# Infinitely Stranger

**Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at** [http://archiveofourown.org/works/889702](http://archiveofourown.org/works/889702).

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**Infinitely Stranger**

by **Aurilia**

**Summary**

John was a lot of things - brother, son, friend. Doctor. Former soldier. But the one thing that any Holmes couldn't have expected was the one thing he was best at: Mage.

(Originally posted on fanfiction.net. As such, this version is slightly different since this site allows more coding to its text than does ff.net.)

Also, if you're artistic and the muse strikes, I welcome illustrations!
A Study in Pink as seen through my magical-AU lenses.

Chapter Notes

This is an AU. More than that, this is a magical AU. I've read quite a lot of Sherlock AUs, but only rarely is John allowed to be 'special' without Sherlock also having something, too (or, in one memorable instance, it seemed as though the author were handing out psychic gifts like parade candy – everyone had one!). So, in order to rectify what I see as a grave injustice to everyone's favorite ex-army doctor, I sought to correct this lamentable lack.

Right now, I've got seven chapters planned with some tentative ideas on how to handle things, post-Reichenbach. However, since I've not written a Sherlock fanfic (well, not never – I wrote one for ACD's original stories when I was about ten, long before I ever found out what fanfic was, and a solid six years before my first foray online), I'm not too sure how well I've done at keeping things true to the characters as they've been presented on BBC's Sherlock. I hope that y'all will lemme know if I fucked it up, yeah? I'm considering this AU to be practice for the real fic I want to do later. So any and all help (including Brit-picking) would be welcome!

**Warning:** All puns contained herein are fully intended. And though I've always believed that Sherlock and Watson were more than just 'friends', I've endeavored to keep this as the characters were shown in the series – not Johnlock, in other words. Updates will also likely come slowly for this fic, but each chapter is going to be long and leave off at a satisfying stopping point (with one exception, but blame the writers for the series for that particular cliffie, not me).

*Quick note about cats and superstitions:* In the US, it's good luck for a white cat to cross your path, but bad luck for a black cat to do so. According to my superstitions encyclopedia, the colors are reversed for English traditions. Just so y'all know, of course.

Yes, this is a series-rewrite fic. As such, I make heavy use of dialog from the show and John's blog. If this irritates anyone, don't read it – I wrote this to amuse myself. I'm only sharing it because that's what I do with things that amuse me. Major, major thanks go to Ariane DeVere for her meticulous work on posting transcripts for the series over on her livejournal. Without her effort, much of this fic would never have come to be. Anyway, enough with my blathering. Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Chapter One: Beginnings**
"My dear fellow," said Sherlock Holmes as we sat on either side of the fire in his lodgings at Baker Street, "life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent. We would not
dare to conceive the things which are really mere commonplaces of existence. If we could fly out of
that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the
queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the cross-purposes, the
wonderful chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most outré results, it
would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and
unprofitable." – Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

It was dismal. Flat and uninteresting and bordering close enough to lifeless to tip the scale from mere
don’t bad dreams over to nightmares nearly every night. Had it not been for the fact the building itself was
less than six months old, he’d be tempted to think that something unspeakable had happened in his
room at some point in the not-so-distant past. Jolting awake for the umpteenth time since settling into
the horrid flat was the last straw. Yeah, nobody could see him. Yeah, sure, it was a needlessly
archaic mindset, but… It’s my bloody head and I’ll cling to whatever I wish. Besides, it’s not about
weakness. It never was – I just hate the clogged sinuses afterwards.

Once his negative emotions finally allowed themselves to be wrestled back into their lockbox at the
back of his mind, he sat up and switched on the light. "I’ve got to get out of here…” he whispered,
not entirely aware that the words were spoken aloud. But… Where would I go? It’s not like Harry’s
room any more. I think her place is smaller than this. Have to wonder why she’s letting Clara keep
their place; after all, if I’d walked in on my wife sleeping with someone else, I think I probably
would’ve wound up tossing ‘em both out before they could find their clothes. Then again, I’ve got
Mum’s temper. Harry’s always been more like Dad. Neither one gets angry – they just get depressed.
He sighed and wished it would rain. He always thought more clearly during rainstorms.

"And my pension really isn’t enough to live on, not in London…” John closed his eyes, briefly
recalling some of the prices he’d seen in trying to find this horrible little mass-produced box of a
room. Looks like I’m going to need to do some research. Or hope that luck runs with me a tad more
strongly than it has been for the past few months. He opened his eyes and glared over at where his
cane leaned against the desk. Then again, I might have simply exhausted my allotment of good luck,
what with… everything. He was unsure as to whether or not classifying poker games and being shot
at in the same category was altogether permissible, but waved the thought away. Well… What could
it hurt?

His shoulder twinged. "Okay, okay, so that was a bad idea. D’you have to keep bloody reminding
me of that every blasted minute?" Yes, he was speaking to a body part. Perhaps I really ought to get
out more. This can’t be healthy. A strangled little giggle escaped on the mental image he received of
Ella finding out about this latest quirk. Definitely need to get out more.

Shaking his head to forcibly eject random thoughts, John yawned, then stretched. Once he finished,
he rolled himself off of his bed and on to the floor. He tugged a large, heavy, hard-sided brown
suitcase out from under the bed. Damn thing weighs too much. Good thing it’s got wheels, else I
never would’ve got it here from the storage place. He placed his hands over the latches, closed his
eyes, and said with a little smirk, "Open sesame." Faint clicks sounded as the locking mechanisms
disengaged. He chuckled, amused as always that it worked.

It wouldn’t work on anything more complicated than the simple locks found on luggage, a teenaged
Harriet’s diary, or handcuffs, but it suited his case. Another small chuckle escaped as he unlatched it
and levered it open. Instead of clothing, either messily or neatly packed – he had a perfectly
serviceable duffle bag for that – it contained numerous wooden and plastic boxes all slotted together
like a 3D version of Tetris. The box he was after was the one anomaly; it was intricately carved
soapstone, the design abstract and somewhat Celtic. It was also the only one wrapped in packing paper. He extracted it from its place and carefully unwrapped it. Removing the ornate lid, he revealed a small leather-bound book, an antique lever-fill fountain pen that sported gold trim, and a half-empty bottle of plain black ink. Eschewing the ink and pen for the moment, he picked up the book and began paging through it.

You'd think I'd have this one memorized by now. He paused at one entry, then shook his head and continued looking. He found it, about a quarter of the way into the book, the page a little dog-eared and battered. "Got it," he muttered, reading the instructions. It took a good five minutes to free the various boxes he needed from their positions, but soon he had a small pile of whatnot handy.

Leaving the mess of boxes for the time-being, he used the bed to lever himself to his feet, then hobbled over and snagged his cane. Ugly thing. Ought to see about finding something less… geriatric. Money, Watson – money first. And you've got more to be thinking on than a cane. Like getting the hell out of this awful place. It took more trips to move the whatnots from the bed area over to the surface of his desk than he liked, but he managed.

Finished moving everything, he pulled out his chair and sat down, leaning the cane against the desk once more. The first thing he grabbed was a small glass jar with a rubber stopper and a handwritten label which read H. J. the C. Oil. Next, he picked up the small taper candle. It was a metallic gold, purchased during the Christmas rush nearly three years ago – the last time he'd been in London, between deployments. Using a bone-handled penknife his grandfather had given him for his eighteenth birthday, John painstakingly etched his own name into the candle, then lightly coated the taper with a couple of drops of the oil from the jar.

He then pushed it firmly into a somewhat battered bronze candle holder and grabbed the box of matches. John withdrew a pair and held them for a moment. He took a deep breath, held it for a moment, then slowly exhaled and dragged the matches across the sandpaper strip on the side of the box. They flared to life with a hiss of sulfur. "Light in the darkness," he said, "draw luck my way." He held the matches to the wick until it flared into life. Waving them to put out the flame, he sat the charred ends in the wax-catch of the candle holder. He focused on the candle flame for several long minutes, painting a vividly clear image of packing his things out of the tiny little cubicle in which he now lived, happily moving elsewhere in London. He knew better than to try to imagine the place he might be moving to – sometimes, it didn't pay to be too specific. As his imaginary self closed the door one last time, he wrenched his gaze from the candle's flame.

Next came the bit he wasn't altogether fond of, but which was necessary in this particular instance. He opened an alcohol wipe from his first aid kit and cleaned off the penknife's blade. Biting his lip, he then made a tiny cut on his right index finger, just deep enough to bleed, and gathered three crimson drops with a ready cotton ball. A wisp of antibacterial cream and one Band-Aid later, and he was using a pair of forceps to hold the cotton in the candle flame. "By my blood, I make it so."

The mass of scar tissue in his left shoulder laughed at him.

I really need to get out of here. "I make it so," he repeated, injecting just a hint of Captain Watson into the tone.

It took about two hours for the miniature taper to burn itself out, and three hours later, just as twilight was beginning to shift to dawn, John's abysmal little bedsit was back to rights, with everything put away. John sat on his bed and stared at the wall, straining his ears to hear something – anything – outside the confines of this tiny little room. It didn't work. It never worked.

Giving up, he levered himself off the bed once more and set about finding some clothes and breakfast. Harry's – No, my phone. It's my phone now – phone chirped the alarm tone. John bit back
Later, after his latest scolding from Ella, John limped his way to Russell Square Park. It was on the way back to his... Well, to that place he'd been staying. But it had people. And sunlight. Intermittent sunlight, sure, but it also had trees and grass and other growing things. And benches, too. Mustn't forget the benches, where you can sit and look around, and as long as you don't stare too hard, everyone ignores you.

He entered the park, intent on his goal – a bench almost exactly centered within the park, which was centered, bridged, over a smallish leyline. Something else lacking at the bedsit. Nearest leyline is almost three blocks away. In the absence of interpersonal contact, it was always best to be alone with something at least minimally sentient. Perhaps I ought to get a dog. "John! John Watson!" an almost-familiar voice halted him in his tracks. He turned around. Yeah, familiar, but... "Stamford," the man said, "Mike Stamford. We were at Bart's together."

"Yes," John said, his mind digging up memories of a much thinner, student-aged Stamford, one that had done all his studying with a book in one hand and a pint in the other at the bar – since closed and remodeled into a coffee house – all the students back then had favored. "Sorry, yes. Mike." John shook Mike's offered hand. "Hello. Hi."

Mike grinned at him. "Yeah, I know – I got fat," he said with a little gesture to himself.

Not arguing any, John thought, but said, "No."

"I heard you were abroad somewhere, getting shot at. What happened?" John could see Mike trying not to notice the cane.

Don't you know that the harder you try not to notice something, the more obvious it is? "I got shot," John replied, his tone matter-of-fact. It had the unintended side-effect of removing the smile from Mike's face.

Stamford cleared his throat awkwardly. "The coffee cart at the edge of the park's pretty decent. Care for a cuppa? We can catch up a bit."

Isn't this why you didn't just go back to the flat? Something that vaguely resembles interpersonal contact? Before that damnable bedsit drives you completely barmy? "Sure, Mike."

A few minutes later, they settled themselves on John's favorite bench. John ignored the worried, curious expressions that flashed across Mike's face with the regularity of clock-chimes. Ever since he'd gotten back, he'd been subject to those looks. The ones that said poor bugger and glad it wasn't me and the ones that simply conveyed a sense of fascination, akin to the fascination of train wrecks and car accidents. Just further proof that a person really can get used to anything. "Are you still at Bart's, then?" John asked, knowing the hospital where they'd studied was nearby.

Mike's smile reappeared, only slightly more forced than before. "Teaching now. Bright young things, like we used to be. God, I hate them!" he joked.

Politely, John laughed along with him. He felt a coil of the leyline below the bench curl around his ankle. It was warm and soft and felt somewhat like the friendly nudge of a housecat looking for attention. With the grand total population of magic users in the greater London area at a total of five individuals the last time he'd counted, John wasn't surprised. He split his attention between Mike and the curl of energy caressing his ankle.
"What about you? Just staying in town 'til you get yourself sorted?" Mike asked.

"I can't afford London on an Army pension," John replied. Mentally, he reached down and petted the energy coil. It sent an interesting vibrating hum of content up his leg, draining away some of the stiffness that had been present ever since his kneecap has slipped partially out of joint during that last firefight.

"Ah, and you couldn't bear to be anywhere else. That's not the John Watson I know."

The coil reached a little higher, wrapping around his injured knee. The pressure sparked along his nerves. "Yeah, I'm not the John Watson --" he cut himself off. It's not Mike's fault. He nudged the coil with his mind, trying to get it to let go or move lower. All he got in reply was a buzz of irritation overlaid with the sense of 'I know what I'm doing, damn it'. The coil tightened a little, sending sparkles of pain zinging up his nerves. It wasn't a brand of pain anyone but a magic user could feel – it was as though bits of himself were being forcibly torn away, but immediately replaced again. He could feel his left hand start to shake slightly, and so switched his coffee to his right. He clenched his left into a fist, hoping that would be enough to keep it still.

Mike – Bless his oblivious little heart – chalked the reaction up to, as anyone would have, time spent in a war zone. "Couldn't Harry help?" he asked, valiantly trying to move past the sudden awkwardness.

Grateful for the distraction from what the leyline was doing to his leg, John scoffed. "Yeah, like that's gonna happen."

"I dunno," Mike shrugged. "Get a flatshare or something?"

The coil of energy loosened its hold and slipped back down to John's ankle. He had to fight not to let out a sigh of relief. "Come on," John said, "who'd want me for a flatmate?" Mike chuckled at that.

"What?"

"Well," Mike said. "You're the second person to say that to me today."

The energy wrapped around his ankle stilled and waited for John to reply to Mike's comment. "Who was the first?" he asked, doubly curious, both at Stamford's statement and at the odd behavior of the leyline. The energy surged in what John could only describe as a hug – like London herself was saying 'welcome back' – before it released him.

"Hang on a second, let me see if he's still there," Mike said, pulling his mobile out of a pocket. He quickly scrolled through the contacts, hit 'send', then held it to his ear. "Molly? Yeah, it's Mike... Not too badly. How about you?" He stood and gestured for John to follow.

Well, not quite what you meant this morning, but it is you getting out of the flat, isn't it? John smiled to himself and allowed Stamford to lead the way, chatting on the phone. Ingrained politeness met up with the odd behavior of the leyline and crashed into the sudden realization that, for the first time in months, his leg didn't feel like someone was pounding tent-spikes through his kneecap, and so he missed the vast majority of Mike's conversation. They entered the teaching hospital as Mike ended his call, then headed to Stamford's office, where Mike deposited his coat.

"Where're we heading?"

"Remember the lab Erin Connelly blew up our first year?" Mike asked.

John nodded. "Yeah. Took them nearly three months to clean up the mess."
"That's the one," Mike cheerfully replied. "In the remodel last year, it wound up as one of the ones assigned to pathology."

John followed Mike a little more closely than before. "They moved the morgue?"

Mike nodded and paused next to an elevator. "That they did." He hit the call button. "More space, better lab equipment. Half of Scotland Yard's murder cases wind up here now." The elevator dinged its arrival. Once inside, Mike continued, "Molly – Dr. Hooper, I mean – took over about the same time that the renovations were complete."

"You mean Dr. Jurgens retired?" John shook his head in disbelief.

"Yeah – none of us thought that old battle-axe would ever retire. But he did. Rumor has it that his wife insisted, moved them out to Plymouth. Think they've got family that direction, but I don't know for certain."

The elevator stopped and the pair disembarked. A droning voice, lecturing in the room directly across from the elevator, halted any further conversation. John took a moment to re-orient himself. If memory has it, the lab he's taking me to should be right there. His eyes landed on a door halfway between the elevators and the pair of double-doors capping the end of the hallway. Mike knocked on the door John had spotted, then entered. John followed close behind, looking around.

You really couldn't tell there had ever been anything wrong in here, he thought, taking in all the shiny equipment. His gaze flicked across the man in the room, just enough to register his presence and to note not a magic user before going back to the room itself. How did they manage to patch the holes in the ceiling, I wonder? "Well, bit different from my day," he said.

Mike chuckled, "You have no idea."

Actually, John thought while the man in the room asked to use Mike's phone, if you gave me a minute, I could probably tell you everything that ever happened in here... If the room was feeling cooperative, of course. But then again, you're not to know about all that – you wouldn't believe me even if I tried explaining it. Mike told the stranger he'd left his mobile in his coat. "Er, here," John said, digging his own out of his pocket. "Use mine." He used the excuse to look a little closer at the stranger. Yeah. Right the first time. Not a mage. Doesn't likely know any either – he's not carrying any charms or hexes. His thoughts weren't enough to miss the flash of surprise on the man's face as he thanked him and got up to fetch the phone. I'd probably be surprised, too, if a perfect stranger offered his mobile. But, across the room is one thing. Closer, I can sense more. And... Yeah. Definitely not a mage and not carrying anything magical.

The man took the phone and slid it open to access the keyboard, then blew all of John's assumptions to dust by asking, "Afghanistan or Iraq?"

"Sorry?" John stalled as he re-scanned his new acquaintance, using more focus than before. He almost didn't see the knowing grin on Mike's face.

"Which was it – Afghanistan or Iraq?" the man repeated, glancing at John.


The door opened, revealing a woman a couple of years younger than John, carrying a coffee mug. The man closed John's phone and handed it back to him while focusing on the coffee and nearly
ignoring the woman, save for some vaguely insulting line about lipstick. The woman – Molly – quickly left. John spent the time checking and re-checking what he already knew – the most magical thing about the room in which he was standing was himself and the handful of charms collected in his pocket.

"How do you feel about the violin?" the man asked, setting his coffee down and focusing on a computer.

John looked over at Mike, only to be greeted by that smug, knowing smirk. He turned back to the tall man. "I'm sorry – what?"

"I play the violin when I'm thinking," the man said, not looking up from his typing. John couldn't help but be slightly envious of the ability, particularly since his own typing tended to be hunt-and-peck. "Sometimes," the man continued, "I don't talk for days on end. Would that bother you?" he asked, finally stilling the typing and looking up at John. "Potential flatmates should know the worst about each other." He shot a false smile at John.

John glanced over at Mike's smug grin. "Oh, you – you told him about me."

Mike shook his head. "Not a word."

It had been a very long time since John had last felt this level of confusion and it showed. "Then who said anything about flatmates?" he couldn't help but ask. He'd never done well with confusion.

"I did," the man replied, turning to grab his coat. He spoke while sliding into the coat with a slightly bored tone and expression. "Told Mike this morning that I must be a difficult man to find a flatmate for. Now, here he is just after lunch with an old friend clearly just home from military service in Afghanistan. Wasn't that difficult a leap."

Feeling as though someone had just pushed him off a pier to drown, John asked, "How did you know about Afghanistan?"

The man ignored him while wrapping a scarf caught between blue and grey and purple around his neck and grabbing his phone. "Got my eye on a nice little place in central London – together we ought to be able to afford it," he said, walking towards John. "We'll meet there tomorrow evening, seven o'clock. Sorry – gotta dash. I think I left my riding crop," he punctuated the words with a tiny wriggle of his eyebrows, "in the mortuary." The man tucked his phone in a pocket and strode past John towards the door.

John couldn't help it – he really didn't do well with confusion. He turned and asked, "Is that it?" A hint of Captain Watson flavored the question.

It worked. The man paused, then turned around and strode back in John's direction. "Is that what?"

"We've only just met and we're gonna go and look at a flat?"

The man glanced over at Mike, then back at John. "Problem?"

John also glanced over at Mike, only to be greeted by that same insufferable smug grin. He looked back at the man, total incredulity threaded through every syllable he spoke next. "We don't know a thing about each other. I don't know where we're meeting. I don't even know your name." The last bit had a hint of 'so there' overlaying it.

The man's eyes narrowed. John fought not to take a step backwards. The last time anyone had looked at him quite that closely, it had sparked a truly monumental argument which had left lasting
ripples throughout the majority of London's leylines – it was partly why he was so confused at the 'line's antics earlier. The man began speaking in the same borderline-bored tone as he'd used when explaining how he'd figured John was looking for a flatshare. "I know you're an Army doctor and you've been invalided home from Afghanistan. I know you've got a brother who's worried about you, but you won't go to him for help because you don't approve of him – possibly because he's an alcoholic, more likely because he's recently walked out on his wife. And I know that your therapist thinks your limp's psychosomatic – quite correctly, I'm afraid." At the mention of the limp, John looked down at his knee and cane. The man's voice shifted to something slightly less antagonistic when he said, "That's enough to be going on with, don't you think?" He headed back to the door, pausing just before exiting long enough to say, "The name's Sherlock Holmes and the address is two-two-one B Baker Street." He disappeared with a wink and a casual 'afternoon' tossed at the room at large.

John stared at the door for a moment, then turned his eyes on Mike. The 'explain now' he figured must be painted clear as day on his face must have gotten lost in translation, because all Mike said was, "Yeah. He's always like that."

After leaving Mike behind at Bart's, John headed back into London. He wasn't about to return to that horrible little cracker box of a flat, not when he had something far more interesting to do. Two buses and a short walk got him to where he needed to be – a tiny little shop on the outermost edges of Soho. He pushed the door open with a jangle of bells, then strode in. "John! I didn't know you were back!" the enthusiastic greeting drifted through incense-laden air and over racks of assorted books and whatnot.

"What, you don't listen as well as you used to?" John called out to the store's owner.

Footsteps sounded on the well-worn floorboards. "Nah, just been busy," the voice came closer, then a man three inches shorter and about twenty years older than John appeared from behind a set of shelves containing innumerable little statues of fairies and dragons. "I could kiss Rowling – for all her books are complete shite, she sure has a way of drumming up interest in magic."

John chuckled in agreement. "Can't argue any, Ajay."

"So," Ajay Singh gestured for John to come further into the cramped, dark store. "When did you get back?"

"Four months ago," John replied. "Ran out of luck."

"You always did rely on luck too much," Ajay pulled a beaded curtain out of the way. "Bea! I'm taking my lunch! Mind the store!" he yelled. After a light beat, a dim 'no problem' filtered back from the direction of the cash register. The curtain revealed a much more brightly-lit nook of a room, with creamy wallpaper, mismatched overstuffed armchairs, and an industrial-sized coffee pot on a stand in the corner. "Have a seat, John, and tell me what brings you by."

John settled into the orange-with-yellow-paisley-print chair and let out a small sigh. The chair might be uglier than sin, but it was the most-comfortable one he'd ever sat on. "Well… You still keep track of all the locals?" he asked, his tone enough to tell Ajay he meant the local mages.

Ajay nodded, pouring two styrofoam cups of coffee. He handed one to John, then gracefully lowered himself into the blue-and-green version of the armchair John was using. "Yes. No one else seems up to the job, after all," he said with a small smile.

"I met someone today –"
Ajay grinned and leaned forwards a bit, "Is she pretty?"

John rolled his eyes. "Not a bird, mate."


"Yeah," John took a sip of his coffee and let its warmth trickle down his throat. "Didn't read as magical, though –"

"Unsurprising, really," Ajay interjected.

John glared at his friend. "You gonna let me finish or not?" Ajay mimed zipping his mouth and made an 'after you' gesture. "Anyway, he didn't read as magical, but he knew things… I didn't recognize the name, but since I've been away… Well, it's not out of the question for someone to have moved to the area." Ajay mutely mouthed a string of words. John grabbed a small cushion off a stack next to his chair and hit him with it. "You can talk now, you prat!"

Laughing like a little boy, Ajay blocked the cushion from knocking his coffee out of his hand. "What was the name?" Ajay asked, once their laughter was back under control.

How come I never came this way before today? Ajay always knows how to make someone laugh.


Ajay immediately shook his head. "Nope."

"I come all the way across London, and all you have for me is 'nope'?"

An unholy gleam spread like slow jam across Ajay's face. "Uh – no, sir, Captain Watson, sir?" John hit him with the cushion again. Snickering, Ajay grabbed it and pulled it out of John's grasp. "But no – he's not a mage, and you're not the first to ask," he said, absently tossing the abused cushion into the far corner of the room, where it knocked over a stack of magazines.

"Who else?" John asked, "And if he's not a mage –"

Ajay shrugged, "Don't know how he does it, John. I've never met him myself, but Mary did. Said that he could tell a whole bunch of intimate details about her just by looking, but that he didn't read as a mage."

John nodded in agreement. "It's… Well, the first thing he said to me was 'Afghanistan or Iraq?' He knew, just by looking, that I'd been invalidated home, that I was a doctor, that… Well, just about the only thing he got wrong was thinking Harry was my brother."

Ajay let out a loud, braying laugh at that. "A mistake more than one man's made, Johnny!"

John glared at him, both for the insult and the nickname. "Careful, Singh – that's my baby sister you're talking about there."

Much later, after a long lunch with Ajay, John eventually made his way back to the bedsit. His knee, though still feeling much better than it had at any point since a sniper's bullet had ripped through his shoulder and flung him down a steep, rocky hillside, was stiff and his thigh was screaming at him to just stop and sit already. He did, on the edge of his bed, his mind mulling over the odd man he'd met that day. Recalling he'd loaned the man his mobile, he pulled it out of his pocket and scrolled to the sent messages. He didn't recognize the number it was sent to, but the message itself was…

Interesting.
He looked over at where his laptop was still sitting on the desk. Smiling to himself, he levered himself up and across the room. Though he wanted to see what the internet had to say about Sherlock Holmes, he started with a basic search to see if he could find out who Holmes had texted from his phone. The number yielded a hit – apparently, it belonged to DI Lestrade, of Scotland Yard. His curiosity increased exponentially and he had to forcibly restrain himself from calling the number. Instead, he typed in Sherlock Holmes' name and got several hits. He spent the remainder of his evening reading through the man's own rather pompous website and the blog posts of what, he came to realize, were people who had hired Holmes as a private investigator.

Just before he was about to stretch out and see if he could manage a few more hours' worth of sleep than he'd had the previous night, he suddenly remembered Ella's insistence on writing down his daily activities. Even without the leyline and the trip to Ajay's, it was still more than I've done in a week. Might as well humor her.

He pulled up his blog and began typing.

A strange meeting

I don't know how I'm meant to be writing this. I'm not a writer. Ella thought keeping a blog would help but it hasn't because nothing ever happens to me. But today, something did. Something happened.

I was walking in the park and I bumped into Mike Stamford. We were sort of mates when we were students. We got coffee and I mentioned that I wanted to move. He said he knew of someone in a similar situation. So we went to Barts and he introduced us.

Except, he didn't. He didn't introduce us. The man knew who I was. Somehow he knew everything about me. He knew I'd served in Afghanistan and he knew I'd been invalided. He said my wound was psychosomatic so he didn't get everything right but he even knew why I was there, despite the fact that Mike hadn't told him...

It took John's painfully slow typing nearly an hour to summarize the public-friendly bits of his day, and by the time he was done, he was more than ready for bed.

For once, the dreams didn't manage to wake him in the middle of the night. John peeled his eyes open at a quarter past nine the next morning. He blinked stupidly at the clock for several minutes, disbelief that he'd slept nearly twelve hours flowing through him like water. Eventually, he was ambushed by a yawn. Stretching, he felt his shoulder give its customary morning complaint, but there was no answering yell from his knee. Well, not until he stood, and then the sharp stab of pain was from his thigh.

"Gonna need to do some exercises, I think," John muttered, heading for the bathroom.

Shower finished, he turned on his kettle as he walked through the kitchen area, and took a seat at his desk. A quick check of the weather told him that today would be far chillier than the day before. What should have been an even quicker check of his blog revealed an argument between Bill and Harry in the comments section. John sighed and rubbed a hand through his damp hair, then typed.
Can't you two email each other or something? This is meant for me to record my thoughts. He posted the comment, then dug clean underwear and socks out of the bottom desk drawer. He'd just pulled them on when his computer pinged out a reply.

Not denying it then?
Bill Murray 30 January 09:57

John rolled his eyes. I'm not gay. He might be. I don't know. It doesn't matter. On posting the comment, he headed into the kitchen area and poured himself a cup of tea, then flicked the lever for the toaster. He then opened the narrow closet that stood in the microscopic hall between the kitchen and bathroom. He tossed his wet towel over the shower curtain rod with one hand while pulling clean clothes off of the cupboard's shelves with his other. The toaster chimed up his breakfast simultaneously with the ping indicating another reply on his blog.

He paused long enough to butter his toast, then carried everything – without the aid of his cane, much to his leg's annoyance – back to the desk. He sat the plate with his toast next to his tea and glanced at the computer screen while reaching for his belt.

LOL!!
Harry Watson 30 January 10:00

He finished threading his belt through the loops on his jeans before replying. LOL? You're 36, Harry. Thirty-six. He posted his reply, then pulled a plain white t-shirt on. He overlaid it with his second-favorite flannel shirt, the one with brown and grey and light hints of red threaded through it, then pulled on his jeans, tucking both flannel and t-shirt in. He'd just finished doing up the belt when his phone rang.

John flopped down on the desk chair and answered it. "Yeah?"

"Awful, just awful. How many times do I hafta tell you 'hello' sounds so much nicer?"

"Good morning to you, too, Harry. What do you want?"

"What makes you think I want something?" Harry asked, her voice carrying tones of indignant innocence.

"Because you called?" John replied. "And because it's before noon. You never call anyone before noon, unless it can't be helped."

"Then consider this one of those 'can't be helped' times," Harry said. "But… You got plans for lunch?"

"No. Not really. Why? You buying?"

"I will if it will get you out of that flat."

"Hey! I went out yesterday!" He was partially angry, but mostly teasing at his own expense. "I know you know so – you saw my blog entry. And what's with you and Bill all of a sudden?"

"What do you mean? The guy saved your life, can't I get to know him a little as a thank you?"

John winced at the thought of his sister getting to know any of his army mates. The potential fodder for teasing alone… "So, lunch?" he changed the subject. "Where and when?"

"That was unexpected," Harry said. John could practically see her blinking at her phone. "It usually
takes a lot more wheedling to get you to agree to meet up. What gives?"

"Nothing," John said. "Just not in the mood for being whinged at this morning."

"Fair enough. How about one, at that pizza place by my flat?"

"I'll be there," John said, then disconnected the call. He ignored it when Harry immediately rang back, choosing to focus on his breakfast instead. When nothing remained but dirty dishes, he shut down his computer and transferred his charms from the jacket he'd worn the day before to his slightly warmer canvas-and-leather one. He also pulled on his favorite oatmeal-colored jumper and his shoes before sliding into the jacket.

Even with the weather being rather uncooperative, he couldn't let the opportunity to walk around go to waste – he had no idea if what the leyline had done was permanent or not.

_Besides, I need the exercise. And it'll be nice to get reacquainted with London._

The walk, though chilly, was wonderful. Lunch with his sister was slightly less so, but that was about par for the course. A second, shorter walk after lunch was equally wonderful, particularly the bit where he'd spotted a stray black cat darting across the pavement just ahead of him. _I can use all the luck I can get._ He'd returned to his flat and set about straightening up. He washed the dishes from breakfast, then hauled his laundry down to the coin-op launderette just up the block.

On returning, with everything put away, and nothing else to do for the better part of three hours, John wasted some time poking around online. He didn't find much of interest, though. He started to get up to go to the store and refresh his supplies of tea and jam, but decided not to. If he was going to be moving, the less he had to move, the better. Instead, he retrieved a jar of Scrabble tiles from the back of the top desk drawer.

He put his laptop away, shook the jar vigorously, and said, "Anything of importance I need to know about the meeting tonight?" He dumped the letters out on the desk. "Let's see… Two Gs, one B, one R, two Ns, I, A, and U." He took stock of the ones that landed letter-side-up. Setting them aside, he swept the rest of them back into the jar.

With the jar refilled, he focused on the letters revealed. "Aging burn?" he chuckled and shook his head. "Uh, no." He rearranged them. "Nu barging?" He shook his head again. "One of these days, I'm gonna remember to tell them how many words to make their answer." Another shifting of tiles. "Bag gin run?" The anagram his Scrabble tiles gave him kept him busy until it was time to head to Baker Street.

He arrived at 221B with ten minutes to spare, so he spent that time examining the area. The café right next door was a plus, as was the prevalence of taxis, but the lack of a bus stop for three blocks in either direction was a definite minus, though the tube station only a block-and-a-half away was a plus. _However_, he switched the majority of his awareness to othersight – granted, it didn't affect just sight, but names were names, and who was he to complain? – and smiled. _The second-strongest leyline in all of London runs right under the building's foundation._

The leyline, noticing his presence, sent out a thick tendril of energy, much like the one at Russell Square Park had the day before. This one, however, was much, much larger. Had anyone else been able to see it, it's likely they would have described it as looking quite a lot like the tentacles of the Kraken from the second _Pirates of the Caribbean_ movie, only glowing silvery-white and lacking in suction cups. John braced himself. The tendril wrapped around him, clinging in a way that reminded him of how his mother had done when he'd finally gotten around to accepting visitors in hospital
after being sent home. It imparted a sense of you're home! and please don't leave me again and I was beginning to worry.

"All right, all right," John whispered to it, after a surreptitious glance to make sure no one was in earshot. "I'm fine. I'm here. Don't plan on leaving again anytime soon," he felt distinctly odd for comforting any aspect of the magical energy flowing through London, but sent a mental caress out to the energy-tentacle anyway. Why didn't it react like this any of the other times I came home?

Because you were leaving again, came the unasked-for reply. The tendril unwound from him, and actually petted his head before disappearing back into the main 'line.

He shook his head. "I'm losing it," he muttered. But before he could continue, his phone chimed. He took it out and turned off the alarm, then strode over to the door of 221B. He had to stretch a bit to reach the knocker, but it wasn't too bad. Behind him, he heard a taxi pull up, followed by the sound of the door opening and closing, then Sherlock Holmes' voice calling out, "Hello."

John turned around and – once more – checked the man with his othersight. Still no evidence of magic whatsoever. Punctual, though. I do have to approve. He should give Harry lessons. He watched as Holmes paid the cabbie with a quick 'thank you', then headed over to where John waited next to the door. "Ah, Mr. Holmes," he said in greeting.

"Sherlock, please," the man replied, shaking John's hand.

Briefly, John lamented the fact that the man was wearing gloves. It wasn't common, but there were times when a magic user could hide what they were from sight, but those misdirects would fail when presented with direct skin-to-skin contact. "Well, this is a prime spot," John commented. "Must be expensive." And what he wouldn't give to live directly over a leyline – any leyline – let alone the second-strongest in the whole of London.

Holmes adjusted his stance so his hands were behind his back. John figured he was subtly leaning against the wrought-iron fence that surrounded the drop to a set of basement windows. "Oh," Holmes said, "Mrs. Hudson, the landlady, she's giving me a special deal. Owes me a favor. A few years back, her husband got himself sentenced to death in Florida. I was able to help out."

The explanation was nonchalant, but John couldn't help but be a little impressed. "Sorry," he said. "You stopped her husband from being executed?"
Holmes smiled at John – the expression was cold, but a little manic, too, and it made goosebumps break out on the back of his neck. "Oh no," Holmes blithely replied. "I ensured it."

John had absolutely nothing he could say in reply, and so was grateful that the door was opened at that moment. The woman was about the same age as his mum, with hair that was once carroty red, but had done more than simply 'start' to go grey, and was wearing a purple housedress. "Sherlock," she greeted Holmes with honest warmth and affection. "Hello."

Holmes' smile became something more honest as he spotted her. He gave her a brief hug, then introduced John. "Mrs. Hudson, Dr. John Watson."

Mrs. Hudson smiled at him. "Hello," she said.

"How do?" John replied.

"Come in," she said, gesturing.

"Thank you," John said.

Holmes headed inside with an imperious 'shall we?' tossed over his shoulder. John followed at a much slower pace. Even with his leg feeling the best it had in nearing five months, all the walking around hadn't done it any favors and stairs were particularly nasty. Mrs. Hudson closed the door behind him while Holmes' footsteps faded up the flight of stairs just inside the door.

"Flat B is just upstairs, dear," Mrs. Hudson said. "Go on up."

Stairs. Of course there'd be stairs. John sighed and hobbled up, counting as he went. There were twelve, then a small landing where the steps did a complete 180, followed by five more. Holmes stood on the final landing outside a pair of doors, one to the left, and one straight ahead. Another set of stairs stood on the right, leading up to what John figured was an attic space. As he reached the landing, Holmes threw open the main door to the flat and stepped inside.

