at you."

There is a faint softening of Sherlock’s shoulders, and he turns to really look John in the eye, for the first time since they’d started talking.

And of course, the doorbell then has to ring.

Sherlock smiles. "Saved by the bell. Hold that thought, John. We will get back to it, I promise."
"God, not you again," Cole groans when Sherlock walks in. He then casts a pleading sideways look at his solicitor.

John watches through the one-way mirror as the older man shuffles his papers and then clears his throat. "I am James Fordyce and I will be filing a formal complaint on behalf of my client. This is police harassment," he intones. "There is no reason why he should have been brought back in today for questioning. He co-operated fully yesterday, and no charges have been brought."

Sherlock ignores the grey-suited man, and retains his line of sight on Cole instead.

Sally Donovan gestures at the chair to her left, inviting Sherlock to take a seat, but he doesn’t, choosing instead to pace from one side of the room to the other with his hands clasped together behind his back, slightly straining the front of his tight-fitting black jacket.

John can see the tension in his shoulders: there is a lot riding on this interview.

Sherlock had been silent all morning. He had clearly not had any sleep, and John thought it like that he'd spent the whole night in the sitting room, combing through the contents of the laptop. He'd been at it all evening already, telling John to stop distracting him when he tried to talk him into coming to bed.

John had also had a mostly sleepless night, finding it hard not to worry about how much solving the case matters to Sherlock; it is as if cracking it is the only way he would believe that his deductive powers have not been irrevocably damaged by what he’s gone through.

John doesn't know what to think of the claim. He's seen nothing that would point to that being true, but naturally Sherlock is the absolute expert when it comes to his formidable brain. John is sticking to his own theory that it has been a combination of too much stress, the aftereffects of his illness and the long ITU stay, and most importantly: the depression that had lowered his energy levels, messed up his concentration and made him doubt himself. The old flair wasn't quite there yet, but during the past few days, some of the familiar spark had begun to make brief appearances. The physical side of things has also improved immensely. Sherlock seems much less careful in his movements now, even forgetting himself on occasion when flouncing around wherever the case takes them.

Still, John knows how brittle this fledgling confidence must still be – come a major setback again, and this house of cards will easily topple. He has given up trying to argue with Sherlock that this is just a case. He knows Sherlock too well to even dare trying to lower his expectations.

Lestrade appears oblivious to this tension in John. He'd delegated the interview to Sally Donovan after spending a fruitless afternoon himself trying to coax something out of Cole. Maybe his own irritation is taking up his focus. To John the DI seems antsy in the role of observer.

Sally looks directly at the video camera recording the session. "For the purposes of the recording, Sherlock Holmes has joined the interview." John watches her turn towards Sherlock and then give him a rather pointed glare, as if telling him to be on his best behaviour.

Sherlock naturally ignores her. He reaches into his coat and pulls out a manila folder. "Mister
Cole. Is it true that you have recently terminated your contract with the Vault?

That gets a grimace from the suspect, and then a heated reply. "Not much point in paying the exorbitant fees, since your harassment has chased away my clients – they're concerned about their confidentiality. Your slander and accusations have ruined my business. That’s going into the complaint, too. I'm going to demand compensation," Cole announces almost triumphantly.

Sherlock steamrollers past all that. "I have witnesses who will testify that you have told them you intend to leave the profession because you believe you no longer need the money. If all goes according to your plan, in three weeks’ time you believe you will be an exceptionally wealthy man. But, of course, thanks to me, your plans won’t come to fruition." He puts on a mock apologetic face, which John knows is carefully designed to annoy the suspect.

Cole glares at Sally. "I object to this man being in this interview. I agreed to come in, voluntarily, I might add! I am co-operating with the police, and willing to answer your questions, but I'm not going to deal with this buffoon."

Sherlock stops pacing, and turns with a venomous look. He opens the folder, plucking a photograph from it and drops it on the table in front of Aiden. "In the spirit of co-operation, why don't you explain to the Sergeant why this pretty picture is the actual reason you are giving up your career as a personal trainer. It doesn’t matter if your client base has dwindled, because you decided to leave The Vault before any of this even happened, even bragged about it," Sherlock announces.

Everyone but Sherlock leans forward to see the image. John knows it is the same house in the old photo that Sherlock had found in the shoebox at the back of Cole’s mother’s wardrobe. This one is in full colour — a glossy one from a property brochure they had found and downloaded last night.

Cole stiffens but says nothing. The solicitor gives him a raised eyebrow.

Sherlock leans his palms on the table, looming over Cole. "For the record..." he smirks at the video camera, "...the suspect has just been shown the sale brochure for Burrows Lea House located in Shere, Surrey. This Victorian property has just been put on the market with a sale price of eight and a half million pounds, by the executors of the estate of a Henry Edwards, a name which will become relevant shortly."

Cole remains silent, but the confidence that had shaped his posture at the start is not quite so evident now.

John senses Sherlock’s excitement even though he’s not physically present – it’s as if he’s scented blood and is now hot on the trail. "Mister Cole, it is my understanding that you are the beneficiary of the will, as the oldest surviving relative of the second child of Henry Edwards. His legitimate heir, Rupert Edwards, died of cancer almost fifteen months ago. You are the descendent of Gladys Pritchard, the illegitimate daughter of Henry Edwards and Eleanor Pritchard, the nanny of Rupert, his son."

Cole straightens up. "So what? None of that is any business of yours, or of the police's."

"Oh, I wouldn’t say that. You have been selling illegal steroids to your clients in order to boost your income so that you could afford the legal fees needed to pursue your claim in the courts. Are you using the same solicitor for that case as is sitting in this room now?"

Cole stays silent, but there is a visible shift in the shoulders of the solicitor.

"Ah, I see that you are. Well, at least it explains why a man who is still living in social housing
with his mother is able to afford a top brief charging the fees that he does. And the fact is that criminal law is not your speciality, is it, Mister Fordyce? You’re a property man, from the Thomas More Chambers, where Christian Whitehead also happened to be employed. Maybe it was on Whitehead’s recommendation that your soon-to-be unprofitable business relationship began?” He turns to face Fordyce. “It must be distressing to learn that your client has been paying your bills with the proceeds of criminal activity.

Fordyce straightens his papers. "That has to be proven in a court of law, Mister Holmes. And in any case, what you are alleging is not relevant to the investigation into the death of Mark Watford, nor do they have bearing on the accusations you have made against my client regarding his friend and former client, Christian Whitehead." He folds his hands on the table and raises his chin, addressing Donovan. "I must add my objections to those of my client. It is blatantly obvious that Mister Holmes here is on nothing but a fishing expedition. I will be adding that to the complaint. I think we are done here. Either charge my client, or release him."

John can see Sally shifting uncomfortably in her chair. Beside him, Lestrade mutters: "he’s calling the bluff; Sherlock better start working some more of his magic."

John knows that it will take weeks for the Met to go through everything on the laptop Sherlock had handed in this morning, and that's assuming the chain of custody can somehow be salvaged to be admissible in court.

He breathes out and gives Lestrade a look. "Just give him a chance, will you?"

In the interrogation room, Sherlock doesn't appear deterred by the solicitor’s bravado. "Not fishing at all; I have the proof – from your laptop," he informs Cole. "You thought you had deleted everything, and buried the computer in Whitehead's locker at the Vault, thinking it would be safe there for weeks. You must have scouted out his lock code during a training session."

He looks back at the window and a triumphant smile briefly passes through his features; he knows, of course, that Lestrade and John are watching. "Even if someone eventually found it, you were counting on the fact that the police are really rather hopeless at processing computer-based evidence. Shame that you don’t understand computers as well as I do. Your deleted files have been resurrected, and the contents of your browser history and your emails are now in police custody."

Lestrade just shakes his head, "Yeah, but--- there is no way in hell we can use that, thanks to his tampering with it before it was recorded as evidence!"

John is starting to get annoyed with him. "Greg, just hold on, will you? Sherlock won’t need it; he’s going to get the confession." This is more wishful thinking than fact, but he's going to do everything he can to buy Sherlock more time.

On the other side of the glass, Cole glares, and then shrugs. "Irrelevant. My family issues have nothing to do with the murder investigation. You're just wasting police time and pursuing some sort of vendetta against me."

Sherlock rolls his eyes theatrically. "It goes to motive, M’lord," he mocks, tone dry and high-pitched. He then puts his hands on the back of the empty chair beside Donovan. "Isn’t that the barrister’s traditional answer to the judge when someone queries his line of questioning? The family connection, as it turns out, is highly relevant. This whole case bothered me from the beginning, because it wasn’t logical that a man would murder someone to protect himself against a Class C drugs charge. But, my research reveals that the will regulating the inheritance of the estate stipulates that the beneficiary must not have a criminal record. The clause was inserted by Henry Edwards with the intention to stopping his son from getting involved in an insider dealing ring.
Unfortunately, a criminal conviction of Aiden Cole – even for something as minor as selling steroids – would therefore irreversibly rule him out."

Sherlock leans forward and drops the second photograph in the folder onto the table. John recognises the Cole family photo, and this time, Aiden reacts with obvious shock. "How the hell did you get that?"

Lestrade actually winces. He turns to John and says, "Yeah, I asked the same thing. You know his methods could get this case thrown out of court."

This time John just glares. They had been granted permission to have a look at Cole's home, but anything and everything pertinent they found should have immediately gone into recorded evidence.

Unaware of the argument going on behind the glass, Sherlock is in full flow. "The manner in which I found this is hardly the gist of the matter."

He taps the toddler in the photo with his forefinger. "Your baby sister is no use – she's still paying off student loans; hasn't got a penny to her name, and shares a bedsit room down in Mortlake."

Sherlock then points to the younger boy. "It must have annoyed you to no end that your brother in Australia, who does have the money, refused to lend you what was needed for legal proceedings in the inheritance claim. Odds are, he didn't believe you. But then, this isn't the first time you've begged him for money, is it? You've gone to him before, with business schemes that never quite pan out and end up draining his pockets, at least according to your sister."

He slides the family photo in front of the barrister with his forefinger. "Perhaps you might want to consider acting for the brother, too, Mister Fordyce. I'm sure he has money to recover from his older sibling, if for nothing else than seeking damages for having to suffer his wallet-draining antics for decades. And when Cole is ruled out because of a criminal conviction, guess who is going to be next in line to inherit?"

Cole snaps, "Bobby's a fucking idiot who doesn't give a damn – ran off to Australia and broke Mum’s heart. He even stopped writing to her: she didn't even get a call from him when she was dying, the heartless bastard! I hope he rots in hell. I'm not giving him a chance to push me out of the way."

Sherlock beams a smile. "I, too, doubt there will be joyous family reunion once he finds out that he's now associated with a drug dealer. Your browser history is a fascinating cache of illegal anabolic steroid purchases. As your money grew tight, you started spending less, charging your clients more, and pushing them to buy more from you, not even caring what was in the pharmaceuticals you peddled. Quick and visible results meant more business, never mind what side effects they might have. No wonder Christian Whitehead ended up in hospital with cardiac complications."

Cole bristles. "There's NOTHING on my laptop that proves I've been selling anything. You're bluffing."

Sherlock spins from where he has been looming over Cole to look straight at the video camera. "No, there isn't. But you've just admitted that the laptop is yours, even though there are no fingerprints on it – you were smart enough to clean those off, but not smart enough to remove digital traces of yourself. So glad you were stupid enough to oblige us with the truth," he adds with a saccharine tone.
It reminds John of the time when Sherlock confronted Ian Monkford’s wife and got evidence from her about his character; give them something to contradict, and they will fall for it every time.

Sherlock’s grin melts away and he resumes pacing. "That leads us to another crime on your growing resume. You’ve been lying to the Housing Association about how long ago your mother died. It’s been six weeks, and you’ve been hoping to stall everything for another three weeks, until the court validates your inheritance claim. The reason is, of course, that you don’t want to be evicted, since a homeless drug dealer certainly isn’t going to make a convincing case as an heir apparent." He turns his re-emerging smile into a sneer.

Fordyce lays a restraining hand on Cole’s arm, as he starts to get up out of his chair, rage contorting his face.

John stiffens, instinct telling him that Cole is going to attack Sherlock.

"SIT DOWN!" Sally Donovan’s command cuts through the tension like a knife, and everyone freezes for a moment. Even John flinches.

Sally takes advantage of the momentary lull to assert her authority: "this is a police matter. You will all respect the procedures of a formal interview."

Cole reluctantly settles back into his chair, and Sherlock takes a step back, carding his fingers quickly through his curls. A nervous tell from adrenaline?

"Thank you, Sergeant Donovan." Sherlock has clearly decided that her order was not directed at him at all. To John this is unsurprising; Sherlock tends to ignore rules he finds arbitrary when applied to him.

"The demand for no criminal conviction is the reason you panicked when your client, Christian Whitehead, announced that he was going to the police about the illegal steroids which had wrecked his health. You argued about it in the hospital, trying to get him to not do it, or at least postpone. When he refused, you realised you had to silence him. Rather convenient, wasn't it, that your little sister was telling you all about her exciting new lab project — producing a plant extract of something lethal called gelsemium elegans for her boss to use in a Chinese court case. No one would think you somehow manufactured it or even knew what it was. It was a stroke of luck, and you really deserved one at last, didn’t you? Heartbreak grass — a tailor-made murder weapon for someone already suffering from a heart condition caused by the drugs you supplied."

Sherlock folds his arms, a sly smile on his lips as he stares down at Cole. "Your sister has confirmed that almost 70 millilitres of the extract at the lab is missing, unaccounted for. In addition, the police have verified with the Jodrell Lab that her swipe card was used to enter the facility after hours three days before Mark Watford died. You've effectively made her into an accomplice to murder. It will cost her the job at the minimum, and she’s unlikely to be able to find another one in a research lab. You’ve ruined her reputation; she’s going to end up working in a garden centre weeding pots and watering plants, thanks to you."

"Keep her out of this; she has...," Cole starts, but snaps his mouth shut when Fordyce quickly raises his hand to halt his words.

"My client has nothing to say to these absurd accusations," the barrister announces calmly.

The trainer seems to get a hold of his emotions and sits back in his chair, arms folded.

Undaunted, Sherlock continues his deductive flow: "you know, you might well have got away with
it. Whitehead’s heart attack came before you could deliver the fatal dose to the hospital. He’s never going to recover consciousness, which means that your secret would have been safe. A happy ever after, walking the paths at the ancestral country pile – if it only hadn’t been for Mark Watford, the one who got in the way.”

Cole now fixes his eyes down on the photograph. John sees that a thin sheen of sweat has broken out at the man’s hairline. He is trying hard not to react to Sherlock’s provocation.

Sherlock begins his pacing around the room again. "I must admit that there is one thing about Watford’s death that still puzzles me. I cannot decide whether if the whole thing was simply idiocy on your part, or callous disregard for an innocent man’s life. It’s plausible that you could have mistaken one of the poison syringes for the regular insulin injections that he insisted on you giving him." He pauses to glance at the solicitor. "Pay attention, Mister Fordyce; this might be a manslaughter defence you could argue. The alternative is that your client selected Watford with malice aforethought as a guinea pig to test whether the extract was, in fact, lethal. That’s premeditated murder, and for that he would spend a long time in prison. I’d say an insanity plea would likely not succeed, and since no such thing exists for sheer stupidity, your only chance would be to convince a jury that he's injudicious enough to plan such a ridiculous murder."

He pauses, for effect. "Personally, I think you are rather monumentally dull-witted, amply demonstrated by what happened when you discovered Watford dead on the floor. You panicked, and used the man’s own gun to shoot a dead body in the hope that when it was found, the police would just conclude that the man was a victim of gang violence."

Sherlock turns to look straight through the mirrored window, as if to lock eyes with the observers there. "It nearly worked, you know. The Forensic team were very willing to ignore the evidence and draw the easier conclusion so that they could get home in time for tea," he nearly sings the last words in theatrical mockery.

John chuckles behind the glass.

Sherlock turns back to the table. "Unlucky for you, I know better. And –" he turns towards the one-sided mirror again, clearly addressing those watching from behind it or via CCTV - "oh, you'll like this bit!" he announces as he shakes his head slightly with relish. He then joins the tips of his fingers in front of him and turns to face Cole again, looking mock sombre. "I can even connect you to the location where the body was dumped!" He reaches into the manila folder and pulls out the last of the items, dropping it in front of Cole’s down-turned eyes.