John followed him in, then stopped and stared around. Bookshelves! It's got built-in bookshelves! And a real fireplace, not an electro-decretive dud! No more fighting with the radiator to get warm. And... Are those floor-to-ceiling windows? They are! He fought not to let any of these thoughts show on his face. "Well, this could be very nice," he said, though a touch of his awe at the flat came through his voice. He took a couple of steps and spotted the kitchen around Holmes. "Very nice indeed."

"Yes," the man agreed, pocketing his gloves. "Yes, I think so," he fidgeted for a heartbeat. "My thoughts precisely." A fond quirk tugged at the corners of his mouth, not quite enough to be called a smile, but not far from it.

"Soon as we get all this rubbish cleared out," John took the man's pause to indicate the various bits of junk spread about, but Holmes said, "So I went straight ahead and moved in," at the same time.

"Oh," John said, then paused. Holmes spun away and started trying to make the mess less of one. "So... this is all..."

"Well, obviously I can, um," he cleared his throat while tossing a pile of papers onto a box, "straighten things up," he stabbed a penknife through a pile of envelopes, securing them to the mantle, "a bit."

Even without concentrating on his othersenses, the glow coming from Holmes' right was extremely powerful. John looked at the source, both with regular vision and othersense. He pointed his cane at
it. "That's a skull," he said. A real, human skull. And not one from a medical-supply catalog, either, not with all the missing teeth.

Holmes glanced at it. "Friend of mine," he quipped, then seemed to realize what he said, and tried again. "Well, I say friend –"

His faltering explanation was interrupted by the timely arrival of Mrs. Hudson. "What do you think, then, Dr. Watson?" she asked, picking up a dirty tea cup and saucer from a stack of books on Holmes' mostly-buried coffee table. "There's another bedroom upstairs, if you'll be needing two bedrooms."

Off to the side, Holmes was quickly stripping out of his coat and scarf, but had turned away before Mrs. Hudson had finished her sentence. John just blinked at her. "Of course we'll be needing two."

"Oh, don't worry – there's all sorts 'round here," Mrs. Hudson cheerfully replied. "Mrs. Turner next door's got," her voice dropped to a whisper, "married ones."

For the second time, John had absolutely nothing to say in response. A quick glance at Holmes revealed that either the man didn't know what Mrs. Hudson was talking about, or simply didn't care. Mrs. Hudson carried on being cheerful, however, as she carried the dirty cup to the kitchen, where she paused at the door. "Oh, Sherlock. The mess you've made!" She sounded like John's great aunt Melanie, fondly disapproving. It brought a nostalgic little smile to John's face.

His thigh chose that moment to start bitching about the abuse it had put up with all day, so John moved a Union Jack pillow and flopped into the nearest armchair. It was almost as comfy as the one in Ajay's coffee-nook. The madman was still attempting to 'tidy a bit', while Mrs. Hudson bustled about in the kitchen, doing likewise, only being far more effective. He took a moment to reach out his othersenses to see if anything else in the mess around him would 'speak' as loudly as the skull on the mantle. Nothing in the immediate vicinity glowed as strongly, though he could sense something upstairs. Wonder what that is, then? His quick scan also brought to light the fact he wasn't the first mage to set foot here. The walls carried traces of a long-ago series of set-spells, the signature tied in with them was slightly familiar. Mary? No, not Mary. One of her ancestors, though. About a hundred, maybe a hundred-fifteen years ago.

He 'switched off' – inasmuch as was possible – and looked back at Holmes. The man was powering up a laptop computer. "I looked you up on the internet last night," John said, trying to make conversation.

Holmes turned around. "Anything interesting?" he asked.


Holmes face morphed into a proud grin. "What did you think?"

You have got to be kidding me. John was pretty sure the thought could be easily read on his face. "You said you could identify a software designer by his tie and an airline pilot by his left thumb."

"Yes," Holmes replied, matter-of-factly. "And I can read your military career in your face and your leg, and your brother's drinking habits in your mobile phone."

Too used to the uninitiated assuming Harry was his brother, John ignored that bit for the time being. "How?" he asked, but was disappointed when Holmes simply smiled and turned away.

Further interrogation would have to wait, as Mrs. Hudson came out of the kitchen, a newspaper in hand. "What about these suicides, then, Sherlock?" she asked. "I thought that'd be right up your
street. Three exactly the same."

Holmes didn’t look up from where he stood, staring down at the street outside through the window. "Four," he said. "There's been a fourth. And there's something different this time…” His voice sounded like he was simply airing his thoughts, not expecting a reply.

"A fourth?" Mrs. Hudson asked, clearly wanting more information.

Heavy, quick footsteps on the stairs kept Holmes from answering, if, indeed, that had been his intention. Instead, he turned around and waited, staring at the still-open door to the flat. A man with graying brown hair, standing just a shade shorter than Holmes, and wearing a tie-less suit and dark coat strode in. "Where?" Holmes asked.

"Brixton," the newcomer replied. "Lauriston Gardens."

"What's new about this one? You wouldn't have come to get me if there wasn't something different."

John had to wonder who the newcomer was and why he'd arrived and what he had to do with the weird suicides that had been in the papers, but kept his mouth shut. His othersenses gave the man a quick scan. I'll be damned – he knows Mary. He's got one of her protection charms in his jacket pocket!

"You know how they never leave notes?" the newcomer said.

"Yeah," Holmes nodded.

"This one did. Will you come?" Though it wasn't immediately obvious, John could clearly hear the desperate note behind the newcomer's voice.

Well, maybe he doesn't actually know Mary personally, John thought. His focus on the item in the man's pocket brought it into sharper relief. It was one of several dozen keychains Mary had made for a friend's jewelry booth at a craft fair during their second year of uni.

"Who's on forensics?" Holmes asked, his eyes narrowing a little.

If he hadn't already figured as much, the question was enough to tell John that this newcomer was a policeman. His face was sort of familiar. Well, the suicides have been in the papers quite a lot lately, and then there've been the news conferences. That's where I've seen him before! He's the DI in charge.

"It's Anderson," the newcomer replied, a hint of apology in the words.

"Anderson won't work with me," Holmes grimaced a little.

"Well, he won't be your assistant," the man said.

"I need an assistant," Holmes commented.

"Will you come?" the newcomer repeated.

"Not in a police car. I'll be right behind," Holmes said, dismissing the man by looking out the window again.

"Thank you," the words were said with honest gratitude. The man glanced around for a moment, then turned and all but ran down the stairs.
As soon as the front door slamming shut reached their ears, Holmes shouted, "Brilliant!" and leapt into the air. "Yes!" He twirled about the room, generally acting like a complete kid. "Ah, four serial suicides and now a note!" He picked up his coat and scarf with an enthusiastic, "Oh, it's Christmas!" Holmes swung into his coat and headed for the kitchen, doing up his scarf while speaking, "Mrs. Hudson, I'll be late. Might need some food."

"I'm your landlady, dear," she chided, "not your housekeeper."

"Something cold will do," Holmes continued speaking as though he hadn't heard her. "John, have a cup of tea, make yourself at home. Don't wait up!" Holmes disappeared through the kitchen door.

John blinked. What does it say about him that the most emotion I've seen him display is a direct result of someone else's death? Think I got it right when I labeled him mad. There is definitely something not right with that man.

"Look at him, dashing about!" Mrs. Hudson said. "My husband was just the same." The innuendo in her latest sentence had John grimacing and thinking that she and his great aunt really were cut from the same cloth. She continued speaking, and John was relatively sure she hadn't caught the expression on his face. "But you're more the sitting-down type, I can tell." John managed to restrain the urge to roll his eyes.

"I'll make you that cuppa," she said, turning to the kitchen. "You rest your leg."

"Damn my leg!" John shouted, giving vent to the frustration he was feeling at even being here. Wincing – That was rather a lot louder than I'd intended – he immediately apologized. "Sorry, I'm so sorry. It's just sometimes this bloody thing," he tapped his cane against his leg.

Mrs. Hudson smiled fondly at him. "I understand, dear – I've got a hip," she said, patting the body-part in question.

Of course she does. If it weren't for the once-red hair, I'd swear she was Aunt Milly. He let out a little sigh. "Cup of tea'd be lovely, thank you," he said as the woman headed into the kitchen.

"Just this once, dear. I'm not your housekeeper."

"Couple of biscuits, too, if you've got 'em," John called out, picking up the paper she'd left on the arm of the chair he was sitting in.

"Not your housekeeper!" she repeated, making John smile a little.

John scanned the headline, noting the paper was a couple of days old. It covered the most recent – well, until today – of the strange serial suicides. A smaller photo next to the large one of Beth Davenport drew his attention. I was right. He's the DI in charge of the investigation. Wonder why he came after Holmes? He noted the name, Lestrade, and tacked it to the man's face in his memory – something that came a little easier having seen the man in person.

Holmes' voice interrupted him before he could actually read the article, however. "You're a doctor." John looked up to see Holmes standing in the doorway, pulling his gloves back on. "In fact, you're an Army doctor."

"Yes," John agreed, then cleared his throat and got to his feet. Holmes stepped fully into the room. "Any good?"

"Very good," John replied. And I've got a box of medals that prove it, if you're interested.
"Seen a lot of injuries, then? Violent deaths?"

"Mmm, yes," John agreed, not too sure where this was going.

"Bit of trouble, too, I bet," Holmes said.

*If only you knew*. Out loud, John just said, "Of course, yes. Enough for a lifetime," and, because it was expected by most people who didn't understand, he added, "far too much."

"Wanna see some more?" Holmes asked, a mischievous little spark visible in his eyes.

Really, what could he say to that? "Oh, *god*, yes," was what came out of his mouth, even though he'd intended the no-doubt expected denial. Holmes immediately turned around, but wasn't quite quick enough to hide the bright grin on his face from John. "Sorry, Mrs. Hudson, I'll skip the tea," John said. "Off out."

The landlady followed them downstairs. "Both of you?" she asked on reaching the main floor.

Holmes spun around and walked over to her. "Impossible suicides? Four of them? There's no point sitting at home when there's finally something *fun* going on!" He ended the energetic string of comments by kissing her cheek with a smack.

"Look at you, all happy. It's not decent," Mrs. Hudson said, as always, fondly and with a smile.

Though John agreed with her assessment, a part of him had to also agree with Holmes' next statement. "Who cares about decent?" He headed for the door. "The game, Mrs. Hudson, is on!" He burst through the door, John on his heels, and hailed a taxi.

About twenty minutes later, the last of the sunlight had finally faded away. John's attention was split between trying to keep track of where the cabbie was driving and attempting to puzzle out the madman sitting to his left. Said madman was busying himself with his phone. Eventually, he lowered it. "Okay, you've got questions."

"Yeah," John said it easily, because it was true. *Who are you? How do you know all that about me, but give no sign of magic? Where the hell are we going?* That last sounded good, so he started with it. "Where are we going?"

"Crime scene," Holmes replied, looking out the taxi's window. "Next?"

"Who are you? What do you do?" He honestly hadn't intended to ask those, but, if a question were going to fall out of his mouth without his permission, better those than the one about magic.

"What do you think?" Holmes responded.

John blinked, then said, "I'd say private detective…"

"But?" Holmes prompted.

"But the police don't go to private detectives." At least, John was pretty sure they didn't. Granted, the majority of his experience in the area came from questionable prime-time telly, but surely, if the TV had it that abysmally wrong, wouldn't everyone know about it?

"I'm a *consulting* detective," Holmes explained. "Only one in the world. I invented the job."

*Okay, a madman, sure, but an arrogant one, too. This could actually prove entertaining. He obviously wants me to ask, so… So be it. "What does that mean?"*
"It means," Holmes said, with great relish, "when the police are out of their depth – which is always – they consult me."

Definitely arrogant. Wonder if I can fix a little of that for him? "The police don't consult amateurs."

Holmes shot him a look that could spoil milk. "When I met you for the first time yesterday, I said, 'Afghanistan or Iraq?'. You looked surprised."

Hmm… Hadn't intended to get the answers for that way, but I'll take it. "Yes," he said. "How did you know?"

"I didn't know – I saw. Your haircut, the way you hold yourself says military, but your conversation as you entered the room said trained at Bart's, so: Army doctor. Obvious. Your face is tanned, but no tan above the wrists. You've been abroad, but not sunbathing. Your limp's really bad when you walk, but you don't ask for a chair when you stand, like you've forgotten about it, so it's at least partly psychosomatic. That says the original circumstances of the injury were traumatic. Wounded in action, then. Wounded in action, suntan – Afghanistan or Iraq."

Really very freaky-observant, isn't he? Well, on to something he couldn't have known, not just from looking. "You said I had a therapist."

Holmes smirked. "You've got a psychosomatic limp – of course you've got a therapist." John opened his mouth to argue the 'psychosomatic' point, but Holmes beat him to it. "Then there's your brother."

"Hmm?" John didn't dare say more than that. He wanted a really, really good moment to reveal the one detail Holmes had glaringly incorrect.

"Your phone," Holmes said, holding his hand out. John handed over the phone, more than half-expecting him to point out the engraving on the back. However, Holmes surprised him. "It's expensive, email-enabled, MP3 player, but you're looking for a flatshare – you wouldn't waste money on this. It's a gift, then." Holmes paused and turned the phone over and over in his hands, looking at it. "Scratches," he said. "Not one, many over time. It's been in the same pocket as keys and coins. The man sitting next to me wouldn't treat his one luxury item like this, so it's had a previous owner. Next bit's easy – you know it already."

"The engraving," John said. Holmes flipped the phone so the letters carved on the back could be seen in the weak light filtering in from the city's streetlights.

Harry Watson
From Clara
XXX

"Harry Watson," Holmes continued his 'lecture'. "Clearly a family member who's given you his old phone. Not your father, this is a young man's gadget. Could be a cousin, but you're a war hero who can't find a place to live. Unlikely you've got an extended family, certainly not one you're close to, so brother it is. Now, Clara. Who's Clara? Three kisses says it's a romantic attachment. The expense of the phone says wife, not girlfriend. She must have given it to him recently – this model's only six months old. Marriage in trouble then, six months on he's just given it away. If she'd left him, he would have kept it. People do – sentiment. But no, he wanted rid of it. He left her. He gave the phone to you, that says he wants you to stay in touch. You're looking for cheap accommodation, but you're not going to your brother for help. That says you've got problems with him. Maybe you liked his wife; maybe you don't like his drinking."

Okay, so he's more than freakishly observant. It's like a superpower or something. "How can you
possibly know about the drinking?"

Holmes smiled at him. "Shot in the dark. Good one, though. Power connection." He turned the phone to show John what he was talking about. "Tiny little scuff marks around the edge of it. Every night he goes to plug it in to charge, but his hands are shaking. You never see those marks on a sober man's phone, never see a drunk's without them." He handed John's mobile back to him. "There you go. You see – you were right."

*That's really not how I pictured him ending that.* "I was right? Right about what?"

"The police don't consult amateurs." Holmes turned his face away to stare out the window once more.

*And all that… Without magic? It's… Insane. Impressive. Daunting. A little unsettling, sure, but so's getting petted by not just one leyline, but two in as many days! That…* he searched for a word, just *one* word that could really sum up everything cycling through his mind. He smirked a little as it surfaced. "Was amazing."

Holmes' head whipped around, his expression somewhat surprised. "Do you think so?"

"Of course it was," John replied, answering the slight insecurity he heard in the question. "It was extraordinary; it was quite extraordinary." *And it's more extraordinary to see you've got this unexpected insecurity amid all that arrogance you've displayed so far.*

"That's not what people normally say," Holmes replied, a small self-depreciating grin taking up residence on his face.

"What do people normally say?" John had to ask.

It's fascinating, really. *He's got this dichotomy to himself that I've never seen outside a kid.*

"Piss off," Holmes said, obviously quoting some unseen bit of memory. The taxi slowed to a stop and the pair climbed out. They ambled towards a collection of flashing lights and police tape about fifty yards away. "Did I get anything wrong?" Holmes asked.

*Ah, that 'opportune moment'. I was wondering if he'd give me the opening I wanted.* "Harry and me don't get on – never have. Clara and Harry split up three months ago and they're getting a divorce. And Harry is a drinker."

Smug descended over Holmes like a midwinter fog. "Spot on, then," he smirked. "I didn't expect to be right about everything."

*And we have a winner!* "And Harry's short for Harriet," John couldn't keep the grin out of his voice.

Holmes stopped short, nearly skidding on damp pavement. "Harry's your sister."

John took a couple of more steps before pausing and looking around. "Look," he said, "what exactly am I supposed to be doing here?"

"Sister!" Holmes said, through clenched teeth, obviously angry at himself for so simple a mistake.

"No, seriously," John attempted to drag the man's attention back to the here-and-now. "What am I doing here?"

Holmes let out the tiniest of sighs. "There's always *something,*" he muttered to himself, ignoring John's inquiry.
The two of them were stopped at the police tape by a dark-skinned woman with longish, curly hair. "Hello, freak," her tone was malicious, her attention solely on Holmes.

John bristled slightly, wondering what made her so bitchy towards his new companion, then figured it didn't much matter – he had much the same reaction towards a couple of people he'd known over the years, and it defied all explanation. Instead of saying anything, he left Holmes to deal with the woman while he opened his senses as wide as they could go and tried to figure out just why Holmes had brought him along. The woman didn't read as magical – no surprise. None of the various people present did. Nor was there anything in the immediate area which was more interesting than was usual. The sound of his name returned his attention to the woman and Holmes.

"Dr. Watson, Sergeant Sally Donovan," Holmes indicated the woman at the tape. "Old friend," he tacked on, sarcastically.

The woman glanced at him, then said to Holmes, "A colleague? How do you get a colleague?" She refocused on John. "What, did he follow you home?"

Didn't the police invite Holmes here? Why's she being such a bitch?

"Would it be better if I just waited –"

"No," Holmes interrupted, then held up the tape.

"Freak's here, bringing him in," Donovan said into her walkie-talkie.

John followed, this time splitting his attention between othersense and what was actually going on around him. So, this time, he didn't miss the pointed comments traded with Anderson. It was obvious by the time Holmes had finished with the forensic tech, just who he'd been quoting in the taxi. John had to bite his tongue, quite literally, to keep from laughing at Anderson's and Donovan's horrified reactions to Holmes' explanations. It didn't keep him from shooting a significant glance at the friction-burns on Donovan's knees as he walked past her into the house, however. Yes, it was petty. But she's a petty bitch, so it's appropriate. Definitely jealous of Holmes' keen eyesight and what is shaping up to appear as an encyclopedic level of knowledge about what all the little stuff most simply don't bother noticing really means.

Ten minutes and fifty-six excruciating stairs later, and John was standing in a room that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. Even if they'd already moved the body – which they hadn't – he would have been able to tell something really bad had happened here. The very walls were appalled.

The floor sang with recent pain. The ceiling wept for what it had seen. And this wasn't a new home, unaccustomed to the darker side of human nature; it had seen quite a lot in its hundred-fifty years. Happiness, sure, but echoes of its original family still resonated loud and clear to anyone who was even a bit sensitive to such things. Alcohol, depression, sickness, and suicide – real suicide, the sort brought on by the preceding three – had all happened here, as had violence and homeless squatters, and even the occasional junkie. Death, too, was no stranger to this address, but the woman lying on the floor… It wasn't suicide, John thought. I don't care what it looks like. Nor what any scientific test would come back with. It wasn't suicide.

He watched Holmes as the taller man inspected the body, using a magnifying glass at times. John would dearly love to know what sorts of information were making themselves known to him, but figured that – as had been the case with 'Afghanistan or Iraq?' – the answers would eventually come from Holmes himself. Instead of asking useless questions, John reached out to the house's spirit. Show me, he asked. Show me what happened here, in this room, with this woman. Please. I need to know.

The house-spirit was likely more upset at what had happened than he was, and as a result, was in a
very obliging mood. Suddenly, the here-and-now faded away to mere ghostlike images superimposed over the room from earlier in the day. Bright light from the windows painted stripes across the dusty floorboards. The door creaked open and the woman stumbled in. She was crying – sobbing, really. "Please," she said, begging someone not yet visible. "Please, I'll do wha-whatever you wa-want – just d-don't hurt me. Please."

There was an inaudible reply, which made the woman sob harder. What? Oh, I specified this room, not the house as a whole. Gotta remember not to limit myself like that. The thought soon became null as someone else stepped through the blankness of the door. John frowned. It was a little old man. He was about the same height as John, and had likely once been about an inch taller, but age had worn him down and stooped his shoulders. His hair was shockingly white underneath a brown checkered cap, and deep lines carved his years on his face. John would have been surprised at anyone feeling threatened by this man, were it not for the gun the man held in his right hand.

While part of his mind tried to identify the gun, and a second part kept track of the goings-on back in the 'real' world, the majority of his attention was riveted to the scene unfolding in front of him. "You'd like it, I think," the man said, continuing whatever his comment from outside the room had been. "This game I cooked up. Bright young thing like you – of course you'll love it."

*A game? What sort of game could lead to this?* John wasn't stupid, not by a long shot, and could easily guess what sort of comment the man had said before stepping into the room, particularly the sort of comment that would make the woman cry so hard. "I… I really d-don't," she hiccuped. "Don't want to play any g-games, sir, please! Won't you let me go? Ple-please?"

"Now, now, there'll be none of that, girlie – you'll get your chance, I promise," the man made a motion for the girl to back away. She did so, nearly tripping over her own heels.

Wait a second, John thought, and the image paused. *Not literally!* he 'shouted' at the house. The image resumed playback. *That's not a real gun he's got. A stage prop, maybe, but it's not heavy enough to be the real deal. Looks just like a Sig Sauer, though, so wherever he got it, the guy who made it knew what he was doing.* The man reached into a pocket of his cardigan and withdrew a small glass bottle containing gelatin capsules filled with white-and-pink powder. He sat it on the floor next to the window. He then switched his gun momentarily to the other hand and pulled an identical bottle from his other pocket and sat it next to the hole in the inner wall where John was standing. The man returned the gun to his right hand and stood so that he was blocking the door.

"You see them two bottles?"

The woman in the pink coat nodded. "Y-yes."

"One's got poison in it. Other's safe as houses. You pick one. Whichever one you don't pick, I'll take. We each take one pill from our bottle. Whacha say, girlie? Wanna play?"

John's throat tightened as he saw curiosity and intrigue and determination flash across the woman's face. "What if I d-don't want to p-play?" she asked, the tears beginning to slow.

"Then I'll shoot you and find myself someone else. School's about to let out for the day. Usually get one or two girls who need a ride. Yesterday, it was this cheerful little third-form girl – she rambled on and on about some rock group the whole trip. Couldn't squeeze a word in edgewise. Woulda picked her, stead o'you, but she was talkin' on her mobile the whole way, see? Couldn't do, not then. But you? You're prime pickings. Come on, girlie – play the game. Could be you win, and the body they'll find up here'll be mine."

That was all it took for the woman's reserve to crumble. She nodded. "I'll play," she said, her voice
suddenly even and steady, even though her hands were badly shaking.

The sound of the door slamming yanked John out of the recreation the house was playing for him. "So she's German?" Lestrade asked.

Holmes, his attention briefly focused on his phone, replied, "Of course she's not. She's from out of town, though. Intended to stay in London for one night." He smiled at his phone. "Before returning home to Cardiff," he said, putting the phone away. "So far, so obvious."

"Sorry," John said, not sure whether or not this was a continuation of a long string of information he'd just not paid any attention to. "Obvious?" he went with what seemed like the best question.

"What about the message, though?" Lestrade asked, gesturing to a spot on the floor.

"Dr. Watson," Holmes turned to John. "What do you think?"

"Of the message?" he was still trying to figure out what – if anything – he had missed while watching the past.

"Of the body," Holmes clarified. "You're a medical man."

"Wait, no," Lestrade interjected. "We have a whole team right outside."

Holmes glared lightly at the DI. "They won't work with me."

"I'm breaking every rule letting you in here!" Lestrade tried to complain.

"Yes," Holmes agreed, "because you need me."

Holmes and Lestrade stared at each other for a long moment before the policeman's resolve wilted. "Yes, I do," he admitted. "God help me."

"Dr. Watson," Holmes captured his attention again.

John hmmmed and looked from the body to Holmes, then asked with his expression if Lestrade was okay with him taking a closer look.

The DI let out a small sigh of defeat. "Oh, do as he says," he said, gesturing to the woman. "Help yourself." He withdrew from the room and asked Anderson to keep the others out for a few minutes.

John walked over to the body, wishing he'd had just a couple of moments longer to view the house-memory – knowing how long the poison took would have helped narrow down precisely what it was. But, then again, they've had three others. Blood-work should have given that info already. He lowered himself to a half-kneeling position on the woman's right side; Holmes crouched on her other. "Well?" he asked.

John glanced at the body, then looked up at Holmes. "What am I doing here?" he whispered.

"Helping me prove a point," Holmes echoed John's lack of volume.

"I'm supposed to be helping you pay the rent," John replied.

"Yeah, well," Holmes smiled, "this is more fun."

"Fun?" John couldn't quite keep his disbelief to himself. The more I learn about this guy… He was unable to adequately end the thought, so he finished speaking. "There's a woman lying dead."
"Perfectly sound analysis, but I was hoping you'd go deeper," Holmes overlaid his retort with a slow blink.

Can't hurt, some tiny part of the back of John's brain spoke up. And he does have a point, you realize. Dead woman or no – this is more fun than you've had since that time back in medical school when... John wrestled the irritating little voice into silence. Enough! Hearing Lestrade come back into the room, he focused on the body. Even though he knew what had caused it, even if the poison involved hadn't been named in the memory, it was relatively easy to spot the various signs. Any half-awake coroner could see this was a poisoning. He finished and straightened up. "Yeah," he said. "Asphyxiation, probably," he levered himself to his feet. "Passed out and choked on her own vomit. Typically, you only see this if it's a drug overdose or alcohol-induced. Since neither seems likely... Well, there are about three million different chemicals out there that could cause it." He paused, then added as an afterthought, "Even could've been an atypical food allergy. Saw something similar a while back."

"Could have been," Holmes nodded, "but wasn't."

"Didn't say it was," John stated.

"Sherlock – two minutes, I said," Lestrade interrupted them again. "I need anything you've got."

John resumed his position near the hole in the wall while Holmes explained what he'd deduced about the woman. He tried to fall back into the memory the house had been so helpful to queue up for him, but the intense energy of Sherlock Holmes mid-revealing rant was far too distracting; particularly how he'd figured she'd had a string of lovers. "That's brilliant," John said, admiringly, and wishing he could see as much without needing to rely on spells and othersense. "Sorry," he amended on seeing Holmes glare in his direction. He made a concerted effort to keep quiet, which only worked until he explained how he figured out where the woman was from. "That's fantastic!"

"Do you know you do that out loud?" Holmes asked.

John apologized again. "I'll shut up."

"No," Holmes replied, "it's fine." He seemed surprised himself at the admission.

"Why d'you keep saying suitcase?" Lestrade asked, sparking a new rant that touched on the unfinished note etched in the floor, and after a table-tennis shouting match between the DI and Holmes that ended out on the stairs. The last word Holmes shouted – "Pink!" – was still reverberating in the air when John realized the man had just rushed out and left him there.

I foresee this becoming something of a habit with that man, John thought, dragging his aching leg down the stairs. And isn't that thought telling? I've known the man for all of a collective hour or so and already have done more real living than I've done since that damned bullet outside Kandahar. Even though his leg ached, even though his shoulder was starting to twinge in sympathy – or because it was about to rain soon – and even with the dead woman upstairs, John couldn't help but smile. He fought to keep it small, though he really wanted to beam brightly at everyone. Wouldn't do at all for these fine fellows and girls to think me as mad as him.

Eventually, he reached the main floor of the house. He stripped off the paper coverall and left it on the folding table where he'd gotten it, then made his way outside. Just in case Holmes had waited, John took a good look around. Just as I thought – he's not here. He was about to tap his othersense to track him when he heard the bitch who was still guarding the tape.

"He's gone," she said, a trace of laughter under her voice.
"Thanks," John snarked back, "but I do have eyes of my own."

"He just took off. He does that." Donovan insisted on trying to seem helpful, even though John could clearly hear the mockery underscoring her every syllable.

"I have noticed as much, yes," John straightened himself as much as he was able and stepped around the woman, then ducked under the tape.

"You're not his friend, you know," she said to his back.

He paused, then turned around. "How would you know? You only just met me tonight."

"He doesn't have friends," she explained. "So, who are you?"

There were so many, many ways he could answer that question. Ways that could burn her, figuratively speaking. Ways that would earn her sympathy. Ways that would likely even startle a laugh out of her. However, he wasn't interested in her sympathy, nor her good will. And as to injury? Well… Maybe she was just having a bad day. Even bitches deserved a second chance. So, he settled on, "Name's John Watson; weren't you listening when he introduced us, Sergeant Donovan?" He made sure to use just a hint of his Captain Watson voice – just enough to make her pay attention.

The Captain Watson voice was either too much for the situation, or she was simply more susceptible to it than most, because she winced slightly and stepped towards him. "Sorry," she said, seemingly honestly contrite. "You don't deserve it – the snark, I mean. But you really ought to stay away from Sherlock Holmes, though."

John quirked an eyebrow at her. "Why?" he asked, still using the thread of magic wrapped in his words which made others shut up and listen and do as I say.

She shrugged and looked down at her feet for a moment, then met John's gaze. "He's not paid or anything. He likes it. The weirder the crime, the more he likes to get involved. Sure, he helps out, but it doesn't change the fact that he's gonna get bored with it all someday. And on that eventual day, helping the police isn't going to be enough. One day, we're gonna get called out to a dead body, and Sherlock Holmes'll be the one who put it there."

The image of Holmes, as seen by his othersight, flashed through John's mind. He glowed – well, anything living glowed – but it was the color which was important in this case. Sherlock gave off a quiet, mellow golden color, threaded through with teal and green, but with no traces of the violent reds or blacks that John had seen in far too many people, particularly those in Afghanistan, and not all of those violent streaks had been seen on the 'bad guys'. "You obviously don't know him as well as you think you do, Sergeant," he couldn't keep Captain Watson out of the statement – not that he'd tried, mind.

Donovan winced again. "Just…" she sighed and glanced over her shoulder. Lestrade had just strode out of the house and called her name. "Coming!" she yelled back, then looked at John once more. "I'm just telling you to be careful, Mr. Watson."

"It's doctor, actually. You really don't listen at all, do you?" John didn't wait for her to reply, instead he turned on his heel and walked as straight as he could to the end of the street. Once out of the woman's line-of-sight, he leaned heavily against the glass walls of a phone booth and massaged his aching thigh. Yes, yes, you're angry with me. I understand. However, you will get better. At least, as long as that stabbing pain in our kneecap stays away. So, if you'd be so kind as to shut up, I'll see about finding us a taxi back to the flat.
The phone within the booth startled him as it let out a shrill ring. John nearly jumped out of his skin, then laughed at himself. Ignoring the phone – probably a wrong number – he began hobbling towards the far-busier cross street at the end of the block. It was a much better place to grab a cab than the deserted-save-for-police side street he was currently on. Reaching it, he glanced right, then left. Right just lead right back into another residential area, but towards the left John could see several shops and businesses. He turned left. Just as he approached the Chicken Cottage, their phone began ringing. Coincidence, John thought, even though it had been his experience that there was no such thing. The phone stopped shrilling even as one of the employees reached to pick it up. Yeah, not really. So, he was half-expecting it when the next phone booth he approached began to ring.

He stared at it for a long minute. Do I answer? He smirked at a long-ago memory involving his sister's diary. Harry always said my curiosity would eventually be the death of me. He stepped into the booth and picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

The voice on the other end of the line was calm, coolly controlled, and sported a very upscale accent. "There is a security camera on the building to your left. Do you see it?"

Ooh, we've had the overgrown mad child, then a dead-but-not-by-suicide body, and now a bona fide Mysterious Voice! Since when has my life become a bad spy story? Grinning, he looked out the glass and had no trouble spotting the camera. He waved at it. "D'you want me to say 'cheese', too?"

"There is no need, Dr. Watson," Mysterious Voice assured him. "Simply watch."

The camera twisted away. "I remain unimpressed," John said, lacing his voice with all the remembered downtime boredom he could muster. "Have fun with your little games, Mr. Mysterious Voice. Find yourself another player, because this? Really isn't my thing. Ta for the distraction, though. Have yourself a nice night." John hung up the phone and quickly strode into the Chicken Cottage. "Hey," he greeted the clerk. "D'you have a loo?" The kid nodded and pointed. "Thanks."

Shutting himself in a toilet stall, but not locking the door, he retrieved one of the charms he carried in his pocket. It didn't look like much, just a sweat-stained white cotton pouch hardly bigger than a pound coin, but it was filled with some very special fern spores. He unwound the string, then pulled it over his head to hang around his neck. "I'm not here. Neither sight, nor sound, nor scent, nor sense of touch shall betray my presence. I am a hole in reality. Eyes aside, ears closed, I am not here," he said the incantation nearly quickly enough to trip over it, but it worked. A cool wash stirred up from his feet and encircled him to the ends of his hair.

Out in the restaurant, John heard the teenaged clerk say, "Sure, I saw him. Pointed out the loo."

John stood on the toilet seat to avoid the inevitable door-to-the-face scenario. Sure enough, less than thirty seconds later, a man burst into the loo and began pushing open the row of stall doors. Since there were only three, it didn't take long for the man to open John's. "Damn it!" he groaned, loudly. It wasn't the same voice as the man who'd called the payphone, but then again, John would've been surprised if it was.

The man backed away and leaned against the row of sinks opposite the stalls. John took the opportunity to slip out before the stall door could finish swinging shut. He waited by the door for either someone else to come in, or for the man to leave. Neither happened. Instead, a very pretty woman stuck her head in. "Problems, Anthony?"

"Guy gave me the slip," Anthony replied with a sigh. "The boss really isn't going to like this."
The woman echoed his sigh and nodded. "Come on, then – so much for an early night. You know he'll be wanting to use plan B now, right?" She held the door open for Anthony. John slipped past her. What now? Baker Street or the flat? He wound his way through the line of customers at the counter, managing to time it so that he slipped outside while a young man held the door for his date. A third option presented itself in the form of the car parked at the curb.

The back window was down. Whistling somewhat tunelessly to himself, John climbed in, then clamored into the passenger seat up front. Whoever Mysterious Voice was, he was gonna find out the hard way that Dr. John Hamish Watson, formerly Captain Watson of Her Majesty's Army, was not to be fucked with. Honestly, this gonna be fun!

He didn't have to wait long before the beautiful woman and Anthony returned to the car. Anthony, as John had assumed, slid in behind the wheel. The woman got into the back, her phone pressed against her ear. "...seem to have lost him, sir," she said, buckling her seat belt as the car pulled away from the curb. "No, sir, we aren't sure how. None of the kitchen staff claim to have seen him." She hit the button to roll the window up. John idly wondered why it was down to begin with, then decided it didn't matter. "None of the cameras, sir? That is... Yes, sir, I know. I shall. We will be there in fifteen minutes, unless traffic fails to cooperate, sir." She let out a bright laugh. "Of course, sir. Thank you, sir." She ended the call, but didn't put her phone away.

John's own mobile rang not ten minutes later. Sighing, he pulled it out of his pocket and declined the call. Don't really want to talk to Harry right now anyway. Not that she'd be able to hear me, but still. I'll call her back later. He glanced at the driver, then back at the woman. Neither had noticed his phone. Good to know it works on mobiles, too. Knew it worked for gunshots, but I wasn't certain electronics would be affected. Electronics can be so tetchy around magic.

The car eventually wound around to an old warehouse. It pulled around the back and into what looked like a large combined parking/storage area. The building's lights still worked, but there wasn't much else showing what it might have been used for. Undoubtedly, Holmes would be able to tell not just what was stored here, but where it was shipped and when. The car slowed as a man, dressed in an expensive grey three-piece suit and sitting on an incongruously new-looking plastic-and-metal chair, with a long umbrella hooked over the back of the chair. He was flipping through a much-abused copy of The Daily Mail. He quit his perusal as the car pulled to a stop and folded the paper back into an inner pocket of his jacket while standing.

The driver got out, leaving his own door open behind him. Sensing this was his best opportunity, John hurried out behind him and stepped off into the shadows behind the car. He quickly removed the notice-me-not charm from around his neck, deactivating it with a whispered, "Thank you for your faithful service, friend," and then stuffed it back into his pocket. He peered around the car and saw the driver had opened the back door and was waiting for the man in the suit to climb in. Just before the man was about to sit, John stood up. "You wanted to speak with me," he said with every ounce of Captain Watson he possessed, stepping out of the shadows. "Here I am."

The man startled, badly, and landed on his rear end in a shallow puddle of unknown origin. "Have to say, I really am not impressed," John couldn't help the snark – it had been one hell of a long day. On the upside, though, the Captain Watson voice lent snark an indefinable level of veracity that would have been otherwise lacking. Firmly ordering his thigh to be strong, he strode forwards with minimal use of his cane. He paused next to the man and offered his hand. "If you wanted to chat, you could have simply called my mobile. It's not like the number's all that hard to find, after all."

The man in the suit made a visible effort to wipe the surprise from his face and – to John's shock – actually accepted the hand up. "I believe I may have made a gross miscalculation," he admitted, climbing to his feet. "Well played, however," he nodded in salute to John. "You really must tell me
"Nah," John argued. "I don't think I really should. You probably wouldn't believe me anyway." The man simply stared at him, but John stared right back, making sure his expression was one of polite puzzlement. That particular expression had managed to get him out of more than one close scrape in his life; everything from detentions in school all the way up to convincing a Taliban insurgent that he knew nothing of value and wasn't a high enough rank to warrant an outright killing-to-make-an-example – and that had been without coupling it with the Captain Watson voice. "This is your show, mister…?"

The man blinked first, so John counted it as a 'win'. The man shook his head. "My apologies, Dr. Watson, but I fear you've thrown me rather off my stride, as it were. Would you care to take a seat?"

John glanced at the uncomfortable-looking metal-and-plastic chair. His thigh sent a distinct don't even think about it message to his brain. "Ta, but no thank you. Wouldn't be polite, what with there being only one chair and all."

"Your leg must be hurting," the man tried a different tactic.

John shrugged, "Same old, same old. Doesn't warrant subjecting it to that monstrosity, just so you can feel superior by looming over me. Figure you can do that just fine without me sitting down, after all – you're what? About six inches taller than me? More than enough height difference to feed your ego, I'm sure."

The man chuckled. "Really, Dr. Watson! Are you trying to bait me?"

"Why?" John asked. "Is it working?"

"Not as such, no," the man replied. "But I give you a solid A for effort."

"Suppose that's gotta count for something. But, I really am growing a bit impatient. How about you cut to the chase, Mr. Mysterious Voice? I'd like to get home at some point tonight, and I'm sure your people," he glanced at the driver and the woman, who were both unabashedly listening in, "would also like the chance to get home before midnight."

"Very well," the man said. John's phone chimed a text-alert. He glanced at it while the man asked, "What is your connection to Sherlock Holmes?"

Baker Street. Come at once if convenient. SH

"Potential flatmate," John replied as he slid it back into his pocket. "But I'm not altogether certain of it yet – he's more than a little mad." Following a hunch, John tapped his othersense and looked at the man in the suit. "But, then again, he's your brother, isn't he? So you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?" The man had an aura nearly identical to that of his younger brother, golden and teal and green, but the individual proportions were slightly different. It had the added benefit of ensuring nothing – and no one – magical was in the vicinity.
The man's expression shifted so quickly, John was nearly positive he hadn't spotted the flash of petulant pouting before a sly smirk took its place. "Bravo, Dr. Watson. You are the first to deduce my relationship with Sherlock on the first meeting."

John 'turned off' his othersense and now that he was aware of the link, he could see vague traces of features shared by the two. "It isn't hard to see the family resemblance," John replied. "So, why meet me here and not, you know, at a pub or something? I can understand wanting to protect a younger sibling, so I get it, really, but this?" He gestured to the warehouse as a whole. "It's a bit much, don't you think?" He had yet to let up on the Captain voice. It was proving to be worth the minor expenditure of energy to keep it up, particularly considering the situation – John was pretty sure that, without it, the man in front of him would be far less forthcoming with information.

"Perhaps," the man allowed. "But then again, I find myself in the altogether unanticipated position of not being the one in control here. You yourself took that by showing unexpectedly and in such a... dramatic manner. I really ought to be asking for lessons."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Anthony's and the woman's mouths drooping open. "I get the sense that admitting you're not in control and asking for help are two things you don't often do," he said.

"That is correct, Dr. Watson," the man said.

"Also, you've got me at something of a disadvantage. You still haven't introduced yourself."

"Mycroft Holmes," the man said, offering his hand.

"Mycroft and Sherlock, eh?" John shook the man's hand. "Your parents really must have hated both of you."

"Father I am certain of. Mummy not so much," Mycroft admitted.

John finally allowed his expression a bit of free reign and smiled. "Well, this has been fun and all, but I'm ready to find someplace more hospitable than an old warehouse. Could you give me a lift back to a main road?"

"Certainly, Dr. Watson, but if you so desire, my people would be more than willing to take you home."
"I'm sure they would, too, but I don't think I'm heading in that direction yet. Just to the nearest place to grab a taxi would be sufficient." John's phone chimed another text-alert.

"If inconvenient, come anyway. SH"

"Come along, then, Dr. Watson. Perhaps we can chat a little more on the way?"

_I wonder if the entire Holmes family is completely barmy? Certainly, both sons are. Both? Are there only two? God help us all if there are any more waiting to crawl out of the woodwork. Two is probably one more than is strictly necessary. However, of the two, I think I'd rather take Sherlock – sure, he's abrasive, rude, and arrogant, but he doesn't try to be anything else. Mycroft? I don't think he'd know what blunt honesty was if it stripped naked and gave him a lap dance. John walked around the car to the passenger side, and settled himself in the front seat. Right back where I started. Wonder what they'd do if I just disappeared in the middle of the car? Though the thought was amusing, he didn't want to try it. He had absolutely no idea what sort of job Mycroft held that would give him access to citywide CCTV cameras, landline telephone numbers, and would allow him to afford a suit John was positive cost more than his parent's house, but he was certain it was the sort which had contingencies upon contingencies for just about anything, and the last thing he wanted was to literally disappear.

Once the car started moving back towards a more civilized area, John twisted around to face Mycroft, who was sitting behind the driver. "So, gonna tell me what your original plan for this evening was? What you woulda done if I hadn't hung up on you?"

"That depends," Mycroft replied. "Are you going to tell me just why it is you need a ride when you arrived at the warehouse on your own?"

"A friend dropped me off," John lied with the ease of long-practice. "Couldn't stick around, though."

"And how did you find the location?"

"Easy," John said. "We followed this car here."

"But Anthony is a very capable driver – he should have noticed being followed…"

John shrugged. "'It doesn't matter how good you are at something, there's always going to be someone who's better than you are.' My dad taught me that when I was a kid, and it's one of the few things I've found is undeniably true."

Mycroft gave John another regal nod. "Certainly so, Dr. Watson. Certainly so. This simply means Anthony will need some refresher courses."

The man in question glared out the corner of his eye at John. John pretended not to notice. "Well, what about you?" John asked. "What had you been planning?"

"A simple meet with someone new to my brother's sphere of influence," Mycroft said.

"Sorry, but that sounds like complete bullshit," John replied, then winced a little. "Sorry for the language, miss," he aimed the comment at the woman sitting next to Mycroft. She didn't even look up from her phone.

"Perhaps there was a bit more to it than that," Mycroft allowed. "However, I doubt that you would be interested, not after having chatted with you this long."

"Never hurts to ask," John replied. "Besides, now you've got me curious." His Captain voice was...
still going strong.

"I was prepared to offer you a substantial sum of money in exchange for status updates on my brother's well-being, should you decide to move into the Baker Street flat."

John forced out a little snicker. "Though I'm sure the money would come in handy," he said, "I'm not really in the information business. Besides, aren't there easier – and cheaper – ways to get that information? Like actually talking with Sherlock like a normal person?"

"My brother despises normal people," Mycroft replied.

"I did manage to somehow get that impression, yeah," John wryly replied. "But you're his brother. There's some sort of universal law that, even if you don't like your siblings, you still have to talk to them every now and then."

"Though such a law would be beneficial in certain circumstances, I fear Sherlock would simply ignore it as he does any law which he finds disadvantageous."

John's phone pinged another text-alert. Sighing a little, he pulled it out of his pocket.

Could be dangerous. SH

Without prompting, his brain flashed back to the anagram his Scrabble tiles had given him. It wasn't 'aging burn' or 'gab gin run' or ' barging nu' or any of the other possibilities he'd gone through before leaving his bedsit earlier that evening. The actual message flashed across his mind in blazing capitals.

BRING A GUN

"Is something the matter, Dr. Watson?" Mycroft asked.

John shook his head and put his phone away. "No, not at the moment." He glanced out the window and saw they were in a commercial district, not far from a cinema. "You can let me out at the cinema over there. I really do need to be going."

Anthony glanced in the rear-view and waited for Mycroft to nod an assent before slowing and turning into the cinema parking lot. The car halted not far from the cinema's doors. "It was interesting to meet you in person, Dr. Watson," Mycroft said as John was about to leave.

John turned his head back around to meet the man's gaze. "Interesting? Probably the only word that really fits, I suppose. "Yeah, it was. Not particularly looking forward to speaking with you again, though."

"A pity," Mycroft replied. "I quite enjoyed our little chat."

"Ta for the ride," John said, finally dropping Captain Watson. He slammed it shut behind him and headed for the multiplex before Mycroft could draw the goodbyes out any farther.

Ignoring the ticket-counter, John headed towards the restrooms that stood between a concessions stand and a loud arcade. After checking he was alone in the room, he put his notice-me-not charm back on and reactivated it. Not particularly caring what the teenaged concessions workers thought of the loo door opening by itself, John checked the movie-times board against his watch. The movie in theater six was just about over. Another two or three minutes would have dozens of people streaming through the hallway towards the exit.

The only hard part about being invisible in a crowd was making sure nobody behind you was about
to run you over, but John managed quite well. On exiting the cinema, he spotted Mycroft's vehicle parked under a broken street light near the far end of the parking lot.

He examined his options:

He could keep the notice-me-not up, duck around the corner of the building, and find a way to the next street over before dropping it and catching a cab or the tube or a bus. But, if Mycroft had access to city-CCTV, then it would be pretty easy for the man to track him. *I really don't want to make it easy on him, not with the whole kidnapping-intimidation-bribery thing he had planned.*

He could keep the notice-me-not up, duck around the corner of the building, and take a bus or catch the tube, but maintaining notice-me-not in crowds was rather more effort than it was worth. *Besides, it's already been a long day. And it's not like I'm being shot at, after all. I'd hate to exhaust the charm, then find I really need it, only to find it non-functioning.*

He could walk, with or without the notice-me-not running. *Not on your life!* His thigh apparently had other thoughts on the matter.

He could hitch a ride in some unsuspecting person's car – it wouldn't be the first time he'd used notice-me-not in that manner. *But then there'd be no telling just where I'd wind up.*

Or… He checked his pockets. There was a battered and half-full box of chalk in his inside jacket pocket. *Ah, yes. That will do nicely. Ajay won't mind, I'm sure.* He wandered around the side of the cinema while pulling a half-used stick from the box. As soon as he was out of sight of Mycroft's car, he drew a full-sized door on the rough cinderblock of the cinema wall, complete with illustrated knob and keyhole. When the drawing was complete, he returned the chalk to its box and put it back in his pocket. Holding his hand over the keyhole, he chanted a long-since-memorized string of Hindi that Ajay swore up and down was a word-for-word translation of *Mary had a Little Lamb.* It had always seemed too long for that, but since John only knew how to say 'thank you' in Hindi, he ignored it; doubly-so since Ajay was the one who taught him 'thank you' to begin with.

When the last syllable fell from his mouth, the door drawing shimmered, taking on a three-dimensional presence that could only be seen/felt/experienced by othersight. John grasped the knob, turned it, and pulled the door open. Closing his eyes – nobody but *nobody* was nuts enough to go through a gate with their eyes open – he jumped through.

The noise of a motion-activated door chime like the ones found in convenience stores announced his arrival. Ajay looked over from where he was sprawled out on his sofa. "Evening, John. What's got you taking the gate tonight? Thought you hated that bloody thing."

John waited for the translocative nausea to subside. It never took long, but it was absolutely hellish while it lasted. "Was being followed by someone I'd rather not see again," John replied. "Sorry for the interruption of your evening, Ajay."

"Stick around. I was about to order some take-away."

"Thanks, but I don't have time right now. Maybe tomorrow?"

Ajay shook his head. "I've got a date tomorrow. I know you don't plan further than that, so I won't ask. Just gimme a call sometime, yeah?"

"Will do," John promised.

"You know the way out," Ajay motioned towards the fire escape.
"Yeah, I do," John nodded, then let himself out Ajay's living-room window. Once back on street-level, he removed and deactivated the notice-me-not charm. One of these days, I'm going to put forth the effort for that true invisibility spell. Notice-me-not is useful and all, but it doesn't work against other mages. He exited the alleyway where Ajay’s fire escape landed and hailed the first taxi he saw. Giving the cabbie the address of his bedsit, he relaxed back into the seat and watched the city flow past the windows.

He couldn't keep the smile off his face. Tonight has been... Fun. Even with the dead woman and Mr. Mysterious Mycroft. It's been fun. His phone rang again. Checking the caller-ID, he saw it was Harry again. Rolling his eyes, he hit 'decline' and returned the phone to his pocket. Pretty sure he'd been successful in losing his Mycroft-tail, he turned his thoughts back to the dead woman and what the house-spirit had shown him. It's really too bad mages are so rare. If we were more common, magic would be something regular people would believe in, and it would be easy to catch the man who killed that poor woman. Unfortunately, if I tried to give the police a description of the man, they'd want to know how I knew, and the explanation... Well, I really do not fancy a long stay in a padded cell. The bedsit's been bad enough, thanks. Okay, so how else can we go about stopping him? I get the feeling he's not going to stop on his own.

The cab pulled to a halt, jolting John out of his thoughts. He looked up and saw that they were at his current address. "Wait a moment, would you? I'll only be a minute," he asked the cabbie.

"No problem, mate," the thirty-something redhead replied. "Meter's running, though."

"Didn't expect it not to," John mumbled, then more clearly, he said, "Be right back." He climbed out of the cab and hurried as quickly as his protesting, under-used, over-exerted leg would allow him to go. His intention had been to just slip in, grab his Browning, and slip out, but he paused at the door. I've used magic more today than I have since Afghanistan. Might do to have a few essentials handy, just in case. It took a full ten minutes to pack a satchel – old, brown leather, he'd had it since primary school – with an assortment of various magic-related odds'n'ends. Positive he was forgetting something important, he left the chaos of his suitcase and its boxes behind to be cleaned up later, and nearly forgot to lock his door behind him on the way out.

Luckily, the cabbie was still there. John breathlessly slid into the back seat. "Two-two-one B Baker Street, please," he gasped out.

Once his breathing was back to normal, John went back to musing on how to stop the old man from killing anyone else. If I can't get a description of the man to the police, how else can he be stopped? I've nothing of his with which to do any sort of commanding spell. I don't even know his name. I wonder if Ajay would know anything? He dug his phone out and dialed Ajay's number.

His old friend and former mentor answered on the third ring. "I know I said to call, John, but weren't you just here?"

"Yeah, sorry. Didn't think of it then, but I do have a quick question for you."

"This have to do with why you gated in tonight?"

"Not directly," John replied. "That was just a… Well, you could call it a side-effect of the night I've had."

"Sounds like we really need to meet up, and soon, Johnny."

John let out a little growl at the childhood nickname. "Don't call me that, Ajay."
His friend snickered. "Sorry," he sounded anything but. "What d'you need to know?"

"Is there any way to find out someone's name – someone you don't already know – when all you've got is an image?"

"I take it you don't mean a photo, do you?"

"Spot on," John confirmed. "I don't have anything I can use like that."

"And you can't just ask them?"

"Not an option, I'm afraid."

"Divination, then. It's the only method left."

John sighed. "I was afraid of that. Unfortunately, you know my preferred method."

"Scrabble tiles, yeah – I know. Not much use, and that's assuming they actually cooperate. Divination never was your strong point – likely why the only method which actually works for you is the one you invented."

"Guess I'll have to figure out something else, then. Thanks, Ajay."

"Any time, you know that. Except for –"

"When Manchester's playing, I know, Ajay. Trust me, I know."

Ajay laughed. "Good to see I trained you well, John."

"Only as good as my teacher," John replied. "But – I ought to let you go. I'll keep in touch. Promise."

"Careful throwing around the P-word, John – you never know what sort of trouble it can get you into," Ajay chided. "But you're right. Supper's here. Talk with you later."

"Bye," John said, then disconnected the call. He put his phone back in his pocket and went back to thinking.

All right, so finding out his name is next door to impossible without finding him and flat-out asking. If this drags on, I'll give the tiles a try, but I doubt they'll give me a usable answer. The last time he'd used his Scrabble tiles to find out someone's name, they'd given him the anagram for the meaning of her name. It was an exercise in total frustration, and not something John was all that eager to repeat. So... What else can I do?

Well, Watson – what did the house show you? You saw the little old man tormenting Jennifer Wilson. No. You saw more than that. He was trying to play a game. There were two bottles of pills. One poison, one harmless – or so he said. What was that movie Harry loved so much when we were kids? The one with Andre the Giant in it? He waved the thought away. Doesn't matter. Could be that both pill bottles are poison, but one that he's developed a resistance to within himself. But of what possible use is speculating on the pills? It's not like he left any behind, and even if he did, there's no way I can get a hold of one for sympathetic magic.

What else did you see? Well, Miss Wilson didn't want to play, but the man threatened to shoot her if she didn't. It's obvious she didn't know his gun was just a prop. But then again, how many people in London have actually seen a real gun before? Not too many, I'd bet real money on that answer. So,
she obviously felt she had no choice but to take her chances with the pills.

Part of the old man's words floated through John's memory. "Then I'll shoot you and find myself someone else. School's about to let out for the day. Usually get one or two girls who need a ride. Yesterday, it was this cheerful little third-form girl – she rambled on and on about some rock group the whole trip. Couldn't squeeze a word in edgewise. Woulda picked her, steed o'you, but she was talkin' on her mobile the whole way, see? Couldn't do, not then. But you? You're prime pickings. Come on, girlie – play the game. Could be you win, and the body they'll find up here'll be mine." I wonder what he meant? Does he drive a bus? Is that how he picks his victims?

John shook his head. No, that can't be it. Miss Wilson apparently was taken in the middle of the day. I've never seen a bus that empty in the middle of the day.

"We're here," the cabbie broke into John's thoughts and yanked him out of his head.

John looked up. Sure enough, there was the door to 221B. He paid the cabbie – it took every last cent he had on him to cover it – and climbed out. He walked over to the door and knocked. Mrs. Hudson quickly answered it. "Hello again, dear," she smiled at him.

"Evening, Mrs. Hudson. Sherlock's expecting me?"

"Go on up, dear," she stepped aside, gesturing to the stairs. "He is in a bit of a mood, though…"

From what I've seen, that seems to be his basic mode of operation, John thought, but said, "Thank you, Mrs. Hudson. Excuse me, please." Ignoring the landlady's knowing smile, he hobbled his way up the stairs, his leg threatening mutiny at every step. I know, I know – I'll sit soon. Definitely hope whatever the leyline did is permanent. Without that agony, I'm pretty sure all I need to do for a full recovery is to rebuild the muscle.

A loud sigh echoed out of the open flat door as he reached the landing between the long flight and short flights of stairs. John hurried the last few steps, then entered the flat's living room. Sherlock was stretched out on the sofa, his left sleeve rolled haphazardly to his elbow while the right was still buttoned around his wrist. His right hand was pressed against the exposed forearm. "What are you doing?" John asked, his inner doctor wanting to know if the man had somehow hurt himself.

"Nicotine patch," he replied, revealing three circles stuck to the inside of his forearm. "Helps me think." He paused for a breath, then said, "Impossible to sustain a smoking habit in London these days. Bad news for brain work."

John took a couple of steps into the room, looking around. Not much had changed since his visit earlier in the evening – everything was still a mess. "It's good news for breathing," he said, still in doctor-mode.

"Oh, breathing," Sherlock sounded uninterested. "Breathing's boring."

John peered a little closer at the man on the sofa. "Is that three patches?"

Sherlock closed his eyes as he answered, "It's a three-patch problem."

Why did I come back? John ignored the thought – he really knew why, but wasn't ready to think it. Instead of lecturing Sherlock on the probability of nicotine poisoning like his inner doctor really wanted to do, he instead made good on his promise to his aching leg. He flopped down on the armchair with the Union Jack pillow, then sat his satchel down on the floor and used it as a foot-rest while massaging his complaining thigh muscle.
He looked over at Sherlock to find the man hadn't moved a muscle. He was still stretched out, his hands pressed palm-to-palm with fingers extended just under his chin. *I've seen marble statues in that pose before, but never an actual person. Is he even breathing?* Yes, if he watched closely, John could see him breathe. Further scrutiny halted as the leyline below the building chose that moment to snake a tendril up into the flat. It was much thinner than the one which had hugged and petted him earlier, closer in thickness to the one which had greeted him at the park the day before.

And like at the park, this one curled around his injured leg, wrapping around his ankle, calf, knee, and halfway up his thigh. John removed his hands from the muscle and let the leyline do whatever it felt necessary. It helped that it suffused the abused tissue with a heady sense of warmth, like a really good heating pad, coupled with an undulating pressure that was better than any massage. John was hard-pressed to keep from groaning out loud as it drained the stiff-and-soreness right out of him. He made a mental note to ask Ajay why the leylines would be doing this for him – healing his leg – the next time he spoke with him, then simply let his mind go blank and enjoy the feeling of being pain-free for what felt like the first time in years.

An uncounted amount of time later, Sherlock's voice cut through the drowsy fog of bliss surrounding John's mind. "It's no use, there's no other way. We'll have to risk it." The man sat up, then blinked at John as though he'd forgotten the other man was there. "Can I borrow your phone?" he asked.

"My phone?" John's mind took a moment to actually register the meaning behind the words. "Yes," Sherlock replied. "I don't want to use mine. There's always a chance the number will be recognized from the website."

"Fair enough, but what do you need it for?" John asked, mentally nudging the leyline tendril. It unwound from his leg and petted him on the head again before returning to the 'line.

"On my desk," Sherlock hooked a thumb indicating the mostly-hidden piece of furniture situated between the living room windows, "there's a number. I want you to send a text."

John retrieved his phone from his pocket. Unwilling to do anything immediately that would wake up his traitorous leg, he simply tossed it at Sherlock. "Go ahead," he said. The phone landed on the cushion next to the other man. "Send it yourself."

"It's your phone," Sherlock replied, looking at it.

"Technically," John argued, wondering if this Holmes would be as susceptible to Captain Watson as his brother had been, "it's my sister's phone. She's just letting me use it for now."

"The argument is invalid – the phone was gifted to you, so it is yours, regardless of its origin," Sherlock rebutted, tossing the phone back to John.

John caught it with his off hand. He let out a sigh. "What's the number, then?" he asked.

"It's on my desk," Sherlock repeated.

John cleared his throat. *It's like dealing with a little kid.* Using just the smallest trace of Captain Watson, he said, "So get up and either hand it here or read it to me. I know you're under this impression that whatever's wrong with my leg's psychosomatic, but I can assure you – it isn't."

Sighing in protest, Sherlock actually did get up and snag a scrap of paper off the desk. He thrust it in John's direction before returning to his perch on the sofa. The scrap fluttered on the air to land on John's outstretched leg, just over the kneecap that had been giving him trouble for so very long. "See?" John risked teasing Sherlock. "That wasn't so hard, now was it?" He dropped his gaze from
the man who'd gone back to ignoring his existence to the scrap of paper. Jennifer Wilson. "Can I ask why you want to send a text to the dead woman from earlier this evening?" he asked, scrolling to the proper function on his phone and entering the number. Sherlock continued ignoring him. John sighed. "Okay – what message do you want me to send?"

Sherlock finally looked over at him. "Type these words exactly: What happened at Lauriston Gardens? I must have blacked out. Twenty-two Northumberland Street. Please come." At that, Sherlock sprang to his feet, then – using the coffee table as a stepping-stone – rushed into the kitchen.

John typed most of the message, but paused partway through. "What was that address again?"

"Twenty-two Northumberland Street."

He typed it in and finished the message, then hit 'send' just as Sherlock reappeared toting a small carry-on bag and a chair from the kitchen. He flopped in the other armchair after setting the kitchen chair in front of it with the small suitcase resting on the makeshift tabletop. John lifted his ankle off his satchel and leaned a little to the side, peering around the back of the kitchen chair. "That's Miss Wilson's case, is it?" he asked, dropping all traces of Captain Watson from his voice. In its place was honest curiosity.

Sherlock unzipped it, then looked up at John. "Yes, obviously."

John slowly got to his feet, unwilling to undo the effects of what the leyline had just done. He stared into the small case, seeing nothing of any real value. *I suppose I could use the case itself to trace where it had last been, but there's no guarantee it would work. The killer only had it in his possession for a little while. That's not nearly long enough to leave behind any sort of usable echo.*

Apparently, he had remained silent for too long, for Sherlock rolled his eyes and stared up at John with a slightly exasperated look on his face. "Oh, perhaps I should mention I *didn't* kill her."

John quirked an eyebrow at the man. "I never said you did." *What brought that on?*

"Why not?" *Good grief, now he sounds affronted that I didn't think he was the killer!* "Given the text I just had you send and the fact that I have her case, it's a perfectly logical assumption."

John let out an amused huff of air. "Logic and me have never been on a first-name basis. Just ask Harry about it, I'm sure she'd give you an earful." He glanced back into the contents of Miss Wilson's case. "Do people usually assume you're the murderer?"

"Now and then, yes," Sherlock replied, adjusting his position on his chair so that he was perched on the back with his feet resting on the seat. He seemed both pleased and amused at the prospect.

"How did you find the case?" John asked, sitting back down. "And where was it?"

"The only way for the killer to have had his hands on the case was if he had kept it by accident. And the only way that makes sense was if he had driven her to Lauriston Gardens and forgot the case was in the car. Nobody could be seen with this case without drawing attention – particularly a man, which is statistically more likely – so, on realizing his mistake, he would have obviously felt compelled to be rid of it as soon as possible. I checked every back street wide enough for a car five minutes from Lauriston Gardens and anywhere you could dispose of a bulky object without being observed. It took less than an hour to find the right skip."

And all that without the aid of magic. Honestly, I don't know whether to applaud or be appalled that he could figure all that out just because he realized it had to be pink. Something of his thoughts must
have shown on his face, because Sherlock peered at him and asked, "What is it?"

"You got all that from the realization that the case would be pink?"

"Well, it had to be pink, obviously."

"You like that word, don't you?"

"Which word?"

"'Obvious'," John said it with a little smirk.

Sherlock gave a little shrug. "So many things in life are obvious. It boggles my mind how much gets overlooked, even by so-called professionals." He turned his attention back to the suitcase and its contents. Gesturing to it, he said, "Now, look. Do you see what's missing?"

John's first instinct was to say no, but he pushed it aside. He nudged the kitchen chair around and really looked at the contents of the suitcase. *Clothes, underthings, cosmetics case, a book. All things you'd expect in an overnight bag. But 'missing'? What could it be? Well, Watson – if you were going on an overnight stay, what would you take with you? Change of clothes, yeah. Bathroom stuff, check. A couple of charms for just-in-case, but let's not mention that bit. My phone and laptop. Hey… "Where's her phone? Was it on her body?" he asked.

Sherlock's face spread into a slow smile. "Ah… That is a very good question, John. Where is her phone? No, it wasn't on her body, so where did it go? We know she had one, you just texted it."

John mused on it for a moment. "She could have left it at home."

"She's got a string of lovers and she's careful about it. She never leaves her phone at home."

Sherlock slid back into a more traditional posture on his chair.

"It could have gotten stolen or lost. It could have even gotten damaged from all the rain you mentioned back at the crime scene and been thrown away."

"Yes," Sherlock said, drawing out the word with a healthy dose of skepticism. "But I doubt it."

"You think the killer has her phone," it wasn't a question. "Sure, I've read that most serial killers like trophies, but a phone?"

Before Sherlock could reply, John's own phone began to ring. He checked the caller-ID, expecting to see Harry again, but the screen displayed 'withheld'. He held it up to show Sherlock. The other man's expression just brightened somewhat, so that he now looked like a grinning – but vindicated – loon. "A few hours after his last victim, and now he receives a text that can only be from her. If somebody had just found that phone, they'd ignore a text like that, but the murderer," he paused for a moment, nodding towards the now-silent phone in John's hands, "would panic."

Sherlock flipped the suitcase lid closed then stood and grabbed his jacket off of the back of his desk chair. John looked at the 'one missed call' message on the screen of his phone, then tucked it back into his pocket. "Have you informed the police?"

Sherlock paused in slipping into his overcoat. "Four people are dead – there isn't time to talk to the police."

*Irony, thy name is Sherlock*, John thought. "Then why are you talking to me?"
The man jerked his chin towards the fireplace. "Mrs. Hudson took my skull."

John had to chuckle at the sheer petulance in his tone. "So, I'm just filling in for Yorick?"

Sherlock grinned at him and tied his scarf around his neck. "Relax, you're doing fine. And how did you know what his name was?"

John shook his head, "What other name could a skull possibly go by?"

Sherlock started pulling on his leather gloves. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well, you could just sit there and watch telly…"

"You want me to come with you?"

Sherlock nodded, "I like company when I go out, and I think better when I talk aloud. The skull just attracts attention, so…" John wondered what it said about Sherlock that he could easily picture the younger man toting a skull along on a 'date'. He laughed. Sherlock's eyes narrowed at him. "Problem?"

"Not at all," John said, climbing to his feet and slinging the strap for his satchel across his chest. It was habit more than necessity that had him using the cane as he followed Sherlock downstairs and up the sidewalk. "Where are we going?" he asked, mentally sending a 'tendril' of his own back to the leyline, petting and caressing it in thanks for what it had done for him. A chirruping purr of content rippled back through the connection before distance snapped it.

"Northumberland Street's a five-minute walk from here," Sherlock replied.

"You think he's stupid enough to go there?" If it had been John on the other end of that text, he wouldn't have gone within a hundred miles of Northumberland, not even with serious money on the line.

Sherlock smiled, bringing to John's mind an image of a cat with bird feathers hanging from its mouth. "No," he said. "I think he's brilliant enough. I love the brilliant ones. They're always so desperate to get caught."

"Why would any killer want to get caught?" the question hurled itself from John's mouth before he could stop it.

"Appreciation! Applause! At long last, the spotlight!" Sherlock explained. He looked at John and in a slightly more conversational tone said, "That's the frailty of genius, John: it needs an audience."

"Yeah," John replied, leveling a pointed look at his companion. I'm beginning to see that.

Sherlock either didn't notice the look or chose to ignore it in favor of continuing his monologue for his very own audience of one. "This is his hunting ground, right here in the heart of the city. Now that we know his victims were abducted, that changes everything. Because all of his victims disappeared from busy streets, crowded places, but nobody saw them go."

John's mind re-played the line he heard in the house's memory. "Then I'll shoot you and find myself someone else. School's about to let out for the day. Usually get one or two girls who need a ride. Yesterday, it was this cheerful little third-form girl – she rambled on and on about some rock group the whole trip. Couldn't squeeze a word in edgewise. Woulda picked her, stead o'you, but she was
talkin' on her mobile the whole way, see? Couldn't do, not then. But you? You're prime pickings. Come on, girlie – play the game. Could be you win, and the body they'll find up here'll be mine." He could feel a connection there, but Sherlock kept speaking and it eluded him.

"Think! Who do we trust, even though we don't know them? Who passes unnoticed wherever they go? Who hunts in the middle of a crowd?"

I would do better with the 'think' portion if you'd shut up a moment, John thought, but his mouth said, "Dunno, who?"

"Haven't the faintest," Sherlock replied, then angled across the street. "Hungry?"

Half an hour later, after an exceedingly awkward conversation with Angelo, who, despite all attempts to convince otherwise, was still operating under the assumption that John was Sherlock's date for the evening, John was enjoying a dish of chicken and fettuccini alfredo. His mind kept whirring, going over and over the man's words from the memory.

"You're thinking hard," Sherlock said, interrupting.

John swallowed the bite he had in his mouth before replying. "Just mulling things over."

"Have you thought of anything new?"

New? "Not as such, no, but I'll let you know if I do."

Sherlock resumed his gazing out the window, resuming his silence since arriving. He suddenly tensed. "Look across the street. Taxi," he said, a layer of urgency flavoring his words. *That's it!* All the pieces clicked together inside John's mind. "Nobody getting in, and nobody getting out. Why a taxi? Oh, that's clever. Is it clever? Why is it clever?"

"Sherlock!" John hissed at him to stop the flood of words and gain his attention.

"What, John? Can't you see I'm busy?" he glared at him.

"That's the answer," John hastily explained. "You asked who'd hunt in a crowd, right? And what do all the victims have in common? They all would have *hailed a cab*!"

Sherlock looked startled for a moment, then, nearly tipping over the table, he leapt to his feet and whirled into his coat. He was out the door by the time John could follow, though the former Army-doctor quickly caught up; the pair narrowly missed getting hit by a car as the taxi pulled away into the night. John hastily memorized the cab number. "I've got the cab number," he said.

"Good for you," Sherlock replied, then closed his eyes and rattled off what sounded to John like a quick-fire string of Google-maps driving directions. A sudden silence erupted from Sherlock, then the man tensed and sprinted down the street, pushing a man out of the way as he ducked into a building.

"Damn it!" John swore and took off after him, throwing a 'sorry' at the malignant pedestrian. Adrenaline flooding his system, it didn't take more than a single flight of stairs to catch up to Sherlock, despite the younger man's longer stride. John made sure to keep up – he had quickly lost track of where, exactly, they were, and didn't want to become separated. He had to pause when Sherlock leapt the gap between a pair of buildings, though. *I hate heights.* Realizing if he didn't follow, though, Sherlock would definitely leave him behind, John jumped the gap. Finally racing down stairs, they reached street-level and Sherlock sprinted towards the end of an alleyway, only to see the taxi amble past before he could get there. Instead of following, Sherlock turned and ran the
opposite way. John didn't have breath enough to argue – *Besides, he's gotten us this far, and we nearly had him just then* – he just poured a little more strength into his running.

Not even five minutes later, Sherlock dashed out of another alleyway and directly into the path of the cab. It screeched to a halt, but not before the man wound up ricocheting off of the grill. *He's like a bloody cat,* John had to think, when Sherlock landed on his feet, pulling what looked like an ID badge out of his jacket. *Police!* Sherlock shouted, *"Open up!"* He started to go for the passenger compartment, but John grabbed his elbow.

*"Not the passenger, Sherlock,"* John gasped out. *"Driver. How could a serial killer hunt with witnesses?"*

Sherlock twitches a little, but didn't reply. He grabbed the driver's door handle with one hand and tossed his phone to John with the other. *"Call Lestrade,"* he said.

John quickly did as Sherlock asked, scrolling through his contacts to find the right name, while Sherlock peered at the cabbie. It was definitely the same old man John had seen in the house's memory. *"Well, well, well,"* the cabbie said, overlaying the sound of ringing through the phone. *"Sherlock Holmes, as I live and breathe."*

*"Shut up, and get out of the cab,"* Sherlock replied.

*"Hello, this is DI Lestrade,"* John heard through the speaker of the phone.

*"Hi, um,"* John wasn't entirely sure what to say, so he went with what came to mind. *"This is John, John Watson – we met earlier tonight, at the house where they found Jennifer Wilson. Sherlock asked me to give you a call. Seems he's found your killer."* John took a look around and realized what street they were on. He gave Lestrade the address. *"If you could hurry, I'd much appreciate it."*

There was total silence from the DI for nearly a full ten seconds, then the sound of a clearing throat echoed through the line. *"We'll be there in five minutes,"* he said, then disconnected the call.

John returned his attention to Sherlock and the cabbie. *"…doncha wanna know how I did it, Mr. Holmes?"*

*"Why, are you confessing?"* Sherlock replied.

The poor guy who'd been the passenger looked hopelessly lost and confused. John stepped over to where he still sat in the back of the cab, with the window rolled down. *"What's going on?"* the passenger asked, his accent enough to tell John he was a tourist.