"Exhibit C – a title deed for the Thurston sawmill in Barking, where you took the body. This was not a randomly picked location, not at all. It was owned by your mother’s first husband, Jack Thurston – your biological father – the man who abandoned your mother before you were born, because he found out she was pregnant and he didn’t want children. She blamed him for her poverty and for the fact that she had to marry a man she didn’t love, in order to put a roof over your head. And, she told you all this, didn't she; as the eldest, you had to know. You’ve always resented your half-brother, Bobby. You might be prone to lying, but birth records tend to be quite truthful. He’s never known about your connection to the Edwards family, has he?"

Sherlock is in the final home stretch of putting the case together, and his pace practically becomes a strut. "So, when you needed a place to dump a body, an adrenaline-fuelled thought occurred: why not give a two-fingered salute to your biological father’s family? That sawmill is a prime development site, and the owners have just got permission to knock it down and build a dozen executive homes. They’re cashing in on your patrimony, since you’re Thurston’s eldest offspring. You may have even investigated whether it would be better to make a claim on that property, but
decided you could do that after inheriting Burrows Lea House. As most idiots who end up getting caught, you got greedy. So, to slow the sale of the sawmill, well — a nice messy murder with hints of drug gang warfare would do very nicely, indeed. Oh, and the evidence of your thinking was on your laptop — deleted, but retrievable. Your search history, your notes, everything. It will look particularly compelling in court."

John doesn't even try to hide his grin. This is a tour de force of Sherlock’s deductive skills. No wonder Sherlock had been glued to his laptop – he must have done a formidable amount of digging around official records to put all this together.

"Too bad that you are still an amateur at this crime lark, even though you began your career quite early. A knife fight when you were a Borstal Boy?" he suggests, his tone betraying that he knows full well he’s right. “That’s an expired conviction, and the statute of limitations keeps that little piece of your criminal past safe from the inheritance claim, but the incident was in the papers back when it happened. Never mind,” Sherlock then sighs dramatically, “you always seem to cock it up in the end, don’t you? You always skip proper planning and go straight to execution – pun fully intended, of course. This is no exception. You won’t inherit anything. Your mother was probably right about you."

Through this whole monologue, Cole has been getting increasingly agitated. Finally, he blurts out, "What? What did she say?"

"That you’d never amount to much, I'd predict. You clearly haven’t read the letter your half-brother sent to her from Australia. Your mother must have been heart-broken to realise that you were bankrupting him with your crazy schemes. In his letter to her he agrees with her assessment that you were the thickest of the three children; took after your father, according to her. Just plain stupid."

Cole’s face goes bright red. "Stop saying that!" he exclaims with obvious threat in his tone. His solicitor gives him a stern look.

Sherlock turns with mock surprise on his face. "Why ever not? The evidence is there; it’s been there at every step of the way – ever since your first school report. You’ve been taunted at school all your life about it, haven't you? Thicc, moron, dunce, numpty…"

Cole shouts, "I'm pretty fucking happy that I’m not some public school dick like you! I’ve had to work hard for a living. No silver spoon for me; no daddy’s money to fall back on." He’s rigid with rage, and the words just come pouring out, flaming with vitriol. "People like you in your smart suits, you always want a short cut, the easiest way that money can buy, instead of deserving it. My rich boy clients got what they wanted by cheating. They wanted muscles like mine, a body I’ve had to build with fucking years of hard work. I’ve earned these muscles, but they want them on the sly. 'Bend the rules, sell me the short cut, I can afford it'," he mocks, and with that, he seems to deflate a little, until he leans across the table towards Sherlock, boldly meeting his gaze. “So, yeah, I sold them shit and they paid top money for it, because I convinced them it was the best stuff out there. They’re the idiots, and I invested that money in getting back what is mine! That house belongs to me, and it’s posh wankers like you who are trying to keep me from it! All I did was stop them from getting in my way. Whitehead was already killing himself with steroids, all I was going to do was give him a push. And I’m not stupid, you tosser – I tested it on Watford, a dickhead of the first order. In fact, he reminds me of you."

Sherlock turns to the window, and gives a slight mock bow. "And that, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, is the reason why the accused is guilty as charged."

The solicitor's dismay is obvious.
Sherlock turns back to Fordyce, and says politely with a devious grin, "Good luck with the trial," before marching out.

Once in the corridor, he heads straight for the lifts, throwing open the door of the observation room as he passes it. "John, come on. Dinner," he orders triumphantly. John hurries after him. He still feels practically intoxicated after watching the triumph unfold in the interrogation room. The atmosphere had been practically electric.

Lestrade jogs after the two of them. "Sherlock, wait! We need all that on paper, too! I need to take your statement----"

"You have it all on video. I'm sure Mr Cole will now be willing to clarify any details you may have missed, now that his pipe dream of being the triumphant heir-apparent shooting pheasants in Surrey has been destroyed. Meanwhile, I am going to take John out on a date," he announces well within earshot of Lestrade and Donovan who has just emerged from the interview room.

John’s brisk steps falter a little, and he turns to face the direction they’ve come from. He wears a wary smile as he dares a glance at the DI.

Lestrade looks both awestruck and amazed. The words 'I knew it' escape half-whispered, half-mouthed, followed by a beaming smile.

Donovan just stares, with the look of a woman who thinks she has now heard everything.

There it is, then: the announcement John has been fretting over, the one he hasn't even plucked up the courage to discuss with Sherlock yet, because it has felt like there are still so many uncharted waters left to negotiate. Unsurprisingly, the big reveal has now happened in a very Sherlockian, oblivious-to-proper-social-conduct sort of way.

To his own surprise, John finds that he doesn't really care. Maybe his priorities have shifted during the past few days. Or, more accurately, months.

He watches Donovan head off and Lestrade bids them farewell before doing the same, and John realizes that this is far from the most embarrassing situation Sherlock has ever landed them in.

They're together, now, officially. No awkward announcement. It’s just out there now. It's not like other people didn't see this coming way before John did. The words which have just been spoken haven’t changed anything in what really matters: the two of them.

A moment later, John can't help a grin spreading on his face as he glances at Sherlock, standing beside him in the lift, all regal posture and cheekbones and black cherub curls and coat collar tugged up like in the old days. Come to think of it, John isn't entirely sure he's seen Sherlock do that ridiculous collar thing since the GBS grabbed hold of their lives and refused to let go.

Sherlock, who isn't looking at him, inhales hesitantly. "I did not mean for it to slip out like that. In hindsight, you may have had views about the forum, the timing and the phrasing of such an announcement." He looks at John, biting his lip. "I'm sorry," he says quietly and seems to be analysing John's expression with anxious meticulousness.

John gives him a reassuring smile and reaches out to give his hand a brief squeeze before the lift doors open. He doesn't want this to mar Sherlock's triumph over what has just happened. What had once bothered him – the insinuations and the false assumptions regarding the nature of their relationship – no longer anger him, because they’re true, and maybe Sherlock has been right all along: the truth is better than any of its alternatives. It's all fine. "Don't be," he tells Sherlock.
Sherlock swallows and blinks a little as nervousness drains out of his posture. John leans to the side slightly so their forearms bump into each other slightly, which elicits a smile and a glance from Sherlock.

They head to Angelo's. No other place had even been discussed in the cab. In restaurant picking, even Sherlock seems prone to sentiment.

"I was thinking about titles," John says while they wait for their entrees.

"None of the families involved were nobility," Sherlock replies, a crinkled brow showing his confusion. He is mopping up the last bits of porcini soup from his plate with the last bit of bread from the basket.

"I meant for the blog post. 'The Hapless Heir'?"

Sherlock rolls his eyes. "That clearly spoils the ending and thus kills the suspense. Must you always try to be so clever?"

"Pot, kettle. 'The Murderous Meathead'?"

"Mmmm… nope."

"'The Twice-Killed Corpse'?"

He gets an eye-roll. "You can't kill a corpse twice, John. A corpse is, by definition, already dead." Sherlock gives John a sardonic glance. "I need to post an ad for a better blogger."

John snickers. The conversation then turns to climbing after their next course arrives.

"You seem to prefer to belay. You're not bored with it, are you?" Sherlock asks in between mouthfuls of spaghetti.

John finds he likes watching Sherlock eat. It's practically hypnotizing after months of Sherlock not being able to do any of such normal everyday human things. Now, he's twirling spaghetti around a fork as though those skills had never been lost. The violin is helping with his dexterity in other activities, too.

"No", John says. "But I have to be careful of my shoulder. Anyway, I rather like watching you on the walls."

"I'm still a beginner."

"You don't act like a beginner, not in anything you do, Sherlock, and it's bloody annoying," he jokes. "I like watching you take on a challenge," John reiterates with a tone that he allows to be a little suggestive. "You look magnificent when you do that – be it playing the violin, hanging halfway up a climbing wall, or a case."

"I don't always get it right. My failure is less of a spectator sport, except for those who find delight in everything bad that happens to me."
"That’s not the point. It’s that you don’t give up; you like challenges."

"So do you."

John nods. "Maybe you just needed reminding of that. It’s not just the end result people enjoy when it comes to watching you work, it’s the process. Watching you circling your prey, getting closer and then going for the kill."

"People?"

"I know you keep saying it’s not a parlour trick, that it’s not entertainment – the deductions, I mean – but that’s why people like reading stuff in my blog about you: you make it a bit mysterious, how you do it all. They don’t just want the answers; they keep asking how you get to the solutions."

John shoves half a potato in his mouth, and is forced to have a quick drink of water to offset how hot the morsel had been. "I’m looking forward to you working out how to deal with our next case," he says mischievously.

"And what would that be?" Sherlock asks, licking a bit of tomato sauce off a fingertip. As John watches his lips circle his forefinger, he can’t help memories of what had happened a few days ago float back. He wouldn’t mind a repeat of that, once they get on the same page about only doing things the both of them would be comfortable participating in.

"This one’ll be a bigger challenge for the great Sherlock Holmes than any murder. It’s a mystery of the heart," John announces with a grin.

Sherlock seems to be still processing that comment, when Angelo putters past, a stack of candle cups in one hand and a lighter in the other. As he passes their table, Sherlock grabs the man’s wrist. "I believe that a candle for this table has become rather appropriate, Angelo. And perhaps some wine. I suspect I may need it."

John matches Sherlock’s smile with one of his own.

They barely make it back to Baker Street before a torrential downpour drowns London in grey. They start a fire, but neither of them make an attempt to settle into an armchair, curl up on the sofa or start doing something solitary.

There’s expectation in the air, brought on by the successes of the day, and wine and the way at least some of the apprehension seems to have lifted from between the two of them. Not all of it, but enough to consider the possibility of other things.

John remembers evenings like this, after cases have come to triumphant ends through Sherlock’s genius, often combined with a stroke of luck and a bit of diligent police work. Mostly, though, resolutions have been reached due to Sherlock’s brilliance. These moments feel like the world has narrowed down to the two of them, because what else could there possibly be outside this flat that could interest John in any way?

He spots Sherlock glancing at his clarinet, currently lying on one of the bookshelves.

"Would you like to play a bit?" John asks. Now that Sherlock has really begun to regain his skills
at a fast pace, he seems to prefer to play on his own instead of being dragged down by John's fumbling accompaniments after so many years out of practice. John had never been all that good with the instrument – a beginner to a virtuoso, when compared to Sherlock's skill level on the violin.

"Not really," Sherlock says, moving in front of a window instead, watching trails of water meander down the glass. He appears calm on the surface, but his fingers are tapping on his thighs, as though chasing a complex piano piece.

John tries not to worry that this isn't the start of what has often happened after a particularly enjoyable and challenging case: the crash and the funk, the black mood. Lord knows, Sherlock's dwelt in exactly that plenty enough lately. Still, it's way too early for such a phase.

John gets up and walks over to the window, encloses the fidgety fingers of Sherlock's right hand in his briefly and then lets go, just to announce his presence.

"Your mailbox must be bursting with cases. I know you haven't sorted your emails for ages. I'm sure there's something there you could pick up now that we're done with The Personal Poisoner."

Sherlock's lashes flutter down in exasperation. "That's the title, then?" he asks in an exaggeratedly exasperated tone.

"Came up with it just now."

"It's passable, in the context of your melodramatic prose. And no, I'm not looking for another case, not right now."

John hums in acknowledgement to fill the following silence. He hopes Sherlock might explain further without pressing.

"What happens now?" Sherlock asks.

"In the next ten minutes, or three hours, or…?"

"In the grander scheme of things."

"I don't know. In terms of work, we carry on as before, I guess. We've never done much planning in that regard. And we have to remember---"

"…Moriarty," Sherlock breathes out.

There had been a time when that name seemed to light a fuse in him. Now, mentioning it seems to bring on hesitation and a tinge of anxiety.

"We can't be sure when he'll show up, but he will. Until then, maybe I'd like a bit of time for myself," Sherlock muses.

John draws a sharp breath in, thrown off balance by this notion. There are many things that the statement he has just heard could mean, but contained in it just might be the idea that Sherlock wants some time alone. Usually the man drowns his sorrows by throwing himself into the work, like a shark that needs to keep swimming, but he has never requested that John leave his side.

They'd had a lovely time at Angelo's, so where is this coming from?

Sherlock turns to face him, frowning as he reads something on John's face he doesn't like. "Oh," he
then says, eyes widening in alarm. "Not what I meant," he clarifies. "I should have said 'us'. Time for us."

From John’s perspective, since Sherlock sucks up all the air when he walks into a room, no one ever notices anybody else when he’s present and lately, they have both been so preoccupied with the inner workings of his particular brain, Sherlock seems to take up well over half of that us.

But, John doesn't mind. He never has, because he doesn't doubt his own importance anymore.

It's exactly as Sherlock had said: he doesn't do things he doesn't want to. They've both wanted this from the start, the two of them, together as more than just flatmates. Sherlock doesn't say things like that unless he's serious, and not even then, since he'd waited years to pluck up the courage to tell John what he'd voiced at the hospital’s winter garden.

"I'd love that," John tells him. They could do some climbing, take a breather. Maybe even travel somewhere? They could do anything. Yet, he knows that Sherlock is more comfortable in familiar surroundings, so perhaps it’s better to stay at home. That's all fine, too, more than fine, in fact. They've wasted so much time already, too many days and hours and minutes both stuck inside their own misconceptions, so close but so far apart.

He snakes an arm around Sherlock and pulls him closer, but where he expects yield there's a fretful stiffness instead. Sherlock looks deep in thought, hovering between participating and retreating.

"You said we could talk some more. What's wrong?" John asks quietly. "We're stuck, until you say it."

"Always words… talking," Sherlock sighs, rubbing his palms up and down his opposite arms, making his sleeves ride up as though he were cold.

John can easily tell it's a nervous tick.

Sherlock inhales sharply, and then continues, averting his gaze from John's: "It would be easier, wouldn't it, if I could have just one word for it, asexual or whatnot, slap on that specimen label and move on to the doing? I know that I want you, just not how. I'm not--"

"I believe you. Sherlock, do you honestly think this is easy for other people? It's a bit like cases, the boring and easy ones aren't so rewarding."

"Says the man who very much used to favour easily obtainable, casual sex," Sherlock points out. "It never seemed to offer much of an intellectual challenge for you, but you weren’t even looking for that, were you?"

"That’s the whole point. I’ve been confusing sex with love. I thought I wanted it easy and uncomplicated, I didn’t love the women I’ve dated, and they didn’t love me. What I was missing out on was… this. With you."

Sherlock’s lip quirks. "There’s that word again… this."

"You want a precise definition? You want me to go all – I don't know – romantic, here? Because so help me God, I will," John threatens playfully. "I want the in-between, finding out how it works for us, all the firsts and the seconds and the awkward bits and the difficult parts, too, because that's what it's supposed to be like with someone who matters. It's weird, and hard, and I wouldn't miss it for the world, because I get to have that with you. It's not about being good at it, or having a game plan to follow. I suppose roles and knowing what to expect are something you find helpful in general when dealing with people, but in this you and I both have to improvise."
Sherlock is still in his arms, clearly not seeking to depart his personal space. He's watchful; waiting for John's reaction. He strokes his palms down Sherlock's arms as though trying to impart a bit of warmth to his pale visage. "I don't want re-enactments of the most effective blowjobs you've learned to perform – I want you," he says quietly, tucking a curl behind Sherlock's ear, his lips close by; "I loved you before I wanted you, and that's what makes this so dangerous and terrifying and worth every fucking thing I could ever do for you."