*"Nothing you need concern yourself with,"* John replied, using Captain Watson's voice once more. *"In fact, it would probably be best if you found yourself another taxi for the evening."*

*"…will do, but then you won't ever know, will ya?"* the cabbie continued his efforts to get Sherlock to… *Not sure if he's trying to get him to let him go or if he's trying to get Sherlock to play his little 'game'.* John walked around to the other side of the cab while the tourist gathered his things and got out of the car.

*"I don't want to know, do I?"* the tourist asked, looking from the cabbie to Sherlock to John.

John shook his head. *"Likely not. You shouldn't have much difficulty hailing another cab if you head to the end of the street,"* he punctuated his instruction by pointing in the proper direction. The man started walking that way, wheeling his suitcase behind him, and glancing back at the cab only once. With him out of the way, John finally turned his full attention to the cabbie and Sherlock.
Focusing all the power he could on the cabbie, Captain Watson stepped up to Sherlock's side and quietly ordered, "Enough! No more chatter, not until the police get here – then you can talk to your heart's content. But until they arrive, you're going to stand right here and not make a sound, understood?"

The cabbie immediately quieted and nodded, but since he wasn't the target of the order, Sherlock took the lack of words to glare at John. "He was going to explain how he did it."

John ignored the glare and leaned around the cabbie to reach into the taxi and turn the vehicle off. "Like you really need him to explain," John replied, straightening with the cabbie's keys in hand.

Sherlock looked pained as he said, "Well, I must confess – there are a few gaps in what I could deduce."

John glanced at his watch. "Well, by my count, you've got a good three minutes left before Lestrade gets here, and a whole cab to inspect."

Sherlock brightened and all but dove into the still-open driver's door. While the man rummaged around inside, John kept one eye on the cabbie. It wasn't typical, but every now and then people could – and did – manage to break the compulsions he used when they were solely voice-laid. He sat his satchel on the bonnet of the taxi and rummaged around in it. Coming up with a bottle of slightly yellow oil, he sat it aside, then dove back into the bag. He quickly located a small ziplock baggie filled with brown mustard seeds, a braid of dried five-finger grass, and a small notebook. He tore a scrap of paper out of the notebook, then replaced it in the satchel. Next, still keeping one eye on the cabbie, he tipped a couple of seeds out of the packet and onto the paper, then added a few fragments of the grass. He returned the baggie and braid to the satchel, then twisted the paper around the seeds and grass. He added a drop of oil from the bottle, its label read *Confusion Oil B*, before returning it, too, to the bag.

He turned and faced the cabbie fully, the twist of paper in his left hand. His right was checking his pockets for a lighter. Locating it in his left jacket pocket, he retrieved it and lit the twist of paper. It burned violently white for one, two, three seconds, but it burned without any heat, leaving white ash in the palm of John's hand. Unnoticed by John, the light had drawn Sherlock's attention, and the younger man was now watching from his seat behind the wheel of the taxi – the two pill bottles and fake gun he'd located in the glove box all but forgotten.

John raised his palm, and the ashes on it, so that it was level with the cabbie's face, then blew the tiny pile into a cloud around the cabbie. "I command and compel you, by the right of mage, to confess your crimes, no matter how big or small, to the police once they arrive. I command and compel you, by the right of magic, to answer any questions the police might pose you to the best of your ability. I command and compel you, by the right of guardian of London, to cooperate fully and without complaint with all the police ask of you. As I say it, so shall it be." John lowered his hand, and saw the pale green glow of compulsion magic form in the cloud of ash-dust, then sink slowly into the cabbie's body.

From Sherlock's perspective, all he could see was a cloud of ashes that hung, suspended in the air, ignoring all eddies and currents of wind and the law of gravity, before settling on the cabbie's hair and clothes in a fine layer as John finished speaking. The distant sound of sirens coming closer prompted him to slide out from behind the wheel of the taxi. "John?" he asked, uncertainty in his voice.

John wrenched his eyes from the cabbie and blinked at Sherlock. "Shit," he hissed. "You saw, did you?"
Sherlock nodded. "What did you just do?"

The sirens were now only a block or so away. John sighed. *Well, he had to find out sooner or later. Can't really hide magic from a flatmate, after all. "Look, I'll explain later, but for now forget you saw it, alright?"*

The first police car screeched around the corner. Sherlock glanced up, then looked back at John. "I look forward to the explanation," he said, then leaned against the taxi, waiting for Lestrade to come over.

John wasn't sure how he managed it, but Sherlock got Lestrade to put off taking their statements until the next day. An hour after their mad dash across what had felt like the whole of London, the pair walked back towards Baker Street. John couldn't catch him at it, but he could feel Sherlock's eyes flicking over and looking at him every couple of seconds. "Oh, for god's sake, spit it out, Sherlock," he said, finally having had enough.

"You said you would explain," came the quiet reply. Sherlock kept his gaze fixed in front of him, no longer glancing at John as they walked.

"I did at that. Well, you said back at Bart's that potential flatmates ought to know the worst of each other, right?"

"Yes," he said, still being uncharacteristically quiet. "I did. However, I was leaning more towards a tendency towards leaving wet towels on the floor of the bath or an appalling need to watch reality television. Not… Whatever that was."

"Well, I don't consider it the 'worst' of me, so it didn't cross my mind. I don't have many bad habits – the Army drummed most of them right out of me. But I'm not just a doctor or a former soldier, Sherlock. I'm also a brother and son, a friend, and…" He took a deep breath, held it for a step, then let it out. "A mage."

"A… mage…" Sherlock drew the words out, something that was trying hard to be skepticism threaded through the syllables, warring with the impossibility of dust ignoring wind and gravity.

"Yes," John said, his tone simply matter-of-fact. "It's really not like how they show in books and in films, but magic is real. I can use it, see it. That's what makes me a mage."

"And I assume these facts are all some great secret."

John snickered. "Not hardly. But mages – real magic-users – we're pretty rare. There're only five of us in the entire London area. Only about a hundred total in all of the British Isles. It's akin to finding someone who's honestly and totally colorblind, or someone who can do complex calculus equations in their head as fast as a computer. Only in my case, nobody believes it until they see it."

"I saw… something. But I'm still unsure if I believe what you're saying." They stopped for a crosswalk light and Sherlock finally turned and faced John.

"I know it's unbelievable. Trust me – I've been in your shoes, and I've been able to see magic my whole life. I can't count the number of shrinks my parents dragged me to as a kid because I saw things they couldn't. It wasn't until I was fifteen and met Ajay Singh that I found out what I was seeing was real."

"And I suppose next you'll try to tell me that unicorns and leprechauns exist."
The light changed, but neither man moved. John shook his head. "Not that I know of – like I said, books and movies and television don't have the right of it. What you saw earlier, that's one of the flashiest spells I know. Most magic's far more subtle."

"Then show me something," Sherlock said. "Something not subtle."

John reached into his pocket and pulled out the small collection of charms he carried with him. He was tempted to use the notice-me-not charm again, but decided not to; it had already been used quite enough in the last few hours. Health charm's not going to be of any help, he thought picking up a green drawstring pouch that was much larger than the white one for the notice-me-not. He returned both to his pocket. Next was a piece of abalone shell, etched with a Celtic knot. Hmm… Doubtful my anti-nightmare charm is even still working, considering. Need to see about recharging it. The shell, too, joined the health and notice-me-not charms in his pocket. John's eyes landed on a carved ring, made from mistletoe wood, and sporting a tiny iron bead – the bead itself had once been part of an honest-to-goodness coffin nail. Now that might work. He picked the ring off his palm, slid it into place on his left middle finger, with the bead facing his palm, and then returned the rest of the charms to his pocket. He looked up at Sherlock. "Do you have a penknife on you?" he asked.

Sherlock shook his head. "It's still at the flat."

John frowned for a moment, then shrugged. "No matter, I think I've something that will work." He looked around for a moment, then spotted a bus stop bench a couple of yards up the street, on the other side of the crosswalk. He ignored the light – there wasn't any traffic to speak of – and headed for the bench. On reaching it, he sat his satchel down and rummaged through the contents. "Here we are," he came up with a fist-sized piece of obsidian. Juggling the chunk of volcanic glass in one hand he got the preexisting ridges lined up properly, then tapped it firmly against a metal support of the bench. A semicircular flake detached from the rest of the glass. John caught it with the ease of long practice. Holding the flake by pinching the middle between his right forefinger and thumb, he returned the rest of the obsidian chunk to the satchel. "Be careful with this, it's sharper than a scalpel," he said, handing the flake to Sherlock.

"And what am I to do with it?"

"Cut your finger or something. Nothing too severe, mind, just enough to bleed a little."

"Why?" Sherlock asked, holding the obsidian flake up so that the light of a street lamp shone through it.

"Because you wanted to see something flashy, and this is the best I can think of on short notice."

"What do you plan to do?"

"Heal it." Sherlock looked at John for a long time. Long enough for John to become slightly uncomfortable. He reached down and latched his satchel without looking, then slung the strap back across his chest. "Look," he said, "you don't have to if you don't want to, but I've not got the ingredients with me to cast othersight on you right now. If we go back to my bedsit, I'll have what I need. Or, if you're feeling up to it, we could drop by Ajay's place. I know a shortcut you wouldn't believe," he smirked a little, wondering if Sherlock would find gates to be as nauseating as he did.

Without warning, Sherlock moved quickly, slicing the edge of the obsidian across the palm of his left hand. It obviously hurt more than expected, because the flake was immediately dropped to shatter on the cement sidewalk. He held his hand out to John.

John looked at it with normal vision for a moment and watched as beads of red blood began to well
up from the two-inch cut across the fleshy bit just under Sherlock's thumb. *Thenar, what Ajay calls the Mount of Venus. Not a horrible wound, but would usually need stitches. Let me see if I can't fix that, shall I?* John held Sherlock's wrist with his right hand, then laid his left over the cut. He closed his eyes and concentrated, focusing his energy through the ring of mistletoe and iron he was wearing. It was only a heartbeat before he felt the telltale tingle of direct energy drain that was the hallmark of all healing spells. It didn't last very long – five seconds at the outside – but it wasn't a very horrid cut, either. John opened his eyes and let go of Sherlock's hand.

Sherlock peered down at his palm. All that remained of the cut were a few lonely drops of blood and a thin, nearly imperceptible, white scar. He ran his thumb over the line, smearing the blood into a streak. "If you can do this," he said, finally looking up at John, "then how did you wind up invalidated home?"

John hadn't been expecting that sort of question. *Then again, is there really anything about this man that I can truly say was expected?* "It's one of the steadfast rules of magic – you can't heal yourself. Healing spells work because you're pouring your own energy into the wound, making it fix itself on a far faster timeline than the body is typically capable of." There was more to it than that, a lot more, but that was the foundation guide for all healing spells. "So, when I got shot outside Kandahar, I had to heal like a normal person. And that included a near-fatal staph infection. It was the infection more than the bullet hole that got me sent home."

Sherlock simply looked at him and said, "Fascinating."

Somehow, John just knew this was going to be trouble.

*But it'll be fun, too. He grinned. Yes, it's going to be a lot of both.*

Chapter End Notes

And thus concludes part one of *Infinitely Stranger*.

I know some of you will likely be disappointed I didn't have John shoot the cabbie like in the series, but this is – like I mentioned before – written primarily for my own amusement. That said, however, if there's any Brit-picking you want to do, I'd be grateful for it (except for spelling – British spelling gives me headaches, so I'm sticking with American spelling whether you want me to or not!).

Once again, I'd like to thank Ariane DeVere over at livejournal for her brilliant (and amusing interjections to) transcripts and hope she will continue her fantastic efforts when series three airs. I also would like to thank Tanydwr over at ff.net for catching a couple of small US/Brit-vocab choices which didn't 'read right'.

With all that out of the way, I'd love to hear what y'all think – especially if I managed to keep folks in-character. (And before someone points it out – yeah, Mycroft is definitely not in-character, but John was using magic on him, so it really should be expected!)

Until next time folks!
Chapter Summary

Tying up a few loose ends from the first chapter.

Chapter Notes

In my research, I have found that not only are gun-control laws far more restrictive in the UK, but so, too, are the laws governing the sales of ammunition. I find this rather mind-boggling (I live in Texas, one of the gun-friendliest states in the US, save for maybe Alaska and Wyoming).

Warnings: All warnings from chapter one still apply. And this isn't so much a complete chapter as a bit of filler to get some more details on the magic I'm using in this world conveyed. Nothing from episode two will be seen here – that's for the next chapter (real chapter). I also tie up a few loose ends from chapter one that didn't want to tie neatly with where the chapter ended.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Two: Little Things

*It has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important.*
– Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*

Sherlock remained utterly silent, studying the thin scar and blood smear on his palm, right up until the two of them reached the door to 221B Baker Street. And then it was like someone had flipped a switch when he hung his coat on the peg behind the door to the living room; questions poured forth at a rate which John had trouble following. After a full five minutes of this rapid-fire gibberish, he lifted his fingers to his mouth and split the air with a shrill whistle. "Sherlock! I know you've got questions, but – damn it – ask them one at a time, alright?"

The younger man frowned at the sudden interruption, then nodded. "One moment," he said, heading for his computer. "Do you mind if I record the information?"

John shrugged. "Considering the fact that just about anything I can possibly tell you has already been published? Go ahead."

Sherlock paused and looked up at John. "What do you mean 'published'?"

"Just that. Every spell I know is in a book somewhere. Sure, the ones that work are sandwiched in among dozens that don't – and you have to be a mage to get any of the real ones to work anyway – but they're all out there somewhere. Usually, they're found in those new-age books in the alternate religion section of the bookshops." At Sherlock's expression, John reiterated, "I did tell you that none of this is secret information. It's just too fantastical to be believed."
Sherlock blinked for a moment, assimilating the information, then quickly tinkered with his laptop. "Audio, I think. I'll transcribe the important parts later." He picked up the computer then headed over to the armchairs. Sitting his computer on top of Jennifer Wilson's suitcase, he adjusted the position of the supporting chair so that it was at a good angle to catch sound from both himself and John's chair. While he was setting up, John took off his jacket and draped it over the arm of 'his' chair. He sat his satchel next to the chair, then took a seat.

Sherlock wasted no time in getting started. "What is magic?"

John let out a little laugh. "Hell if I know. I don't think anyone really knows for sure. It's part force, part energy, part will, and semi-sentient on the whole."

"Semi-sentient?"

John nodded. "Yeah. Magic has a mind of her own. There are times you can cast a spell with all the right components and it simply won't work. No rhyme nor reason to it, it just won't happen."

"And there is no pattern to these… misfirings?"

"None that I've been able to see. Ajay, either, for that matter, and he's got about thirty years more experience than I do." The leyline tendril was back. It arched up against John's injured leg, then wrapped itself in a figure-eight around both of his ankles, sending microscopic vibrations coursing up both of his legs like the purring of a cat. He hadn't realized quite how sore he was after that mad dash earlier, but now, with no more adrenaline coursing through him to mask it, and with the 'line draining it away, he could appreciate just how much muscle-strain that little jog had inflicted on him.

"You said you see magic. Does that mean you see when it's being used…?"

John shook his head. "Well, yes, but not just then. Magic is in everything, and I do mean everything."

"Even the air?"

"Well, maybe not that, not unless there's a lot of smoke or fog or dust," John allowed. "But everything else? Yeah. Something simple, like that chunk of obsidian I've got, has the least. Living things have the most…" he trailed off, remembering a nonliving example which didn't follow the rules as he knew them.

"But…?" Sherlock verbally nudged.

"It's not just sight that 'sees' magic. It's all the senses. Hearing, touch, smell, taste. Magic has an imprint on all of them, but the easiest way for me to describe it is through sight," John said, laying an important bit of groundwork. Sherlock nodded to show he was following. "When I focus on the magical aspect, what I consider 'turning on' the othersight, it most commonly shows up as visual glowing. That obsidian chunk and other things like it – say an ice cube or an empty soda can – they all glow at about the same level. Slightly more complicated things glow a little brighter, like a filled soda can, or a chunk of concrete – the kind with all the little pebbles stuck in it. Next up are single-celled organisms like bacteria. Then come mushrooms and the like, then complicated machinery like cars – they glow at about the same level as plants. Animals glow even more brightly, with the brightest one I've ever seen being an orca in San Diego, and yes, that includes humans, too. Mages are the brightest of all, unless they're shielding themselves… However," John reached the crux of the matter, "I saw, quite by accident, a computer system that glowed so strongly, it nearly blinded me." Before Sherlock could ask anything about it, John held up a hand to halt the line of questioning before it could begin. "No, I can't say where it was. Even mentioning I saw it would be enough for..."
certain people with far too much power than should be in the hands of bureaucrats to be very, very angry with me. But, on the topic of computers, I can say, without any fear of reprisals, that they've been getting steadily brighter over time. Particularly the last couple of years." He didn't mention how that last little factoid alternatively thrilled and frightened the bejesus out of him.

"Fascinating," Sherlock replied, his mind obviously drawing conclusions in mere moments that had taken John several years to piece together. "So magic has no adverse effects on electronics?"

John shook his head and mentally reached down to stroke the tendril around his feet. "It depends, mostly on the mage, but partially on the gadget itself. Ajay hates technology with a passion – or it hates him, I've never really been clear on the distinction. Not counting the cash register he has for the store, the only electronics he has are a microwave that he winds up needing to replace every six months or so, a motion-activated door chime," John didn't clarify that one, he let Sherlock fill in the blanks as he saw fit, "an old-fashioned rotary telephone, and an old vacuum-tube television; both of which have remained the same since I met him. His clocks are all wind-up, and the last time I saw him flip a light switch, the bulb exploded."

"What about you?" Sherlock gestured vaguely in the direction of his laptop. "What sorts of effects do you have on electronics?"

"About normal, I'd say, with one exception."

"And that is?" Sherlock asked, one eyebrow twitched slightly higher than the other.

"My watch," John pulled up his sleeve a bit to show it to Sherlock.

"Casio, analog, and you've replaced the band," Sherlock nearly folded in half to peer closer at it, "five times, most recently about a month ago." He straightened back up.

"Yes," John confirmed the deductions, idly wondering how he knew how many times he'd changed the band over the years, "but in the twenty years I've owned it, I've never needed to have the battery replaced," John said. "Dad gave it to me when I left for uni," he felt the need to defend still owning it after two decades.

"Sentiment," Sherlock said the word like most would say 'scum' or 'toenail fungus'.

"It's not a dirty word, you know," John said, wondering just what Sherlock had against it. "It clouds the mind; makes logical thought nearly impossible."

"There's very little room for logic in magic – you're going to need to understand that right off," John warned him. "For example, take mistletoe." He indicated the ring he was still wearing. "The plant itself is toxic, but three-quarters of the healing spells out there need it to work. Or how about a coffin nail?" He turned his hand over to show the slightly-rusty bead of metal on the 'working' side. "Logic would dictate that the nail from a used coffin would be best suited to spells that bring about harm – hexes – right?" Sherlock nodded. "You're wrong. A coffin nail, or the metal it's made from, is one of the strongest focuses you can find for protective magics, and again, it's used in about half of all healing spells."

"Where do you get coffin nails these days, I wonder?" Sherlock didn't seem to realize he'd asked the question out loud.

John chuckled. "They're not that hard to find, not if you know what to look for. I've got a handful in my kit back at the flat I've been staying in that I ordered online from a pagan supply place in the States – the person guaranteed them as the real deal, salvaged from one of their Civil War era
cemeteries that had been moved to make way for a dam."

"How do you know they're genuine? I wouldn't simply take the word of someone I only know through the internet."

"Valid point, but there are ways to check. Anything that's been in close contact with death, particularly over a long period of time, has an imprint of that death on it." John explained, then cleared his throat. "Would tea be remiss?" he asked.

Sherlock had the grace to look a little abashed. "My apologies – I was rather more interested –"

"It's fine," John assured him, nudging the tentacle aside so he could stand. Sherlock grabbed the laptop and moved it to the kitchen table. John quickly spotted the electric kettle on the counter. "Where d'you keep the tea?"

"I think Mrs. Hudson left a box in the cabinet next to the sink. Cups should be there, too," the world's only consulting detective made a vague gesture and settled himself at the table. "You were saying?"

John quickly located both cups and tea, but found nothing but a box of baking soda in the fridge. "No milk?"

"Haven't had time to do any shopping yet. Sugar's in the silver canister by the stove – I take two." Sherlock double checked his audio program to make sure it was still running. "But you were saying about death leaving an imprint?" he refused to be deterred from his line of inquiry.

John nodded and filled the kettle from the tap. "Yes. Anything in contact with something dead – a whole being, I mean, not just something like leather – has a very distinct reading with othersight, though in this case, it isn't my sight that notices it."

"How do you sense it, then?"

"Oddly, death smells like cinnamon to me. But not the spice kind, the hot kind they use to make candy."

"It's the same spice," Sherlock couldn't help but correct him. "It's just they use concentrated oil for sweets. The spice itself is ground bark."

Shutting off the tap, John plugged the kettle in and flicked the switch. "I knew that, actually. I have several spells that use the spice, but only two which require the concentrated oil."

"At least that's one ingredient you shouldn't have much difficulty locating," Sherlock said, a small smile tugging the corners of his eyes.

"True enough," John agreed.

"What's the oddest ingredient you've found yourself in need of?"

"Hmm…” John gave it some considerable thought. "You might need to narrow your definition of 'odd', Sherlock, because in a certain sense, they're all a bit odd."

"Bizarre, random, grossly disgusting, or just plain hard to find," Sherlock said, being anything but helpful.

"Well, as for random… the most random thing I've ever seen as a requirement for a spell was a
handmade hoop of yucca fibers," John heard the kettle start to simmer, so he stripped the paper off of a pair of teabags and placed them in the cups he'd found.

"Doesn't seem any more or less odd than mistletoe or coffin nails," Sherlock commented.

"It does when it's the only ingredient needed for the spell, but then again, I'm unfamiliar with the symbolism." He looked over at Sherlock. "I ought to warn you, I'm not a purist by any sense of the word – I honestly don't care what culture the spells come from as long as they work as advertised."

"Yucca… That would be the American Southwest, yes?" Sherlock asked, and John nodded. "What is it used for?"


"What?" John was glad Sherlock hadn't yet had his teacup in hand. He was certain the younger man would have wound up either dropping it or spraying his laptop.

Smiling to himself at Sherlock's shocked expression, John explained while hunting out the sugar. "Animal shapeshifting. The magic itself is extremely easy, provided you've done your homework. You can't change into something you don't know, after all, and I'm not just talking about what the creature looks like. You have to have a level of knowledge about the animal's anatomy that rivals the best specialist veterinarian or else it simply won't work. You also have to choose an animal that's about your same size – you can't suddenly turn into a mosquito or an elephant." Locating the sugar canister, he added two cubes to one cup, then returned it to the cupboard. "Spoon?"

Sherlock gestured at the vertical row of drawers to the side of the sink, under the counter while asking, "Is this something you can do?"

Quickly locating a spoon in the top drawer, John shrugged. "I've given it some considerable thought. Even looked into a couple of animals I thought sounded appealing, but never really had the time for concentrated study. And, yes, before you ask, I already have the hoop I'd need. All that remains is the studying." The kettle clicked off with a little chime. John turned around and poured the water into the waiting cups, stirred Sherlock's, then picked both up and headed back to the comfort of the living room's armchairs.

Sherlock grabbed the laptop and followed him. A moment later, they were resettled in their chairs, the laptop back on the pink lady's suitcase. "If you can change yourself so drastically, can you change other things, too?" He might have worded the question to make it seem as though he were asking about turning a turtle into a teapot, but John could see a lingering longing, a holdover from childhood daydreams, lurking in the man's silvery-blue eyes.

He toyed with the tea bag for a moment before answering. "I've not found any sort of spell that lets a mage change anything – or anyone – but themselves." He glanced up, and yes – there was a brief flash of honest disappointment on Sherlock's face.

Sherlock quickly recovered, however. "So, going back a couple of steps in this conversation –"

"Is that what this is?" John mused aloud. "It rather feels more like an interrogation, albeit a friendly one." He snickered at Sherlock's 'stop interrupting me' face. "Sorry. Go ahead."

He cleared his throat. "Going back a couple of steps in this conversation, if yucca was the most random ingredient, what was the hardest one to locate?"

"That one's easy – High John the Conqueror oil. It's used in nearly every luck spell I've ever seen, but the plant itself only grows in the southern US, and though it was once-popular, hardly anyone..."
grows it any more. The oil's made from the root, blended with either olive or sunflower oils. Last time I found any, I wound up paying nearly sixty pounds for a two-ounce bottle. Luckily – pun not intended – you never need to use much of it at a time. "Now that I'm no longer at risk for deployments to other countries for years on end, it might be worthwhile to look into a rooftop garden or something similar. It would certainly be kinder on my pocketbook than paying through the nose for certain ingredients. "I honestly don't know why it fell out of favor with gardeners – it's quite a lovely flower."

"Luck spells?"

John leveled an odd look at Sherlock. "I've lived, off and on, in a war zone for the last eight years, Sherlock; yet I've only managed to be shot the once. You think I could manage that without some heavy-duty luck on my side?" He didn't mention the gambling that had almost been bad enough to run him out of medical school – his first experience with luck magic – particularly since he didn't even bother with lottery scratch-cards any more.

Sherlock blinked and assimilated the new information. He took a sip of his tea, then said, "You mentioned you were shot outside Kandahar…?"

"That really isn't to do with magic," John didn't much like discussing Afghanistan. It was the main reason why Ella thought he had 'trust issues'. Seemingly in response to the sudden rush of painful memories, the leyline tentacle surged up and set about wrapping itself around both of John's legs, his waist, and then draped a length of itself like a stole around his shoulders. The 'pointy end' took to petting his right hand.

"I think it does – you said you were using luck magic, but you still got shot."

John shrugged, more than confused by the leyline, but not wanting it to leave – it seemed to be putting up a bit of a buffer of sorts between the memories and his emotions. "I lived… eight others in that same attack didn't." Including the nineteen year old kid who'd been riding in the truck right next to him when everything went pear shaped. John reached up and wiped the side of his face with the back of his hand, banishing the phantom feeling of arterial spray. Far better for it to be a sense-memory than a full-on flashback.

"It wasn't a case where the magic didn't work?"

John shook his head. "I was hit by a .50-caliber armor-piercing incendiary, Sherlock. My corpse
should have been missing everything from my left clavicle to my fingertips, as well as a goodly chunk of the ribs, flesh, and organs off that side. If that isn't 'luck', I don't know what would qualify."

Sherlock's eyes narrowed. "You were shot in the shoulder, but you claimed the limp wasn't psychosomatic…"

"The force knocked me out of the truck and down a miniature mountainside. All sand and stone and scrub. Cracked my knee – quite literally – on a rock. Starburst hairline fracture of the right patella, coupled with a partial dislocation and moderate nerve damage. It isn't psychosomatic." John wanted to be angry, furious even, that anyone would question him on something medical. He hadn't been boasting when he'd told Sherlock he was a very good doctor. Not only had he been the top of his class at Bart's, but he'd saved more than one life the medics had triaged as 'hopeless'. And it hadn't anything at all to do with magic – he couldn't afford the drain on himself that it would take to magically heal some of the gaping holes he'd fixed in people; it would have killed him to even try. He wanted to be angry, but couldn't quite drum up the energy. The leyline seemed to be draining or buffering that emotion, too. The tendril's 'head' or 'hand' had swiftly moved up to caress his hair and face, like a mother comforting an upset toddler after a fall in the park.

Sherlock, of course, couldn't see the tendril, nor could he see what was going on in John's mind. He smirked and leaned forwards a touch. "If it isn't psychosomatic, John, then where is your cane?"

"I left it at the restaurant, didn't I?" John breathed out the not-a-question in total disbelief and closed his eyes. "Now that – that's to do with magic, and I personally don't understand it a bit." The warm traces from the leyline migrated back to petting his right hand. John sipped his tea, then met Sherlock's gaze. "I told you that magic as a whole is at least semi-sentient, right?"

Sherlock nodded, "Yes."

"Well, the magic that isn't bound up in something collects in what are called leylines. Most of the time, they're likened to rivers or streams of magic flowing through the world, but that's not entirely accurate – they don't really 'flow' anywhere like water does. They're more like roots or webs running just under the surface of the earth, following patterns that only make sense to them. Each collection of connected leylines has it's own… personality, for lack of a better word. As it happens, there is a single leyline system running under London. It's large enough that it also covers a few miles outside the main metropolitan area, too. And ever since yesterday, London's 'line system has been behaving particularly oddly towards me."

"How does it usually behave?"

"It's a mutually-ignoring relationship, typically," John said, then finished off his tea. "Neither mage nor leyline takes any special notice of one another, save for if the mage feels run-down. In that case, simply being near a leyline is akin to having a cup of really strong coffee. Otherwise, leylines and mages have the same sort of relationship as people and rivers – they coexist, but don't really interact. However, if something happens to the mage, like if they've been in an accident and are in imminent danger of death, or if they've burned themselves out on casting spells, they can call to the nearest 'line and offer a 'service unto magic' in exchange for just enough of a boost to ensure they don't die before assistance can reach them."

"'Service unto magic'?"

"Basically, you're promising the leyline consciousness a favor that it's allowed to call in at any point after you've healed up. Annie Holt's the only mage I know of who's done so – she's… God, she's gotta be ninety-six or ninety-seven now. But she told me that when she was in her twenties, she'd been walking home from her job at a laundry, and was mugged. She's still got the scar across her
throat – the man snuck up behind her and slit it ear-to-ear, “the tendril wrapped around John
shivered, ”then took off with her weeks' wages. But she survived by promising the strongest leyline
in London a service unto magic in exchange for her life. Magic likes being used, so it accepted.
Annie survived.” The magical tentacle hugged John on the last two words.

"What did the leyline have her do, or don't you know?" Sherlock asked, his tea sitting forgotten at
his elbow while his hands took up a fidgety position palm-to-palm just under his chin.

"That was the weird part, the way Annie tells it. The magic wanted her to give a little boy a piece of
stick-candy. It was several months after the mugging, mind, but the task she'd been set was to give a
child a sweet."

"Ripple effect," Sherlock muttered, his voice quiet enough that John wasn't altogether certain that
was, in fact, what he said. "So," he cleared his throat again, "if that is how a leyline usually behaves,
how has it been acting strangely?"

The 'line wrapped around John seemed to give him an encouraging squeeze. "Well, up until
yesterday afternoon, just before Mike took me to meet you, in fact, walking on my knee was the
second most-painful thing I'd ever done."

"I assume the first was getting shot."

John nodded. "It was like someone had taken shards of glass and heated them red-hot, then wedged
them behind my kneecap with each and every step. I've been living on oxycodone – if that tells you
anything of significance – and even then, it only worked for maybe a couple of hours at a stretch."

"Nasty stuff," Sherlock commented.

"Yes, it's why I only took it if I had to go out somewhere. Probably why I've spent the majority of
the last two months sitting at my desk, watching videos on Youtube," he said the second bit with
more than a hint of self-depreciation. "Anyway, yesterday, I got entirely fed up with staying at my
bedsit, so I decided to spend a little time outside. I've always been fond of Russell Square Park, so I
went there. There's a smallish 'line that runs through the park, and one of the benches is bridged right
smack over it. I got there – by this time, I'd met up with Mike – and we sat on that bench. The leyline
took note of me. Acted like a cat at first, one begging for attention."

"How so?" Sherlock took John's pause for breath to ask for clarification.

"It sent up a tendril of itself. That tendril nudged me and it's only polite to reply, so I gave it a little
pat with my own magic. I was careful just to make sure it was a 'hello' type pat, I was very clear on
that. The last thing I need is to accidentally owe magic a favor. But it seemed to take that pat as an
invitation. It wound up my injured leg and… Well, it drained the pain. I have no idea if it healed the
nerve damage or if what it did was temporary or not, but for the first time since getting shot… I
haven't had to take any sort of opiate in order to breathe." John seemed a little surprised himself at
how long it had been. "And then it…" he trailed off, partly embarrassed and partly truly befuddled at
what had happened next.

"What?"

"It petted me, like you'd pet a dog you're fond of. The 'line at the park wasn't the only one to act
strangely, either – there's a pretty powerful leyline that runs right under this building, and it's been
acting strangely since I got here, too!" The 'line vibrated oddly around him, and it took John a
moment to realize it was laughing at him. John groaned and reached up through the tendril of power
to rub at his forehead with his right hand. "Great. Now it's bloody laughing at me. Of all the things
I've seen and done in my life, this just takes the damn cake – I've got a leyline-feeler wrapped around me like the world's longest, skinniest housecat, and it's bloody laughing at me."

As he sat there, the absurdity of the situation must have struck Sherlock – either that, or the man simply caught sight of the aggrieved and put-upon expression on his face – as the curly-haired git joined the leyline in laughing at him. "Quit it," John said, exasperatedly, and dropped his hand back to the armrest of the chair. "It's really not funny, Sherlock!" He was sure, had he known the man a little better, he could have come up with something to say which would have stopped him from laughing, but as it was… Well, I don't particularly know all that much about him, now do I?

"It's just," Sherlock managed to get out between snickers, "I'd never before truly understood what someone meant by saying 'they look like they're being nibbled to death by ducks' until just now."

John scowled at Sherlock. "Ta," he said sarcastically, then waited for the younger man's mirth to fade.

It didn't take as long as he would have figured before Sherlock managed to calm himself. "You mentioned not having what you needed to cast 'othersight' on me; I assume this indicates that you have the ability to make others sense magic as you do. Is that correct?"

John sighed and nodded. "Sort of. I can't make it so you really experience exactly what I do. Unlike when the term's used to reference a mage's inborn abilities, the spell for othersight is precisely just that – all it affects is the target's vision."

Sherlock's next question didn't surprise John in the least. "What do you need to cast it?"

"A true cat's eye gemstone of at least one karat in size, about the same amount of amber, a tablespoon or so of dried mugwort and an equal amount of wormwood," John rattled the list of ingredients off without needing to pause for thought. He saw the question rising in Sherlock's expression and answered it before it could be verbalized, "You're not the first person I've gone through the 'magic is real' conversation with, Sherlock. And for most, seeing is believing, so I've cast othersight several times over the years. If you want me to do so on you, all you need do is ask – and replace the cat's eye. Those damn things are bloody expensive."

"Does the cut or clarity of the gemstone matter?" Sherlock asked, slight 'thinking' lines forming between his brows.

John shook his head. "No, but it has to be true cat's eye – the jewelers call it chrysoberyl – not just a piece of quartz with a cat's eye effect."

"What of the amber? Are there any specific requirements towards that aspect?"

"None – it doesn't even have to be one piece. There just has to be a roughly equal amount of both amber and cat's eye, just like the wormwood and mugwort need to be in equal amounts."

"'Equal amounts'…" Sherlock let out a tiny sigh. "Does that mean equal mass? Weight? Area? Volume?"

"Um… Considering amber's really light – a lot lighter than people expect – it's volume, I'd say, is what you're looking for." John suddenly got a mental image of Sherlock in the lab yesterday afternoon. Enigmatical comments about riding crops aside, he paused and recalled the boxes of chemistry equipment in the kitchen, _he really is a scientist at heart, isn't he?_ "Both gems get ground down, and you use equal quantities of both powders." A yawn ambushed John. Stretching as well as he could without disturbing the leyline too much, he glanced at his watch. _Jesus, is that all it is?_
Sherlock's eyes narrowed at him and John could only guess what the world's only consulting detective was seeing. Probably figured out Mum's a botanist from how my eyes crinkle or some such. The brunette reached over to the laptop and clicked a key without so much as glancing at it. "Enough for now. I believe Mrs. Hudson keeps the bedroom upstairs furnished with linens. I'll endeavor to have milk available come morning," he said, clearly dismissing John from the conversation and the room as he got to his feet and wound around stacked boxes to where a violin case rested on his desk.

John yawned again and nodded. "Suppose you don't need to hear it, but –"

Sherlock just waved a nonchalant hand in his direction, "Yes, yes – you'll be taking the spare room." The latches on the case clicked open as punctuation to his comment. "I'll tell Mrs. Hudson when she wakes."

Reluctantly, the tendril unwound from around him and allowed him out of the chair. Picking up his jacket and his satchel, John headed for the stairs that lead to the attic level of the townhouse. Halfway up the stairs, he had to pause as the sound of an extremely rapid chromatic scale sounded from the living room, then merged into the first movement of Schoenberg's Violin Concerto. John simply stood there, listening for several minutes as the expertly-played piece of music washed over him. You know, I'm glad I'm not a jealous man, he thought, then forced his feet to continue carrying him up the stairs.

He reached the landing where the steps, like the ones below, twisted in a 180-degree bend. John had to focus on his othersense – the dim light from the living room had faded to the point where he couldn't see much otherwise. Since wood was once-alive, it had a particular greenish 'glow' about it. Plastic was a similar case, having been oil in a previous incarnation, and living many eons ago, so the light switch was relatively easy to locate. He flicked the switch and 'deactivated' his othersight. The light revealed a landing similar to the one on the floor below, only about six times larger, and – like the one below – it sported a pair of doors, one to his left, and one straight ahead. He checked the door on the left first, and found a cozy white-tiled bathroom, complete with claw-foot tub and copper fixtures.

The second door opened to reveal a singularly massive space, divided neatly in half by a pair of half-walls with built-in shelving, that supported a checkerboard of colored glass panels stretching to the ceiling. The area closest to the door held a fireplace, positioned directly over the fireplace in the living room below, along with a tired-looking roll-top desk, a metal folding chair, and a pair of matching armchairs facing the fireplace. The chairs had once been a dark blue, but had long since faded to a comfortable no-color grey.

"The more I see of this flat, the more I like it," John whispered to himself, not even aware he had done so. He walked across the slightly creaky wooden floor to see what was behind the colorful room partition. I wonder why Sherlock didn't claim this floor as his? He's certainly got enough stuff to need the extra space. Then again, he paused for a moment, looking a little closer at the walls. The area with the desk – John figured he'd call it his study, for lack of a better term – only had two electrical outlets. That's probably why. But it's not like I really need more than that. I've got my phone charger and the one for my laptop, and that's about it. Though I might want to consider getting a lamp or two. Having just the overhead out here would get a little irritating. He continued into the back portion of the room. A standard double-sized bed, lacking in sheets and blankets for the mattress, but sporting a bookcase headboard, was positioned to his right, bracketed with a pair of nightstands supporting matched bronze lamps. To the left stood a wardrobe, which looked much like the rest of the furniture – a little battered and worn, but still perfectly serviceable.
John walked over to the nearest nightstand and clicked on the lamp, then toed out of his shoes. He sat his satchel on the floor, his jacket absently draped over it, then took a look at the contents of the wardrobe. There wasn't much: three sets of sheets, all in variations of blue and green floral prints; two waffle-weave thermal blankets, both well-washed blue, and an itchy-looking crocheted quilt, the zigzag pattern consisting of every color under the sun.

It took him all of five minutes to make up the bed with one of the sets of sheets and a blanket. He pulled his jumper off and balled it up to serve as a pillow, then stripped out of his flannel and jeans, hanging both on the small row of pegs bolted to the wall next to the wardrobe. Forgetting to turn the lights off, he was asleep moments after he laid down.

Violin music followed him into his dreams.

"This place is a complete nightmare," Sherlock said, glancing around John's pathetic little bedsit.

John, even though he agreed, winced a little. "Well," he said, hurrying over to where his magic-supplies were still spread all over and around the bed, "it's not usually such a mess."

"The mess is the only thing giving it any sort of personality," came the reply.

"Yes, well..." John wasn't sure what to say next, so he didn't say anything. Instead, he set about getting all the magical supplies packed back into their boxes.

Sherlock leaned against the counter that separated the living area from the kitchen. "Will this take long?" he asked, checking his phone for messages.

"No, not long," John replied, tucking the flaps of a cardboard box under each other. "Maybe twenty minutes."

"Good. I told Lestrade we'd be by around noon."

John glanced at his watch. "It's only half-nine."

"Twenty minutes to pack, another twenty to get back to Baker Street," Sherlock ticked off points using his fingers. "I am assuming a shower would be something to indulge in once we get back and you've clean clothing to change into, so thirty minutes for that. And I am further assuming you would wish to be unpacked today as well."

John shrugged. "I've lived half my life out of a duffle bag, Sherlock. Waiting to unpack isn't going to bother me any."

Sherlock simply arched an eyebrow at him. "You're just stalling."

Knowing he'd promised the younger man he'd cast othersight on him as soon as he was unpacked, John grinned. "You sure you really want me to? I mean – you see everything as it is. Wouldn't do for you to go overloading that brain of yours."

"You deal with it," Sherlock replied with a little shrug.

John scooped a handful of loose pebbles of various semiprecious gems back into their leather pouch and tucked it into one of the wooden boxes spread over his bed. "Yeah, true enough. But I was also born this way. I've only ever had my othersenses stripped once, and the experience was enough to tell me that I never wanted it to happen again." He moved on to the next box, also made of wood, but containing pop-up rows of padded holders in which identical glass rubber-stoppered jars of
various liquids were stored, each jar sporting a handwritten label. The only jar ‘missing’ was the confusion oil he had in his satchel – which he’d left back at Baker Street, along with his jumper. "It wasn't losing the sight that bothered me so much – it was when it came back."

At Sherlock's silence, John looked up from his packing. He could practically feel the skepticism pouring off of the younger man. "Have you ever spent a couple of hours blindfolded?"

"I hardly see how that's relevant."

"It's the only thing I can think of that even comes close to what othersight is, though. So, have you? I don't want the details on why, just a yes or no is good enough."

Sherlock nodded, slowly.

"And when the blindfold was removed, did you notice how much more intense colors seemed to be?"

"Illusory, caused by the deprivation of mankind's most-essential sense."

"I know that," John's voice carried a hint of impatience. "I know it's all in your mind, but it doesn't change the subjective experience, now does it? Go around for a while without sight, and when it comes back, it all seems somehow more than it was before. It's a lot like that – othersight, I mean. Only it's about a thousand times more intense."

The look he got in return was still disbelieving, but John gave up trying to explain it. He'll see what I'm talking about soon enough, I suppose. I don't think that even mentioning the fact that the last three people I saw have othersight cast on them fainted from the experience would be enough to dissuade him. It's something he's going to have to see for himself.

It took about ten of his prophesized twenty minutes to get the wheeled, hard-sided brown suitcase repacked with all the boxes of his magical whatnots.

That done, he moved on to the rest of the flat. Retrieving his duffle from underneath his bed, he stuffed his pillow into it, then headed to his desk. Opening the bottom drawer, he quickly had his clean socks and underwear transferred into the bag. Next came the top drawer. His laptop and charger were set aside on the desk’s surface – he had a carrying case specifically for it. His jar of Scrabble tiles tucked nicely in his jacket pocket. And then there was his Browning.

That’s what I forgot to grab last night! I got so sidetracked by the magic, I completely forgot about the gun.

John shrugged. "Half the officers there have all done the same thing. Nobody was going to turn in anyone else. Besides, if I remember rightly – which may not be the case, they were pumping me pretty full of morphine at the time – it was Bill Murray who packed for me, and even if it weren't unofficial standard practice, he would rather lose a limb than rat out a friend; he was my primary
nurse and is the only reason I'm still breathing right now." He tucked the gun into the duffle, then zipped the clip into an outside pocket of the bag.

"This may not have occurred to you, but have you thought how you're to obtain more ammunition for it, should the need arise?"

John nodded and double-checked the desk. _Good, not forgetting anything this time._ "I've thought about it," he said, heading for the closet between the kitchen and bath.

Sherlock followed. "And?" he prompted, resuming his leaning posture against the kitchen sink.

"And you needn't worry about it. If I wind up needing to restock, I'll simply let you know how much you owe me." John tucked a stack of t-shirts into the duffle, followed by his olive green jacket, and then moved on to his impressive collection of jumpers.

"And why would _I_ pay for your ammunition?"

"Because, the way I see it, you wouldn't've asked if you didn't plan on using it." A small smirk twitched the corners of Sherlock's mouth at the correct deduction. "It's only fair you replace what you use. However," John paused and leveled a stern look at his new flatmate, "it will take some time, so please take that into consideration before arbitrarily absconding with my pistol, yeah?"

"How much time?"

"Between two and three weeks," John replied without hesitation, then returned to his closet. Next came his flannel shirts.

"No way to expedite that?"

John shook his head. "Nope. Only a week in the mail, but the rest of the time's to allow the shipper to get everything together."

"Hmm…"

_Why do I not like the sound of that?_ John continued putting his clothes in the duffle, finishing up with the flannel shirts and moving on to his jeans. "Okay, what was the 'hmm' for?"

"Oh, nothing, just an idle musing."

Jeans done, next came his pajamas. "Out with it already, Sherlock."

"Is ammunition the only stupidly-illegal item you obtain from this shipper?" Sherlock looked far too thoughtful for John's liking. "It is always best to know one's options."

"Considering I don't even want to ask, the answer is yes. Bullets are the only semi-illegal item I ever ask for. And no, before you ask, I'm not putting you in contact with them. _Ever._" John was tempted to use Captain Watson and make a 'suggestion' that Sherlock forget it, but he decided to keep that in reserve. _Just in case._ His spare washcloth and towel were next, and finally, the quilt his mother had given him while he'd still been in hospital. It was far too big for a twin-sized bed, but would do admirably on the double in his room at Baker Street.

"Pity," Sherlock said as John stepped into the bath.

"Not really," John replied, retrieving his shaving kit from under the sink and his toothbrush from the holder bolted to the wall. He snagged the half-empty prescription bottle of oxycodone out of
Sherlock's curious hands and shoved it in the duffle, as well; it had been on the back of the sink until the detective had spotted it. *Wish I didn't need to have it. Wish I'd never needed it to begin with, but it's probably a good idea – just in case what the leylines did or are doing winds up being a temporary thing.* He'd used the last of his shampoo yesterday, and so didn't have to bother with trying to secure an open bottle in his duffle. But he did wrap his bar of soap in his other washcloth, and bundled it into his towel from the day before. A quick scan of the room confirmed that to be the last of it.

Tugging the drawstring on his duffle closed, John hauled it out to the main room and sat it on the floor next to his suitcase. His cellular charger he tucked into a pocket, along with his coffee mug. He thought for a moment. *Don't believe there's anything in the kitchen I really need to take with me. There's only a couple of teabags left, and all that's left in the fridge is a bottle of beer. I'm not pocketing a bottle of beer.* He snagged his laptop case off of the counter and slid his computer and its charger into it.

"Think that's everything," He said, settling the shoulder-strap for the computer case across his chest. "I've got a few things in storage, but there wasn't any room for them here. I'll see about retrieving them later this week."

Sherlock didn't reply, but did immediately head for the door. John sighed a little and stooped to shoulder his duffle, then extended the pull-handle for his suitcase, thankful once more that the bedsit was on the ground floor and that there weren't any steps or ledges he had to go over. By the time he caught up with Sherlock, the man already had a taxi waiting. John tossed his duffle into the seat next to Sherlock, then wrestled the suitcase into place. *How am I going to get this monstrosity up all those stairs?*

It turned out to be something of a moot point – on arriving back at 221B, Mrs. Hudson informed him that the house's original dumbwaiter was still functional. The suitcase fit – barely – but it kept him from having to try and haul it up two rather steep flights of stairs.

Figuring he had a little time to kill, John busied himself by putting his clothes in the wardrobe. It lacked any place to hang hangars, but had copious amounts of shelf-space, along with three large drawers under the shelves. His olive jacket joined his black one on the pegs next to the wardrobe, and the quilt his mum had made looked lovely spread across the bed, supporting his pillow. His phone charger got plugged into the outlet behind the right-hand nightstand while the charger for his laptop was connected to the outlet nearest the desk, with the computer itself on the desk. *Do I still have that old office chair in storage, or did I give that away before my last deployment?* Even though his leg was feeling more like it was supposed to, nobody in their right mind willingly used a metal folding chair.

Checking his watch, he found that it was still only ten-thirty. John opened his spell-component suitcase and rifled through the tightly-packed boxes until he located a midsized black plastic case, slightly smaller than the average household toolkit. He also grabbed a piece of chalk, a couple of thumbtacks, a length of string that had a small lead weight tied to one end, and a pocket-sized laser level. On his way out to the landing, he snagged the folding chair, too.

Flicking the switch to turn on the overhead light – the only window was on the north side of the room and yielded very little light on such an overcast day – John took a long look at the wall next to the bathroom door. Unlike the landing downstairs, and the entry hallway on the main floor, this particular bit of the house had no wallpaper. Instead, it appeared as though whoever had last renovated the building had chosen wooden paneling instead.

He nodded to himself, then selected a point midway between the bathroom door and the corner that
fused with the wall containing his bedroom door. He unfolded the chair at the appropriate spot, then used the level to pick a height even with the door frame for the bathroom. He marked a tiny 'X' on the wall with his chalk, with a second one approximately thirty inches to the right. John switched off the level and clipped it to his belt. Next, he wound the free end of his weighted string around the point of a thumbtack and pressed into the center of the first 'X', letting the string unravel and hang straight down. Using the string as a guide, he chalked a straight line from the 'X' down to the floor. He repeated the procedure on the second 'X', then connected both vertical lines with a horizontal one, once again using the string – this time stretched between a pair of tacks – as a guide to keep the line straight and even.

With the outer edges chalked into place, he removed the tacks and string. Sliding the chair out of the way, he moved the toolkit from the floor to the chair and opened it. It contained a battery operated dremel tool, with nearly three dozen bits. He selected one of the tungsten carbide ones – the one he always thought looked rather like a pencil cap eraser – and set it in place. Only slightly holding his breath – the last time he'd charged the battery had been years ago – he switched it on. A bright whirr let him breathe again. Setting the tip against the first chalk line, he set about sanding a shallow semicircular groove into the paneling of the wall, taking care not to let it go too deep; he had no idea how thick the paneling was, after all, and he really didn't want to be putting holes in the walls.

The sound of the stairs creaking alerted him to his new flatmate's arrival. "I thought you'd be unpacking."

John flicked his right hand vaguely in Sherlock's direction. "Like I said, unpacking can wait. Some things are more important."

"Such as?"

John was pretty sure that meant 'what in the bloody hell are you doing?' and so explained, "Such as getting a gate anchor set."

"Pardon?"

"A gate anchor. Basically, as long as I have a piece of chalk, I can always come home."

"And how, exactly, does that work?"

John glanced over. Sherlock was leaning against the stair rail. "How? Magic." He honestly couldn't resist the answer. Sherlock rolled his eyes and let out a slightly disgusted, yet impatient noise. John smirked. "It's… Really hard to describe. Once I get the anchor point set, afterwards, I can draw a door, step through it, and come out here. Or I can use this one," he nodded to the rectangular outline that lacked a knob-circle to make it even vaguely doorlike, "to access any other gate anchor I've been given permission to use by its creator."

"Teleportation?" Sherlock drew the word out into its individual syllables, making almost sound as though he were trying to say something completely different – and likely in another language.

"Not exactly," John finished what he could reach without the aid of the chair and started on the second vertical line, going up from the floor. "Way I read it in all the sci-fi books, teleportation's instantaneous. Gating isn't. Yes, it's extremely quick, literally like just walking through a door from one room to another, but it still takes time. And – whatever you do – never keep your eyes open. It's slightly nauseating, even with them closed, but open? It's downright hellish."

"You didn't have one at that place you were staying."
"Nope," John agreed. "Always knew the bedsit was going to be short-term. No sense in going through the effort of installing a permanent gate anchor in a place I wasn't going to be staying."

"There is no guarantee you'll decide to stay here, either," Sherlock pointed out. John could hear traces of that odd insecurity he'd seen in the man the night before bleed into his words.

John turned off the dremel and faced Sherlock. He cleared his throat, then said, "I don't plan on moving anywhere else. Even if you decide to move on, I'm doubtful I will – it's not every day you find a flat this nice sitting right on top of London's second-strongest leyline. I'll put up with quite a lot, just for that privilege." Something that looked quite a lot like disappointment flashed across Sherlock's face, almost too quick for John to catch it. "Besides, the company's good. And where else could I fall asleep to the sounds of concert-level violin, unfiltered through speakers?"

The expression on Sherlock's face softened slightly. "I should probably warn you – as it hadn't yet come up in conversation – I've been known to drive people off. Even those who put up with the violin tend to get rather sick of coming across my experiments."

"Well, I'll cut you a deal on the experiments," John said, internally congratulating himself on having actually gotten something right about his new companion that he hadn't been told outright. "I'll leave them alone, if you leave my magic alone. I've got a list of setspells that need cast, and some of them require charms to be set at specific points and can't be disturbed, or the spell fades."

"My last flatmate on Montague Street took exception to the severed hand in the deli drawer of the refrigerator."

John shrugged. "If you manage to get a hold of another one, try to make sure the man was hanged for murder, first." Sherlock blinked slowly at him. "With the proper preparations, it makes a rather… unique candle holder called the Hand of Glory."

"So, the experiment I have going concerning the explosive properties of vitreous humor when exposed to microwave radiation under pressure…?"

John made a 'whatever' motion. "So you put eyes in the microwave, so what? Mike, Erin Connelly, George Peters, and me once duct-taped a cadaver to the ceiling of Professor Morisen's lecture hall and rigged it to crash down halfway through a gross anatomy lecture."

"I've been reliably informed that both practical jokes and puns are considered to be the lowest forms of humor." John could tell, despite the dry tone, that the younger man was fighting back a grin.

"Ah, yes," John airily agreed. "I'd heard that, too, but when you can do both…"

They managed to maintain silence for a beat before simultaneously dissolving into laughter.

Making their way through NSY, John kept getting odd looks thrown his direction; but whether that was because of who he was with, because of the fact that his companion was carrying a bright pink suitcase, or because of the fact that he kept getting distracted whenever someone's 'lucky charm' happened to be more literal than they believed… Well, John couldn't say for sure what the cause was. He just found it slightly irritating. Hence, he was more than a little grateful to finally reach DI Lestrade's office.

Lestrade closed the door behind him and gestured to the chairs facing his desk. "Have a seat," he said, flopping into his own. Even to John's non-Sherlockian – Sherlockian? Brain? Seriously? John twitched slightly, dismissing the thought with, Well, what else would you call it? – eyes, it was obvious that the detective hadn't yet had the chance to do more than catnap since the night before.
"Long night?" John asked sympathetically. Sherlock rolled his eyes.

Lestrade just nodded. "Yeah – with a right royal headache on top of it all, too. The man you two caught last night… He died in custody while we were questioning him."

Sherlock's interest sharpened. Very carefully not looking at John, he asked, "How?"

"Brain aneurysm apparently," Lestrade replied. "I just got the report back from Dr. Hooper over at Bart's."

"Did he tell you why he killed those people?" John quietly asked, his mind trying to figure out if the compulsion spell he'd set might have had a hand in the man's death.

Lestrade nodded. "There were two reasons, so far as we could tell – the man was babbling something fierce. Firstly, he kept on about how he'd managed to outlive four people. I'm guessing he knew about the aneurysm."

"Hardly a deduction – of course he knew about it. He'd likely been told about it three years ago," Sherlock said, unable to hold his tongue.

"How d'you figure that?" Lestrade allowed himself to get side-tracked.

"His clothes were freshly laundered, but all were at least three years old, so he certainly wasn't planning ahead." Sherlock leaned back in the chair with a 'so there' expression.

"And the second reason?" John asked, wrenching the topic back around.

"Money," Lestrade said. "He claimed to have a sponsor – for every person he killed, money was supposed to go to his children. His son's nineteen and going to uni, his daughter is twenty-two and works as a hotel concierge here in London. Both of their accounts have been flagged and any large deposits are definitely going to be back-traced." Lestrade shuffled through some papers on his desk before locating a yellow legal pad. "Mr. Hope – the cabbie – he claimed he'd had the idea floating around the back of his head for quite some time. Becoming a killer, I mean. But he said that he wasn't sure how to go about it, then went on to mention a name." He looked up at Sherlock. "Moriarty. It mean anything to you?"

John's new flatmate leaned forwards and gestured for Lestrade's notebook. Glancing through the notes, he shook his head. "Not a thing," he said. "Who – or what – is it?"

Lestrade frowned. "That's just it – we don't know. Bastard died before he said anything else." He shifted in his chair. "Well, let's get the paperwork over with. Hopefully, I'll actually make it home for dinner tonight."

The three settled into giving their statements – in John's case, it was highly edited, with Sherlock's only failing to mention the flash of spelllight and laws-of-physics-ignoring-dust – of the events that had lead to the capture of one Jefferson Hope, former London taxi driver.

Much later that night, over Chinese take-away, John finally felt reasonably settled. Sure, he still had a few things in storage that he wanted to fetch, but the flat was now warded. Chalk lines drawn on the windowsills anchored setspells that kept ants out of the house. The faint hint of eucalyptus lingered in the air – a remnant of a similar setspell against roaches. A small bundle of mistletoe hung from the ceiling in the kitchen, with identical bundles bound with red silk ribbon were hung from each of the flat's fireplaces in order to guard against fire catching hold among Sherlock's book collection. Licorice twigs hung from the ceiling on fishing line in each corner of the flat, warding against break-
ins and robbery. Outside, a line of red brick dust lined the joint between the first and second step up into the flat proper, standing guard against anyone trying to enter with ill-intent. And on the mantle in the living room, right next to Yorick, was a hollowed-out egg, packed with cinquefoil, the holes patched over with red wax, to halt any malevolent magics anyone tried to aim at 221B or its occupants. Upstairs, the gate anchor’s outline was fully etched into the paneling. It had to sit for a couple of days for the blood lining the etching to fully dry, then John could fill the shallow groves with a combination of glue, crushed moss agate and turquoise, powdered peony blossoms and basil, and sawdust from a yew tree.

The leyline under Baker Street was still acting like some strange amalgam of housecat and mother-figure, but John figured he could live with her odd behavior if it meant his leg remained pain-free. *Hell, even if it wasn't acting weird, I'd likely still be here. Like I told Sherlock, it isn't every day a mage gets the chance to actually live atop a leyline.* He glanced at his new flatmate – Sherlock was busy dissecting an eggroll, he liked the filling, but didn't care for the wrapper. *And the company's more than tolerable. He hasn't flipped out about the magic, which is what I really expected. I can only count two people who didn't run screaming after a blatant demonstration of what I can do. Yeah, I think I'm really going to like it here.*

He pushed the thoughts away and dug back into his lo-mein.

Chapter End Notes

High John the Conqueror is an absolutely gorgeous flower – it's bright pink (fuchsia, really) with trumpet-shaped flowers (like jimsonweed or morning glory). More people need to cultivate it, if only for the color! There aren't many non-tropical flowers with that level of vivid pink, after all.

Okay, so that should do it for *A Study in Pink*. I don't know if, now that I've a whole chapterlet without using the source materials (much) I was still able to keep everyone in character. Now, I know the bit about the severed hand was a touch OOC for John, given his reaction to the severed head later in the show, but – this isn't *exactly* the same John as was shown in the series. His magical experiences would have given him at least some level of immunity towards Sherlock's random body-parts acquisitions, in my mind at least. If you disagree, please let me know why. Also, don't be shy about any other criticisms you might have – I tend to beta my own work, and as such, am prone to missing things. Also, if anyone sees a blatant Americanism, let me know (save for spelling – British spelling makes my head hurt) and I'll go back and fix it.

Until next time folks!
Settling In

Chapter Summary

A bit more 'between time' betwixt A Study in Pink and The Blind Banker.

Chapter Notes

In browsing through John's Blog, I found that not only did A Study in Pink happen at the end of January (year unspecified – and I've arbitrarily decided to set this during 2011, mainly 'cause John's obviously in his late thirties and I wanted a unique birthday for him), but that The Blind Banker didn't occur until late March. What did they do in the interim? I attempt to fill some of the gap in this chapter, then move on to TBB plot, hence the sudden introduction of dates at the beginnings of specific segments. And since this is AU, keep in mind some things are going to be… different – canon Nazis beware! Also, The Blind Banker is – by far – my least favorite Sherlock episode (mainly because there's no Lestrade – I love Lestrade), so it's going to get the least attention of all the episodes. I'm also going to warn y'all that I've taken a track the writers of the show ought to have taken: John, as an ex-Army doctor who did time in a freakin' war zone would have been able to see that Van Coon hadn't committed suicide, just by the fact that the gun (a Sig Sauer P226) didn't match the hole in the body's skull (a .22 is about the only caliber bullet that won't – normally – punch through a skull and .22-caliber Sigs are only slightly less rare than hen's teeth). Yes, this isn't magical knowledge, but it is something that John – even as presented in canon – should have known.

Warnings: All warnings from chapter one still apply. And do I really need to tell y'all not to try the othersight spell in real life? Good, I thought not.

Again, major thanks to Ariane DeVere for her tireless efforts in posting transcripts over at livejournal!

Nov. 11, '13 ETA: I finally found a fic utilizing the hover-to-translate option and pulled up the source code on the sucker. Now, I also have that nifty addition to my fic! I still left the footnote translations, just in case my novice HTML skills fail me (and for those of you who, for whatever reason, can't 'hover' a cursor).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Three: Settling In

Things must be done decently and in order. – Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes

February 1

John woke to the sound of his phone ringing. Peeling one eye open, he idly noticed it was far
brighter in his room than it should have been. He reached over and picked the phone up. *That can't be right.* The screen said:

Tue, 01 Feb. 13:47  
You have ONE missed call.

He scrubbed a hand over his eyes, dislodging granules of sleep-sand, and blinked. He refocused on the phone as the voicemail-alert chimed. It hadn't changed much.

Tue, 01 Feb. 13:48  
You have ONE missed call.  
You have ONE voicemail message.

"Damn," he breathed the word in total disbelief. *Last time I slept 'til two in the afternoon, I think I was sixteen.* Yawning, he stretched, receiving only a token complaint from his shoulder, then checked the call-log on his phone.

Missed Calls (13)  
1. Ajay Today, 13:47  
2. Harry Yesterday, 22:19  
3. Harry Yesterday, 21:20  
4. Harry Yesterday, 19:51  
5. Harry Yesterday, 17:23  
6. Ella Yesterday, 14:58  
7. Harry Yesterday, 12:34  
8. (Withheld) 30 Jan, 21:32  
9. Harry 30 Jan, 21:05  
10. Harry 30 Jan, 20:38  
11. Harry 30 Jan, 10:02  
12. Harry 29 Jan, 12:41  
13. Harry 27 Jan, 13:27

John winced at the visual proof of the number of times he'd ignored his sister the day before, then had the phone clear the list. He called his voicemail and listened while collecting clean clothes from the wardrobe. "Hey, John – it's Bea, Ajay's assistant? He asked me to call you. You know how he is around anything tech-related. Anyway, he wanted to know if you could come by the store sometime today. He's wound up about *something*, but won't tell me what. Ring back and let me know, okay?"

After telling the automated system to delete the message and disconnecting, he stared at the phone for a long moment. *Wonder what that's all about?* Shaking his head, he went back to getting dressed. *I suppose I'll find out soon enough.* After a quick shower, he headed downstairs, calling Ajay's business number. It rang three times before Bea answered. "Hanuman's Hideaway, how may I assist you?"

"Hi, this is John Watson. Is this Bea?" John spoke, striding through the living room towards the promise of caffeine in the kitchen. Sherlock glanced at him from his perch on the sofa as he went by.

"Oh! Hi, John. Sorry I missed you the other day," Bea replied.

"Yeah, me, too. Got your message," he grabbed the kettle and started filling it. "What's Ajay doing now?"

Bea let out an explosive sigh. "That's just it, John – he won't tell me! He was tinkering with that bronze statue of Ida – you know the one I mean?"
John turned off the tap. "Yeah," he said, his memory supplying him with an image of when Ajay had found the blasted thing. "I know exactly what you mean." He sat the kettle on the counter and flicked it on. "What did it do this time?"

"He won't say! He's locked himself in the coffee-nook with fully half the books we carry on portents and omens and won't bloody come out! All he'll say anytime I try to drag him away is 'call John and see if he can come by, please!'" Bea was panicking. From what she was describing, John figured it was either entirely warranted or a simple misunderstanding. It wouldn't be the first time a non-mage panicked over nothing.

John let out a sigh. "I'll be by in about half an hour, all right? Think you can handle it until then?"

"Thank you, John – he's really starting to worry me."

"Yeah, I can see that." Out loud, he simply said, "Don't fret. I know him – it's probably nothing."

"I can only hope," Bea replied. "See you soon, then."

John ended the call and tucked his phone into his pocket. "Going somewhere?" Sherlock asked from the doorway to the living room.

John nodded. "Yeah. But, I've time for a bit of breakfast first. Want some tea?" he asked, looking over at his new flatmate.

"Sure," Sherlock agreed, settling himself at the table. He nudged a Petri dish and peered at its contents for a moment. "You mentioned an Ajay – is this the same man who taught you?"

John nodded again, and set out the things to make two cups of tea. "Yes. His assistant just called. She thinks he's acting strangely and is worried about him, so I'll head over and see what's up here in a bit. You can come if you like."

Sherlock made an odd gesture with his head that was halfway between a nod and a shake, then opened the Petri dish and sniffed the contents. Frowning, he grabbed a transfer pick out of a chipped coffee mug containing an assortment of tweezers, pipettes, and other small tools, and scraped an infinitesimal quantity of the whiteish growth out of the Petri dish. John added two sugar cubes to Sherlock's tea mug, and simply watched. The brunette smeared the contents of the pick across a clean glass slide, added a drop of crystal violet stain, and centered a slide-cover over the drop before securing it in place on his microscope.

"Looking for anything in particular?" John asked, idly wishing the kettle would hurry up.

"Simply trying to ascertain whether or not certain materials present in the growth medium have any adverse affect on the development of Clostridium tetani," Sherlock replied, adjusting the focusing power of his microscope. "Thus far, no luck."

John winced. "I trust your tetanus vaccine's up to date, then?" Sherlock nodded. The kettle finally boiled. John made a mental note to check his own records. Sure, it was standard practice to give a booster whenever warranted – say, for example, when one winds up having a .50-caliber chunk of metal go tearing through one's left shoulder – but it never hurt to double-check. He poured hot water over the teabags in their waiting cups, stirred Sherlock's, and sat it on the table at his roommate's elbow, then sat across from him. "What have you tried so far?"

"The usual – arsenic, mercury, cyanide."

John blinked and wondered if there was any way he could get Sherlock to consent to doing his
experiments somewhere other than the kitchen table. Figuring it would likely be a lost cause, he resolved not to eat or drink anything that smelt of almonds or garlic – unless he himself had prepared the dish. Even then, I might not.

Sherlock was now staring at John over the eyepieces of his microscope. "What?" John asked.

"No lectures on the inadvisability of poisons in the kitchen?"

"Considering I keep hemlock and wormwood in the tea cabinet, I think that would be a bit hypocritical, don't you agree?" John sipped his tea and mentally reviewed his supply of herbs. I'm nearly out of everything, though. His bank balance drifted in front of his eyes for a split-second. Hmm… Might be able to do some minor restocking, but – even with rent here being less than the bedsit, I need to start looking for a job.

Sherlock's eyebrow twitched slightly and he went back to peering through his microscope. "You are… Singularly refreshing, John," he commented.

"I could say the same about you, you know," John replied, only slightly surprised to find that it was true. Not too many people I've told about magic can just take it in stride.

Almost as though Sherlock heard the thought, he asked, "So… Have you finished unpacking yet?"

"Mostly," John replied. "I still need to get the last of it from storage, but everything from the bedsit's been put away." And even though the flat didn't look it, Sherlock had also finished unpacking the day before. It was cluttered – and, if Mrs. Hudson were to be believed, 'messy' – but John didn't mind. He found it a nice change of pace from the ordered precision that had ruled his life since basic training. And if I can't quite bring myself to leave my own bed unmade, or my things scattered about, then well… That's just to be expected, isn't it? "Oh, I checked my supplies. I don't have a cat's eye quite large enough for othersight, so that'll have to wait a bit. However, I can show you something equally interesting, if you're willing?"

Sherlock scowled at what he was seeing in the microscope, removed the slide and placed it in a small, wooden box half-full of similar slides, and scribbled a note on the pad by his right elbow. "And what would that be?" he asked while writing.

"Gate travel," John replied, then finished off the contents of his teacup.

The fire of curiosity – something John could easily spot, having seen it looking back at him through the mirror on more than one occasion – flashed into life in Sherlock's eyes. He dropped his pen on the notebook and pushed away from the table. "What are we waiting for, then?" he asked, springing to his feet.

Chuckling, John took the time to set his teacup in the sink before joining a hyperactively bouncing Sherlock. "Grab your jacket," he said, heading back up to his room. By the time he'd collected his own coat and a stick of chalk, Sherlock had followed him up to the landing. He echoed his own posture from the day before in leaning against the balustrade rail, and was staring at the incomplete anchor carved into the wall.

"You said this," he gestured to the design – which now looked rather more like a door, complete with a Celtic-knotwork-style braid around the edges – "wasn't yet complete."

"It's not," John replied, shrugging into his coat. "Which is why we'll gate to Ajay's, but we'll have to come back home the regular way." Picking a bare spot of wall, he quickly sketched a rough door with the chalk. As he had done to evade Mycroft, he placed his hand over the illustration of a
keyhole, then rattled off the too-long-to-be-a-nursery-rhyme string of Hindi. As normal, the door – to John's sight – gained a three-dimensional presence.

He was just about to open it when Sherlock interrupted him. "May I?" he said, a hand extended in the direction of the invisible-to-him doorknob.

John let go and stepped aside. "The magic's set. Once it is, anyone can use it, so knock yourself out. You recall what I said, though, about keeping your eyes closed?"

Sherlock nodded and tossed a quick glare in John's direction that quite obviously said 'I'm not an idiot'. However, as the younger man's hand blindly groped for and located the knob, a flicker of trouble stirred in John's mind. Sherlock opened the door and stepped through before John could say anything more, however. John reached out to catch the door from slamming shut and thus ending the spell. *Damn it… He kept his eyes open, didn't he?* Sighing, he stepped through after his companion, wondering if Ajay kept ginger tea on hand.

He didn't notice Mrs. Hudson's face appear behind the rail surrounding the stairs as he stepped through the wall and across London.

Emerging in Ajay's flat above his store, the chime of the 'doorbell' ignored, John's suspicions were confirmed on finding Sherlock facedown on Ajay's paisley rug. *"I told you to keep your eyes closed."*

Sherlock groaned and grasped the carpet with his right hand – his left was still hanging on to his Belstaff. "Your warning was insufficient," he mumbled to the rug's weave.

Impressed he could open his mouth without vomiting, John headed to Ajay's kitchen and rummaged in the cupboards until he found a tin of ginger candy. Stealing a piece for himself, he unwrapped a second one and lightly charged it with healing magic. "Here," John said, kneeling next to Sherlock's head. "Eat this – you'll feel better."

The tiniest sliver of blue-grey peeked out from behind Sherlock's eyelids. He forced his hand to unclench from the carpet and shakilly took the sweet. Looking from it to John and back, he popped it into his mouth. "Can't make it worse."

John had to tap into his inner doctor to keep the majority of the smug 'I told you so' at bay, but patiently waited until his flatmate's greenish cast had faded back to his normal vampiric pallor. "Better?" he asked, offering a hand up.

Sherlock ignored it and carefully climbed to his feet. "Yes. I suppose a 'thank you' is in order, even though your warning was cryptic enough to simply trigger curiosity."

No stranger to backhanded gratitude, John let it roll off him. He was just about to indicate they head on down to the shop itself when Bea's voice sounded from the hallway outside Ajay's living room. "That you, John?" she called, then appeared around the archway.

"Morning, Bea," John smiled kindly at the woman who was approximately five years older than himself. "May I introduce my flatmate, Sherlock Holmes?" Sherlock stepped forwards, his eyes taking in the tallish woman with a single head-to-toe glance. "Sherlock, this is Beatrice Archer."

John wondered what details Sherlock was seeing in the tallish woman with her short, graying auburn hair, emerald green jumper, comfortable jeans, and well-worn trainers, then decided it didn't really matter. He didn't know Bea all that well; she had only started working for Ajay four or five years ago, and for the majority of that time, he'd had slightly more important things to be worried about.
"Ajay still in the nook?" he asked.

Bea nodded. "Yes, and he won't come out at all. Kept telling me to call you – so I did."