John finds it hard to concentrate when that pair of eyes, the sea glass–like details of which are permanently etched into his memory, are fixed so intently on his own, but he forces out the words he knows are risky, which might break the spell of this fragile intimacy, but he needs to say them: "I think I need to hear it again: do you like what we're doing, all of it? Genuinely like, not just as some sort of a trade-off you're willing to have, or as part of what you think relationships are supposed to include?" He's already half willing to take their current position as evidence, but he needs to know Sherlock is capable of expressing his own needs and wants. They can't construct this on the basis of just John's deductions. He's not the detective here.

Sherlock looks slightly insulted. "Of course. Whatever gave you the idea that I didn't?" he asks in a slightly alarmed tone.

A suspicion slithers in: would Sherlock deliberately mislead him in this? John nearly shakes his head, because the answer seems written on the painfully honest, unsure expression on Sherlock's face. He doesn't let people get close to him. Not like this. He wouldn't risk facing whatever frightens him about relationships like this if he wasn't serious. Or sure. "Things you say and things you do are sometimes at odds," John whispers into the nape of his neck, resting the weight of his head on Sherlock's shoulder.

John wonders how many opportunities for honest communication he's missed by taking what Sherlock says at face value. He's going to make a vow never to obey a command such as 'leave me alone' again, without first finding out what lay behind it.

"The same likely applies to all humans. We all conceal things by saying the opposite, by overcompensating. So do you," Sherlock argues.

John had never said it out loud to anyone, but an example that comes immediately to mind are his own frequent protestations during their early acquaintance:

*I'm not gay, I just fantasize about my male flatmate a lot.*

They pull apart, not reluctantly but each thoughtful and seeking a bit of space to explore the avenues of information opening in their minds.

Sherlock is still studying John's face with challenge in his eyes, inviting him to argue further, to make his case, to try to convince him to change his own notions, probably dead set on not giving in an inch. He hasn't realised John has already yielded – wanting to understand instead of making Sherlock accept his stance.

John suddenly realizes there's probably no single thing he could say or do to unravel years and years of misconceptions, bad experiences and a lack of confidence in Sherlock's head. There will need to be small steps, but at least this conversation has already served as one, among many more than he hadn't previously even realized they'd taken.

Is it any wonder that someone who's had over a decade longer to wonder about sex and relationships than John has would be more daunted than he had been to take the leap from friends to lovers? Especially when that person's previous sexual experiences had had nothing whatsoever to do with love? The things Sherlock must be worrying about are not the childish ideas of a
teenager trying to pluck up the courage for the first time – they're the concerns of someone who's been let down by people and the world around him countless of times.

Sherlock crosses his arms, glancing out the window. "So, when you ask me how I am feeling, and I say fine, then you need to know that things have not returned to normal. I don’t feel that way I did before the Guillain-Barré, and I doubt I ever will. The baseline of fine has been altered."

Suddenly, a new connection is made in John's head, and the question forming is a revelation: how much of Sherlock’s reticence is due to his anxiety about his health? "Then we just need to work around that," John says in what he hopes is an encouraging tone. "And you can't even be sure yet if this is the final stage of recovery."

"It's not a matter of working around things," Sherlock says quietly. He steps back to the edge of the table and hitches a hip onto it. John hates the way in which he seems to withdraw, to retreat like this, when the GBS is discussed. It's like it has a power over him still, despite everything they've done to prove themselves that it's over.

Maybe it is, but only for John. Maybe he's been clinging on to that relief for his own sake, to such an extent that he's ignored the fact that for Sherlock, it might still be something he battles constantly in ways he has not fully revealed to John yet.

"How does one possibly work around the doubt that whatever it feels like now, might only be a pale imitation of how things could have been? That it could be wrong and distorted and ruined, something supposedly pleasant turned to painful and irritating? Without a guarantee that it will ever change? If there's a way to work around that, I would certainly want to hear it."

"But if you don't know what it would have been like, how can you judge----" John starts, but it doesn’t look as though he’s being listened to.

Sherlock shoves himself upright from leaning against the table, and ties the dressing gown tighter around himself.

John blocks his way to the kitchen with an outstretched arm. "There is a way to work around this. And it's pretty bloody simple: you stop setting a standard. You stop thinking there is the right way and the wrong way for something to feel like – or that it would have been better before. You've got to stop thinking there's something wrong with you, that you're broken somehow. We have a blank slate here, a new start – there is nothing to compare this to, so stop doing that. If you like something, we continue. If you don’t, we try something else. Same goes for the things we find out I fancy, or don't. Everyone has their own dislikes and sensitive spots, and it has nothing to do with having had or not had GBS."

Sherlock looks more than a little sceptical. "It would be helpful to have a list of such pointers beforehand."

John grabs Sherlock's arm and pulls him down to perch on the armrest of John's chair. He complies, and cards an idle hand through John's hair from the neck up. It's left sticking in all directions.

"I'm not writing you a bloody list, you berk. You're going to have to deduce and experiment," John says in a slightly suggestive manner.

To his relief, Sherlock laughs.

"What we can plan is tomorrow. Anything you'd like?" John adds, practically giddy with the
realisation that he had managed to defuse the situation. He rises from his chair and as a detour, goes to give Sherlock a lingering kiss half on his upper lip and half on his cheek before heading to the kitchen.

"Yes, I’d like to go back to First Ascent," is the answer he receives.

John delights in the slight change in Sherlock's voice his gesture has brought on. Distracted, even flustered, as though he had trouble controlling his tone.

"Right. We’ll blow off some steam, then," John promises him.
To play a wrong note is insignificant; to play without passion is inexcusable!
– Ludwig van Beethoven –

They enjoy a leisurely breakfast at a café at the corner of Baker and Melcombe streets. Sherlock had texted Jonathan first thing after waking up, and they were in luck – it was his day off, and he was more than willing to join them at First Ascent.

Even though the case was now as good as solved, and this usually meant a good meal and a crash into bed for heavy sleep well-earned, last night's conversation had kept Sherlock awake for the better part of the night. He kept turning John's words around in his head like a Rubik's cube, tempted to believe things were as John believed: his to define, instead of lamenting over what-ifs regarding days already gone, during which they'd been too afraid to take a step forward in their relationship.

Instead of finding solace in the solitude he usually needed for such heavy thinking, Sherlock had found himself reaching out for John, inching closer across the expanse of the bed that always felt wider than it really was in the dark. He had pressed his face between John's bare shoulder blades, inhaling the man's scent. Its calming effect was likely more placebo than actual human biochemistry, but Sherlock knows enough about pheromones to wonder. The closeness had allowed him to finally drift off to sleep. At first, he hadn't been sure whether he had woken John up or not with his shifting, but then an arm, its movements sluggish and uncoordinated because of the hour and John's still half-slumbering state, had idly carded through his curls. It was not a pat, not a stroke, merely an acknowledgement and a test that whoever had scooted closer was exactly the person it was supposed to be. That small gesture had given Sherlock a sense of belonging that was intense.

In the morning, he'd woken up on his side, and instead of the anxiety and slight vertigo he had begrudgingly grown accustomed to as the default sensation of waking up, opening his eyes had not connected him to empty air and the white ceiling, but to meet John's gaze. Dregs of sleep and unadulterated delight drew lines on John's features, prompting Sherlock to inquire what on Earth he had found to grin about at such an ungodly hour.

"You," John had said, his tone benignly teasing. "Besides, it's already gone past ten."

An hour and half later, John is seated beside him on a barstool at the long window table, sipping his tea as he watches the scarce pedestrian traffic going past. He's half-tempted to suggest they forgo the day's exercise and head back home for a bit of glorious idleness awarded to them by post-case satisfaction, but blowing off steam is likely a more constructive idea. As relieved as he is about how he feels increasingly confident to engage with John in the physical side of things, the
notion of spending a whole day within the four walls of 221B makes him slightly on edge—anticipation mixed with a tinge of anxiety about how they would spend the time.

"Want a real challenge, Sherlock?" Jonathan is standing at the base of one of the vertical walls as he says this, a gleam in his eye.

"What does that mean, in this context?" Sherlock asks, tugging at his trousers so that a seam won't chafe under the harness. They’ve already done a climb each on two slab routes, and his muscles are now nicely warmed up. He glances at John, to see if he looks keen on this mystery challenge, but quickly deduces that he is just as surprised by Jonathan’s comment as he is.

Despite the man's reassurances that he does, Sherlock hasn't worked out if John actually enjoys climbing. He does come along eagerly when Sherlock suggests they do it, but he seems more content when belaying, instead of climbing himself.

"Time to take the training wheels off. No top rope – instead I'll teach you to lead a climb by attaching the rope onto the wall as you advance. We use dynamic ropes, which means that they stretch when you fall, since the falls tend to be bigger with lead climbing. It's called sports climbing, which means the anchors are already there, so you only have to clip the rope to them."

"That's different from that other thing you mentioned, where you don't have clips that are already installed?" John asks.

"Yeah, that’s trad climbing. That’s when you’re outdoors, making your own way up a virgin wall; part of the process is deciding where to cram in those safety devices."

"How do you do that?" John is looking up the wall, with a bit of concern. "You’ve used a drill to get those clip attachments in up there. How does that work on a mountain side?"

Jonathan leans over and picks something out of his large bag. It’s an odd collection of metal objects, with varyingly shaped pieces, each one with a woven wire cable loop. "You use these, taking up enough variations to let you get them wedged in whatever nooks and crannies present themselves.

"Everyone has their own signature collection; it’s called a rack. It's part of the solving the puzzle, trying to predict what you'll need up a particular route. Once you're up there, what’s on the rack is all you’ve got – you can't plan for every possible thing, every possible challenge ahead, so at some point you just have to say fuck it, use what you’ve got, and start moving forward. Some beginners solve this by hauling up about 40 different cams and nuts and hexes on their racks..." He smiles at the image he has conjured up, before shrugging. "The rock will teach them, eventually, that even if they drag up a whole shop-full of gear, life's still gonna throw some unknowns in their plans. That's the whole point, really. You improvise, you make do, you survive. Anyway, I thought I'd ask in case you were ready to expand your horizons," Jonathan concludes cheerily.

John glances at Sherlock while administering a bit of magnesium onto his fingers. "I'm not sure I want to put any extra strain on my shoulder. I'm happy with just top-roping, but if you'd like to try this, I'm happy to belay."

To Sherlock, the notion seems intriguing. Top-roping has been fine, but it's irritating having to maneuver his hands around the rope, and John has been keeping it so tight that it lulls him into a
What Jonathan had just said about the mind-set of trad climbing has struck a chord with Sherlock. The calculated risks, the making do with what one has at their disposal. Isn't that similar to what he used to do – improvise, see solutions where others only keep staring at the problem and shaking their heads, getting out of impossible scenarios with just his wits?

He's ready for the next step. He wants the next step. He might fail, but hasn't that risk always been there?

He could have failed, made a complete fool of himself with revealing the depth of his feelings to John, but he took that risk and the result is standing here next to him, hands in pockets, sweaty and covered in magnesium dust. John gets so much of it into his hair since he's belaying Sherlock more than Sherlock him. John had commented that he likes watching Sherlock climb but the opposite applies, too. John, muscles taut, working his way up a route, hair dishevelled, sweat shining on his forehead – rather delectable, really.

"I'd like to try," Sherlock says.

A short demonstration by Jonathan and two practice climbs later, Sherlock knows that this is the way he likes it. Suddenly, climbing is no longer about beating his body’s limitations. Losing the feeling of being restrained by the top-rope has let his mind focus on other things, and he finds that liberating. It’s like enjoying something that is two-dimensional and then suddenly discovering a whole new dimension.

He’s eyeing a wall they have never scaled the routes of before. This one’s a brick one, and he can see that the clips are in more challenging positions.

"Hold on, Sherlock." Jonathan is smiling but shaking his head. You're doing fine, but before you tackle that one, there's one more thing we haven't covered. In many ways, it's the most important one. You need to be able to fall correctly to avoid getting injured," Jonathan says, leaning down to pick up a few carabiners from the floor.

Sherlock raises half a brow. Surely humankind has mastered that during their early evolution. He's had plenty of practice in the months after leaving the ITU. He knows how to fall, repeatedly.

"This isn't like in top-roping, where you're unlikely to fall any further than a meter. That's why we can use cheaper, static ropes which don't stretch as top-ropes. You can probably imagine what would happen if you fell several metres before a non-stretching rope caught your fall."

Sherlock can see John grimacing at the edge of his peripheral field. A war surgeon can probably imagine the colourful consequences of such G-forces exerted onto the spinal column. Sherlock can, too.

"There's going to be a bounce, possibly a sideways swing which hopefully won't be too big if you've been clipping correctly. You need to fall like a cat, legs ready to absorb the impact and to keep your head from hitting the wall."

"Maybe we should have done this earlier," John comments, his sarcasm gentle and framed with a grin, "God knows you fall off enough things when chasing down suspects. You must have already used up a few of those nine lives."

Sherlock knows that John wouldn't have made such a joke even a month earlier, or at least he would have looked mortified afterwards for making an inadvertent reference to Sherlock's physical
state. It's a huge relief that John's *be-careful-in-case-he-breaks* approach is gone.

The climbing has helped. Sherlock still needs to pace himself, but the muscles in his torso, his shoulders and his arms are becoming more well-defined, and the stairs at home no longer pose any problems for him. He does still take a short pause on the landing, and a long sprint down the streets might still be well beyond his abilities, but he's getting there.

Jonathan rattles off some directions for belaying during a fall, which are simple enough: lock the belay device as best as you can, and brace yourself.

"Let me show you," Jonathan prompts. John takes the belay, and Jonathan climbs, clipping himself in as he ascends at a brisk pace. When he has made his way some ten metres up an easy pitch, he ignores the last two clips on the route.

Sherlock stands behind John, lost in thought. Watching Jonathan is making him surprisingly uneasy. He isn't afraid of heights, and normally wouldn't bat an eyelid at having to do such a thing as Jonathan is about to demonstrate.

"Ready?" Jonathan’s question floats down the former grain silo and John calls back. "Yes."

Sherlock watches the climber stop, take a deep breath, and fall backwards.

For the next few seconds, Sherlock’s reaction is almost visceral fear, even though he knows this is safe and controlled. Jonathan’s plummeting form passes the last clip he had put his rope through and the belay snaps into action. There is a grunt from John, who takes the weight. The sudden tension on the rope tugs Jonathan violently towards the wall, but he’s ready, using bent knees and arms to cushion the impact. He immediately seizes a handhold, places his soles on two larger holds and leans back, craning his neck to face his audience.

Sherlock says nothing.

The old doubts are returning: this will, invariably, test his abilities on several levels. Balance, strength, sheer willpower of being determined enough to do this. He should be fine. He does more physically challenging and riskier things on a regular basis. Or, more accurately, he used to.

All he needs to do is to use his legs to slow down the impact of his own body against a wall, not dodge a knife attack or leap from roof to roof.

Somewhere, the thought is still jarring.

He suddenly remembers how he felt at Harwich, sliding off a horse a mere 1.6 metres above the ground. He didn't trust his balance, didn't trust his senses, didn't trust his leg muscles to do what they were told. He remembers John, arms outstretched, ready to catch his fall, neither of them convinced that he could manage on his own.

He doesn't rely on the help of others. He doesn't put his trust in other people like that – whatever needs doing, he does it himself to ensure he, and he alone, controls the outcome.

Something about John's expression had struck him that day at Harwich like a hammer to the heart, when he'd declined John's assistance. It had been disappointment and betrayal, barely hidden due to its intensity. Why had helping him been so important to John, and why is he remembering it now?

"Penny for your thoughts," John says.

"I should think they're worth slightly more than that," Sherlock snaps back, and surprises himself
at the sudden biting edge in his tone.

A frown line forms on John's forehead. "Didn't mean anything by it. You look like you don't want to do this," he points out quietly.

Is he so obvious? Clearly, he needs to work on his facial expressions. Maybe the Guillain-Barre has messed them up in ways he hasn't properly appreciated yet. On the other hand, when he has watched himself in the mirror, everything has looked to be in working order.

He realises he hasn't replied to John. "I'm fine."

He needs to work on that fine quickly, because Jonathan is back on the ground, having been lowered gently by John's belay. It must now be Sherlock's turn.

His hands shake almost imperceptibly as he clips the striped green dynamic rope onto his harness. Without a glance at John, he announces the start of the climb, and receives a slightly hesitant reply of 'belaying'.

As he makes his way up the route, very little of it registers in his memory as he clips the rope to the carabiners hanging from short slings on the wall almost automatically. Jonathan hollers up to him to stop him from clipping the last few pitches – he had been already reaching for the first carabiner he was supposed to ignore. Focus.