"All right, I'll see what it is he needs. You ought to go back to minding the store," John replied, heading through the arch and down a long hallway bordered by storage rooms on either side. "I've no idea how long this will take." The stairs down emerged in Ajay's store, right behind the cash register. Bea took up a position by the register, watching as John and the newcomer worked their way through the mazelike racks to the bright little area Ajay called his 'coffee nook'.

From just behind John, Sherlock's eyes quickly took in the ambiance of the rather dark store, noting the racks of candles, incense, and non-Christian statuary, immediately knowing just what sort of store John had brought him to. The ease with which the man navigated spoke of longstanding familiarity. A thousand little details were noted, then dismissed as unimportant as the majority of his mind focused on what he'd just experienced with the 'gate'. Holding on to an invisible doorknob – smooth, cool, would have said bronze or brass had it been a case of identification sans sight – had been odd enough, but it had taken him more willpower than he would have otherwise assumed to take that step through what looked like a solid wall. And of course he'd kept his eyes open. What had followed next was a prime example of the plasticity of subjective time: Actual time elapsed could only have been a split-second, yet it had felt like an eternity. The world had seemed to melt, reforming into what seemed like a photographic negative, but the colors hadn't been right for that to be a truly accurate description. A truly disorienting sensation of sudden movement – simultaneously both upwards and downwards – caused the not-a-negative image to stretch and skew around him, breaking apart into a thousand individual points of light on the darkest of purple backgrounds, overlaid with what Sherlock could only describe as an amoeba of pulsating electric blue, stretched so far holes and tatters had appeared in the organism's structure. It was bright and beautiful and breathtaking, but it was also disturbing and distressing and wrong in a way that Sherlock had never before experienced. Then there was an inaudible but very physical snap and everything inverted and coalesced and he was suddenly standing in an unfamiliar sitting room.

"Ajay?" John's voice dragged Sherlock away from his attempt to understand what he'd experienced. "You called for me?" John pulled a few strands of a bead curtain aside, revealing a bright little sitting area, filled to bursting with pillows and cushions and books.

Ajay, sitting on the blue-and-green paisley print chair, his nose buried in a book, didn't even look up. He tossed a small metallic object to John. "Take a look at that, John," he said.

John peered at the object. It was an oval, three inches long and about two inches wide, made of a golden-colored metal – John figured it was probably brass – and sported a raised Celtic knot pattern on one side. He flipped it over. The reverse showed a stylized line-etching of the all-seeing eye. "Okay," he drew the word out, "what is it?"

"A medallion," Ajay replied, snapping his book shut and finally looking up at his student. He noticed Sherlock standing just behind John and blinked. "Who's this, then?"

John, still looking at the medallion, stepped into the room. "Ajay, this is Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock, Ajay Singh." Ajay nodded at Sherlock, but didn't get up. "But this is a what now?" John asked, handing the metal oval back to Ajay.

"A medallion," Ajay repeated, refusing to take it back. "And, so far as I can tell, it's yours."

John blinked, then looked a little more closely at it. "Uh… No, I've never seen it before." Sherlock held his hand out for it, and John unthinkingly handed it over.
Ajay shrugged. "Doesn't mean it isn't yours," he said, setting his book aside. He stood and climbed over a pile of books to the coffee urn in the corner. "There's been something building lately. I've noticed a tension growing; Mary's even felt it."

John's interest sharpened. "She's back?"

Ajay shook his head. "Been and gone, mate – she was here for about a month, back in late August and early September."

John had been shot on September twentieth, and had been back in London as of September twenty-fourth. "Just missed her, then," he couldn't have masked his disappointment even if he'd tried, which he didn't.

Ajay poured three cups of coffee. "How you take it, Mr. Holmes?" he asked.

"Black, two sugars, please," Sherlock replied, studying the medallion. "This looks as though it was dug out of the banks of the Thames; somewhere around Hungerford Bridge, unless I'm much mistaken."

Ajay finished fixing up the coffees, then handed one to John and a second to Sherlock. "Just under it, in fact," Ajay confirmed, picking up his own coffee and sipping at it. "After you dropped by, I felt Ida calling my name, so I went downstairs and had a little chat with her."

John groaned. "Haven't you learned yet nothing good ever comes of that?"

"Hey! Don't be insulting my lady, Watson!" Ajay's tone was somewhat sharper than he'd intended, but he couldn't bring himself to apologize for it. "You can't blame her for what happened last time. All she did was let me know what was going on so I could come save your sorry hide."

John winced and rubbed the back of his head. "Sorry, Ajay – you know I didn't really mean it like that. Far be it for me to ever insult a lady."

Ajay looked slightly appeased, though still a little irritated. "Anyway, she told me to go looking and that's what I found."

John glanced at Sherlock. The 'consulting detective' seemed to be following the conversation rather well. After figuring out Harry walked out on Clara – not to mention her issues with booze – just from her phone, it's no wonder I'm not surprised. "Still doesn't explain why you said it's mine, though."

"You're the only one I know who favors Celtic knotwork, John," Ajay replied, as though that explained everything. To him, it likely did.

Knowing he wasn't going to get a better answer than that, John let out a little sigh. "Fine, so it's mine – that still doesn't explain what it is."

Ajay gestured to the books. "And I've been trying to figure that part out, but so far, I haven't had any luck. Maybe you'll do better, yeah?"

February 2

John lounged in 'his' chair by the fireplace in the living room, his laptop taking up space on his knees. The leyline, as had become normal, had a tendril coiled around his ankles. Sherlock had run out not long after sunrise, muttering something about clay-content of potting soil or some such. John
hadn't yet had his morning tea and so hadn't really been listening. It was nice to have the flat to himself for a bit. Had he not missed his appointment last week, he would have had to suffer another scolding from Ella regarding his lack of updates to his blog the day before. However, with missing the Tuesday appointment, they got shifted so he wasn't due back until Saturday. *I might as well make sure she's got nothing to gripe about this time.* He logged on to his blog and started typing.

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**My new flatmate**

So, I went and looked at the flat. It's a fantastic location, and the flat itself is as close to perfect as I could have hoped for. When I saw it, Sherlock had already moved in so it was a bit of a mess. Still is a bit of a mess to be honest, but it's a nice change from where I was before.

And the madman himself? He's fascinating. Arrogant, imperious, pompous. But he's got this weird streak of vulnerable insecurity running through it all that actually makes him more likeable than he'd otherwise be. He's not safe, I know that much. I know I'm not going to be bored and I doubt we're going to be arguing about whose turn it is to pay the gas bill or what we're going to watch on the telly. And yeah, he is probably most likely definitely mad. But he plays concert-level violin, so he can't be all bad.

So I had a quick look at the flat and chatted with the landlady. Then the police came and asked Sherlock to look at a body so we went to the crime scene, then chased through the streets of London after a killer and wound up solving that serial suicides thing – which weren't suicides at all, but murders.

Since then, I got the rest of my things out of storage and met up with Ajay Singh, an old friend of mine. I'm now mostly moved in to the flat on Baker Street. I just have a couple of boxes left to unpack, but I'll get to those later today.

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He reread his post and nodded. It was sufficiently vague enough to not raise any eyebrows, so-to-speak. Once it was posted, he sat his computer on the small table next to the chair and busied himself with the morning paper. It wasn't long before he heard the chime that alerted him to a reply to his post. Before he could set the paper down, a second chime sounded. Setting the newspaper on the arm of the chair, he pulled his computer back on to his knees.

*What!? Answer your phone!!!*

Harry Watson 02 February 09:47

*Please answer your phone.*

E Thompson 02 February 09:47

Smirking a little, he hit 'reply' for Harry's post. *If you'd quit calling me for stupid stuff all the time, I'd be more likely to answer when you call, now wouldn't I?* He posted the reply, then stared at the comment from Ella. He had to double-check the call-log in his phone to verify, yes, Ella had tried to reach him the day before. He hit 'reply' once more, then typed, *Sorry I missed your call. I forgot my phone when I went to pick up the rest of my things from storage. Was there something in particular you needed?*

He didn't even get the chance to move his computer back to the table before a reply came back.
Seriously, John! What's going on? Are you all right?!
Harry Watson 02 February 09:48

John sighed, then replied to his sister. I'm fine. In fact, I'm better than fine. You don't need to panic. He hit 'post' and his mobile rang. He wriggled a little to retrieve it from the pocket of his jeans and noticed it was Ella. He hit the little green button. "Morning, Ella."

"You certainly sound better," the therapist replied.

"I'm fine, really," he assured her. "But I assume you had a reason to be calling?"

"Yes, yes," there was the sound of computer keys clacking in the background. "I have had a family emergency crop up, John, and will be out of the area for two weeks. So, we need to reschedule our next appointment. Does Thursday the eighteenth at ten work for you?"

"Um, yeah," John replied. "Sure."

"I shall see you then, John," she said. "Take care of yourself."

"You, too," he said. "See you then."

After disconnecting the call, he sat the phone on the side-table and sighed. He rubbed lightly at his temples. Mandatory counseling – what a complete waste of time. At the very least, we ought to be allowed to chose our own therapists! You'd think, what with the sheer number of injuries involved that result in chronic pain, they'd be sure that any therapists on the list were of the opinion that chronic pain wasn't solely mental! It was an old argument, one he'd had firm opinions on even before landing with nerve damage himself. His computer chimed again, halting the stream of thoughts before they could develop into a sulk.

Didn't realize you were keeping a blog, John. I wouldn't have thought you were the type. As for what you said about Sherlock, and what happened, it doesn't surprise me one bit. Good luck, mate.
Mike Stamford 02 February 09:51

The well-wish had John smiling a little once more. "Thanks, Mike," he muttered, then decided the computer had taken up enough of his morning. He closed the lid and sat it on the floor next to his chair. Once more picking up the paper, he began scanning the headlines, only to be interrupted by his mobile's text-alert noise. "Oh, for the love of--" he snapped the paper down and picked up his phone. It was from Harry.

when u say ur fine & not to panic thats when i panic most

John sighed. I'm not going to get a nice, quiet morning, am I? he wondered, then hit 'reply' and sent, I honestly am fine. You don't need to worry.

"Yoo-hoo," Mrs. Hudson's voice came up the stairs, seemingly in response to John hitting 'send'.

"Good morning, Mrs. Hudson," John greeted the landlady as she walked through the door Sherlock had left standing open.

"Your mail, dear," she handed him a small pile of advertisements and a bill from the gas company, while looking around the cluttered living room.

"Thank you, Mrs. Hudson," John said, taking the stack and flipping through it. "How're you doing today?"
"Oh, fine," she replied, still not looking directly at John – everywhere else, certainly, but not directly at him. "Just fine, dear, thank you for asking." She picked up one of Sherlock's books and fidgeted with it before setting it back on the stack on the coffee table.

"Would you like some tea?" John asked, slightly puzzled by her uncharacteristic behavior. His own had long since grown cold on the side-table. He picked up his RAMC mug and made to stand.

Mrs. Hudson startled slightly, then said, "Thank you, dear, but no – I've left the kettle on downstairs, myself. I really should go see to it before it burns us all out."

She left before John could say anything else. That was… Odd. She's usually so friendly. What happened?

He finished standing, stepped out of the leyline coils, and headed for the kitchen. Depositing the mail on the table next to the microscope, and his mug in the sink, he walked out the side-door and down the stairs to flat A. He knocked lightly, hearing the sound of a radio playing quietly inside Mrs. Hudson's flat. "Mrs. Hudson?" he called through the closed door. "Are you certain you're alright?"

She pulled the door open after a long few seconds' worth of waiting and smiled falsely at John. "Yes, dear, I'm certainly fine. No need to worry yourself on my account."

Donning his very best 'concerned doctor expression', John frowned at her. "Please, Mrs. Hudson – I can tell something is bothering you. I'd like to help, if I can." A thread of magic wound through his voice; it was similar to the Captain Watson tone, but instead of urging blind obedience, it whispered of the promise to keep secrets silent.

Wrapping her arms around herself, she wilted a little. "My apologies, Dr. Watson, won't you come in?" she stepped aside. John joined her in her sitting room. The music from the radio was slightly louder, but the device itself must have been in the kitchen. "I'm certain I'm just being silly…" Mrs. Hudson trailed off, her eyes focusing on something slightly off to John's left and about a million miles away.

He laid a warm hand on her shoulder and surreptitiously herded her to her settee. She sat automatically. John sat next to her, angled so he could easily see her, and kept his hand on her shoulder. "Silly about what?" he quietly asked.

"Yesterday, I was bringing up the mail – there was a letter for Sherlock, and I thought it might be important…" she was still looking at something only she could see, but John didn't mind. "I saw – no," she corrected herself with a shake of her head. "I thought I saw something I couldn't possibly…"

"Was this in the afternoon, by chance? Around two o'clock or so?" John was pretty sure he knew what she'd seen.

Mrs. Hudson nodded. "I'd just gotten back from the market. I thought you and Sherlock were home. I had thought I'd heard you. But…" she trailed off again.

John shifted a little to put his face in her line-of-sight. "You came looking for us, heard us up on the landing outside my room, right?" She nodded, focusing on him for the first time all day. "And I'm guessing you saw us disappear, right?"

"Am I losing my mind?"

John smiled reassuringly at her. "Not in the slightest, Mrs. Hudson. We truly did 'disappear'."

She blinked in confusion at him. "How is that possible?"
John settled himself a little more firmly in his seat and began explaining. They were still talking when Sherlock returned home at six o’clock that evening.

February 9

It was shocking, really, just how easily John fell into the rhythm of life at 221B – experiments, middle-of-the-night violin, and all. Once everything was unpacked, all setspells were put into place, and his gate anchor set, he turned the majority of his attention to attempting to determine what the medallion might be. After researching it every way he knew how – both magically and through more mundane methods – he had to admit defeat. It was time to contact an expert.

To: m_morstan@EuropeanArchaeology.com.uk
Subject: HELP

Mary,

It's been a while, hasn't it? But I suppose that's only to be expected. It's not like I've had reliable internet access since the last time I was in London. I don't know if you've heard or not, but the Army booted me. I got shot and they sent me home. So, if you wind up back in London again any time soon I'll be here. Are you still working that site in Cyprus? Or has the institute moved you on to better things?

On to why I'm bugging you 'at work'. Ajay found a thing. Says it's mine though I never before laid eyes on it. I can't figure out what it is, though. It's an oval, about three inches long, two inches wide, and about a centimeter thick. Has a Celtic knot on one side and an all-seeing eye etched on the reverse. It seems too bulky to be a coin but doesn't have any points for attaching a pin or necklace chain. Ajay called it a "medallion". My new flatmate says it's made of brass if that helps, and it itself isn't magical but resonates quite like that pendant of yours. What was that thing made from again? I can't recall. Any help would be vastly appreciated.

In other news, my mailing address has changed (again). It's now 221B Baker Street, right here in London, and Harry gave me her old mobile, so I've her old number too. And the shrink I was assigned to see after being shot has me blogging. Quit laughing, it's not particularly funny. However, if you want to get a hold of me, you can through the website: www.johnwatsonblog.co.uk

I think that's all for now. I eagerly await your reply.

John

February 10

To: drjhwatson@memail.com.uk
Subject: re: HELP

John,

Always a pleasure to hear from you! And I'm sorry to hear we missed each other. Ajay tells me it was just a matter of a week or so, too. Yes, I'm still working the dig on Cyprus, but not for much longer. The higher-ups want me back in London soon to oversee work on what's assumed to be a structure of some sort just under the Thames (right outside MI6 HQ!). They got the C-14 dating back, and it's around 7K years old, which would make it the oldest structure in all of London, if that is indeed what it is and not just random wood, of course.
Now, what's this about getting shot? Why am I only hearing about this now? What happened? Are you alright? You were supposed to have been CAREFUL, you stupid sod! What were you doing that you got SHOT?

Ahem. Sorry.

And you? With a blog? Hahaha! You! You can't even get a photocopier to work properly, and you're blogging? Hahahaha!

Ahem again.

Okay, so Ajay found a strange little trinket and decided it belongs to you. From the description, there's not a whole lot I can say about it. Do you have any photographs? Or, if it's not pressing, I can take a look at it in person soon. I should be back to London no later than March 1st. That reminds me, if I do manage to be back in time, I'll buy the first round (even though it's your turn).

See you soon,  
Mary

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To: m_morstan@EuropeanArchaeology.com.uk  
Subject: re: re: HELP

What do you mean it's my turn to buy the first round? I got it last time. Remember? The Christmas party? That redheaded girl who was wearing the antler-headband threw up on Dr. Iverns shoes? Any of this ringing a bell?

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To: drjhwatson@memail.com.uk  
Subject: re: re: HELP

Hmm… I might remember something about that night. Specifically, something concerning that same redhead an hour earlier, the broom cupboard on the third floor, and you losing your pants.

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To: m_morstan@EuropeanArchaeology.com.uk  
Subject: re: re: HELP

OK. It's my turn to buy the first round.

And didn't we agree never to speak about that incident?

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To: drjhwatson@memail.com.uk  
Subject: re: re: HELP

Speak for yourself, Captain Three Continents.

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To: m_morstan@EuropeanArchaeology.com.uk  
Subject: re: re: re: HELP
February 14

To: drjh watson@memail.com.uk
Subject: Happy Commercialized Greeting Card Day!

I retain the right to keep my sources anonymous.

So, does 'Three Continents' have any big plans for tonight? I'm planning on a nice, romantic session with this lovely chap. He's quiet, but wholly engrossing and utterly fascinating.

To: m_morstan@EuropeanArchaeology.com.uk
Subject: Happy VALENTINE'S DAY
Attachments: thing1.jpeg, thing2.jpeg download all

How much do you want to forget you ever heard that nickname?

No, no major plans, which is a pity because my flatmate, Sherlock, is going to be out again tonight. He's spent the last three nights in the morgue at Bart's, trying to track down the source of some weird noises that have been freaking out the pathologist (a really lovely girl named Molly, by the way) who works there. It's been driving him, and me by extension, absolutely nuts.

And you're the only person I've ever known who could seriously say that spending Valentine's picking rock out of an ancient skeleton is in any way 'romantic'.

In any case, I've attached a couple of photos of that medallion. Let me know what you think.

February 17

To: drjh watson@memail.com.uk
Subject: Thing1 and Thing2? Seriously?

It would take more money than is currently available on planet Earth to make me forget that particular gem of a nickname, Three Continents. Even you have to admit it's better than 'Easy John'.

From what you've said on your blog (and, yes, I still laugh every time I picture you hunt'n'pecking your way through those rambling entries), your flatmate doesn't seem the type to be interested in a ghost hunt, so what's going on there? Is he trying to impress the pretty pathologist?

Without seeing it in person, I can't say anything with 100% accuracy, but it looks modern to my eyes. The medallion can't be any older than about 50 years or so – that particular version of the eye of providence was only put into use around 1810 and the Celtic design shown wasn't used prior to 1960 (it's a decidedly modern interpretation of more ancient symbols). If what you said about it resonating like my rhodochrosite point, then… Well, I'm going to need to see it in person.

I'm definitely going to be back by March 1st. Just got the confirmation from the institute today – my flight lands at Heathrow on Feb. 24, at six-thirty in the evening. Care to pick a girl up from the airport?

February 18
To: m_morstan@EuropeanArchaeology.com.uk
Subject: So I'm not that great at naming things. So sue me.

Oh, god. I'd forgotten that one. Thanks for bringing it up.

I'm getting better at typing, I promise. Mostly, it's because the phone Harry gave me has a regular keyboard, and it seems like everyone these days sends texts instead of calling (except Harry – she still calls me at least twice a day). I'm hopeful that I may even get to the point where I can type without having to look at the keys.

Yeah, Sherlock usually doesn't bother with 'ghost stories' but he's not trying to impress Molly so much as remain in her good graces. Any time she gets an unclaimed or unidentified body Sherlock usually winds up with pieces of it for various experiments. I don't think Molly blackmailed him into checking out the noises, but I can't be sure. She's the one interested in him, but he seems to not notice. How that manages to slip past him, yet he noticed she'd gotten a kitten because of a snag in her sock, I'll never understand. The source of the noises, by the way, was a pigeon that had gotten into the ventilation system. I have to wonder both at how it managed such a feat and at just what it was eating because the noises had persisted for a solid week before Sherlock looked into the matter.

Thanks for the info on the medallion. I hope we can come up with something slightly more useful when you see it firsthand.

And six-thirty in the evening? Are you kidding? There is absolutely NO WAY I'm braving rush hour traffic at the airport! However, I've got a gate anchor set. You're welcome to use it. That is, if you remember how.

February 21

To: drjhwatson@memail.com.uk
Subject: I'd say what was on my mind, but I'm a lady.

Of course I remember how to use a gate. You know the only reason I don't just gate home every night is because BBiWY. If someone spotted me in London when I'm supposed to be in Cyprus, and there weren't the customs records and such, it would cause such an awful stink.

So… Are you going to tell me the activation phrase? Or do I have to guess at it?

To: m_morstan@EuropeanArchaeology.com.uk
Subject: Big Brother is Watching You, Not Me.

Aut viam inveniam aut faciam.

I thought it particularly appropriate.

February 23

To: drjhwatson@memail.com.uk
Subject: As long as there's no elephants.

Ha! I see your love of puns has yet to die a slow, agonizing death. I'll see you tomorrow evening, John. If possible, could we have curry for dinner? I've not had any decent Indian food in months.
Sherlock could easily see that John was anxious. However, this anxiety was expressing itself in odd ways: John would sit, attempt to read either the paper or something online, then get distracted no more than five minutes in, sigh, and set aside whichever he'd been attempting to read, then he'd stare into the distance for a solid ten minutes, shake his head, and start all over again.

What do I know as fact? John has said – multiple times – that an old friend was coming over this evening. Mary Morstan, field researcher for the UCL Institute of Archaeology.

John reached to the side table and picked up his mug, only to find it was empty. Sighing for the umpteenth time, he sat it back down and refocused on the newspaper. Sherlock smirked. That had been the fourth time John had attempted to drink from an empty cup.

Now, 'old friend'. If there's a phrase in the English language more vague or fraught with more mutually-exclusive meanings, I've never heard it; save, perhaps, for the ever-present 'fine'. However, it is safe to assume that the sarcastic and negative connotations may be disposed of – the emotional overtone when John said the words was fondly nostalgic, not sarcastic or mocking in any way.

The distinctive chiming beep of a text message coming through John's phone interrupted the former soldier's repetitive behavior. He nearly jumped out of his skin, then scrambled to remove it from his pocket. A bright, childlike smile nearly split his face in two on seeing the message.

Miss Morstan, then. Sherlock glanced at the clock on the microwave. And only ten minutes later than expected. John quickly typed out a reply, then sprinted for the stairs up to his room. Sherlock followed at a more leisurely pace. Not a romantic interest, that much is clear from John's behavior when we are out. He's the sort wired to be monogamous; the sort who likely wouldn't even look at other women if he were in a relationship.

On reaching the landing containing the doors to the upstairs bath, John's room, and the aesthetically-pleasing design of the gate anchor, Sherlock leaned against the door frame to John's room and shifted his constant stream of John-data to the back of his mind and brought forwards the one on magic. He didn't need to wait long, only a moment or two, before the air surrounding the anchor point acquired a thick shimmer, like heat waves bouncing up off of pavement in summer sun. Heartbeats later, Mary Morstan stepped through the shimmer. The ghostly echo of a slamming door sounded as though through water and from very far away, snapping that shimmer out of existence with its noise.

"Mary!" John all but shouted, even as she echoed his tone in saying his name at the same moment.

Under the main file heading of 'John Watson' in his mental hard drive, Sherlock quickly created a sub-folder for Mary. Morstan stood a solid five inches shorter than John, even in her sturdy hiking boots, and likely only reached five feet, one inch tall while barefoot. She had long, board-straight blonde hair of a hue several shades lighter – and far more yellow – than John's, and it was patiently obvious that the white streaks in it were not grey, but the simple result of long hours under the Mediterranean sun. She had it pulled back into a tight ponytail that was none the worse for wear after her recent airline trip; Either she failed to fall asleep during the journey, or she took the trouble to freshen up prior to coming here. Either scenario is equally likely. I need to check the arrival time for her plane to accurately determine which is the case. Her face likewise showed evidence of sun-exposure, bearing a solid tan, numerous small brown freckles across the bridge of her nose, and a hint of sunburn. Her features were, altogether, rather plain, save that her slightly-too-large eyes were a clear and bright greenish-blue. A pair of plain gold studs graced each earlobe. Fourteen karat, hypoallergenic backing, possibly a gift. She also wore a silver chain around her neck from which a blood-red crystal point hung. Rhodochrosite. Rather difficult to locate, but not completely
uncommon, either.

She wore what was undoubtedly a variation of her standard ‘working clothes’: Khaki cargo pants with the option to unzip the legs and so have a pair of shorts, held up by a worn leather belt sporting a hand-tooled silver-and-turquoise buckle – spent time in the Grand Canyon area of the American southwest – topped with an olive-colored tank-top under a lightweight blue canvas jacket with numerous pockets and the sleeves rolled to her elbows. Her hands showed the distinctive calluses of someone familiar with long, tedious, hard work – had he not already known she was a field archaeologist, it would also have been easy to deduce. A battered grey backpack was slung carelessly over one shoulder, a button-pin secured to the visible strap which read We have enough youth; how about a fountain of smart? Sherlock couldn't help but agree with the sentiment. Lastly, her suitcase was similarly-battered, grey, soft-sided, wheeled, and big enough that the woman herself could have curled up within it with room to spare.

In normal circumstances, Sherlock would have immediately dismissed the thirty-something woman as inconsequential. She was utterly, utterly dull and ordinary and normal.

Yet, she was also a mage like John.

And so Sherlock couldn't simply write her off just yet.

John hadn't been aware of just how much he'd missed seeing Mary until she arrived. He hugged her in welcome, kissed her cheek, and then she smacked his arm and immediately began poking him. "Hey!" he complained, as she poked the extremely ticklish bundle of nerves in his side. "What gives?"

"You," poke, "were," poke, "shot!" She quit poking at him and stepped back a pace, letting her backpack slide off her shoulder and land at her feet. "I was just checking for holes."

"It's been five months!" John protested. "They've healed. Promise."

Mary glared at him. "You. Were. Shot," she repeated. "And nobody told me! You weren't supposed to get shot, John!" she punctuated his name by stamping her foot. "And what do you mean, 'they've healed'?"

John winced. "I mean any and all holes have healed," he said, trying very, very hard to be reasonable. "It wasn't just a graze, Mary – they wouldn't've sent me home if it were."

"Where?" she asked.

"Outside Kandahar," John replied.

One of Mary's eyebrows arched up halfway to her hair. "Not that where, you twit!" she smacked his right bicep.

"Oh, sorry," John might have pulled off the apologetic look, if it weren't for the fact that his eyes were distinctly mischievous. "My shoulder."

"Show me," Mary ordered.

John unbuttoned his red-checked flannel and slid his left arm out of the sleeve, then rucked up his t-shirt so the white cotton was gathered in a bundle next to his neck. The scar on his front wasn't all that impressive, just a circular indentation about the same circumference as a thumb with a small raised ridge surrounding it, located just below the collar bone. A pair of surgical scars traced angry red lines to either side of it, arching over his shoulder and leading to the far more impressive scar on
Mary let out a distressed noise, then stepped back into John's space. She reached up and lightly traced the scar on his front, then followed the lines around. She laid her hand over the exit-wound scar sitting in the center of a web of surgical lines, and closed her eyes. "Titanium scapula replacement," she murmured, "and… Fourteen pins. Oh, Johnny…"

"Hey, Mary," John whispered, reaching up with his left hand. He laid it gently on her cheek. She opened her eyes. "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

Sherlock could tell they'd forgotten he was there. Either that, or they simply haven't noticed me. From their interactions, he now felt reasonably secure in labeling the relationship. Close friends at the least, certainly closer than John is with his sister. If they've ever been romantically entangled, it was an amenable parting.

Mary leveled a watery smile at John. "I guess we'll both set off the metal detectors at the airport now, won't we?"

John let out a small laugh, knowing she was referring to a set of pins resulting from a badly-broken leg when they'd been sixteen, and set to straightening his clothes. "I suppose so," he agreed. "So, you know where you're staying yet?"

Mary made a visible effort to push aside her emotions. "Yes. The institute's springing for a hotel until I can find myself a decent flat." She cleared her throat. "For now, though… You had something you wanted to show me?"

John turned to lead the way to his room and stopped short on seeing Sherlock. "Oh!" a slightly sheepish expression flitted across his face. "Um, sorry. Sherlock, this is Mary Morstan. Mary, this is my flatmate, Sherlock Holmes."

Mary smiled at him, the expression one of honest friendliness. "Good to meet you," she said with a small nod.

Sherlock made a small 'whatever' gesture, and opened his mouth. John quickly shot him a warning glare, which Sherlock knew was meant to be a reminder of his promise to be on his best behavior. "The Pyla-Koutsopetria project is going well, then?"

Mary's smile brightened. "Certainly! Every season we're finding more and more. The latest finds are actually helping us cement the role of Pyla during the time of the crusades."

What followed was a long and intense conversation – during which John felt hopelessly outclassed, and both proud and irritated at Sherlock's ability to actually interact with someone in a manner other than outright confrontational belittlement – that trailed down the stairs and into the living room. Somewhere between Mary pointing out that her entire career was about noticing the 'little things' and knowing what they meant and Sherlock revealing that a knowledge of history was essential 'because it has all been done before', John gave up even trying to follow along and ordered takeaway.

Eventually, after all that remained of the chicken tikka masala and garlic naan were crumbs and smears of sauce and a half a container of rice, Mary brought up the medallion again. John fetched it from his room and handed it to her. She spent a full five minutes examining it, then handed it back to him. "It's new," she said. "More than that, though – it wasn't made by anybody."

John peered at the metallic disk and let out a small sigh. "You ever hear of anything like this before?"

Mary nodded, slowly, but Sherlock edged in and asked, "Excuse me? How can it not have been
made by anyone? And how can you tell?"

The blonde looked up at him, then glanced at John. John shrugged. "He's been told about our side-
line."

"I can tell because it's what I'm good at. I know it's new – less than a couple of months old, at the
most – and that magic herself crafted it the same way I know you over-paid for your sofa. You got
ripped off, by the way; the salesman may have called it 'Italian leather', but the cow who once wore
this skin," she patted the cushion she was sitting on, "lived in Texas."

Sherlock's eyes narrowed. "The salesman wasn't lying – I would have noticed."

She shrugged, "Then his supplier was the one lying."

Shoving aside the dubious origins of his beloved sofa, Sherlock returned the conversation to the
matter at hand. "You still haven't answered how you know."

Mary looked at John, seated on the opposite end of the sofa. "I thought you said you told him…?"

"I did!" John protested, then paused for a moment. "Well, I've gone over some of the basics…"

Mary let out a small giggle. "Which, in John-speak, means he's answered questions as you've
thought of them, right?" she moved her gaze back to Sherlock. At his nod, she sighed. "Okay, let me
see if I can't set you straight on a few details – mainly because I doubt they would have occurred to
Johnny-boy here," she nudged John's thigh with her sock-clad foot. Her boots were sitting under the
kitchen table. "With John as the exception, every other mage I've ever met can do a handful of spells
really well, typically all of the same type. Our mentor, Ajay, is particularly gifted at divinatory spells.
Penny Kapstan, a girl I met in Arizona a few years ago, is truly scary when it comes to travel spells.
And me? I've a knack for seeing the history of a place or object – it's why I wound up in
archaeology."

"How is John the exception?" Sherlock asked, taking a seat on the coffee table. John suddenly
became inordinately interested in studying his half-empty beer bottle, the red tint of embarrassment
flooding his face like fog.

"He's bloody good at everything!" Mary replied, friendly exasperation coating her words. "Honestly,
I don't know why he wanted me to look at the coin – he could have figured it out on his own."

"Not true," John protested. "I did look, but…"

"But you doubted what it was telling you," Mary finished his sentence. This time, her tone was
enough to tell Sherlock that doubt, specifically self-doubt, was nothing new to her understanding of
the ex-Army doctor.

"Didn't you have done so, too?" John countered, the light embarrassment fading. "I mean, I've
never even heard about magic making a physical object before!"

"I have," Mary volunteered.

"And so having you look at it makes sense," John said, a note of 'so there' threaded through the
words.

"So," Sherlock said, drawing out the word, "why, then, was the medallion created? And why did
Mr. Singh indicate that it belonged to John?"
Mary took a sip of her own beer before explaining. "I've only ever come across it a couple of times – a magic-made item, I mean. The first was when I was interning as an undergrad outside Cairo. We were excavating a smallish burial chamber and I found a side-corridor that had been bricked over. Would have missed it completely, but it practically screamed to be noticed with othersight – you've been told of othersight?" She waited for Sherlock's confirmation before continuing. "The side-corridor held some setspells tied in to the local leyline system. Basic stuff, for the most part – notice-me-not to shield it from robbers and a strengthening charm for the structure itself – but one setspell was particularly nasty. The mage who'd crafted it wanted to make sure nobody ever disturbed the tomb with malicious intent, so he set it up that if anyone ever entered that side-corridor with bad things on their mind, they'd be hexed with never-ending nightmares."

"And what was this ancient mage protecting?" Sherlock asked, filing away the knowledge that setspells could be used for more than simple pest-control or fire-suppression.

"Well, if you asked any of the others who worked that dig, they'd reply that it was just an empty room," Mary said, then took another swig of her beer. "Just another prime example of the Egyptian tomb-builders' love of dead-ends and false passages. However, it wasn't entirely empty. There was a small alcove in the northern wall of the room that supported a medallion not unlike John's. It was the same basic size and shape and also made of brass, though the imagery on it was decidedly different. On the raised side was an image of Thoth. I've no idea what was on the back of it – I wasn't about to trigger the setspell just to satisfy my curiosity."

"If you didn't touch it, how did you know it was magic-made?"

"I don't have to touch something to read it," Mary replied. "I'm not a ruddy psychometrist, you know. The history it showed me was… well, it was fantastic." The way she breathed the word indicated that it was also rather unbelievable. "I saw that it had been dug up from the banks of the Nile by a little kid who'd taken it to his mother. The woman thought the boy had stolen it and so had taken it to the nearest temple of Thoth and handed it over to the priests. Eventually, the coin made its way into the hands of the mage who'd laid the setspells on the tomb. The entire history of the medallion flashed through my mind in a matter of moments – I'm still sorting out bits of what it showed me."

John took her pause for breath to say, "I remember you telling me about that. Didn't you have a similar experience when you were in Choco Canyon?"

Mary nodded. "Nearly identical, except for the cultural differences. Same sort of thing, too – the medallion was secreted away from the sight of any but a mage and protected by setspells tied into the local leylines. The history of it, too, was nearly identical. Pulled out of the nearest river, wound up in the hands of a mage, and so forth." She finished off her beer and sat the empty bottle on the floor. "Now, as to it's purpose… John, you weren't far wrong when you compared it to my point," she gave the red crystal at her neck a small tug. "It's – from everything I saw with the other two – a focus."

John looked at the disc, turning it over and over one-handed. "A focus for what?"

"Tying leylines into spells, from what I've seen," Mary replied.

John didn't need to look at Sherlock to see the questions around him. "Typically, tying a leyline into a spell is rather… tricky."

Mary scoffed. "Tricky? Try damn near impossible!"

Ignoring her, he continued, "It makes it so that whatever spell it's tied to is permanent, constantly
renewing itself by the connection to the leyline."

"And as to why it'd be yours, well, I'd think that much would be obvious now you know what it's for," Mary said. John nodded absentmindedly, still examining the oval of bronze. Sherlock cleared his throat, but before he could say anything, Mary spoke. "John's got the strongest othersense I've ever heard of. Me, Ajay, the few other mages I've met in my life – we can all sense when something's magical, though it manifests in different ways. Personally, I hear it. A humming noise, not much different to that of electricity, but I have to practically be right on top of it before I notice it. But John? From what he's described, he's always seeing it or smelling it or feeling it."

John nodded again, still pondering the brass coin. "True. I have to actually block it out most of the time." The leyline below 221B chose that moment to send up its tendril. It wrapped around John as had become its custom, but this time, the narrowest point of the tentacle coiled down his arm, wrapping around his right hand and the medallion it held. John stilled and felt the coin grow warm. He saw it begin to glow a warm golden color that pulsed in time with his own heartbeat. The tendril patted his hand, then sank back to the main 'line.