It's been a long training session already, in terms of what his stamina is. His legs are shaking from exhaustion; thankfully this route has consisted of easy, wide holds instead of the more demanding one he'd been scouting out on that brick wall.

Sherlock leans backwards slightly and shakes his aching right hand. After top-roping and using frequent clips it's strange, knowing that if he loses his grip he will plummet down a distance, effectively freefalling until the rope catches him. It adds a whole new edge to everything.

Finally reaching the hold marked with masking tape to denominate it as the spot from where he's supposed to do this, he looks down. Jonathan and John are watching him expectantly.

This isn't like him. The old Sherlock Holmes, the one in the mirror, doesn't hesitate, not even when he's about to jump into the Thames, leap over a gap between ten-storey buildings, or run into a minefield. John might, but he still follows where Sherlock leads, after muttering a few curses.

This Sherlock, in contrast, still gets tired at ten in the evening and doesn't know who he is half of the time. Or does he? During the last day of the case, he had managed to stop thinking about all that. Instead, he'd just done what needed to be done to solve the case. He hasn't spared much thought to the other him, lately, the one he hasn't been able to reach no matter how long he has tried to stare it down in the mirror.

Maybe he's begun to trust himself again, at least a little bit. And trust, Sherlock suddenly realises, is exactly what he is being asked for here. Trust that his fall will be broken by a skilful belay, trust that he'll not be left in a terrifying state of disarray and, in-between, trust that John won't abandon him, drifting, feeling separate from himself. Trust, that the most important thing might not be losing control, but the promise that it will be returned to him afterwards.

He's being asked to trust willingly, not because he has to, but because he wants to.

Last night he'd woken up drenched in sweat and hyperventilating from a nightmare in which no one had been able to see or hear him even though he was yelling right into their ear. When he got his heart rate back under control, instead of a sudden and compulsive desire to make a hasty retreat
from the bedroom, he had put his hand on John’s shoulder, wanting to have company, wanting to hear evidence that he hadn't been plunged back into the helpless depths of the Guillain-Barré. After a mumble of acknowledgement and a reassuring pat on his shoulder from a still half-asleep John, they'd both fallen back asleep.

He had trusted John to fix it, and he had, with the sheer power of being there.

He has *always* trusted John, with his soul and his life – why is his body still such a huge deal?

Maybe because he still doesn't quite know how to deal with it himself, never has. Giving in to its whims seems more dangerous now than ever. Still, what John had said yesterday had instilled at least some sort of a hope to the contrary.

Maybe John could carry some of that, some of what he hasn't been able to solve yet. Maybe Sherlock should and could *let* him.

He needs to do this. He needs to choose on which side of the mirror he's going to stay.

His arms are getting numb and shaking terribly, and he's sure he's going to lose his grip unless he makes a decision quickly. Climbing down might be already impossible, so he'd have to be lowered down if he doesn't take the plunge. He might be able to drag up the rope, attach it to a clip he sees right by his left hand, but that's not why he's up here.

He glances down to floor level again. Jonathan is showing him a thumbs-up, still letting him take his time. John has planted his feet firmly on the ground, rope tightly held in his grip and pressed against his thigh. He's is bracing for when the rope would catch on the belaying device and yank him upwards.

Their eyes meet. John nods slightly, blue eyes intense and encouraging.

This is what they do. They beat the odds, escape the disaster. They win. *Together.*

This is it.

Sherlock inhales sharply, closes his eyes, and lets go.

For a moment, the air whistles in his ears and he's being pulled down towards the earth at an accelerating rate. The sense of gravity makes his stomach flip.

His eyes pinch shut without even realising. He's helpless but not lost. Not evaporating. Not disappearing. This is not the weightlessness of the GBS, not how he'd felt floating in the pool at Harwich.

He's not in control at all, but somehow, he... *is* exactly that.

The rope snaps straight, yanks him upwards, a slight pain and a heavy pressure hitting his thighs and his waist and his groin, as his harnessed body absorbs the impact. Then, he's sailing through the air, headed straight towards the wall. He stretches out his legs, knees bent, hands ready to lessen the impact significantly.

He grabs a handhold that protrudes from the wall like a horn, and uses it to stop the remnants of the sideways momentum of the rope. He finds footholds and a second handhold.

Finally, he looks down.
John is grinning at him like a man who has won the lottery and whose Christmases have come all at once. His face looks like Sherlock feels – or at least how he will probably feel in a few minutes, once he manages to convince the lizard part of his brain that he's still very much alive. Right now, he's still trembling from the adrenaline and the relief, and from the realization that while he may not have his strength back yet, he is in control.

And, even when he sometimes isn't, there is a man standing down there who will always catch him when he falls.

"I’m so fucking proud of you. You know that, don’t you?" John asks, hoping that Sherlock will deduce that he isn’t just talking about the climbing.

They’re in the back of a cab taking them back to Baker Street. John’s muscles are tired, but it’s the sort of soreness that he will gladly put up with, knowing that it was worth the exertion. For the first time in what seems like ages, John realises that he feels the sort of happy one can only be when not chronically worried about someone.

Sherlock glances up from his phone, puzzlement creasing the space between his eyebrows in a way that John has often found endearing. His curls are a sweaty, magnesium-dusted mess and their movements are shaking loose some white dust onto his coat.

"Why? For solving the Watford case?" Sherlock asks. "I should have solved it ages ago. It’s only because I am so…” Sherlock’s sentence stumbles to a halt.

"Human?" John helpfully supplies, hoping that Sherlock can hear the smile behind his use of that word, knowing that he will see it as an epithet, rather than a badge of honour.

Disgruntled, Sherlock snorts and returns his attention to his phone.

"Not about the case. I meant the climbing. And everything else."

Without looking up, Sherlock just sniffs. "That, too, I could have done better before the GBS."

John realises that Sherlock hasn't used a euphemism. He's calling it like it is. He shakes his head and puts his hand over onto Sherlock’s thigh. "No, you nutter — before you wouldn’t have even been willing to try climbing. You need to stop comparing everything now with what was before. It’s better now than it was before."

Sherlock looks over at John, that wrinkle appearing once again. "How? I take ages to solve a case, I play the violin worse than I used to, and I need to sleep. How could that be considered better?"

His tone is calm and conversational now, whereas mere weeks before, if John had raised such a subject, it would have been met with fervent denial, a sulk or a desperately anxiety-laden, clipped bit of conversation before a retreat.

John lets out a careful laugh. "Because before, you and I weren’t where we are today. It’s not just you, by the way. I’ve had stuff to think about and to learn, too, I’ll have you know. Instead of wasting my time, dead set on ignoring the obvious, and caring more about what people think than about what's important, I’ve finally realised that for better or for worse, you’re the one. So, try not to be worse all the time, and we’ll get on fine."
Sherlock blinks, eyes wide. "Worse than... what? When? In what way?"

John smirks, emboldened by Sherlock's relative calmness that he can tease the man a bit without severe consequences. "Well, you can stop hogging all the duvet. And using up all the hot water. That would be a start."

Sherlock shrugs. "Take the first shower then. I can wait."

The next day, Helen comes over for a practice session as scheduled. Sherlock finds himself glad to see her again. Ending up in a hospital again had caused an unfortunate break in his regular violin practice.

He has now permanently given up commanding John to retreat to the bedroom during her visits. He ought to be able to play when there's company present, and John tends to try and stay out of their way during violin practice anyway.

John wanders into the kitchen, laptop in hand, cover open, in the middle of scales practice. Sherlock's pitch falters slightly but he picks up the slack and manages not to lag behind in the rhythm. He can't help his eyes following John around the room. Not angrily, but wanting to know what John is planning to do. Someone hovering around is not conducive to his concentration.

Helen has picked up on this. "It's just John," she says slowly, in a low tone as Sherlock is about to switch to g minor. "Pay him no mind. He's heard you play before. He's not here to judge."

Sherlock presses his eyelids closed for a moment to clear his head, shifts his balance and begins the scale. It goes... acceptably.

"Good. Now let's see what you've done to poor Kreisler," Helen jokes, referring to Kreisler's Preludium and Allegro, a piece they've been working on.

Dangling the bow on his thumb, Sherlock digs out the sheet music from a pile on his desk and arranges the pages onto the music stand. Then, he rearranges the bow between his fingers, and launches into the piece.

He's had trouble deciding what length of bow stroke to use for the first three and a half lines of music, consisting of quarter notes tempting to use more vibrato than what the urgent tone of the melody would support. A more dulcet sound should be reserved for some of the later parts. The composition offers wonderful variation, ranging from sombre, almost Bach-esque arpeggios to perky, Mozart-like whimsy and sawing, aggressive passages leading to dramatic, borderline angry high notes. It's a regal yet moody short piece that offers very good dexterity practice.

When Sherlock reaches a later theme requiring sharp switches from one string to another known in violin vocabulary as barriolage, Helen raises her hand. "Stop."

Sherlock is confounded as to why. As far as he could tell, his much-improved technique had been serving the passage well so far.
"It's not a calm and collected etude. It's full of passion, alternating between a battle cry and a lament. You're playing it as though reading instructions from an Excel spreadsheet."

Sherlock narrows his gaze. This is one of those moments when Helen assumes he knows what she's talking about when she resorts to these abstractions and interpretations. If he wants to play the piece as a technical exercise, surely that's allowed?

"Technically, this is well within your current abilities, and you practically know it by heart already. It's safe, what you're doing, focusing on as flawless a technique as possible, but we need to start thinking beyond that. You're holding back. Once you decide to play a note, that's the end of the decision-making. It needs to be let out without trying to control every nanosecond of it with the will of Margaret Thatcher."

"Who's she?" Sherlock lets the violin fall from his shoulder, circling his palm around it and dangling it by his thigh.

"You have got to be kidding me," John mutters with a crooked grin in the kitchen.

Sherlock gives him a sardonic glance. There's a knot in his left shoulder that still aches, even though he's not holding the violin up. He wonders if the climbing they've done during the past few days has taken too great a toll. Since the case wrapped up, they've visited First Ascent several times. His right little finger is numb. All this adds up to a level of physical discomfort that's making him irritable, but not too much so to not want to play.

"Which theme in this do you like the best?" Helen asks him, pointing at the sheet music.

Sherlock raises his left brow, suspicious. Is there a right answer to be found in the frown lines on Helen's face? Musically, he enjoys the tense, fast later parts but they're a little too physically challenging at present to be effortless to play. There is a section where three strings are to be played on each down stroke of the bow, requiring sharp, long movements with a lot of pressure, and to achieve this the composer has instructed to lift the bow after every note. After the menacing rise in the crescendo, the triple stops are a bridge leading into the most triumphant repetition of one of the main themes. "The triple stops section after the barriolage crescendo in the Allegro?" he suggests.

"Why are you asking me? It's your choice."

Sherlock doesn't know what to answer.

"How do you find it sounds? Angry? Desperate? Triumphant?"


"There you go. Try to find that, instead of worrying about some less-than perfect split bow legato a few lines back, or finding a maximally bouncing spiccato. Put that anger where it really belongs, which is in the moment. And don't hesitate to let the bow to really bounce off – it'll help you get to the next one quicker. It doesn't have any effect on whether you're going to hit the right spots on the left hand, so just let it happen. The sound needs to be a little on the edge, almost uncontrollable."

Sherlock raises the violin, and starts playing from the start of the preceding section which consists largely of modified scales.

"No, no, jump straight to the section we talked about. And keep repeating it," Helen interrupts, and Sherlock leaps from mid-phrase to the start of the variation. He tries to forget for a moment the details of what he's doing, and to focus more on listening to the sound.
He repeats the theme three times and then slows down as though stopping, but Helen raises her hand and waves it in a circle to signal that he should continue. Sherlock can tell from the edge of his visual field that John has stopped moving around the room, now standing quite still in the kitchen.

"Again," Helen says, "and stop holding back!"

Sherlock almost stops and argues that he isn't, but Helen gives him a stern look, and he speeds up his playing slightly.

"Not faster. *More.*"

Sherlock lets the bow move a little faster but doesn't raise the overall speed of the music, and this produces a crisper, richer sound but he knows that he is running a serious risk of losing his precision in controlling the bow.

"*More,*" Helen demands quite loudly, and irritated determination springs up in Sherlock. He takes a step away from the music stand to focus on the feeling of the bow in his hand instead of reading the notes which he already knows intimately.

"*More!*" Helen demands louder. "Close your eyes," she then suggests.

Sherlock obeys, while repeating the melody over and over again. A slight film of sweat is forming on his temples. He's tired, slightly confused as to the purpose of this dull, repetitive exercise and wonders when it'll all end.

"You're getting distracted," Helen accuses him, and Sherlock counters such a preposterous accusation by letting the bow bite more into the string. The tone of the music turns more aggressive, more demanding – frantic, even.

"*Good!*" Helen says, "*More!*" she commands again.

He curves his forefinger slightly more around the stick of the bow, and lets his wrist rise a little bit more to allow him to start the down strokes as close to the frog of the bow as possible. He leans the bow more on the side, so that instead of the full width of the horse hairs, just the edge of them is touching the string, making the sound sharper.

The variation doesn't sound beautiful and perfect and flawless anymore – instead, it's formidably dramatic, demanding of attention, imperfect and much more interesting.

But Helen isn't done yet. "Better, but not enough," she says sharply. "*MORE!*" she suddenly yells, and Sherlock sees John flinching at the sudden command in the kitchen.

This bullying is beginning to grate on Sherlock nerves. If a full-on auditory assault is what Helen wants, then that's what she's going to get.

The sweat begins to gather at his temples as he continues to play, letting each round of the theme get louder, more out-of-control. In his anger, he finds his muscle memory taking over and he stops thinking about hitting the right left hand finger position or whether his bow is aligned perfectly.

The music flows out, and for the first time in months, it feels like an extension of himself instead of an instrument of torture and a constant source of humiliation. He lets the residual annoyance and his rage at the unfairness of everything that has happened to him bleed into the stroke of his bow.

This is *his.* No one can take this away. He defines what he wants to play, and how he plays it. So
what, if he can't play the Paganini *Caprice 24* technically as well as he used to – he'll play it however he bloody well he *wants* to.

After two repeats of the variation, he launches into the highlight part of the *Allegro*, a *fortissimo* repeat of the main theme. Sweaty curls are sticking on his forehead, his shoulders aching constantly, but he hardly cares.

He no longer fears hearing himself play, no longer dreads the wrong note as he used to. Instead, he tries to welcome such occurrences, so that he can exact revenge on them in the next passage by doing better, by being even braver, by taking an even bigger risk with his finger positioning.

The arrow-head like sautille bow strokes before the last theme variation take almost everything he has, but he makes it through without faltering, focusing on the melody instead of staring at his own fingers.

For the finale, he closes his eyes again, breathing heavily as the vibrations from the D string he's attacking with his bow carry down his chest. The last notes he plays leaning slightly back, letting the bow fly down the string, adding an almost melodramatically overdone vibrato. He wasn't going to tone it down even though it might not be what the composer had intended, because this is how he *wants* to play it right now, to flip the entire universe with this petulant, arrogant, glorious piece that's flowing from his fingers into his ears.

The final note. His bow slows down until he lifts it off the string. The sound continues to echo from the violin for a moment until it dies down, signalling that his pitch had been impeccable.

He opens his eyes, and he's slightly startled when they meet John's. He must've been too concentrated on the playing to notice him making his way to stand by his usual chair. At first, John looks stunned, almost disbelieving, but then an unadulterated grin lights up his features.

Sherlock glances at Helen next.

She looks happy, even lets out a laugh. "I told you that you were holding back. You believe me now?"


John hasn't called him amazing for a long time. Not like this. He has played this piece well, several times during the past week, but it hasn't garnered much attention from the man.

This time, it had been different. This time he had let it emerge freely, let it *happen* instead of trying to control every bit of it.

"How did that feel?" Helen asks, looking now somewhat worried, probably because Sherlock hasn't said a word yet.

"I---" he stumbles on his own words, unsure what to say. He wets his dry lips and steals a glance at John again. He hasn't taken a seat, instead he's still leaning on the back of the chair, watching him with open admiration mirroring the look he'd worn on the first days of their acquaintance.

"I think my work here is done," Helen says, and Sherlock realises she's right.

He has regained enough of his technical skills to continue practicing on his own. Helen will likely be available for future tutoring if he requires it, but right now, he knows that he just wants to play without anyone scrutinising him too carefully. He wants to play with John, for John, because that's what he had actually been thinking about, after closing his eyes and tackling the very ending of the
Allegro: the two of them, together. The adrenaline of the chase, the thrill of the game. The recklessness, the surprises, a life in which one never knows in the morning what happens come nightfall. A glorious sort of unexpectedness, for which he finally feels prepared again.

To find the music again, he had to let go of it. Maybe that’s the solution to a lot of things.

Chapter End Notes

I will accept no arguments: you *have* to hear the piece Sherlock is playing. [Here you go](#), as performed by the amazing Itzhak Perlman.
After Helen leaves, Sherlock can't resist practicing some more. He realises that, far from wanting to chase John out of the room as he has in the past, some sort of threshold has been crossed, and Sherlock is content that he remains. It doesn't matter anymore if John hears him making mistakes. Oddly, it doesn't matter to him that much anymore, either.

His calves are aching from all the climbing, so he ends up dragging a kitchen chair next to his music stand, and sits down to play.

It's not a very complicated piece - the Romanze from Dvorak's Czech Suite, but the trill notes combining the E and A strings have been a challenge. He thinks through the piece first, wanting to grasp the meaning before he plays it.

John reads a medical journal by the kitchen table, stealing occasional glances at him. He's smiling in a peaceful, content way Sherlock doesn't remember seeing in a long time.

Sherlock grabs a piece of cloth he keeps on a bookshelf and rubs it gently against the A-string – rosin build-up had been making the sound slightly raspy. He turns the screw on the bow slightly to release some of the tension from the horse hairs – Helen keeps reminding him that it'll be easier for him to play with a softer bow for now. It makes the sound fuller and warmer - not all that good for Paganini's Caprices, but since he isn't exactly up to his old level yet, Paganini will just have to wait.

He has become rather fond of the Romanze. It takes its time with content — careful, relieved legato notes, singing of liberation and determination. Instead of bittersweet or yearning, it's calming, full of promises of better times.

Bringing the bow down on the strings, he repeats a passage several times, trying to get the transition from one phrase to another smoother as his bow keeps bringing forth a whisper from the g string instead of staying neatly on the a. As Helen had instructed, he tries to deviate his wrist even more towards the ulnar side when he's playing with the lower half of the bow. After a few minutes, that side of his palm - the tendons of his pinkie finger - develops a dull ache that's highly distracting, since it's radiating up his arm.

He does the first two pages of the Romanze once more, then lets his bow descend. He rests the violin on his desk where sunlight from the window can't reach and wreak havoc with the wood. Then he loosens the bow – he is still forced to squeeze it between the side of his thumb and forefinger to get a proper hold. Some things take longer to return than others.

"Have we got any ice?" he asks, and John perks up. He takes in the sight of Sherlock kneading the fifth extensor tendon near his wrist.

"We had a bag of peas yesterday but Mrs Hudson borrowed it. It's only fair, since she probably feeds half the food she buys to us. You haven't been overdoing it with the tennis ball again, have you?"

"John. How can anyone borrow peas? Presumably, she's eaten them and not yet replaced them with another bag. Never mind. It's just a bit sore from the practice."

John dog-ears his magazine and leaves it on the table. As though given a cue, they both take a seat on the sofa. Sherlock splays his fingers and winces as the tendons cramp. John picks up his right
hand carefully, running his own slightly coarse thumb tip along the side of Sherlock's palm.

John's finger feels cool against his warm, probably slightly inflamed, joints.

"That was beautiful, by the way," John points out, curling his own fingers around Sherlock's pinkie and stretching it straight, pressing his thumb on the knuckle. Sherlock feels the joint crack deliciously, but when John releases the finger, the ache returns. John pinches the tendon between his thumb and forefinger, cataloguing the entire length of it between the knuckle and the wrist, and when he hits a sore spot, Sherlock breathes out and leans back on the sofa, letting his eyes drift close. The massage continues and he lets his mind drift into idle, concentrating instead on the sensation of John's touch.

When John kisses his knuckles, his eyes fly back open. He opens his mouth to say something, to ask what, but John steals all coherent thought from his head by then taking his little finger into his mouth.

A jolt of what feels akin to electricity runs down his spine as he feels John's lips and tongue curl around the finger, and all less important thoughts are shoved aside: John is taking over what shreds of awareness his brain has left. A haze descends which makes him warm all over, whipping his heart into a rhythm that pounds in his ears like a distant drumbeat.

He can feel it – the two of them skirting the moment when they will either retreat, or move forward to unknown territory. Anticipation is like a low hum in his bones, and the unspoken promise hanging in the air empty air between them kicks his brain into overdrive.

John would probably tell him to stop overthinking everything right now, but it's not like his brain is something he could possibly turn on and off at will. How is it possible to be both present in the moment, yet to step away from the brutal minutiae of it, in order to appreciate the higher purpose of sex, in lieu of just letting it fill a biological need? Whatever romantic notions he might have had in his head about how it should feel, reality is proving to be much more intense. Even the sensation of kissing John feels so intense that he can practically feel something in his head threatening to short-circuit.

He can't help stiffening up his muscles as the adrenaline of anxiety hits his blood system. How will he cope with full-on sex, when the things it requires are something he has battled all his life, such as getting overwhelmed by the barrage of sensations and being robbed of all control?

He knows that John can't understand this. Categorising, analysing, observing and memorising are things he does to keep the world in order and to keep track of his own position in it. Whenever he had engaged in anything sexual he's had to be in control, limiting what the other person does to him. It has been strictly transactional, no emotions involved at all. He has always suspected that if he lets his emotions and the sensations overwhelm him, he won't be able to handle it.

What sorts of false signals will his body send? If even a hand on his shoulder or lips pressed to his neck can bring him to an intellectual standstill, what's going to happen if John is suddenly everywhere? Will they ever even get there? Will it ever work, or will the Guillain-Barré team up with his strange brain and present its final side effect, robbing him of something he hadn't even had before the illness – a chance to find out what it would be like to make love to John Watson?

"How does it work?" he hears himself asking.

Anything to stall for time.
John places a final kiss on the side of his finger and then crosses all of his own with Sherlock's. It seems to return the atmosphere to something a little less heated, a little less laden with expectation, and Sherlock breathes a little easier.

"How does what work?" John asks.

Sherlock can deduce that he is clearly trying to conceal disappointment. Has he somehow deflated the mood?

Still, he's dodged this for long enough. He pulls in a deep breath. "This," Sherlock says waving a hand in the empty air between them.

There should be a better word for it – 'sex' doesn't quite cut it, because he hardly needs pointers on the technical side of the act. It's the communication involved which he needs to understand if they're to proceed further. It must be a bit like dancing, where there are general guidelines to be followed, but practice is required for everything to become effortless and easy.

"I don't know," John says, "but that's kind of the fun part, finding out."

John has said something similar before, and Sherlock strongly disagrees with anything so dangerous and unpredictable being fun. With any other activity, he would find those attributes desirable, but not with… this. The thought is daunting – engaging in something without being able to predict any of the significant turns or the outcome. Well, perhaps one might make assumptions about the outcome, but not of what happens before or after.

Shouldn't John be more uncomfortable doing this? Isn't this what he'd spent years announcing was certainly not his thing, being with a man? The notion that John may have got past such reservations without Sherlock even noticing, makes him feel even less confident and more self-aware of how difficult he must be making everything.

"If you want to do something, do. If you don't like something, tell me. That's all you need to know," John says.

Sherlock bites his lip, frowning as he stares at their joined hands. The gesture is chaste, and he finds he has a hard time negotiating it with what John had just done to his finger. The combination is odd, even confusing but… intriguing. "How do people learn this?" he asks, frowning.

"Lots of really embarrassing experiments during their teen years, mostly."

Sherlock opens his mouth to argue, but John intervenes. "I know you probably didn't. You didn't miss anything worthwhile, I promise," John adds with a mirthful laugh. "I'd definitely delete some of the stuff I went through if I knew how."

Does John think it better to do those mistakes, to go through the embarrassment and confusion at the age of thirty-four, then? It's hardly a consoling thought. "What if we find that I have no particular talent in this area? Apart from a modicum of purely technical skill?"

John looks at him as though he's being completely daft. "Sherlock, you couldn't mess this up if you tried. Not for us. It's not just about what happens now, it's about everything that's happened since day one."

Sherlock can't think of anything to counter that. It's very vague, but it does make a modicum of sense. John certainly isn't considering taking him to bed because of curiosity, or because he has no one else in his life with whom to alleviate his sexual frustration.
John is right here with him, because he wants to be, despite having gone through some very testing
times due to Sherlock being in his life.

"I'm not trying to talk you into anything. I'm just saying that you can have what you want, whatever
you want. Or don't. That's fine, too," John says.

It's not the words that break the log-jam. It's the look in John's eyes that makes Sherlock shift
closer on the couch so he can place his head on John's shoulder. It's a promise without a threat, and
it's the same look John has given him so many times before. It's a reminder of who they are, that
while what they are heading towards might be new, the reasons behind wanting it all are not.

John takes the hint and stops talking. He picks up Sherlock's hand again so he can trail kisses down
the side of his palm, then on the inside of his wrist. Sherlock had never realised it might be such an
exquisitely sensitive spot. He can't help wondering if this is something John does to everyone he
goes to bed with, or if it's something that has been invented just for him. Not that he'd mind, either
way, he realises. For once, what's transpiring isn't only about what works for other people.

What John is doing is certainly working on him, and he finds that some of the anxiety that the
conversation had stirred up is ebbing away at John's touch.

John then draws his hand down, tucking his leg – his good leg, not that there ever even was a bad
leg to start with – underneath himself and shifting sideways on the sofa so that he can grab
Sherlock's shoulder in a firm hold and pull him into a kiss, this time where it belongs, on his lips.

If there's a good kind of drowning, then this is it.

It doesn't take long before Sherlock's mad nerves are on fire, and for the first time he's grateful of
their heightened sensitivity because he wants to feel all of this, every single thing John is doing to
him. He can't keep up, the barrage of feeling and wanting and needing so overwhelming, but he
doesn't care. It should be frightening, and he should not be willing to relinquish control like this,
but any chance he might have of resisting probably blew out of the window around the time of the
first "amazing" uttered in the back of a cab en route to a pink-clad corpse.

In a way, this is where they've been, right from the start. Hiding their desire in plain sight.

Sherlock almost forgets to reciprocate. He practically slaps his hand on the back of John's neck,
manoeuvring him even closer, crushing their lips together. John leans his hand on the sofa, stands
up onto his knees, and straddles him. He leans his head back and looks at Sherlock intently as
though seeking permission, lips pink and wet, out of breath. He looks gloriously distracted, happy
up to the point of wearing an almost silly smile.

Now that their bodies are pressed together, Sherlock practically wedged between the sofa and John,
he can feel the unmistakable evidence of John's arousal against his stomach. John swallows, then
breathes out raggedly, watching him from beneath half-closed lids.

Something in Sherlock's perception shifts.

This is yet another thing he hadn't factored in, at all – what it would do to him to see John in such a
state. Whatever doubts he may have had about his ability to reciprocate, for his body to be able to
overcome the nervousness he was bound to feel, all fly out of the window as he takes in the sight of
the man. He doesn't even know how, but he has somehow had this profound effect on John. He
would try to memorise the sight, every tiny detail of it, if he had time, which he doesn't,
because fucking hell John's lips have descended on the side of his neck and there's a little bit of
teeth even and -
"You said 'yes and no', once," John whispers breathlessly, his voice thick with need and promise, "which one is it right now?"

"Yes," Sherlock manages to gasp out, and he doesn't even sound like himself. He sounds like someone who could do this, someone who no longer floats above a body they've lost a connection to, someone who could take everything he's feeling right now and accept that it's real.

He slides his hand up John's back, gently curls his fingertips under the wing of the scapula, letting his nails dig in slightly through the fabric of John's shirt.

There is a breathless "OH!" of realisation and Sherlock realises it has come from him. John is not the problem. Instead, he's the solution. He feels boneless, weightless, but not untethered at all, because he's not alone. John is not drowning Sherlock in sensation; he's the filter to the white noise that clutters up his head. John takes the useless storm of distraction, and gives him something else instead, something he can easily focus on without being overwhelmed.

"All right?" it isn't a question, merely a gust of wind John whispers into his ear.

He nods, letting his eyes drift closed briefly before leaning back and looking at John. He'd like nothing but to sink into the feeling of John pressed up against him, but something about the question he'd just been posed makes him wonder at the meanings hidden behind it. And for once, he can't deduce them.

John fixes his gaze on Sherlock. He's smiling, and that smile goes up all the way to his eyes, creating the tiniest of wrinkles around the edges of them. "Bedroom?" he asks slowly, his hope trying to seduce Sherlock's uncertainty within that one word.

"Yes – probably better for -" Sherlock answers, and before he can get to the end of the detailed analysis or something he was probably supposed to formulate, John has pulled him to his feet and off to the bedroom they go, before Sherlock has managed to fully recognise the significance of what is happening.

John throws himself onto his back on the bed after divesting himself of his T-shirt, his smile encouraging and his outstretched arm an invitation.

Sherlock sits down on the edge of the bed, and begins to fumble with his dress shirt buttons.

John sits up, circling his fingers around Sherlock's wrists and then his palms, nesting them inside the warmth of his own.

"I can do it," Sherlock begins to protest.

"I know you can," John says, voice thick and quiet as though it's full of barely contained things. It sounds like Sherlock feels. "But I very much want to," he explains.

Sherlock lets his hands fall to his sides. Slowly, determinedly John unbuttons him, reveals his chest inch by inch and places a kiss where Sherlock's collarbone meets his sternum. Whatever strange things Sherlock's nerves are doing right now, he doesn't mind. He had needlessly feared that it would all be too much, when the truth is that right now, he wants so much more.

John runs his tongue over the tendon of the right side of his neck, which sends a tingling shot of electricity down his leg. Clothing feels like a terrible hindrance right now, and all he can think is that both of them should discard the rest now.

He remembers many other times when John has undressed him. The reasons for doing so had been
innocent, dictated by necessity or kindness when he'd been ill, injured or so exhausted that even divesting himself of his socks had been too much to bother with. At one point, it had become a regular end-of-case ritual: him, collapsing face-down on the bed, John sighing, dragging off his shoes and socks and spreading the duvet over him.

At one point, John had stopped doing it. Why? Had it occurred to John, then, that what is going on right now might happen? That John might want it to happen?

John's lips are pressed on his forehead next in a hesitant and chaste manner. "What are you thinking so hard about?" he asks.


John leans back slightly, watching him carefully. "I always knew pillow talk with you would be weird, but I wouldn't have thought you'd get that analytical."

"You want to have sex with me," Sherlock says.

He must have been frowning or something equally amusing from John's perspective, because the laugh lines John has on his temples reappear and he's now grinning. It doesn't look mocking, merely softens his look of determination into something slightly less unsettling. "Yeah, though I hope that wasn't a question. Did you ever think about this? Before?" John asks and sits down next to him on the bed. He twists so that he's sitting slightly sideways and they're facing each other.

The question leaves Sherlock confused, because John hasn't defined before what. And, before he can ask for clarification about when, John kisses him again. Slowly, at first, but then with more boldness, gripping Sherlock's lower lip briefly between his teeth before sliding a hand behind his neck and practically crushing their mouths together.

Sherlock has a desperate urge to tackle John down onto the bed, to get closer, to have every inch of him covered by the warm weight of John. He needs friction, he needs-

John presses his cheek against his neck. The raspy feeling of a five-o'-clock shadow on his bare, sensitive skin is startling at first, but when he forces himself to be still and relax, it merges into all other sensations and gives him that edge he hadn't even realised he'd needed. John's hands on his skin are making his feel as though touch has suddenly commandeered a larger section of his brain's sensory processing than is possible, since he couldn't give a toss about anything else right now.

"I-" Sherlock starts but his lips are dry which needs to be remedied first with a darting tongue, "-feared you'd find out that I wanted you."

John apparently can't help but smile at this. "Wouldn't sit very well with the image of the thinking machine in your blog, would it?"

"At the hospital, you very nearly did find out," Sherlock reveals.

John leans back and looks at him with awe and playful suspicion. His face is flushed, and so is Sherlock's chest, and they both seem to be radiating a curious sort of warmth.

Sherlock finds it irritating that John has stopped the proceedings. He wants more, wants to know how bad the urgent, pressing warmth at the base of his spine will become until he can't take any more of it, until he can no longer resist the already pressing need to take himself in hand. He feels impatient, but isn't sure how to proceed.

"That was for me?" John asks.
"More or less," Sherlock replies quietly. He should be embarrassed, really, at discussing that objectively mortifying moment when John had found him in a state of rather stubborn arousal without any means to sort out the problem, but considering his current state is even more blatantly eager, it's all an afterthought, really.