"What just happened?" Mary asked. "Something… Wait, you live on a leyline!" She smacked John's right shoulder hard enough to bruise. "Why didn't you tell me!"

John closed his fingers around the medallion and grinned at Mary. "You really should've paid attention when you got here," he teased. "I noticed it before I even stepped inside the first time."

Mary looked at Sherlock and hooked her thumb at John. "See? That right there's what I was talking about."

February 25

As interesting as Sherlock found magic, and as much as both John and Mary wished otherwise, Mary had duties she needed to attend to, and so after spending the night on their not-Italian-leather-after-all sofa, she departed to the hotel her employer had arranged. Not long after bidding her farewell, Sherlock got a phone call from a potential client. Though John would have loved to tag along, his own phone had chirped out a reminder that his weekly session with Ella was scheduled for ten o'clock. And I really hope I can convince her that I don't need her 'services' any longer. Last time's smugness about being 'right' about the so-called 'psychosomatic' pain in my knee was bad enough.

So, instead of watching his flatmate figure out his latest mystery, John was resigned to an uncomfortable hour in Ella's office. He arrived at ten-to, and waited in his customary spot, idly flipping through a magazine on interior-decorating until Maggie, Ella's secretary, called his name.

"Good morning, John," Ella greeted him, then settled herself in her favored armchair by the bank of windows.

"Morning," John replied, sitting in the chair that faced her.

"How have you been?" she asked, the question always the same.

"Good," John replied. "Met up with an old friend yesterday. Hadn't seen her in three years. She just got back from Cyprus."

"It's good you're spending time with others," Ella said, marking something down in her notebook. John found it slightly humorous that Ella'd begun taking notes at an angle that meant he couldn't read what she was writing. "You side-stepped the question last week, so I'll expect an honest answer this
time: Are you still having nightmares?"

Not since I recharged my charm, but I don't think you'd believe that answer. "No," he replied. "Not since before I moved."

She made another note. "And how is that going for you?"

"Good," John said, knowing she'd only get worried if he told her about the sheer unpredictability of living with Sherlock – particularly the ongoing experiments and illegal body parts. "It's going good."

"We focused rather exclusively on other matters last time," she calmly stated, though John knew she was crowing inwardly about having 'proof' that chronic pain was all 'psychosomatic', "so we didn't get the chance to discuss it, but you noted in your blog post of February second that your flatmate was," she paused and checked her notes, "a 'madman'. Would you care to elaborate?"

John sighed a little. "If you've been reading, you should know what I think already. Sherlock's… well, Sherlock. He's exceedingly brilliant and not shy at all about letting you know so."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"Why would it? It's true." Anyone bothered by the truth ought not bother getting out of bed in the mornings.

Ella didn't answer his question. Instead, she said, "In the comments section to your entry on February ninth," that was the date he'd posted the details on how he and Sherlock had captured Jeff Hope, "he seemed to take exception to your view of events. Does he do so often?"

John shrugged, "I don't see how that's relevant."

"Living with someone who cannot – or will not – curb the sharper side of their tongues is far from a healthy environment, John."

He couldn't help it. He laughed at her. "Oh, please! What? You're thinking this is some sort of abusive relationship?" At her pitying expression, John just laughed harder. "That's just absurd! I'm a grown man. I can take a little constructive criticism. I saw that comment, too. All Sherlock said was that my version of events read like an adventure novel and that I should've focused more on his science! It's not like he was calling me stupid or an idiot." He very carefully didn't mention the number of times those particular epithets had been aimed his direction by his flatmate. He only means them when people simply don't see what he sees. And he doesn't mean them as insults, not really, more like simple statements of fact.

Ella took a moment to furiously scribble in her notebook. John forcibly regained control of himself. "Look," he said with a small sigh, "I've done everything you've asked of me. I'm not hiding in my room, I go out with friends, I'm living my life. I've not had any bad dreams lately. I don't even need the cane anymore!" He took a breath. "To be completely frank, Dr. Thompson, I don't think I'll be back next week. It's not as if I'm going to be sent back to Afghanistan again; the Army's done with me."

"I won't lie and say I'm entirely okay with that, but it isn't anything you can really help me with. When you introduced yourself back when I was still in hospital, you said you were supposed to help me readjust to civilian life – I think you've done that. Anything beyond that, and… Well, it really isn't any of your business."

John stood and headed for the door. He paused and looked back at Ella. "I'm sorry," he said, apologizing for the outburst. "But…"

She shook her head with a small smile. "No, John – I've been waiting for that, actually."
"Excuse me?" he turned around fully to face her.

"It's the easiest way to tell if someone really is doing as well as they claim," she explained.

"What? By picking at them until they snap and they tell you to sod off?"

She nodded a little. "Not precisely, but close enough. I think you'll do well, John, but don't hesitate to call me if you need me."

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February 28

John smiled contentedly. Despite the pouring rain, or rather, because of it, he was in a good mood. Slipping between raindrops, he ignored the icy breath of wind snaking down his collar as he walked purposefully towards the Tesco a couple of blocks from their flat. Tea, milk, bread, cheese... Anything I'm forgetting? He ran down the list of groceries they were in dire need of, but couldn't think of anything else.

The sound of a car horn to his immediate left startled him out of his thoughts. It also shattered his concentration, so the rain quit ignoring him and had his hair plastered to his skull in a matter of moments. He looked over and sighed. The black car was another Non-Descript Vehicle™, and John could see Anthony behind the wheel. He walked over and stood next to the window for the back seat. The beautiful woman whose name he still didn't know rolled the window down about three inches. "Your presence is requested, Dr. Watson."

John sighed. "I've got things I need to do today. Can't your boss just call me?"

She powered the window up and opened the door. "No."

So much for John's good mood. The woman slid over and he sat in her abandoned seat. "What's this about, then? Thought I told him I wasn't interested in his 'offer'," John buckled his seat belt as he spoke.

"I'm sure I don't know," the woman replied, turning her attention to her Blackberry.

John sighed and stared out the window as the car maneuvered its way into traffic. It soon became apparent that the car was heading towards Whitehall. I suppose that answers that question. So, Mycroft Holmes is some sort of government official... He gave a small internal wince. Perhaps I shouldn't've just disappeared like that. But I didn't know so at the time. Granted, John wasn't up to Sherlock's level of deductive reasoning, but he didn't really need to be; he could conclude that the man likely had something to do with state security, what with his access to CCTV and all, without needing someone to point it out to him.

Half an hour after being interrupted on his shopping-run, John followed the beautiful woman through a maze of blandly imposing offices and corridors until they emerged into one that seemed to serve as the master template from which the rest of the building had been struck. The décor was tasteful and expensive, but not ornate, and favored dull and uninspiring shades of paper, ecru, eggshell, and the like, coupled with dark woods. The overall effect was one of inoffensive overt intimidation. An atmosphere that can only be generated by governments, specifically the ones who like to think themselves fair and open-minded.

"Mycroft Holmes," John greeted the man, a hint of Captain Watson threaded through his voice almost without his permission.

"Dr. Watson," Mycroft replied, then gestured to a comfortable-looking wooden armchair with a
beige cushion. "Have a seat, please."

John stepped forwards, halting between the pair of identical chairs which faced the man's desk. "Why am I here?" he asked.

Mycroft sat, picking up a file-folder as he did so. He opened it and paged through its contents until he located what he was looking for. He handed a glossy, high-quality photograph to John. "I have a few questions," Mycroft said.

John looked at the photo. It showed the door of 221B and the entrance to Speedy's next door. That wasn't the most interesting bit, though – this particular photo showed Mary exiting the flat, John right behind her with her suitcase. "Doesn't this constitute stalking?" he asked, trying not to let anything other than minor irritation show on his face. Is this a threat of some sort? And if so, is he threatening me? Or Mary? And if so… What for? I mean, yeah, I did manage a minor bit of humiliation when we first met, but that wouldn't call for something like this, would it? And Mary? What could she have to do with this? But then again, what is this?

"Certainly not," Mycroft sounded slightly insulted at the prospect. "It is simply the only way I have to ensure my brother's safety – he won't allow a more direct form of protection."

A little of the panic that had been building within John managed to dissipate. "You keep surveillance on your brother?"

Mycroft nodded. "There are any number of unsavory individuals who would think nothing of causing harm to befall Sherlock simply as a means of getting to me. Sherlock, too, has a rather lengthy list of people who would dearly love to see him come to trouble."

Involuntarily, the corner of John's mouth twitched. "Sherlock doesn't need to come to trouble – trouble seems to have him on speed-dial."

Mycroft chuckled. "You might be right about that."

A little more of the unease in John's mind drifted away, only to be replaced by an equal amount of frustration. "You might have said something about this the last time we spoke."

"No," Mycroft replied. "At the time, you had yet to decide whether or not you would be moving in with my brother. Surely you can see why you were not informed."

John looked at the photo again. "So why tell me now? And if you were just informing me that you were watching, why pick this photo?"

"Anyone who visits my brother is checked by my security team," Mycroft explained. He gestured to the chairs once more. "Please sit, Dr. Watson."

Sensing this wasn't the power-play that had occurred in the warehouse – Not the same sort, at any rate – John settled himself on the edge of one of the chairs. "I can't imagine your team found anything of interest against Mary. I've known her all my life."

A small smile surfaced on Mycroft's face. "Typically hyperbole, but I am inclined to believe it in your case, Dr. Watson."

John shrugged. "Can't help being the truth – we were born at the same hospital, on the same day. I only have her beat by four hours. We lived next door to each other while growing up. Like I said – I've known her all my life. Still, though, you've not gotten to the point. Why this photo?"
"It isn't so much the individual, Dr. Watson," Mycroft said, leaning over to retrieve the photo. "It's the fact that there isn't one detailing her entrance to the flat which concerns my team." He flipped through the folder once more and withdrew two pairs of photos. The first showed Lestrade entering, and then leaving, on the day John had first visited Baker Street. The second showed the paper-boy arriving at Mrs. Hudson's door – what had once been the townhouse's back door – and then leaving with a handful of biscuits and a broad grin. "She arrived by means other than the doors into the building, and that is what concerns me."

"I can't help it if whoever you've got manning the camera ducked off to the loo at a bad time," John said, handing the photos back to Mycroft.

"My people work in teams for that reason, Dr. Watson. There is no way possible that they would have missed someone entering the flat."

"Obviously, they did."

"Or Miss Morstan found another way there," Mycroft countered. They stared at one another for a long minute before Mycroft spoke again. "I find it equally intriguing how her flight from Cyprus landed at Heathrow at six-thirty-two, yet," he found one more photo to show John. It showed Mary through the windows of the living room, "she was within your flat by six-forty-five."

Visions of being sequestered in some secret government lab flashed through John's mind. "I don't know what to tell you," he said, hoping none of his sudden fear showed.

"Perhaps the truth might be a good place to start," Mycroft suggested, his tone implying dire consequences if John failed to comply.

The fear John felt hit a tipping point and surged into anger. *I will not sit here and take this. Not from some bureaucrat drunk on his own power.* John shifted his awareness into othersight and felt about for the nearest leyline. It wasn't far – the merest trickle of a 'line ran not thirty yards off to the north, at the outermost edge of his ability to tap. Simultaneously reaching for that power-source and pulling all the inner strength he possessed into position, he spoke with the most-powerful version of Captain Watson he could craft. "You honestly don't want the truth, Mycroft Holmes. You will find valid reasons to any discrepancies such as these, you will not go digging any deeper. You will not interfere in my life. You will not interfere in your brother's life, not unless there is a real and valid risk to his safety. Understood?"

While John was speaking, Mycroft's face became placid and his eyes glazed and vacant. At the all-but-barked 'understood', he blinked, animation flooding his features once more. "I see," he said. "You are correct, that is one possibility I had not considered."

John wondered what it was that Mycroft thought he'd said, then decided it didn't matter. "Happy to help," he stated, getting to his feet. "But, if we're done here, I really do have things I need to get done today."

"Certainly, Dr. Watson," Mycroft replied. "Anthea and Anthony will take you wherever you need to go today – consider it an apology for wasting your time."

John considered the free ride a pretty fair trade, considering he'd just tinkered with Mycroft's perception of reality. He only hoped that the compulsion stood the test of time. He headed for the door. As he exited, he heard Mycroft hit the button for his intercom. "Patricia? I need Stetler and DuVall in my office in ten minutes!" John could almost feel sorry for whoever Stetler and DuVall were – *almost*, but not quite. *Serves them right for spying on normal people.*
It wasn't until he got home that he thought to wonder if Mycroft's office had any sort of security cameras.

**March 5**

"Oh, come on! That looks worse than the blue thing did!" John threw a kernel of unpopped popcorn at the television screen.

Mrs. Hudson tutted, "Come now, John – I think it looks nice. And it wasn't blue, it was *cornflower.*"

As had become customary for Saturdays, John and Mrs. Hudson were in her flat, watching horrific talk-show television programs. The latest one was a makeover program which both enjoyed, though for different reasons. Mrs. Hudson enjoyed the tips and tricks portion of the program, John liked poking fun at the 'contestants'. Sherlock also enjoyed his flatmate's newfound hobby – it guaranteed one morning a week where he could experiment without fear of lectures on noxious fumes or smoke.

The stench of rotten eggs drifted down the stairs and into Mrs. Hudson's sitting room. "What's Sherlock doing?" Mrs. Hudson asked, going over to the bookshelves next to her television and picking up a spray-can of aerosol deodorizer. She spritzed a generous amount into the air, masking the stench with a rather cloying orangey smell.

"No idea," John replied. "And with odors like that, I'm not too sure I want to know!"

**March 10**

The ringing of his phone dragged John out of a perfectly comfortable sleep. His room was still dark, so he knew without checking a clock that it was still the middle of the night. He picked up his mobile, just as it went silent.

Thurs, 10 Mar. 02:11
You have ONE missed call.

Before he could check the log to see just who called him so late, his phone started ringing again. He sighed and honestly considered hitting 'ignore'.

Call From:
Harry

He hit 'accept'. "Hello?"

"Oh, thank god – you're the first one to answer."

John didn't recognize the voice. It was female, upset, but it most definitely wasn't his sister. "Who is this? Why d'you have my sister's phone?"

"My name's Linda. Harry and me were out for drinks, y'know? Everything was going okay, but then something happened and…" the girl on the other end of the line started hyperventilating.

Visions of a million different ways that sentence could be concluded poured through John's head as he reached for the light switch. ...*and she had too much to drink and wandered in front of a night bus.* ...*and she caught sight of Clara and snapped and is now in jail for manslaughter.* ...*and the bar suddenly exploded, killing everyone inside, but I lived because I'd ducked out back for a cigarette.* Instead of allowing his panic to rule him, he simply grabbed his best Dr. Watson voice and soothed,
"Calm down, Linda. Please, tell me what happened to Harry."

The girl took several shuddery breaths before replying, "I think it was the nibbles. She'd asked for pretzels – most everyone else in the bar were sticking to the free peanuts. But she'd only had a couple, then she just couldn’t breathe."

"Harry's allergic to peanuts," John replied, still using the same tone of voice. "I'm guessing she wasn't able to use her epi-pen?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't know – we could've gone somewhere else," the girl babbled.

"Don't worry about it, Linda," John upped the power-content of his voice, wishing it worked as well over the phone as it did in-person. "Did you call an ambulance?"

"Yeah," she sniffled in his ear. "Yes, I did. They took her to A&E."

"Which hospital?" John asked, getting to his feet and walking to the wardrobe. After Linda told him, he said, "I'll be there in about forty minutes."

He was dressed in record time, and true to his word, arrived at the hospital exactly forty minutes after the call with Linda had ended. It wasn't difficult to locate her, even though he'd never met her before. Harry had a type – tall, red hair, brown eyes, and painfully thin. There was only one woman in the waiting area that fit that physical description. He approached her with a comforting smile. "Linda?"

She looked up from where she sat sprawled on an uncomfortable plastic chair. "John?"

He nodded. "Have they told you anything yet?"

She shook her head. "I'm not family. I told them you were on your way, though."

"Thank you," he said, "I'll go see what I can find out. You wait here."

It didn't take long to find that Harry had, indeed, suffered a severe allergic reaction, likely brought on by residual peanut oil in the serving bowl at the bar, and would be kept overnight for observation. Her doctor didn't anticipate any complications; it was just precautionary. By the time John had relayed this information to Linda, Harry herself had regained consciousness and demanded Linda be allowed to sit with her.

Harry also took a moment to thank John for 'riding to the rescue' – something which she hadn't done since they'd been kids. Must just be a remnant of nearly dying.

John was able to rejoin his bed before sunrise, though he didn't catch any more sleep. He resolved to call Harry later that afternoon. Just to make sure she's really okay.

March 18

A loud thunk, immediately followed by a shivery cracking noise startled John out of his book. He looked up to the windows and it didn't take more than a moment to discern the cause: A gray-on-black bird with a purplish-blue cast to its feathers had crashed against the right-hand window, cracking the pane. The bird itself had landed on the window ledge. John marked his place in his book and got up. Sliding the window open, John picked up the bird. Broken neck, he thought, then took a closer look at it. Jackdaw, he identified it. Member of the crow family. He closed the window and took the bird's body into the kitchen. He laid it on the table, then rummaged about in the cupboards.
The scent of cinnamon oil began to pervade the air around John, but he ignored it. Coming up with an empty jar, he sat it on the table next to the bird's body, then took a seat. It took him nearly two hours to strip the bird of primary and secondary feathers, which he saved in the jar. The rest of the bird's feathers, he took less care with, and disposed of them. He was about to start stripping the other unusable bits off the skeleton when Sherlock's voice interrupted him. "I trust that isn't supper?"

John let out a small laugh. "God, no! Though it would give new meaning to the phrase 'eating crow', I doubt this is what they had in mind." A fresh wash of cinnamon swirled on the air as Sherlock stripped out of his coat, answering the question as to where his flatmate had gone. "Did Molly have anything interesting for you?"

Sherlock sighed and flopped into his chair. "Sadly, no," he replied. "And Lestrade's had a slow week, too." He looked at the bird John was working on for a moment. "What of you? You doing anything fun?"

"Fun? Not particularly. If you like, you can do the next bit."

"'The next bit'?"

John nodded. "Yeah. Crows only have two spell components – feathers and bones. The rest can be tossed."

Sherlock looked intrigued. "I know where I can get some demestid beetles…"

"No!" John nearly shouted it. "You are not bringing flesh-eating beetles into our flat, Sherlock!"

"Why not? They'd be in a terrarium."

"Because they'd escape, and you'd get side-tracked on a case, and we'd come home to find the only thing left is Yorick over there," he gestured to the skull on the mantelpiece, "sitting inside a hollowed-out brick shell!"

"It was just a thought," Sherlock said, then fell silent for several minutes. "Okay, fine – hand it here. I'm bored enough to try anything at this point."

John slid the bird carcass over. "The long wing-bones and the skull are the most important parts. The rest of it… Well, I'm sure you'll find some use for it."

While Sherlock started dissecting the bird, John returned to his cabinet and rummaged about inside. "What are you doing?" Sherlock asked, as John extracted his wooden box of herbal spell components.

Rifling through the plastic bags for the right ones, John glanced over at his flatmate. "The cat's eye stones you ordered arrived this morning. That is, if you still want me to cast othersight on you."

Sherlock grinned. "Absolutely." He split his attention between extracting the wing-bones of the bird and watching John.

John grabbed the green marble mortar and pestle off the counter and moved it to the table, along with the two packets of dried herbals from the wooden box, then disappeared into the living room. He quickly returned with a small box that had come in the mail, then left once more to go up to his room. He returned after a couple of minutes with a leather pouch roughly the size of Sherlock's hand and an empty glass bottle with an eyedropper lid. The purpose of the pouch soon became clear as John emptied part of it onto the table – it contained innumerable semi-precious gemstones, both in their natural state, and cut and polished. John picked out a small sphere of polished amber, then returned
the rest of the stones to the bag. He then opened the package and, after disposing of the wrapping and packing paper, came up with a small ziplock containing six greenish-grey cat's eye gems, all of which were about half again larger than John needed.

"You didn't need to buy so many," John said. "One is more than enough."

Sherlock shrugged. "Didn't have the option to buy just one. Besides, this way you've got spares, should the need arise."

"Doubtful they'd ever be needed, but I suppose it's the thought that counts." John opened the baggie and selected one of the stones for closer scrutiny. "However, these are nearly perfect."

"'Nearly'?"

John nodded. "They could do to have a touch more of the cat's eye effect, but really, they're more than adequate," he said, setting the baggie with the other five stones aside. He lined up the two baggies of herbal ingredients, the bead of amber, and the cat's eye next to the mortar and pestle, then grabbed a seldom-used coffee mug out of the dishes cabinet. John measured about a tablespoon's worth of mugwort leaves into the mortar, then began grinding it to dust with the pestle. Once the leaves were ground fine enough, he poured the powder into the coffee mug, and repeated the step with the same amount of wormwood. The wormwood was rather tougher than the mugwort and took a fair amount of time to grind.

"I've a question," Sherlock said, carefully separating tendons and ligaments from the bone he was focused on.

"Just one?" John asked. "Usually, your questions come in veritable floods."

Sherlock gave a half-shrug, both admitting John had a point, and clearly stating he wasn't about to apologize for it. "Why all this?" he nodded to the table, indicating the bird, the jar of feathers, the components John was working on. "If it's magic, then why all the paraphernalia?"

"Try cooking a six-course meal without any pots and pans, then ask me that again." John checked the status of the wormwood. It wasn't quite fine enough, so he kept at it. "Not all spells need a physical component. Some need words or gestures instead. Still other uses of magic – I wouldn't call them spells, exactly – simply need the desire for a particular effect."

"What dictates whether a spell needs anything more than desire?"

"What you need it to do," John replied. "For example, I know three separate spells for unlocking something. The first is the most basic sort of spell. A gesture and words and will. But, it'll only
unlock the simplest of locks." He let out a laugh. "I used it as a kid to unlock Harry's diary. She used
to get so mad at me… No matter where she hid it, I always found it. Told her I unlocked it with a
paperclip." John checked the wormwood again and found it sufficiently powdered, so he added it to
the coffee mug, then grabbed the kettle. "The next unlocking spell I know is only good on door locks–it won't work on a padlock that's bolted to a door, it has to be an actual door lock. It's a little more
complicated, needing words, a physical component, and will."

"What physical component?"

"Chicory," John replied, setting the now-filled kettle on the counter and flicking it on. "A braid of the
root, stems, and leaves." While waiting for the kettle to boil, he used a paper towel to clean out his
mortar and remove the traces of dust from the pestle. "In this case, since the component doesn't get
consumed by the casting of the spell, it's classified as a charm."

"Sounds like something that could be handy to have around. And the third?"

"No words, no gestures, one physical component, and will," John listed. "The physical component in
this case is my own blood. It's considered a last-resort spell, since it causes yourself harm to cast, but
because of that, it's one of the more-powerful ones out there."

"Didn't you use blood when you set up the gate anchor?" Sherlock asked, pausing in his efforts with
the bird.

John nodded, "Yeah, but it wasn't for the same reason. For the gate, you use your own blood as a
keying mechanism. That way, even if another mage finds out your activation phrase, they still won't
be able to use it without your permission. It's why gates are so secure. We could be out somewhere–
even on the other side of the globe – and I can open the gate and we could go through it to come
come. Even if we were being chased by someone and they somehow managed to catch the door
before it closed, they wouldn't be able to walk through without my permission. As of right now," he
paused as the kettle started to boil and turned it off, then carried it over to the mug of herbals. "As of
right now," he repeated, pouring water into the mug, "there are three people other than myself who
have permission to use the gate upstairs. Ajay, Mary, and you." With the mug half-full, he returned
the kettle to its place on the counter. "Tea?" he asked, getting out his RAMC mug.

"Sure," Sherlock agreed. "I know that once it's set, I can walk through it, but if you need to give me
permission, why was I able to accompany you to Ajay's?"

"Ajay doesn't have as many restrictions on his gate. His gate is set to read intentions, rather than
individuals. Anyone tries to gate into his place with nefarious purposes in mind, and the spell simply
won't work." With the tea ready, he carried Sherlock's over to him, then resumed his seat at the other
side of the table. He took a sip, then sat the mug down and tossed the bead of amber into his mortar.
"It's actually easier to set a gate anchor to read intentions than individuals, since the most important
part of magic is what you intend to do with it." He started grinding the amber. "It's why any spell
component can be replaced by the blood of the mage doing the casting, if it's an emergency."

They worked in silence for nearly five minutes before Sherlock thought of another question. "Your
sister doesn't know about the magic?"

John shook his head. "Nope. None of my family know – none of them want to know. To this day,
they're convinced that Mary stole her dad's car when we were sixteen, and that's why she has
surgical pins in her leg and why I wound up with a broken arm." He sighed. "They never did like
Mary much."

"So what's the real story?"
John checked the amber, then went back to grinding. "Mary and I had been studying with Ajay for just a little over a year. Remember me telling you how all the spells I know come from books?"

Sherlock nodded. "Well, the way I can tell if a spell's real or not is that the text in the book shimmers a little, like it was printed with a little bit of glitter in the ink. When we were sixteen, I found a bridging spell in a book at Ajay's. If you cast it right, and the magic worked, it was supposed to let you walk on air over a waterway. It was the closest thing I could find at the time to flying – my main interest at the time. There was this little ravine with a brook at the bottom of it that formed the boundary between Mary's dad's sheep farm and Mum and Dad's apple orchard. It was the quickest way from her house to mine, but that ravine was a nuisance; slippery and muddy and cold even on the hottest summer day." He checked the amber again and found that it was now powdered to the proper consistency. He poured the powder atop the floating clumps of herbal dust steeping in the coffee mug.

"Anyway," John continued, "I found the bridging spell and thought it'd be a great idea. Her dad had vetoed building an actual bridge, but this wouldn't leave anything around for him or my parents to get upset over." He added the cat's eye to the mortar and paused long enough to drain half his tea. "I still don't know what went wrong – if I cast it incorrectly or if it was one of those times when magic simply doesn't work – but we were both halfway across the bridge when it dispelled. Fell a solid sixty feet into that cold, muddy brook. Lucky we didn't kill ourselves." The cat's eye shattered with a crunching noise not unlike the sound of crushing ice. "Harry's the one who found us, nearly six hours after the fact."

"And how did your parents come up with the car crash story?"

John shrugged. "You'd have to ask them, but they weren't the only ones who told themselves a little story and believed it – Mary's dad thinks we were climbing the apple trees." Another piece of the cat's eye crunched into smaller fragments. "Needless to say, I rather lost my taste for high places after that."

Comfortable silence once more descended on the occupants of 221B, broken only by the sound of chrysoberyl crushing into dust. It took nearly ten minutes of concentrated effort for the stone to be pulverized into the proper consistency, and by the time it was done, John's hand and arm ached. He picked up the mortar, then said, "You might want to close your eyes – this will be bright."

He waited until Sherlock positioned one hand over his closed eyes, then moved the mortar over the coffee mug and squeezed his own eyes shut before dumping the powdered cat's eye into the mug. A long flash, similar to a nearby lightning strike or the pulses of light from an arc welder, flooded the room. Once it faded, John opened his eyes and looked at the contents of the mug while setting the mortar back on the tabletop. "Interesting."

Sherlock dropped his hand and his eyes snapped open. "What's interesting?"

"The color," John said, indicating the mug's contents. "It's always different, depending on who it's for." Sherlock leaned forwards and peered into the mug. The liquid contained in it was a clear emerald color, similar to – but purer than – the green glass used to make bottles. John shook his head, dismissing memories of the other times he'd crafted this particular spell, then removed the eyedropper-stopper from the bottle he'd brought down from his room. There was just enough liquid to fill the bottle.

"What next?" Sherlock asked, his tone eager.

"Now, it's gotta sit for a while."

"How long?"
"At least a week, though a month would be better," John replied as he started cleaning up the mess. At Sherlock's disappointed expression, John said, "The longer it sits, the longer the effects will last. Right now, you'd only have a couple of seconds of othersight. After a week or so, the effects will last up to about ten minutes. If you can stand waiting the full month, it'll last at least an hour."

Sherlock sighed and went back to picking flesh off the jackdaw carcass.

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March 23

It's just going to be one of those days, isn't it? John had thought it twice so far this morning, and that made the third instance. First, he'd broken a shoelace. Then there'd been no hot water left for his shower. Now, it was the direct result of smashing his face against the plate-glass of the automatic doors of Tesco. Definitely one of those days. A harried young mother with two small children gave him an odd look as they sidled past him and through the doors – that actually opened like they were supposed to. John hurried after her before the doors could close shut. With the way my day is going, they'd wind up slicing my hand off.

John wasted no time in quickly locating the items they needed and rather than wait forever at one of the standard check-outs, he headed for the self-service one that was empty. The first item scanned without issue. The next one beeped, and he saw it appear on the screen, but when he went to put it in the bag, the automated voice – at a decibel-level that he felt rivaled rock concerts and the television at his great aunt Milly's house – droned, "Unexpected item in bagging area. Please try again." He gave the computer a moment to 'catch up', then did as it suggested.

"Isn't technology wonderful?" a middle-aged woman commented, smiling lightly at John.

"When it works," John agreed, then picked up a head of lettuce. He dragged it slowly across the scanner.

"Item not scanned. Please try again."

John blinked at it. Who sets the volume on these things? "D'you think you could keep your voice down?" he muttered at the blasted machine. He tried scanning the lettuce again.

"Item not scanned. Please try again."

The woman let out a little chuckle. John glanced over and found a young man had joined the queue to use the machine. Great. No pressure or anything. He looked at the plastic wrap on the lettuce and spotted a flake of brown slimy gunk spread over the barcode. With a small grimace, he wiped it away with his thumb and tried one more time to scan it. The machine beeped. He gave the computer a moment, then added the lettuce to the bag.

Lastly, he scanned the milk. It beeped immediately, and John let out a small huff of relief when the computer accepted it in the 'bagging area' without comment. He hit the 'pay now' button and dug his debit card out of his wallet. The other self-check machine had cleared by this point, and the woman who'd smiled at him was now using it. He inserted his card and waited.

"Card not authorized. Please use an alternative method of payment."

John had the urge to kick the machine, but managed to hold back; however, his frustration and irritation with the way his morning had gone hit a breaking point and he couldn't help but lash out at the machine. A spike of magic speared it straight through the card-reader.

The automated voice sounded once more, "Card not auth--" and devolved into a long, shrill buzzing
noise. Luckily, the noise only lasted a moment, before the touchscreen dimmed, then brightened, then dimmed again. It flashed the 'blue screen of death' for a split-second, then the entire terminal powered itself down. John lifted a hand to his forehead and rubbed at his temples.

"Is there a problem, sir?" a pimple-faced kid in his early twenties came over.

"That," John nodded to the machine, "just died, I think." He reached over and removed his debit card from the slot. The smell of slightly-charred plastic accompanied it. "And it killed my debit card, too."

This sort of situation was obviously out of the kid's depth, so he said, "Wait here a moment, sir – let me get the manager."

Not even thirty seconds later, a man in a cheap suit and tomato-red tie strolled over, the kid at his heels. "Good morning, sir," he greeted John.

"Not particularly," John argued. "Your machine just fried my debit card."

Half an hour later, John exited the Tesco with his groceries, a Tesco gift card containing a hundred quid, and was feeling slightly better about life in general, though he was still angry about having to replace his bank card. On returning to 221B, he clomped up the stairs. Sherlock was still sitting in his chair, reading. "You took your time," he said, not bothering to look up from his book.

"Yeah, well, it's just been that kind of morning."

"How so?"

John deposited the bags of groceries in the sink – the only place along the kitchen counters they'd fit. "Broke a shoelace, had a cold shower because someone used all the hot water, and nearly broke my nose because the bloody doors at Tesco didn't open for me. Then I nearly didn't get the shopping because the spee bachee chip-and-PIN machine hates me." (1)

"How can a machine hate anybody? It's a machine."

John paused in putting the milk in the fridge. He turned to face Sherlock. "Everything mankind makes has a bit of a personality, Sherlock. Surely, you've noticed. Maybe a bit of lab equipment that only ever seemed to work properly for you, or a camp cot or folding chair that liked to bite people?"

Sherlock shook his head. "Can't say that I have."

John sighed and went back to putting the shopping away. "What happened with that case you were offered? The Jaria Diamond?"


"Not interested in a missing diamond? For the amount of money they're offering?"

"No amount of money is interesting, John. It's the puzzle that I'm interested in, and theirs wasn't a puzzle. It's obviously an insurance scam they wish to lend verisimilitude by hiring me and thus is not my area."

Finished with putting things away, John bundled up the plastic sacks and tossed them in the rubbish bin under the sink. He'd just reached over to grab the kettle when Mrs. Hudson's voice echoed up from the hallway outside her flat. "John? You home?"
John poked his head out the kitchen door. "Yes, Mrs. Hudson. You need something?"

"I've dropped an oven mitt behind the stove, could you help me fetch it out?"

Tea. All I really want right now is a cuppa. Maybe a biscuit. John was about to decline when the selfish little voice at the back of his head spoke up. Mrs. Hudson made chocolate biscuits yesterday – you know because the whole building smelled delicious for hours. Surely she'll give you one if you help her. Besides, when have you ever visited with her and not wound up with tea? Tea you didn't have to make yourself. "Be right down!" he called out. He glanced over at Sherlock, who was staring at the sofa with a self-satisfied little smirk.

John just shook his head and headed down to Mrs. Hudson and her chocolate biscuits.

Two hours and four chocolate-chip-laden biscuits later, John returned to his own living room. Sherlock had finally moved from his chair to the desk. John was half-tempted to congratulate the man on actually getting off his rear end when he spotted the laptop open in front of his flatmate. He frowned. "Is that my computer?"

Sherlock didn't look up from the screen. "Of course," he said, beginning to type.

"What?" Sometimes, John really wanted to strangle his flatmate.

"Mine was in my room," Sherlock explained.

"And you couldn't be bothered to get up?" John made a mental note to set a notice-me-not on his computer in the future. "It's password-protected!"

"In a manner of speaking. Took me less than a minute to guess yours," he said, still typing. Even as frustrating as Sherlock was being, John still had to admire the talent it took to say one thing while, presumably, typing something else. "Not exactly Fort Knox," Sherlock droned on.

"Right," John stated, fed-up. "Thank you," he strode over and snatched his computer away from Sherlock, barely missing slamming the detective's fingers between the screen and keyboard. Setting the computer next to his armchair, he flopped down, entirely too weary with the day. And it's not even noon yet. The pile of mail resting on the end table next to his chair drew his attention. I need to thank Mrs. Hudson for bringing it up… again.

He flipped through them, noticing more than one bill marked 'past due'. He sighed. "Need to get a job." Sherlock replied, "Oh, dull."

"Dull or not, bills don't just pay themselves." John returned the stack to the end table and realized he was beginning to get a headache. The thought triggered the return of his pet leyline. It curled up around him and sent a vibrating hum through him, easing tense muscles and draining away his irritation. This really isn't fair, you know, he thought at the 'line. I had a perfectly good mad going. It just 'purred' a little harder.

"I need to go to the bank," Sherlock announced, springing to his feet.

John poked the leyline into releasing him. "What? Why?"

"Might be nothing. Probably is nothing," Sherlock said, slipping into his coat. "But then again… He wouldn't have emailed if it were nothing," this bit was said in an undertone. John wasn't altogether certain Sherlock was aware he'd said it.

Intrigued, John stood and followed Sherlock downstairs and into a taxi.
An hour later, and John was once more irritated to the point of wanting to hit someone – only this time, it wasn't his flatmate, but a self-important smug git of a banker. Luckily, he didn't have to suffer the man's presence for too awfully long. Another hour later, and John was back to wanting to strangle Sherlock.

He pressed the doorbell outside Van Coon's flat once more. "Sherlock! Let me in."

Silence. Sighing, John glanced around and didn't see any people. He spotted the security camera in an upper corner over by the lifts, and hoped he was far enough away that what he was about to do wouldn't be clearly seen by it. He reached into his inner jacket pocket and pulled out a recent addition to his charm collection; a braided stick, roughly one centimeter wide and six inches long, made from dried chicory roots, leaves, and stems. He held it against the lock of Van Coon's door and whispered, "I command you to unlock; remove this obstacle from my path."

The lock clicked and John opened the door. The flat was very obviously the home of a rich man; the furniture alone had likely cost more money than John had ever seen in his life. Well, unless I don't count the advance check that Wilkes just handed over, of course. "Sherlock? You okay?" he called out, looking around.