Is sex supposed to include this much talking? Is this something John enjoys? For Sherlock, the jury is still out. What if he says the wrong thing? He does, often, judging by the reactions of other people.

He decides on less talking. He kisses John, taking his time with it, even adding a bit of tongue which feels obscenely intimate, and judging by John's hum of approval and shifting closer to him, it's a gesture well received.

Sherlock reaches out to switch off the lamp on the bedside table.

"Don't," John says, "I want to see you."

"You've been staring at me for two years; that should be enough to get by," Sherlock scolds him, and turns off the light.

It doesn't get dark – a cone of light from the lamp in the hallway seems to offer just enough illumination to see what they're doing. Sherlock pulls off his socks – surely people don't leave socks on during?

John is still wearing his own. Sherlock proceeds to rid him of them, which makes John laugh. *Ticklish, obviously.*

"I'd really like to see you right now," John repeats in a playfully pleading tone. He's on his side in the middle of the bed – there's enough light coming in from the corridor to make out his form.

Despite his request, Sherlock makes no move to switch the light back on. It's not because he's shy, or coy about nudity. John has seen him naked plenty of times already, and he's had eyefuls of John when barging into bathrooms and bedrooms uninvited.

It's not just about the way he looks, either, even though this isn't the body John has been staring at for two years. He's still much thinner than before the GBS.

It's also not just the newness of this.

He realises he still fears being overwhelmed. It's the only thing he still worries about. He can't bear to be scrutinised while trying to process everything. And, eliminating the light helps dampen down at least one of his senses. Even the little things John has been doing practically override his intellectual processes, and if mere touch can do that, then combining sensations even more intense with visual cues would be too much at this point. He could never keep up, which means that he'd have to stop.

He arranges himself to the space between John's side and his arm, on his back.

John lays a palm gently onto his stomach. His fingers then slip underneath the edge of Sherlock's undershirt which has ridden high on his torso. Together they wrangle it off him.

"You've gone quiet," John says in the darkness.

"Thinking", Sherlock says and swallows, as John's warm palm trails down his chest this time, drawing swirly patterns on his skin. It almost tickles, but somehow John manages to keep it just
"I think we need less of that," John says, turns more to his side, and kisses Sherlock slowly, languidly as though memorising every brush of skin against skin and every soft breath afterwards. John then slides his hand down Sherlock's arm, fingernails trailing a fuse of explosions along the palm, drawing out a ticklish shudder. John then laces their fingers, and Sherlock presses their palms together to erase the ghost sensation still there. He realises that John has remembered that too gentle a touch is difficult, and is grateful for the firmness of his actions.

He then turns to face John, pulling him close so that his cheek is against Sherlock's shoulder. John responds eagerly by sliding his free hand to grab hold of Sherlock's buttocks, yanking him close, so close that it feels as though they're merging into one another. Sherlock slithers a leg between John's, which brings his groin against John's thigh, and he can't help letting out a strained sigh. It's part relief, part a delicious sort of frustration that makes him again want to discard every and all pieces of clothing still separating them. How long can this be drawn out?

There's another kiss, then another, until it becomes impossible to tell where one ends and another begins. Sherlock feels as though he's drinking oxygen straight from John's lungs, that he could keep doing this forever, needing nothing else.

It's still hard not to think, especially since John has now somehow hoisted himself atop Sherlock's thighs, leaning on the palms of his outstretched arms on the duvet on both sides of Sherlock's head, staring at him intently. They're both breathing heavily, deeply, and there's a rosy flush on John's upper body that looks different from what is produced by exercise. Well, another sort of exercise, anyway.

Is there a plan to this, a sequence of events John usually aims for? What does John think Sherlock ought to do right now? Should he confirm consent once more, or is it not blatantly obvious he's about to go well and truly insane if there isn't a hand on his cock within the next few minutes? Or should he show some initiative in bringing John closer to the hopelessly gone state he is already in? How analogous is the situation at hand to John's previous exploits? And what about -

"Safety," Sherlock blurts pointedly, his voice a half-broken rasp he hardly recognises as his own.

John's face does something strange, as though he's trying to frown and raise his eyebrows at the same time. "Safety?" John then asks incredulously, mouth quirked up in amusement and confusion. "Not a word anyone ever expects to hear from your mouth." He slides downwards, careful not to let his whole weight rest on Sherlock's knees, eventually boring his face on Sherlock's stomach.

What must be a tongue circles his navel, which elicits a gasp instead of the hopefully sensible words Sherlock had intended to produce with his open mouth.

He tries again, once John has stopped doing that ridiculous gesture, although he wouldn't mind that same tongue doing others things. "If you worry about contagion.... I never did share needles, but-"

"They did a hep screen and an HIV test as part of your screening at UCLH. You're clean. As am I," John says after raising his face to look at him.

As much as Sherlock would like to see right now what other tricks John might come up with next, perhaps this conversation needs to be had.

"I had myself tested after Laura," John explains, placing a warm palm on Sherlock's right thigh as he rearranges himself into a sitting position next to him. "There's been no one since then."
Which one had that been again? Sherlock racks his brain. "The EMT ten months ago…?" He can hardly be expected to keep up with Johns conquests.

"No, the drug rep from - never mind. Jealous?" John teases.

"Always," Sherlock announces and John leans forward to gently dig his fingers into Sherlock's sides, obviously as punishment.

Everything John does – every firm finger against his bare skin, every exhalation against the dark hairs that trail down his stomach – seems to govern a larger part of his consciousness than they had before. Is this how it always feels, or is it a result of his illness? As intense as the feeling is, he finds himself welcoming it instead of wanting to push the culprit away, to run, to shield himself like he had wanted to years before during his scarce experiences with what could be counted as foreplay and how is it that with John this is so diff- Good lord.

What is John doing to his left nipple? He scrambles to raise himself by wedging his elbows underneath him, but John gently pushes him down by draping an arm across his chest. His hands then move down to Sherlock's hips and then to the waistband of his boxers.

Time has slowed down, languid like treacle. Everything feels like the scent of honey, all sounds seem muted and every colour has a taste. On the horizon, Sherlock can sense an edge of panic, because this sort of synaesthesia usually marks the onset of a meltdown, but for the first time it occurs to him that he might just ride it out, not resist, because he's not in danger.

For what feels like the first time, his brain is capable of holding on to that thought, of allowing himself to melt away into it, to relinquish some of the control to John, to enjoy the cascade of sensation, no longer fearing that he'll break to pieces.

He can trust this. He needs to trust this. He's not about to fall apart.

He might, again, at some point, because life is bloody unpredictable, but it won't be because of what they're doing right now. He's not alone in a crowd. John is here.

He grabs John's biceps, perhaps a little more tightly than necessary, and pulls their bodies against each other. He feels practically drunk on all the skin pressing against his own, wants to make an inventory of every inch, but right now he can't focus on any single task. John's hands are moving up his ribs, his muscles contracting under the touch. John finally settles all his weight down onto him, and Sherlock can't help arching back when John's groin presses against his cock. The sensation brings him closer to an orgasm than he'd like to admit. Embarrassing, really, but that thought gets shoved aside by the sensation of John bucking his hips slightly against his. He curls his fingers into John's hair and closes his eyes, trying to stop the room from spinning, until he realises he doesn't want it to, because this is not vertigo, it's another sort of falling, and it's not the least bit uncomfortable.

He let's go, sinks into it, allows himself to drift with nothing but the awareness of John to keep him tethered to the world.

Suddenly, the warm weight disappears, and after a moment of shifting he discovers John sitting between his bent knees, trailing kisses southwards from where the dark hairs begin on his lower abdomen. There's a warm palm on his calf, thumb rubbing back on forth in a hypnotic rhythm.

John then takes him in his mouth, and in a moment, Sherlock decides that there are no more thoughts that he needs to be having right now.
"So, there is an off button to your brain, and it works on your mouth at the same time."

"Oh, shut up, John."

"Make me," John says mischievously, shifting his pillow closer.

How convenient it is that Sherlock has always enjoyed a challenge.
Darkness. Can't move. Breathing – self or a machine?

Where is he? Where is this?

He swallows, at least he can still do that. He's breathing, but it's hard and keeps getting harder and his heart is convulsing against his ribcage.

"John!" he calls out, voice breaking with relief that he can produce sound.

There's a startle and a rustle of sheets – is that someone else shifting under the duvet or is it him and he just can't feel it? There seems to be a disconnect between his sensation of where his body ends and the bed begins.

"I can't----" he tries to call out for help again, but the words get stuck in his dry throat. Is he even saying them out loud?

A sudden weight presses down on his hip. He manages to wrench his own upper limb free from the nameless something that's keeping him in place and to desperately grasp at whatever is trying to imprison him. It feels like a hand. "John!" he calls out in alarm.

He still can't breathe.

There's a hand on his cheek, now. Sherlock squeezes his eyes shut, not wanting to face what's right outside the black mirror of his eyelids, in case he's back in that place, in case he never even left--- Thoughts stutter to a halt, as he fights the panic. He hears his name being called from somewhere distant. It's like being underwater.

"Hang on; let me turn on the light," John mutters.

Sherlock wants to tell him that the bulb had burned out the night before last.

There's a groan, "blasted bulb's out." At least this is reassuring evidence that this is his own bedroom.

He feels hands on him, then. "Oh, you stupid sod, you've just got yourself tangled up in the sheets," John's voice chides tiredly but endearingly.

If John sounds like that, it can't be that bad, surely. Sherlock feels himself being rearranged, and suddenly his other hand springs free. He finally dares to open his eyes. There's enough light coming through the curtains for him to guess where he is. London is never really that dark, not even in the middle of the night.

He can move, now, but the cold sweat clings to him like fog and he can't stop shaking. He stares at John, who is lying on his side and watching him, a hand hovering in mid-air as he tries to decide whether to reach out to Sherlock or not.
"Hey, calm down. It's fine. You're fine," John whispers, and Sherlock doesn't need to explain why it doesn't work like that, why it isn't that easy, but John already knows that.

He still isn't quite sure what's going on. "Where am I?" he asks. He thinks he knows, but he wants confirmation from someone he trusts.

"Home. With me." John shifts closer and pulls him against his chest, resting his chin on Sherlock's shoulder. The sharpness of it is almost uncomfortable in the notch between his trapezius and his clavicle, but it's grounding. Gentle fingers stretch the collar of his T-shirt so that a kiss can be pressed on his bare shoulder blade. "Can you feel this?" John asks quietly.

John knows what is required at times like this because Sherlock has told him. Evidence.

"Yes," Sherlock says, mouth dry and heartbeat still in his ears. John's coarse five-o'clock shadow scrapes a little when he kisses the side of Sherlock's neck next, not so much as to be unpleasant, but it does tickle.

Sherlock squirms slightly.

John's warm palm snakes underneath his shirt, fingers ending up splayed on Sherlock's upper back, his other arm wedged between them. "Can you feel this?" John asks, walking his fingertips along the bony ridge of Sherlock's shoulder blade.

"Yes," Sherlock whispers and lets out a ragged breath. The anxiety is receding like the tide off the beach but not gone entirely.

John strokes his hand down to his hip, thumb brushing back and forth on the sensitive skin just above his waistband. "Can you feel this?"

Sherlock swallows and nods, and he knows John can feel him doing so.

Fingers trail from his neck up to his scalp, then tug gently at a handful of his hair, eliciting a shudder. "I know you can feel this," John asks, his tone now less tentative.

"At no point did I ever stop feeling that, so it's hardly evidence of anything," Sherlock protests.

John, with his cheek now pressed against his deltoid, must be smiling, judging by the minuscule shifts Sherlock can feel on his skin. He doesn't care if he's over-sensitized or not if it means that he can now deduce these things without even seeing or hearing anything.

Sherlock turns to his back while John withdraws to rearrange some of their bedding again and then crawls closer again so that his front is pressed against Sherlock's side. "Go back to sleep," John says and yawns.

Sherlock no longer feels like he has misplaced his Transport and been left floating in the darkness. For a moment, he just breathes, letting the tension flow out of him into John's warm body, now framing him protectively.

Moments pass and the adrenaline dissipates. His brain can now focus on more than just survival. John is squirming a little to find the most comfortable position and the arm he has just slung across Sherlock is warm and reassuringly heavy. Slowly, John's movement and their proximity begin to bring on tentative arousal. Sherlock is surprised that this can even happen: shifting from fright to the polar opposite in such a short period of time.

John is well and truly an exorcist.
"You're cruel," Sherlock tells the man in a low voice. "Getting someone worked up and then abandoning them just to sleep."

"I thought I was trying to make you not worked up."

"There's more than one kind."

"And you can catalogue them all in the morning and write an essay on your blog. Now, sleep, please."

Sherlock huffs indignantly but decides not to punish John by shoving him back to the opposite side of the bed.

Sherlock had always assumed that coming to terms with something meant plastering on a sunny smile and accepting the naive disposition that what he's gone through made him grow as a person and helped him appreciate life in the vein of a magazine sob story.

It doesn't have to be like that. Sherlock knows that now. There are no other expectations besides survival and trying to make the best out of each day, which they do. With someone like John by his side, someone who intimately knows both him and what he has gone through, everything is easier.

He still hates the memories of the illness, but that's fine. He doesn't have to find a silver lining in them, but he does need to accept them as part of his story. The nightmares come and he lets them. Well, it's not like he can stop them, is it? When the fear feels as though Death itself is watching him in the darkness, he no longer stares back but draws the proverbial curtains. They drink tea at night when either of them wakes up kicking the duvet as though fighting off an enemy soldier or some unknown, abstract foe. Sometimes they even drink whisky, neither saying anything but still with a perfect awareness that they're not alone.

He hasn't gained all his weight back yet, but the notion of having residual weakness from the GBS months, even years afterwards has lost its shock value and moved into the realm of being understandable. Not tolerable; never that. But understandable, nonetheless.

Endearing has been promoted to adorable. Sherlock protests, but only half-heartedly – who is he to question John's poetic choices, especially during moments he's being lifted by his thighs onto the kitchen table to be snogged senseless? John seems to have realised that physical proximity will easily derail Sherlock's train of thought by offering more interesting things to do. Damn clever army doctors.

Some evenings, instead of watching crap TV together, Sherlock goes exploring. He plays his fingers on the back of John's hand, then runs his fingertips along the tendons there. He imagines he can read the life lived there like reading braille. There are 2500 nerve endings on a square centimetre of a fingertip. Some of his might have been silenced forever by the Guillain-Barré, but there are still plenty enough in working condition that he can make up for what might be the stupidest mistake he's ever made – not mapping every inch of John with his fingers and his lips much earlier.

He plays the violin whenever he needs to be firmly reminded of what is real and what are just lingering memories. The bow is a weather vane of his moods – more susceptible to bounce and
screech than it had been before the illness. It reveals to John when he's tired, distracted or angry, and he likes this notion that John can read his mood on it since he's still not very good at expressing such things verbally.

He does accept that some things must be discussed. He's learning to do this, as well as the other confounding intricacies of being in a relationship. All in all, Sherlock realises that The Change, as he's begun to call it (John thinks everyone else is calling it 'finally you idiots got your heads out of your arses' but Sherlock prefers his own term, since it's more practically concise and much less insulting of his intelligence), has happened with very little fanfare. They've always been like an old married couple, anyway. In a way, the shift in their dynamic had already happened before the GBS barged into their life. "You sort of had me at hello," John had said, and Sherlock had corrected him, "No, I had you at Afghanistan or Iraq."

He would have assumed that showering together would spare both time and hot water, but the truth is quite the opposite. They tend to get preoccupied with sex, and while he enjoys every bit of it, there is a definite slipping hazard and he abhors the feeling of the damp, cool shower curtain latching itself to his bare back.

It isn't always plain sailing. Once while sharing the shower, John had slid his hands around Sherlock and placed both of his palms on his chest. Soon, after sliding his hands down, John had noticed the waning of his arousal, making Sherlock curse inwardly. All it still takes is one moment of self-doubt, a second of hesitation, and he begins questioning whether what's going on is actually real.

John had put his palms on his shoulders and turned him around, looking concerned in a manner Sherlock had grown to hate. He half hoped that John would understand how his gesture could have been misconstrued as something more suitable to caressing a female figure. He so did not want to try to explain what was going through his head.

There was a moment of silence, and eventually, Sherlock decided to bite the bullet, his own hands hanging uselessly at his sides. "Do you miss---" he let the question trail out because he hesitated to ask it, in case the answer was too painful. "I appreciate your willingness to make sacrifices in some things," he offered instead.

John wrapped his arms around Sherlock again and held tight. Somehow, being sopping wet made hugging feel much more intimate than it does even when unclothed in bed.

"Don't ever say that. Ever," John warned him. "There are plenty of words I could use to describe our relationship, but none of them would involve sacrifice."

"I wasn't questioning your commitment. Just making an observation that there may have been things you enjoyed about being intimate with women."

John kissed his left clavicle. "Sure, but you don't need to worry about any of them. Breasts are nice, and I've seen plenty, but I've never had anyone as half as gorgeous as you."

Sherlock gently stroked John's biceps with his thumbs, and his tightly concerned posture relaxed. He doesn't share John's conviction about his looks, but the most important thing is that John thinks like that. Besides, he tends to dismiss Sherlock's compliments just as easily.

When Sherlock looks in the mirror it offers a very different image than what is seen by John and vice versa. It's all in their heads: the misinterpretations, the years of cemented beliefs based on no empirical evidence at all. A perfect example is that John thinks his scar unsightly and hates it. Obviously, Sherlock doesn't love the pain and suffering and loss of a career it signifies, but it's part
of John and in a way, without it, they would not be where they are now.

"Earth to Sherlock," John had said, sliding a hand around his waist to hand him the bar of soap. Sherlock had blinked back into reality and started washing as John grabbed the shampoo.

"I'm not missing out on anything since you're capable of being both a cock and a *complete tit*," John then commented deadpan and even had the utter gall to hog the entire jet of water.

As the weeks pass, allowing himself to remember things about the GBS feels less and less unsettling. Sherlock finds that he can even talk about it all now – the night he was admitted, the MITU, Harwich, all of it.

John had once asked him what the worst thing was, and Sherlock could have listed many– being wheeled out of the hospital en route to Harwich was certainly up there since that cemented the fact that he was not going to walk out of the National on his own two feet like he had wanted. That moment had hammered home that recovery was going to be very slow and very difficult. He could also have named the day ending up on a respirator became unavoidable, or the moment when he had thought that John was about to walk out of his life. He could have mentioned pain, loneliness, the uncertainty of the future or the loss of dignity as he could no longer look after himself. He could have mentioned pain, loneliness, the uncertainty of the future or the loss of dignity as he could no longer look after himself. Now, those things are only pieces of a complex puzzle, and the whole ordeal no longer feels as black and white in his memories as it once had. At first, he'd been petrified to silence by how the illness had left him, and the bad memories had tainted everything.

Lately, he has begun to remember more.

He remembers John's hand sliding under his. He remembers crossword puzzles, Morse-tapping John the final word when he couldn't figure it out. He remembers riding at Harwich, closing his eyes and getting a moment's respite from acknowledging the state he'd been in. He remembers finally coming home, John waiting for him here. He still has the urge to apologise for being so wrapped up in himself that he must have effectively decimated everyone else's joy over his return, but John insists he'll hear none of it because then was then and this is now. He remembers the first taste of ice-cream and the first sip of decent tea after being extubated.

He remembers the winter garden, John's lips on his, properly, for the first time.

"Mycroft's coming over," John tells Sherlock one afternoon. He has been putting off inviting the man over, but at some point, they have to do this. John feels that an attempt to build bridges is his responsibility since Sherlock would likely never make the effort, and it had been John who had told Mycroft to take a step back until things got better.

Sherlock stops leafing through a stack of papers. He'd complained earlier that he couldn't find the sheet music for Tartini's Devil's Trill Sonata, so that's what he must be still looking for. John isn't very fond of that particular composition, so his offer of helping Sherlock search had been half-
hearted.

"When? Why?" Sherlock demands.

"He said his meeting would end at around half four. It's been a while since you've seen him, so I thought it might be nice to have him over for tea."

Sherlock stares at him, scathing disapproval evident on his face. "I hardly think not having seen Mycroft for a while is a problem in need of remedying." He twirls his bow between his fingers, eyes roving the piles of papers on the table doubling as his desk.

John picks up an anatomy textbook from the floor – it's one of his own, borrowed by Sherlock for God-knows-what, discarded after it had outgrown its usefulness. "The last you saw him was almost two months ago, and you were drugged out of your mind screaming bloody murder at him. Maybe it's time to call a truce, yeah?"

"What do you care?" Sherlock asks, flouncing onto the sofa. "You're not under any obligation to put up with him, nor am I."

John hardly expects the brothers to stop bickering, but doing that again would be a positive signal that walking on eggshells around Sherlock has well and truly stopped. "He's still your brother, which means that yes, I do have to put up with him sometimes."

Sherlock's gaze flicks to the side as he momentarily closes his eyes. John has learned this is the milder version of his signature eye roll.

"I think he'd like to hear that you are at least willing to try to understand his side of the story."

"Understanding and acceptance are two separate continents, drifting further apart the older we get. It's not your role to try to bridge the gap."

"Is that the reason the two of could practically cause earthquakes with the nasty glares?" John teases him.

This time he gets the full eye roll. "Your grasp of Earth sciences is not your strength, John. Major earthquakes are caused by the collision of two tectonic plates or such plates shifting against one another – not their separation."

"So, what is my strength, then?" John asks with a grin.

This gets him a smile. "I could list them now, but I won't have finished by the time he arrives, and some items on that list might prove embarrassing to us both if overheard by him."

"Why can't you get it?" John asks, pushing aside Sherlock's uncharacteristic praise to return to his concerns. "Yes, he's a giant arse sometimes. Yes, his methods of trying to micromanage your life are beyond condescending. Yes, he underestimates you in a lot of things and yes, he went over the fucking line interfering with your discharge appointment at the National. I understand why you'd be paranoid over his motives, but you do remember what we talked about? In regards to 2007? He did what he needed to, in order to protect you."

Sherlock is not looking at him. "I will admit some of your points may have merit. But, not all of them," he warns.

"I don't know the details of what happened between the two of you---" John had started.
Some of the anger seems to drain out of Sherlock's features.

"---and you do have a right to be bitter, because you went through hell, and things associated with it are never going to bring out any happy memories. But, have you ever considered that the way in which he meddles, as you call it, might be because he might not feel all that good about what happened back then, either? It's bad for the person sectioned, but it can be hell for those who helped initiate the process. It can't have been easy for him to watch you go through all that."

"No," Sherlock admits, looking thoroughly sad and deep in thought, as though he is remembering something important. "I suppose not, but then he didn't care."

John feels angry in that barely contained way of his when he's feeling protective. "I doubt the two of you ever really talked about what happened after the dust had settled. So that might not be a fair assessment. Am I right?"

Sherlock shakes his head, wiggling his toes on the chilly floor. He finds he can still derive some absent-minded joy from the ability to do so.

"I doubt you ever will because you're both arrogant, stubborn idiots with delusions of infallibility," John tells him, "But please stop holding it all against him. That was then and this is now. And, if it's any consolation, if I ever find out he's spearheading some bullshit conspiracy against you, I'm going to kick his bloody arse myself. Agreed?"

Sherlock cocks his head in acknowledgement – begrudgingly, but still.

John breathes a sigh of relief when Sherlock decides to put on a decent set of clothes for the impending fraternal visit. He'd spent half the day lounging around in his blue dressing gown, which had finally been let out of exile from the bottom of the wardrobe.

At half-past five, John makes tea.

He isn't going to try to push either of the brothers into talking about something worthwhile, because that is, in all likelihood, a fool's errand. He just wants them to sit down together without it ending in the verbal equivalent of world war three.

Five minutes after the kettle boils, the doorbell downstairs rings. Before, Mycroft had always walked in without asking for permission, so this is new. John briefly amuses himself by wondering whether Mycroft has lately become worried about interrupting something private. He had called John a week earlier, on a morning when Sherlock had been particularly bored and particularly interested in experimenting with certain body parts of John's. John certainly didn't mind, until Sherlock had decided to continue his ministrations while he was still on the phone. There had been a little too much teeth, and the resulting commotion had led to John deciding he never again wanted to hear the words 'in flagrante delicto' from the mouth of Mycroft Holmes. At least they had been followed by a hasty retreat from the conversation.

Once seated in John's usual armchair, Mycroft turns his attention to Sherlock, who escapes said attention by grabbing his violin and launching into a well-rehearsed rendition of a Handel violin sonata.

After the last crystal-clear, beautiful notes echo out, Mycroft nods appreciatively. "I see Mrs Ellicott has earned her keep, although I am disappointed she didn't manage to fix the out-of-tune non-free string D4 that has always afflicted you."

John wants to wring his neck for failing to realise how much support and encouragement
Sherlock's violin playing still needs. However, after he shifts his gaze to Sherlock's face, he calms down considerably because there's a tiny smirk there, a flicker of anticipation. John has seen this before. It's a challenge accepted.

"How it still must grate, being so clumsy that Mummy made you give up the piano after no one could bear to hear you practice," Sherlock comments. He puts the violin on the bookcase, and takes a seat in his usual chair, looking at Mycroft as though he's something a particularly unpleasant cat had dragged in.

"I take it the poisoning case was solved, then?" Mycroft asks politely.

"Your part in that was marginal. Stop fishing for gratitude."

"Far be it from me to ever expect such a thing," Mycroft says. "Ah, thank you, John," he adds upon receiving a mug of tea.

The fancier tea set of Mrs Hudson's which had been used at Sherlock's homecoming is still available in the kitchen cabinet, but John had decided a long time ago that making Mycroft Holmes drink tea out of a chipped novelty mug adorned with curse words was a sight worthy of regular appreciation. He particularly enjoys the accompanying disapproving frown.

It doesn't fail to appear today.

Sherlock ignores his tea, as is customary.

John sips down half his mug while watching the silent pair of brothers steal glances at each other. "Don't all talk at once," he jokes.

"It's unusually warm for this time of the year," Mycroft comments dryly.

Sherlock groans melodramatically. "This is what you invited him here for – to bore for Britain?" he asks John. "The mind, it boggles. Besides, it's still one Celsius degree below the maximum average for this month, and even the precipitation is within the statistical norm for the last decade." He shifts his disapproval to his brother with a melodramatic sigh. "If you had to come here to wear down the furniture, you could have at least brought a tin of biscuits."

John spots a tiny twinge of a relieved smile playing on Mycroft's features. It's probably because Sherlock sounds like the old version of himself, instead of the ball of anxiety of recent times.

"Mummy sends her love, and asks if the two of you might visit for Christmas and New Year's," Mycroft says.

John is startled by the idea. He has not seen Sherlock's parents - or Harry, for that matter – since he and Sherlock became an item. John tries to imagine what the Holmes parents' home in Surrey might be like. Sherlock has not offered a description of it, and his parents certainly outwardly seem less posh than their offspring, but who knows? Even the queen sometimes dons a pair of wellies and a worn raincoat.

"I doubt John would be interested," Sherlock dismisses.

"I think John would be very interested," John corrects, which earns him a glare.

"You need not worry about having to make a grand reveal about your relationship," Mycroft says with a careful smile, "I have updated the parental unit on the situation."
Sherlock's brows climb. "So, you approve? Despite the *sentimentality* of it all? You were the one who tried to convince me caring is not an advantage."

"While it often leads to unnecessary suffering, caring sometimes helps reveal to us our priorities," Mycroft says pointedly before turning to John, looking pleased with himself. "Father doesn't seem to have much of an opinion, but then again he never does, and Mummy is *delighted*."

"Must be my wholesome charm," John says.

Sherlock's lip quirks up. "You look harmless enough, I suppose. Respectable. A doctor, even. That's always something for her to mention to the family's Chanel-clad vulture contingency."

"Mother's side of the family," Mycroft explains to John. "She's the black sheep of the clan. Chose a scientific career over life as a wealthy socialite."

"She's the black sheep?" John asks. "Have they *met* Sherlock?"

They're lying on top of tangled sheets, spent, happy in the universe that seems to have shrunk down to just the two of them in the darkness of the bedroom. Neither of them has had the energy to get a flannel yet or drag themselves to the shower.

"Sherlock?" John asks him.

"Mm?"

"What do you remember from the hospital from those couple of days when you were…. " John pauses, battling between honesty and diplomacy, "a little out of it?"

Sherlock raises himself onto the elbows, trying to gauge where John's face is in the dark. "Is this a pre-planned attempt to try and take advantage of my post-coital generosity to pry? You're putting a whole new spin on the word 'interrobang'."

John chuckles. "No, you dork. You're not the only one whose brain takes off on weird tangents sometimes."

Sherlock considers this and finds the explanation acceptable. They have begun to have occasional discussions of his hospitalisation, but John has not asked about this before. Sherlock fights the impulse to worry that John is using such information to gauge his current level of mental health. At least John's reactions to things Sherlock has revealed have invariably reinforced his trust that he's not about to be betrayed.

"Moriarty. Ravens, for some arbitrary reason. I'm sure there's more, but it's all a bit of a haze."

"Right."

"Any comments?" Sherlock asks, mildly alarmed by John's silence.

"Not really. Just curious, I guess. You do know how many ITU patients get hallucinations?"

"I do since you've taken care to reassure me numerous times that it's normal."
John's fingers lace with his. "I don't mean to pry. Do appreciate you telling me, though."

Sherlock turns on his side, sliding a hand onto John's thigh and drumming it with his fingers. John shifts a bit, likely ticklish.

"Post-coital generosity?" John asks incredulously and laughs. "Remind me of that next time my money's run out because you always make me pay for the cab."

Some things *never* change.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Our dear, dear readers: only one chapter to go.

It will be sad to part with this particular story, but we have no intention to part with this *series* yet...

We shall return in a few days to deliver the final chapter, along with many exciting gifts.
These things sneak up on him for no reason, these flashes of irrational happiness. It's probably a vitamin deficiency.

– Margaret Atwood

Sherlock is thinking about flute notes. Not ones played on an actual woodwind, but those created by finding a secret spot on a violin – they're different on each individual instrument, and can only be discovered by daring to experiment on the four strings, gently seeking out where the sound turns from raspy to melodic.

Sherlock rather thinks John has found his flute notes. At least the sounds he keeps coaxing out of Sherlock are all rather new and unexpected.

Sherlock flings his legs off the bed, gathers up a sheet and trails it behind him as he heads out of the door. His toes curl a little on the draughty floor, the sensation more akin to burning than cold, but he doesn't care. If this is how his nervous system wants to be today, then so be it. The full effect of his pain medications has finally kicked in after so many months, dampening the worst remnants of the GBS to just a mild buzz of static. He can ignore it.

He wraps the sheet around his naked form and shuffles to the kitchen. John is there, frying eggs. The crackling of oil in the pan may have concealed the whisper of the sheet, but their floors are creaky enough that John must know he's present.

John turns his head, flashing him an all-knowing smile. It needs to be wiped off that face, Sherlock decides. He needs to wrench control back to himself. John has been bossing him around lately on the pretence of sexual experience. Sherlock’s determined to take the initiative; he has a whole series of experiments in mind.

John returns his attention to the eggs in the pan. Sherlock crowds him in front of the stove, wrapping his arms and effectively also the sheet around him, enveloping them both in the sweat-and lord knows what else -scented white fabric.

"And how are we this morning?" John asks suggestively. He backs away from the stove a bit. “Don’t want that sheet to catch fire, do we?”

“Something else is on fire,” Sherlock suggests and presses up against him, relishing the warmth radiating from John's form.

He's allowed this. Even after weeks and weeks of such bliss, there's still a novelty to it that trumps even cases that are a full ten on his scale.
But never mind that. He's a man on a mission.

He snakes his fingers underneath the waistband of John's pyjama pants. At least the man has been sensible enough not to wear a shirt. During their first intimate encounters, John had turned out to be slightly apprehensive at being completely naked in his presence and under his scrutiny when it comes to certain anatomical features. A particularly troublesome spot had turned out to be the scar on his shoulder.

Wasn't Sherlock the one who was supposed to be nervous, the one who had changed so much during the past months and felt as though he'd stepped into the wrong skin? Thankfully, the initial skittishness on both their parts had quickly dissipated once primal instincts took over. Sherlock now regrets the way in which he had spent his former life looking down on such activities. But, that was all "pre-John".

"We are bored, and in desperate need of attention," Sherlock whispers into John's ear, letting just enough of his baritone colour the sound. John squirms as though there were shivers going down his spine. Perhaps there are. His voice has always seemed to have a similar effect on John as John's fingers on his scalp produce. For every action, there is an equal reaction.

Sherlock's other hand begins a slow crawl downwards before John grabs it and moves it back up to his waist. He begins turning and Sherlock, expecting a kiss, flutters his lids closed. Instead of John's lips on him, a piece of toast is shoved into his mouth. He stumbles backwards, grabbing hold of the offending piece of bread.

John laughs. "Breakfast first, you berk. Some of us need food before a third round in twelve hours. Not everyone runs on some sort of a human version of a fission reactor."

Sherlock stare at the toast and then devours it. John turns back to the stove, flips his eggs and then glances towards the kitchen table. He spots Sherlock's hand just about to reach for something on John's plate. "Oi!" he shouts as Sherlock grabs the muffin and strides into the living room.

John chases after him and Sherlock makes a daring escape by climbing on the coffee table where he scarf's down the muffin in two bites.

John is indignation and amusement all wrapped in one. "That was my last one, and you insist you hate them. You're going to get it for that," he threatens playfully.

Sherlock bats his lids in feigned disinterest, licking crumbs off his fingers. The sheet has slipped so that it barely covers the dark hairs low on his stomach. "Oh? And what sort of a punishment did you have in mind?" he asks suggestively.

John's looking at him in a way that is positively predatory. Sherlock decides he likes it.

"You're going on the bloody rack for this, Sherlock Holmes."

"A bloody one?" Sherlock asks in mock astonishment, "Here I was thinking I'd shacked up with a boring old army doctor instead of the Head Inquisitor."

John tugs at his sheet and Sherlock climbs down.

John snorts. "I'd never have thought I'd miss the sight of you climbing on furniture."

Sherlock shifts close to John, who circles his arms around him.

"What's this, then?" John asks teasingly, grinding his hips against Sherlock's, having now noticed
the erection he's sporting. *Obvious.*

"Autonomic dysfunction," Sherlock answers deadpan.

John pinches his left buttock. "Is that what it was last night, too? My mistake."

Sherlock looks down between them and frowns. "It's hardly my problem if it *likes* you," he drawls, raising his brows suggestively.

John reaches down between them, under the sheet, and coils his hand around Sherlock's cock. "You're a prat and a thief."

"Your eggs are burning, John."

"That's--- romantic?" John suggests, looking as confused as he often is.

Sherlock glances towards the stove. "No, I do mean that quite literally."

There are cases, of course. But, there are also days when they are so wrapped up in each other that Lestrade's texts go unanswered and Mrs Hudson's offers of scones ignored. During those days, not even a case that has the potential to be a *twelve* could drag them out of each other's orbit.

There are other kinds of days as well: days when Sherlock's skin crawls with a desire to fix his head with cocaine, days when he won't talk to anyone or disappears for endless walks that produce blistered feet yet do little to improve what John calls his black mood. It passes, it always does, and John makes it pass quicker than anyone else who has ever tried. Sometimes John gets fed up with his histrionics or sofa sulks and gets some air himself. While some things have changed for the better, it's not all roses. They are still who they are—it's just that now they are themselves, together.

Sherlock still has concentration problems, or at least he thinks so. John says it's common after a long stay at the ITU, as are the still-lingering fatigue and the nightmares, but Sherlock worries about it more than he worries about any remaining physical impairment. He can work, quite effortlessly really, when it comes to deducing things, but putting all the pieces of a case together afterwards requires more pacing and more post-it notes than it used to. Back in the day, he could keep it all organised in his head.

"If you overexert yourself, it's going to be even slower and then you'll blow a gasket again," is the sort of thing John keeps telling him. He also keeps reminding Sherlock how many times he has solved a case in less than an hour. It doesn't matter because Sherlock thinks he should be even faster. There's always room to improve, even before the Guillain-Barré. He's good enough to be able to do his job. He'll be even better at it with practice. He'll be the *best* consulting detective on this planet, and since he's the only one, he sets the bar.

In his adult life, he has always refused to obey what others see as his limitations. He pushes himself past them. The illness had brought on memories of belittling words of professionals from his youth, and those had teamed up with the demon of the GBS. Vulnerable and weak after the ordeal, he had been easy pray for self-doubt, one of the only things truly capable of sliding him into the deep end.
When nothing else had helped, John's reassuring presence had created for Sherlock a space in which to be himself again. John has taken his broken music, his dissonant tones, and taught him to tune them again to something that works. They are not in the key they were before, but a new one; a duet instead of a lonely, frightening solo. It’s a sound dense with memory, yet the harmonies are awash with hope.

He's in love, which hardly solves all of his life's problems, but he'd rather stop breathing than to give up the man at his side.

Relationships, like music, seem to require risk-taking. Helen says that the risk-aversive violinist will never be a good one because they don't push their boundaries. Sherlock has had to accept the possibility of failure, and that has allowed him to let go with the reckless abandon required by more dramatic pieces. It is logical: how could one hope to express the emotions written into the notes, if one refused to experience them?

When he looks in the mirror now, he suspects that the other Sherlock, if he were ever to make an appearance again, would be rather envious. The poor coward, despite all of his purported confidence, never did have the courage to reach for what he truly wanted.

Now that Sherlock has done just that, he knows a truth. When everything had felt wrong, distorted and alien, John had remained a steady reflection of him. John wants him, stays with him, and that is enough to remind him of the right priorities. When Sherlock looks in the mirror now, he can smile at his own reflection.

A week later, Sherlock is surveying the landscape that is John Watson, something that has certainly become one of his special interests lately. Just a sheet covers the two of them from the waist down as they lie on their sides, facing each other. The geographical feature that has attracted Sherlock today is John's right eyebrow. He is using his lower lip to explore the texture, which is nothing short of fascinating. "Did you know that the hair of your right eyebrow is much thicker, almost wiry, compared to any other body hair type of yours?" he asks.

There is a muffled snort. "Can't say that I do, no."

"It's very straight, too." Sherlock cannot resist a running commentary. Like a television naturalist, he keeps his voice muted, lest he frightens off the creature he's observing. "I shall look forward to finding out how much they'll grey with the rest of you."

John pinches his side as punishment and he squirms. A warm hand then settles on the small of his back. Sherlock's lets his eyes drift shut to block out the soft morning light that is edging around the bedroom curtains. While his mouth is still occupied on the eyebrow, his fingers are busy exploring another part of John. "Your chest hair is moderately curly, soft, yet the hair on your head is straight, and a bit thicker. Such a contrast to the soft down on your forearms or the tight curl of the hair at your groin. I wonder why?"

There is a mutter from John's lips, which are pressed against Sherlock's chest. "Just don't start pulling anything out to go look at it under a microscope, please."

"This is the field study part. Lab analysis comes later." Sherlock shifts his hand away from John's
midline, where it had been caressing the man’s chest hair, shifting toward the topography he knows is to the right. Now, after considerable practice, he can navigate these landmarks without looking. Just there – the skin tissue changes texture, guarded by a little ring of tiny hairs, a hillock that rises in anticipation as he rubs John’s nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

There is a corresponding rumble of pleasure, and John moves his hips against Sherlock. Works every time. Sherlock has deduced that the purpose of John doing this must be to make Sherlock keenly aware of his erection. He promptly decides to continue yesterday’s experiment: he turns his thumb fractionally, which means that he is rubbing the nipple with the edge of his nail.

A soft moan escapes from John. Sherlock decides to abandon the eyebrow, now fully mapped, when John raises his head to kiss him. He lets his lower lip curve into a smile when John turns his head slightly to trail a line of further kisses towards his ear. He echoes the moan he’d just heard when John's lips continue downwards and find his own left nipple to give it a nip.

What Sherlock had never anticipated was how interesting intimacy could be. From a cold, logician’s perspective he had always worried about sustained physical contact providing too much sensory information, and about the profoundly unromantic notion of exchanging bodily fluids. He had been certain that his sensory perception issues would surely get in the way of enjoyment. What little experience he had amassed of intimacy before had all been disappointing; either initiated by others with little regards for his wishes, or him trying to grin and bear it for the sake of joining the rest of humanity in what literature and music tried to sell off as wonderful and fulfilling.

Then, this had happened - John had happened - and proved him wrong, just as he has proven Sherlock wrong in so many other things. Compared with the sum total of Sherlock’s prior sexual experiences, this is something entirely different. Nothing is hurried, haphazard or unsentimental. He knows the pedestrian biochemical reactions, but somehow the experience is so much more than the sum of its physical parts. He now he has all the time in the world to explore, investigate and experiment in what brings pleasure to another person, and in so doing, discovers that rather than the sensory storm he feared, he is now able to give as good as he gets.

The greatest surprise has been that sometimes, overwhelmed can be good. Time out of mind. Brain offline for a moment. John is there, he isn’t in danger. It's all right to let go.

John is learning about Sherlock at the same time, and they've established that some things do make Sherlock decidedly uncomfortable. Too soft a touch is problematic, and might always be so, and using a tongue in certain places makes Sherlock squirm away when it all becomes a little too much. He’s not particularly ticklish, but he really doesn’t like the bottom of his feet touched. Having the weight of John lying across his chest is oddly comforting. The man is domestically warm, which makes the experience resemble being in bed with his own John-sized hot water bottle. For someone who has always suffered from cold feet and hands, this is an unexpected bonus, even if said hot water bottle keeps suggesting that Sherlock should wear bed socks. “Really, John? I tell you that I can’t abide things touching the soles of my feet and you prescribe bed socks? Are you a sadist?”

Yet another revelation is how much Sherlock enjoys physical contact outside of sex. John's warm surgeon’s hands are remarkably strong and capable of doing marvellous things to muscles. He has enjoyed the benefits of a number of full body massages that leave him a boneless heap, drifting off in a cloud of oxytocin. It is odd, what John can do to Sherlock’s body; he smiles at the thought of designating John as his transport mechanic of choice.

“Earth to Sherlock. You in there?” A firm grasp of his rump makes him wriggle with pleasure, and buck his own hips back into John. Lucky for him, it turns out that John is rather fond of Sherlock’s
buttocks. He’d always assumed that John was drawn to breasts, given the number of his women-dates that had qualified in that department. But, according to what John has confided to him, he is actually more turned on by a shapely arse. John had even gone so far as to reveal that it had been the very thing that he’d first realised his eyes kept being drawn to in his flatmate in a manner not entirely platonic.

Before John, his derriere had not been a feature that Sherlock had given much attention to.

"By definition, it's behind me. How am I supposed to know what it looks like, or care?" Sherlock had pointed out, standing in front of the mirror on the wardrobe, twisting his neck to try and see his rear-view reflection from the angle John had just been looking at it. There was something about that pose which had led John to pull him over to the bed and begin this research session.

He answers John's call for attention by sliding down from on top of him to his side and shoving his leg between John's. “We shouldn't forget the sandpaper rasp of your five o'clock shadow. That’s an entirely different kind of hair. Wonder if it would be curly or straight if you left it unshaven?”

“I’m not growing a beard just so you can find out,” John protests before they stop talking, their lips again becoming more interested in doing things other than forming words.

That night, Sherlock falls asleep effortlessly, without a care in the world, coiled next to John like an oversized viper. Not touching, but close, so close that he'd only need to shift his arm to find contact with John's back as he sleeps on his side, facing away from Sherlock.

At around two in the morning, he wakes up. He expects to experience what he has learned to think of as the usual – the sensation of falling, a sense of being lost, a fear that it's all been a dream, that he's still there, hooked up to a respirator.

None of this happens. In the dark, he can make out the outline of the periodic table poster, the bedside cabinet and the shape John makes under the duvet. He's home.

A car drives past. John is breathing quietly.

Sherlock's mind no longer yearns to make him leap out of bed, to escape the confines of his own brain, to seek out solitude and distraction on the cold bathroom floor. He wants to stay here. He wants to be here, and he can't wait for morning because that's when John wakes up and talks to him and spends time with him and listens to him and goes places with him.

A thought: what if they had this before, long before the GBS nearly separated them for good?

No. Such what-ifs are pointless. He can't waste any more time on them.

Without John, there would have been nothing left of him after the GBS. John had redrawn the lifeline on his palm every single day as they joined hands, kept him safe and relatively sane. It had taught him something more valuable- that to climb high, you had to risk a fall. That’s why he’d said what he said in the winter garden.

Something John had said had stuck with him: 'I'll take the good things and the bad things if they come with you'. Maybe they would have got together without the GBS, but the timing would have
been different. It could have taken months, years, decades. Or they might never have been brave enough to risk it. Sherlock would never thank his body for betraying him, but at least it had been the catalyst for where they are now. No regrets; he has better things to do with his time.

Sherlock still doesn't know how to put it into words, but he is willing to try now. He talks to the skull. He talks to John. And when words are inadequate – they often are – he is consoled by the thought that no matter what the means of communication, John seems to make sense of him even when Sherlock isn't really able to decipher himself.

He stretches out under the duvet. His muscles are sore, but instead of being some residual thing from the GBS, the aches he feels are a glorious reminder of their climbing session this afternoon. Logical. Normal.

He turns to his side and pokes John where he thinks a shoulder ought to be. It takes more than a few tries, and the calling out of John's name for the man to stir. Sherlock curls his fingers around John's arm and tugs to signal that he wants to be face to face.

He can't really see John's expression in the dark, but if he did, Sherlock would imagine John looking a little cross-eyed from being very sleepy still. There might be a pillow crease indent on his cheek and his hair is probably a mess. What an incredible thing it is to have this, to know these things. To have memorised them in preparation of days apart, of which there will hopefully be very few if not none.

"What?" John asks, turning to his side. "What is it?

"John, I'm----" Sherlock starts and pauses because he hasn't really thought what it is he wants to say. He can feel it, in his head, an overwhelming sensation he wants to convey, but what is the right word?

"Are you okay?" John asks, sliding a hand out from underneath the duvet and reaching out to feel where Sherlock is. He manages to poke him on the cheek.

"Yes. I think I am," Sherlock answers very pointedly. That's the gist of it, isn't it? As usual, John has unintentionally helped him solve the mystery. He's alright, he really is.

"It's the middle of the night. What's going on?"

John hasn't really understood.

"I'm happy," Sherlock says.

John opens his eyes. "Yeah? That's all?"

Sherlock is taken aback. "That's all?!!"

"I'm just surprised you'd wake me up for--- that."

"It's important," Sherlock says petulantly.

John reaches out a hand and places it on his waist. "Sorry, I---- yeah. Sorry. Of course, it is. I'm happy, too. I really am." John flops back onto his back, shoves a hand between Sherlock's neck and pillow to be able to snake it around him, then pulls Sherlock close, kissing him in front of his ear.

Sherlock lays his chin on John's shoulder, breathing in a very distinctive scent – one very specifically belonging to John, which can't really be named or described.
Sherlock runs his fingers gently down John's arm, relishing the sensation of goose bumps brought on by the cool air in the room. His fingertips trace over a sliver-like scar near his elbow he's been meaning to ask about, but now is probably not the time. John lets him explore wordlessly, not inching closer, not trying to change the atmosphere into something laden with aroused expectation. Somehow, John knows he needs this, needs to memorise every detail, to create something of a road map to guide him home.

John carries on his skin what Sherlock carries inside – battle wounds. Because that's what the past months have been, a civil war within him that turned to trench warfare.

Tonight, he feels like it's a battle they have won.

"I love you. Always did. The whole time," Sherlock whispers. "Even when I didn't know what to do with it."

He could go through all of it again if he had to if the GBS relapsed. It would be devastating, but he'd do it for John if he had to. For the first time, the thought is consoling instead of frightening.

He'll never be alone again, no matter what happens, and it's the only thing that counts. The rest is just white noise and memory.

- The End -

TO OUR READERS:

*Thank you.* Two simple words often overused to express gratitude over condiments passed around the table and for someone not slamming a door in your face. Today, we want them to mean much more than a social convention.

During the nine months we spent giving life to this story (isn't that apt?) we have had more fun than we could ever have thought possible. An indispensable part of it have been all of YOU. You've laughed, cried, complained, screamed, supported, wondered, theorised, thrown bricks, speculated on the case, shared your feels and your hopes, loved our boys and cheered us on. To get to share this story with you has been a privilege, and we want to thank you….

… by giving you MORE. The first bit of that more is a (hopefully at least mildly amusing) [making-of thingy](#) which is posted together with this final chapter.

During the coming weeks, we shall also publish a set of short stories that take place in this 'verse.

*But, most importantly, prepare yourselves for….**
Sherlock loses his mind. Mycroft loses control.

It's 2007, and the Holmes brothers must come to terms with their demons – and each other.

A standalone prequel to "The Breaking Wheel" and "On the Rack". COMING SOON.

Works inspired by this and Lightweight Kind of Loneliness by J. Baillier, Inherently Given by J. Baillier

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!