"Back here!" Sherlock replied, his voice emerging from a short hallway that connected the living areas with the bath and bedroom. John hurried over and stopped short at seeing his flatmate standing over an obviously dead man, sprawled atop the bed. "I believe it's safe to assume the graffiti at the bank was, indeed, a warning."

John walked over to the bed and spotted the small-caliber bullet hole in the man's temple. "Think you might be right about that," he said, frowning at the man.

"I'm going to call Lestrade. Back in a moment," Sherlock exited the room, pulling his mobile from his pocket as he did so.

John took a closer look at the dead man. A .22, he thought, mentally comparing the hole in the man's temple with the innumerable bullet holes he'd patched up in Afghanistan. His eyes took in the man's lack of color and drifted down to the gun in his hand. Mental note, Watson – start keeping some latex gloves in your jacket. The gun wouldn't let his eyes move. Sig Sauer P226, .40-caliber. His thoughts ground to a screeching halt. Wait. If his gun's a .40-cal, then there's no way this is what it looks like. He turned around and headed out to the living room. Sherlock was still talking into his phone, relaying the address. He disconnected before John could tell him what he'd found. "The police will be here in a few minutes," he said, then started examining the contents of the flat. John opened his mouth to tell Sherlock what he'd found, but Sherlock interrupted before he could actually say anything, "Quiet, please – I need to think."

John just left him to it, heading back to the body. Okay, so I know he didn't kill himself, not with the gun he's got. Aside from it being the wrong caliber, he'd used the Sig, there would have been a massive exit-wound. No exit-wound, small entrance wound, hence not the .40-caliber. Besides, he's got the gun in his left hand and the wound's in his right temple. Not impossible, but had it been suicide, he wouldn't have wound up sprawled on his back like that. So – definitely not suicide. So… Who killed him? Since the door was locked when we got here, he could have known whoever it was. Let them in. But that doesn't make sense, either – not if Sherlock's right and the graffiti at the bank was some sort of warning. Unless it was a case of not knowing who was doing the threatening to begin with. But that doesn't track, either – if he didn't know, then why the gun? And who'd let someone they didn't know into their flat? Just precisely how Sherlock had managed to get in flashed through his memory. Okay, so the Wintle woman in the flat above needs a stern lecture on trusting complete strangers. John walked over to the wall of glass that overlooked London and opened onto
Van Coon's balcony. The door was unlocked. *Definitely needs that lecture.* He idly wished the building was older, then he could ask it to *show* him what had happened. *Unfortunately, you can't communicate with a building spirit that's newer than about five years or so. This place is only two or three years old at the most.*

He walked over to the bedroom door. *Yeah – this one was locked, too.* He sighed and straightened from his quick examination of the now-broken latch and leaned against the wall. *Who would want to kill you? Why? Did you lose a bunch of money? Sleep with the wrong woman?* He continued musing on possible motives until the police arrived. Forensic technicians began to swarm the flat, and a coroner began taking pictures of Van Coon's body.

Not long after, Sherlock strode into the room, pulling on a pair of gloves. "D'you think he'd lost a lot of money? Is that why he was killed?" John asked, watching Sherlock kneel next to a suitcase on the floor.

"Been away…" he rifled through the dead man's suitcase, "three days, judging by the laundry." He stood. "Look at the case; there was something tightly packed inside it."

"Thanks, but I'll take your word for it," John snarked, rapidly losing what little patience he'd managed to keep during the course of his day.

"Problem?" Sherlock asked, leveling his narrowed gaze at John.

"Yeah, I'm not desperate to root around some bloke's dirty underwear." Sherlock turned and faced the body, peering at it with his singular level of intense concentration. "Those symbols at the bank," he said, walking to the foot of the bed.

"You said it was likely a warning," John said.

His flatmate nodded, looked at Van Coon's shoes, and began carefully rifling through the dead man's pockets. "Why were they painted? If you want to communicate, why not use email?"

"Email's a cinch to track these days," or at least, that's what a million different procedurals on the telly claimed.

"Precisely," Sherlock agreed, bending over to examine the body's hands. "But who would send a threat in such a manner?"

John shook his head. He'd not come up with a possibility to that particular question yet himself. "Don't know. Any ideas?"

"Six," Sherlock said, then moved up the body and gently pried the man's mouth open. He reached in and withdrew a piece of crumpled black paper. "Well," he examined the scrap of paper. "Make that three." He slid the paper into an evidence bag.

Before John could ask for more information, a plainclothes policeman strode into the room. Sherlock looked up and said, "Ah, Sergeant. We haven't met." He offered the newcomer his hand, but the man ignored it.

"Yeah, I know who you are, and I'd prefer it if you didn't tamper with any of the evidence."

Sherlock handed the man the evidence bag containing the crumpled paper. "I've phoned Lestrade. Is he on his way?" Sherlock's voice carried more than just a hint of scorn, coupled with an undertone that seemed to say 'just who do you think you're dealing with, you gnat-brained baboon?'. 
"He's busy," the man replied. "I'm in charge. And it's not 'Sergeant', it's Detective Inspector," he paused, "Dimmock."

John shared Sherlock's expression of surprise. _This kid doesn't look old enough to shave. How on Earth did he manage Detective Inspector?_ John managed to close his mouth before the man's eyes landed on him, though it was a near thing.

Dimmock turned and strode out to the living room, Sherlock close on his heels. John hurried to catch up. "We're obviously looking at a suicide," Dimmock said to one of the forensics techs.

"Wrong!" Sherlock said, pulling the DI's attention back to him.

Dimmock glared at Sherlock. "It's the only explanation that fits the facts!"

"It's one _possible_ explanation of _some_ of the facts," Sherlock argued. "You've got a solution you like, but you're ignoring anything you see that doesn't comply with it."

"Sherlock!" John interrupted, not wanting to completely alienate the kid.

The consulting detective looked over. "What, John?"

John made a small gesture that he hoped Sherlock would understand meant 'tone it down'. "Far be it for me to disagree with a Detective Inspector," he spoke to Dimmock, "but Sherlock's right – this wasn't a suicide."

"And just who might you be?" the kid sneered at him.

John used just enough Captain Watson to make the kid actually _listen_ to what he had to say. "Dr. John Watson, late of the RAMC. The bullet hole in Van Coon's temple is from a .22 – god knows, I saw enough of those in Afghanistan to be able to tell the difference. The gun he's got is a Sig Sauer P226, .40-caliber. Had he used the Sig, which he couldn't possibly have done, it would have punched straight through his skull, leaving a bloody great mess behind." John straightened a little on seeing Sherlock's quickly-buried impressed look. "Even ignoring the fact that a .40-caliber bullet would have gone straight through, he's got the gun in his left hand and the wound's in his right temple. Granted, it's not impossible for someone to suicide that way, but had he done so, he wouldn't be sprawled out across the bed on his back – he would have been found in a crumpled ball-like position on the floor."

Sherlock nodded in agreement and picked up where John left off. "Conclusion: Someone broke in here and murdered him. _Only_ explanation of _all_ of the facts."

Dimmock appeared to be having a little bit of difficulty processing all the new information. "But the gun… Why…"

Sherlock answered before he could finish the question. "He was waiting for the killer. He'd been threatened." He then walked away, sliding back into his coat.

Dimmock blinked. "What?"

"Today, at the bank where he works," John supplied the information. "Sort of a warning."

"But the GSR test came back positive!" Dimmock protested.

"He fired a shot when his attacker came in," Sherlock explained, tying his scarf around his neck.
"And the bullet?"

"Went through the open window."

Dimmock let out an annoyed huff of air. "Oh, come on! What are the chances of that?"

"Wait until you get the ballistics report," Sherlock said, pulling his gloves on. "The bullet in his brain wasn't fired from his gun. I guarantee it." John nodded his agreement.

"But if his door was locked from the inside, how did the killer get in?" Dimmock asked.

Sherlock let a sarcastic little smile surface on his face. "Good," he said, condescendingly. "You're finally asking the right questions." Without waiting for a reply, he headed for the door that would take him to the lifts and back to street-level.

John lingered long enough to smile apologetically at the newly-minted DI. "Sorry about that. He takes a little getting used to, but he's normally right about these things," he also didn't wait for Dimmock to reply before hurrying after Sherlock.

Later, after a phone call with Wilkes' secretary to determine the man's whereabouts, and a caustically-delivered chiding, John, Sherlock, and Wilkes were in the men's loo of a restaurant John figured he'd need a major bank loan in order to afford so much as an appetizer. Wilkes was going on about Van Coon. "Harrow, Oxford. Very bright guy. Worked in Asia for a while so…"

"You gave him the Hong Kong accounts," John finished the sentence, hoping that they could finish up quickly. *Maybe grab some lunch ourselves. My stomach's beginning to think my throat's been cut.*

Wilkes didn't appear to have noticed John's comment. "Lost five mil in a single morning – made it all back a week later. Nerves of steel, Eddie had."

"Who'd wanna kill him?" John asked.

"We all make enemies."

*Yeah, I'm beginning to see why, you unmitigated prick. The least you could do is actually seem like you're going to miss the guy. Even if it's just that you'll miss the money he could have made for you. Something that doesn't manage to put me in mind of that blasted chip-and-PIN machine from this morning! You don't all end up with a bullet through your temple," he said, and didn't bother trying to keep his sarcasm in check."

Unfortunately, it seemed to fly right over Wilkes' head. "Not usually," he agreed. His phone began to ring. He removed it from his pocket and checked the screen. "It's my chairman. Excuse me for a moment." He answered the call. "Sebastian Wilkes… Yes, Mr. Onogaisho… No, sir, not as yet… I understand, sir… Yes, sir… Thank you, sir." He ended the call and returned his phone to his pocket. "The police have been in touch with my boss. They're unwilling to state a cause of death at this point, but want to speak with me 'at my earliest convenience'." He let out a long breath. "Still, it won't do any harm to conclude my meeting first," it had the tone of a thought carried unwittingly into the physical world. Wilkes looked hard at Sherlock. "I hired you to do a job, Sherlock. Don't get side-tracked." He walked away before Sherlock could reply.

Once Wilkes was gone, John sighed. "It is wrong of me not to like that smarmy git?"

A small smile tugged at the corners of Sherlock's mouth. "No, John, it's not wrong – I never liked him much myself."
Surprised, John had to ask, "Then why are we working for him?"

"'Bills don't pay themselves,'" he quoted John's own words from earlier. "And it's either work for Sebastian or ask my brother for money. Of the two, I'd rather deal with Seb."

John simply couldn't argue with that.

Later that evening, as the pair sat down to dinner, Sherlock looked over at John. John could practically feel the gears spinning in his flatmate's head. "What?" he asked.

"Tell me what you think of the case," Sherlock said, ignoring the sandwich on his plate and downing a gulp of coffee. "What do you know so far?"

"Um… Sure," John contemplated a potato crisp for a moment. "Let's see… Van Coon worked at Shad Sanderson, late nights, trading with Hong Kong. Last night, someone broke in and left a threatening message in the form of some spray-painted squiggles, the exact meaning of which we still don't know."

"Ignore what you don't know for now. Stick to what you do."

"Okay," John blinked at Sherlock, then popped the crisp in his mouth. After washing it down with a drink of water, he reordered his thoughts. "Okay, so someone left a threatening pair of squiggles. At some point, Van Coon headed home, where he got out his Sig Sauer P226 and waited. Also at some point, Van Coon fired his weapon – the gun shot residue test the forensics techs performed said as much. Again, also at some point, Van Coon was killed by a .22-caliber shot to his right temple. Death would have been nearly instantaneous." He paused to take a bite of his sandwich.

"Is that all?" Sherlock sounded disappointed.

John shook his head and chewed rapidly. After swallowing, he sipped his glass of water. "That's everything that can be proven. There are a few things I've got ideas on, and a couple of other odds'n'ends that aren't particularly relevant – not to mention a whole host of questions we don't have the answers to just yet."

"What are some of your ideas?"

"Well, firstly, I don't agree with your theory that the bullet Van Coon fired went out the open window."

"Why not?" Sherlock asked, taking another drink of his coffee. "It would explain why there are no bullet-holes in the room itself."

"A valid point," Sherlock said. "And one I'd not thought of, but which has little bearing on the case as a whole." He glanced at the contents of his mug and got up to refill it. "Go on. What else were you thinking?"

"You said he'd been away three days. That's something that'd need checked out." John ate another crisp. Sherlock leveled a look at John. "What?" the doctor asked.

"Do you doubt my deduction?"
John shook his head. "No, just curious as to when he'd been gone, when he got back, where he went. You never mentioned any of that. Could have something to do with why he was killed. And speaking of that – why was Van Coon killed?"

"Immaterial," Sherlock waved away the question. "We find who killed him and the why is usually self-explanatory."

"But wouldn't knowing the why of it make it easier to find the who?"

"Where we find one, we'll have the answer to both, but since we have neither motive nor murderer right now, this branch of the conversation serves no purpose. So – back to what we do know. What else have you come up with?" He added a pair of sugar cubes to his coffee and returned to the table.

John took another moment, both to eat a couple of bites of his supper and to consider everything they'd learned so far. Swallowing, he said, "There'd need to be someone at the bank who knows what's going on."

"How did you come to that conclusion?"

"Well," he took a drink of water and swished it around his mouth a moment. "Firstly, there's the security footage. Someone would have had to either turn off the camera while the graffiti artist painted his message or they'd had to have gone back after the fact and deleted that minute of recording. Secondly, you said it when we were leaving the bank – there's only one place where the squiggles could be seen. Only someone familiar with the bank's layout would know where to place the paint in order for Van Coon to have seen it. Since only one minute was missing from the CCTV, it couldn't have been that the 'artist' took the time to figure it out."

"It could also be that someone hacked into the feed and manipulated it externally," Sherlock countered.

John frowned. "It's a bank, though – aren't they supposed to have pretty decent anti-hacking software?"

"Computer hacking isn't my specialty, but even I could get into Shad Sanderson's security feed. Wouldn't take more than an hour."

"I'll take your word for it." John finished off his sandwich. "Still begs the question of how the painter got into the bank to begin with."

"Same way he got into Van Coon's flat," Sherlock replied. "Through the window."

"You do realize, don't you, that that answer is the one Wilkes hired you for in the first place?"

Sherlock just shrugged. "And I'll tell him, but not until the rest of this delightful little puzzle has been worked out."

*I really should have been expecting that answer.* "Why not tell him now?"

"Because we might need to revisit that office. It is doubtful, yes, but I do like to keep my options open."

The next day started off much better than the previous one had. John actually had a hot shower, there was plenty of tea, and he didn't break any shoelaces. After breakfast, while Sherlock was busy staring at printouts of the photos he'd taken of the graffiti at the bank, John shrugged into his jacket.
"I've got an errand to run," he said. "Anything you need while I'm out?"

Sherlock didn't reply, so John took that to mean 'no'. Despite the lack of cash he had on him, and his rather charred bank card, John paused on stepping onto the pavement and let out a happy little sigh of content. *I wouldn't've taken a cab today anyway.* It was one of the rarest things in his experience: A brightly sunny, unseasonably warm and pleasant early spring day. Whistling somewhat tunelessly to himself, he set off at a brisk walk, heading for his bank to replace the now-dead debit card in his wallet.

The weather seemed to have infected everyone he came across, as smiles were the main expression on passersby. Even the bank staff were pleasant and helpful without crossing the line into 'I'm just doing my job because it's a paycheck'.

Three hours after leaving, John returned to 221B with his wallet sporting a newly-printed debit card. He slid out of his jacket and deposited it on his armchair. "I said, 'could you pass me a pen'," Sherlock stated, not looking away from the photos he'd printed earlier.

John looked over to see that he'd taped the pictures to the mirror above the fireplace. "What?" he asked. "When?"

"About an hour ago," Sherlock replied, still staring at the photos.

John sighed a little and tossed Sherlock a pen. "Didn't notice I'd gone out then," he said, walking over to the photos. "Find anything new?"

Sherlock made a vague gesture to the laptop open on the desk behind him. "Have a look," he said, clicking the pen and focusing his attention on a notebook.

John stepped around his flatmate, grabbed his laptop off the desk, and carried it over to the sofa. Flopping onto the couch, the first thing he did was access the computer's security features and changed his password from JHW021972 to his military ID number. Once that was taken care of, he then paged to the open web browser and read the article Sherlock had located.

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**Ghostly killer leaves a mystery for police**

An intruder who can walk through walls murdered a man in his London apartment last night. Brian Lukis, 41, a freelance journalist from Earl's Court was found shot in his fourth floor flat but all of his doors and windows were locked and there were no apparent signs of a break in. A police spokesman said they are still uncertain how the assailant broke in...

"This sounds awfully familiar, Sherlock," John said, closing his laptop and setting it on the coffee table.

"It does at that, doesn't it?" Sherlock smiled, the expression both one of pleasure at the puzzle and slightly grim. "Shall we see if DI Dimmock is willing to actually listen now?"

"That's not entirely fair," John said, putting his jacket back on. "He listened yesterday."

"Correction – he listened to *you* yesterday."

Following Sherlock back down the stairs to the street, John said, "Do I detect a note of jealousy
Sherlock scoffed. "Hardly," he scoffed, then hailed a taxi. Ten minutes later, Sherlock turned to face John and said, "Okay, fine. Why did Dimmock pay attention to what you were saying?"

John smiled. Glad to see I was right. "It's one of those uses that I don't consider a spell, per se. I can thread magic through my voice. Came in handy in a war zone, both in shouting orders and warnings and in getting the boys I patched up to follow doctor's orders." Seemingly satisfied, Sherlock went back to staring out the taxi's windows.

Three hours later, after a trip to Lukis' flat and a stop by the West Kensington Library, John and Sherlock returned to Baker Street. Pictures of the spray-painted squiggles they found at the library were printed and added to the growing collage on the mirror. "So, the killer goes to the bank, leaves a threatening cipher for Van Coon. Van Coon panics, returns to his apartment, locks himself in. Hours later, he dies."

John picked up the thread and spoke, nodding, "Then the killer finds Lukis at the library, writes the cipher on the shelf where he knows it'll be seen. Lukis finds it, goes home —"

"Late that night, he dies, too," Sherlock concluded the story.

"Why these two men, though?" John asked.

"Only the cipher can tell us," Sherlock said, running a finger over the squiggles in the newest photos.

"What are you thinking?"

"If this," he tapped the photo, "is, as we are assuming, a code of some sort, then there must be other examples of it out there. We need only to find them."

"Easier done than said," John replied.

"Don't you have that idiom backwards?"

John shook his head. "Not this time, no. Sympathetic magic – traces the connections of things. I get enough practice at it that it's become second-nature."

"Practice?"

John gave him a rueful little smile. "You'd be shocked at how often I misplace my keys."

With a twitch of his eyebrows – John knew, just knew Sherlock was laughing at him in his head – Sherlock looked back at the photos of the squiggles of yellow paint. "What do you need?"

"Depends on what line of commonality you want me to look for," John replied.

"More symbols such as these," he tapped the photo once more.

"Okay, then I'll be right back." John darted up to his room, grabbed a broken compass out of his desk drawer, then dashed back to the living room. "Give me one of the photos, preferably one that shows both symbols."

Sherlock handed him the one from the library. "Anything else?"

John shook his head and lit the photo on fire with his blue plastic lighter. "Fire sprite, fire sprite, burning brightly in the night, as you glow, consume and feed, kindly please don't hurt me," he
murmured, watching the flame creep across the photo. As it crept closer to his fingers, he felt the currents of air rushing around it, but no heat. He let out a teeny breath of relief. With a wisp of white smoke, the flame reached the end of the paper and died. Crumpling the ash in his hand, he dusted it on the outer surface of his battered compass. "Show me the way to that which I've seen," he commanded, then opened the case. The needle inside pointed directly to the collage of photos on the wall. John paced across the room twice to make sure it was working properly, then handed the compass to Sherlock. "Okay, it's all set."

"It's not of much use if it simply keeps pointing to the photos we already have," Sherlock commented.

"To dismiss the nearest link, all you need do is say 'seen and acknowledged'. The needle will then aim for the next-nearest link." As he said the words, Sherlock watched as the compass needle swung around and aimed at a point off to his left.

"How long will this last?"

"Long as you need it or until I dispel it."

Sherlock smiled, then handed the compass back to John. "Best get going, then. I'm going to go talk to Van Coon's PA, then see if Dimmock will let me take a look through Lukis' things, see if the man had a diary or something else that would tell us his movements."

Is it wrong of me to find this fun? John pondered the thought while following the compass-needle across London. The first place it tried to lead him was straight back to the library. A quick 'seen and acknowledged' reset the needle. The next location was a bit of a mess, layers upon layers of spray-paint coated every surface available; he earned several odd looks from the juvenile delinquents loitering in the area. John ignored the kids and found some of the same yellow paint from the bank and the library. Though whatever message it was intended to convey had been partially painted over, John still photographed it, then used his penknife to chip a flake of the paint away. Never hurts to be prepared. It looks like they – whoever's behind this – uses the same paint for everything.

After leaving behind the skateboarders and BMX-riders, the compass directed John towards a nearby set of train tracks. John wound up having to scale a chain-link fence, but not ten minutes later, he found a brick dividing wall covered top-to-bottom with more indecipherable squiggles. I think this is what Sherlock sent me after, John thought, taking a couple of photos in the late afternoon sunlight. He reset the compass and continued on his strange little scavenger-hunt.

The next place the compass tried to lead him to was the bank. John dismissed it as quickly as he could. From there, the compass directed him to the National Antiquities Museum. Unfortunately, the building had closed not five minutes before John got there. Sighing, John tucked the compass into his jacket pocket. The sun had just finished setting and it was rapidly getting chilly. He pulled out his phone and called Sherlock. When the automated voicemail kicked in, John disconnected, then sent a text.

Found some interesting things. How about you?

Two minutes later, his phone beeped.

I know what the symbols are. Meet you back at the flat. SH

Idly wondering why Sherlock felt the need to sign his texts – Hasn't he noticed that most mobiles will tell you who sent a text? – John flagged down a taxi. "221B Baker Street," he told the cabbie.
Once back at the flat, John wasted no time in sprinting up the stairs. He stopped dead on opening the door, though – the thickly sweet scent of fried rice and lo-mein and potstickers pervaded the air. "Thought you didn't eat on cases?" John asked, taking off his jacket. There was a take-away bag from one of the best restaurants in Chinatown sitting on the kitchen table.

"I don't," Sherlock replied. "I was in Chinatown anyway, though."

"Thank you," John said, sincerely, while reaching for the take-away. "What all did you find out?"

"The symbols are Hangzhou – Chinese numbers, in other words. Mostly, only street-traders use them, it's a bit of an obscure and ancient dialect otherwise."

John stripped the paper off a pair of disposable chopsticks, then opened the carton of lo-mein and breathed in the steam. "What else did you find?" he asked, digging into the noodles and flopping into his armchair.

"Both Lukis and Van Coon were in Chinatown the day they died. Recall me mentioning something was packed in Van Coon's suitcase?" John nodded, his mouth too full to answer verbally. "I'm fairly certain they were smuggling something back from Hong Kong."

Swallowing hastily, John asked, "If they both met up with whoever was running the smuggling at this end, then why were they killed? It doesn't make any sense, not if they finished already."

"Unless one of them stole something," Sherlock countered.

John slowly nodded, "Yeah, I suppose I can see that – something goes missing on the Hong Kong side, but since both Lukis and Van Coon were there at about the same time, they don't know which stole whatever it was." John inhaled another large bite of his dinner.

"What of you?" Sherlock asked. "Did you find anything of note?"

John nodded, chewing madly, and fumbled in his jeans pocket for his phone. He swallowed enough to say, "Yeah. Took photos. The last couple I think are the most promising. Gonna need to go back out tomorrow, though – the compass indicated there was some sort of similar message at the National Antiquities Museum, but they'd closed by the time I got there." John tossed his phone to Sherlock. Catching it, Sherlock shook his head. "I already know what we'll find there – another set like is at the bank and library, only sprayed across a statue."

"Who was the warning for?" John asked, not too sure he really wanted to hear about another body, not while he was trying to enjoy the best example of his all-time-favorite Chinese food dish he'd ever tasted.

"Soo Lin Yao," Sherlock replied, hooking John's phone to the printer. "She lives, or lived, above the front for the smuggling operation and works at the museum. My guess is they used her experience with antiquities to appraise the smuggled goods prior to sale." The printer began spewing out hardcopy of the photos John took. "It seems she's somewhat more able than either Lukis or Van Coon – she's disappeared. I contacted Molly and she's confirmed that there haven't been any unidentified bodies in London that match Yao's description, either."

His appetite surged back, and John took another bite. After swallowing it, he asked, "Why would they go after her, though? If she's their appraiser, I mean, wouldn't she be needed?"

Sherlock shrugged. "Perhaps she wanted out. Perhaps she has whatever it is that was stolen. Perhaps she committed some unpardonable sin against the people behind this and her being a target is a
simple matter of expediency. We won't know unless she turns up." He plucked the new photographs off of the printer and handed John his phone, then taped the printouts up with the rest of his collage. There was barely any scrap of mirror to be seen through the pictures and notes.

While Sherlock mused on the possible meanings for the numbers, John finished off the lo-mein and half the potstickers. The rice and remaining potstickers he tucked into a safe corner of the fridge to have for lunch tomorrow. "Getting anywhere?" he asked, returning to the living room.

Sherlock ignored him.

"Or he just didn't hear me. He tends to block out the rest of the world when he focuses like that, doesn't he?" John left him to it and turned his own attention to more mundane tasks, such as cleaning up the collection of half-empty tea and coffee mugs spread around, and taking out the garbage. When three hours had passed with Sherlock having moved only enough to be breathing, John stretched out on the sofa and immersed himself in a medical journal. He was asleep even before he finished reading the first page.

"We're not going to be able to crack this without Soo Lin Yao," Sherlock's voice yanked John out of his slumber. He glanced at his watch. It was half-past eleven at night. He'd been sleeping for a little over two hours.

"Pardon?" John yawned.

"The numbers are in pairs, John," Sherlock said, pulling on his coat. "Always in pairs."

John stood, stretched, then grabbed his own coat and followed Sherlock outside. During the taxi ride to the museum, Sherlock actually called someone on his phone, rather than send a text. "Andy Galbraith? Yes, this is Sherlock Holmes. Could you meet me at the museum? Oh, good – you're still there. I'll be there in half an hour."

Forty minutes later, following a mildly confusing conversation with a lovestruck history geek, Sherlock located Soo Lin Yao. John lingered behind long enough to convince the boy to go home; he wound up needing to use his Captain Watson voice to do so. Once finished with Andy, John rushed to catch up to Sherlock. He found him in the museum's restoration room, already talking to Soo Lin – who was far younger and much prettier than John had expected.

"You saw the cipher," she was saying as John entered the room and joined them at the table. "Then you know he is coming for me."

"You've been clever to avoid him so far," Sherlock replied. "I had to finish," Soo Lin looked at the teapot on the table, her eyes sad, "to finish this work. It's only a matter of time." She looked up at John, then at Sherlock. "I know he will find me."

"Who is he?" Sherlock asked. "Have you met him before?"

Soo Lin nodded. "When I was a girl, living back in China. I recognize his signature."

"The cipher," Sherlock said.

"Only he would do this – Zhi Zhu," she said the name like a curse, then shifted on her stool, bringing her right foot up to her knee. She then took off her shoe and revealed a tattoo on her heel. "You know this mark?" she directed her question to Sherlock.

Sherlock replied, "It is the mark of a tong."
"Every foot soldier bears the mark. Everyone who hauls for them," she said, putting her shoe back on.

John blinked at her. "'Hauls'?" Soo Lin just looked at him. "You mean you were a smuggler?" He couldn't quite wrap his mind around it – that this pretty girl had done anything illegal, let alone smuggling.

"I was fifteen," Soo Lin explained. "My parents were dead. I had no livelihood, no way of surviving day to day… Except to work for the bosses."

"Who are they?" Sherlock asked.

"They are called the Black Lotus. By the time I was sixteen, I was taking thousands of pounds' worth of drugs across the border into Hong Kong. But I managed to leave that life behind me. I came to England." She smiled, though the expression still seemed sad to John's eyes. "They gave me a job here. Everything was good – a new life."

"Then he came looking for you," Sherlock said.

"Yes," Soo Lin agreed. "I had hoped after five years maybe they would have forgotten me, but they never really let you leave. A small community like ours – they are never very far away."

Silent tears started coursing down her face. She wiped at her cheek. "He came to my flat," she said. "He asked me to help him to track down something that was stolen."

"And you've no idea what it was?" John asked.

She shook her head. "I refused to help."

"Good for you," John said, leaning across the table. Soo Lin looked up at him, confused. "It would have been easy for you to say you'd help, if only to avoid all this." John laid a comforting hand on hers.

"Easier than you know," Soo Lin replied. "Zhi Zhu is my brother." She paused for a moment, almost as though to allow the men time to digest this fragment of information. "Two orphans. We had no choice. We could work for the Black Lotus, or starve on the streets like beggars. My brother has become their puppet, in the power of the one they call Shan, the Black Lotus general. I turned my brother away. He said I had betrayed him. Next day I came to work and the cipher was waiting."

Sherlock reached into his coat pocket and pulled out one of the photos John had taken, but before he could ask, John shook his head at him. "Now's really not the time, Sherlock," he muttered. Louder, and to Soo Lin, he said, "Come with us."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because it's better than waiting to be killed," John replied. "Maybe we can stop that from happening."

Soo Lin turned her hand over and clasped his wrist. "Do you really think so?" she asked.

John nodded firmly. "I know so."

As Soo Lin slid off her stool, all the lights simultaneously went out. "He's here. Zhi Zhu. He has found me!" There was no mistaking the terror in her voice.

The flutter of Sherlock's coat in the faint light coming through the windows caught John's attention,
and he snapped his left hand out, snagging its hem. "Let's not go haring off after mad assassins in the middle of a museum filled with priceless artifacts, shall we?" John whispered urgently.

Irate at being thwarted, Sherlock spun around. "Then what do you plan to do to catch him?" he hissed.

John let go of Soo Lin's hand and dipped into his jacket pocket. He held up a stick of chalk. "Let's get her out of here, first – then we can worry about it." Or better yet, let the police handle it. It's their job, after all. "Come on," he ordered, not letting go of Sherlock's coat, and strode over to a wooden panel in the wall. Ignoring Soo Lin's confused look, he quickly drew the outline of a door. He held his hand over the keyhole and whispered, "Aut viam inveniam aut faciam." As soon as the door manifested, he yanked it open, pushed Sherlock through, then Soo Lin, and then jumped through himself.

He landed in a tangle of limbs on the landing outside his bedroom at 221B. After sorting themselves out, Soo Lin took a look around. "Where…?"

"You're in our flat," John replied, offering her his hand.

She accepted his help in climbing to her feet. "Moshu shi," she breathed in wonder.

"Huh?"

"She just called you a magician, John," Sherlock absently translated, brushing imaginary dust off his coat.


Still somewhat dazed, Soo Lin followed John and Sherlock into their living room. She muttered something in Mandarin. John paused in taking off his jacket. "Pardon?"

Sherlock hung his Belstaff on the hook on the back of the door. "She just said, 'I should have known better than to disbelieve Grandmother's stories.'" He added his scarf to the hook.

John blinked, then finished removing his jacket. "What do you mean by that?" he asked Soo Lin.

She fell onto the end of the sofa. "When I was very young, Grandmother used to tell stories about moshu shi. About the magics they used. I always thought they were fairytales."

John smiled at her. "Well, to be fair, most of them actually are just stories." He tossed the jacket on his chair and sat next to her on the sofa. "Just so you know, just in case anyone asks…” he said, somewhat awkwardly, then trailed off, not too certain how to conclude what he wanted to ask.

Soo Lin proved to be as smart as she was pretty, though, and nodded. "We took a taxi from the museum. Who would believe anything else?"

"I hate to interrupt this rather touching moment," Sherlock sounded more impatient than apologetic. "But we do need your help, Miss Yao."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Of course," she said. "Anything."

Sherlock handed her the photo John had taken of the spray-painted numbers. "Can you decode this?" he asked.
Soo Lin nodded. "These are numbers," she said, pointing to the squiggles of bright yellow paint.

"Yes, Hangzhou, we know," Sherlock interrupted. "What we don't know is what the numbers mean."

"It's based upon a book," Soo Lin replied.

"Ah! Page number, then word number, right?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Which book?" Sherlock pressed.

"The *London A to Z*," Soo Lin replied.

Sherlock frowned. "Damn it!"

Soo Lin looked to John in confusion. John smiled a little. "One of the few books Sherlock doesn't own a copy of. No matter," he said. "I've got one in my room." He dashed up the stairs, grabbed the book off his desk, then hurried back to Soo Lin and Sherlock.

It took about two minutes to translate the squiggles. When finished, the message read: *Nine mil for jade pin dragon den black tramway.*

On reading the message, Sherlock's face broke into a pleased smile and he collapsed into his armchair. "Call DI Dimmock, John – let him know… Well," he gestured vaguely towards Soo Lin, "everything."

Three days later, John met up with Soo Lin at Speedy's. He'd heard through Sherlock that Dimmock managed to track the Black Lotus back to a Chinese circus, and all fourteen individuals arrested – including Liang Yao, also known as Zhi Zhu.

"How are you doing?" he asked Soo Lin after paying for their lunch orders.

"Well," Soo Lin replied. "I wanted to thank you and Mr. Holmes… Where is he?"

"He had some business to deal with at the bank," John replied. "Otherwise I'm sure he'd be here." That was a complete lie, but he didn't see the point in telling such a sweet girl that Sherlock found her 'boring'; Sherlock and John had visited Wilkes the day before, and while Sherlock spoke to Van Coon's PA, John had told Wilkes about the hole in their security system. "And no thanks are necessary. I'm just glad you're alright."

"They are placing me into witness protection until after the trial," Soo Lin volunteered.

"You don't seem pleased."

"It will be hard, I think," Soo Lin said. "Can I ask…?"

"Certainly," John replied. "What do you need?"

"Grandmother used to tell of small trinkets, things overlooked…"

"Charms," John supplied. "And I think I know what you want. I've already thought about it." He rummaged in his pockets for a moment, then pulled up a small piece of jewelry – a turquoise point, wrapped in silver wire, and strung on a piece of black silk cord. He handed it to Soo Lin. "Keep it
with you – you don't even have to wear it."

"A protection charm?"

John nodded. "It won't stop everything, but it should keep you off the radar of anyone who wants to cause you harm."

"Thank you."

John shrugged, "Like I said – no thanks are necessary. You just take care of yourself."

Soo Lin stood, pulling the necklace cord over her head. "Don't worry," she said. "I will."

Chapter End Notes

Am I the only one wondering just why Sherlock needed a roommate when his freakin' coat cost £1,350 (that's over $2000 in US money) and he wears Dolce&Gabbana? Hmm… Maybe that's the answer – freakin' clotheshorse spends all his cash on his closet…

Anyway, the phrase John uses as his 'password' for his perma-gate (aut viam inveniam aut faciam) is a quote by Hannibal (the man who took elephants over the Alps in a bid to conquer Rome), which translates to 'I'll either find a way or make one'.

As much as I actually liked Sarah (she was one of the redeeming features of this particular episode), I couldn't really work that angle into the AU plotline I'm developing (at least not yet – she might show up later, though).

And if someone (anyone, really) spends enough time in an area where another language is spoken, that language will eventually be absorbed (I speak from experience). Ergo, since I have this version of John having spent a number of years in Afghanistan, I figured he's at least passably familiar with Pashto. With that in mind, I figured he'd likely cuss in Pashto when particularly upset. Any and all instances of this will be noted with footnotes (though I don't anticipate it becoming common). And, if you know better than I (who had to look things up online, and we all know how unreliable interwebz sources can be), please feel free to correct me. Also, does anyone know the HTML coding to create text-blocks when your mouse hovers over a word (search-engines hate me, and so I've not been able to find what I'm looking for on my own)? I'd rather have that than the footnotes. Thanks ahead of time.

1.) spee bachee – 'son of a bitching'

Please remember to let me know what y'all think! Thanks in advance.

Until next time folks!

12/9/18: Killed a typo.
Chapter Summary

*The Great Game* as seen through mage-colored spectacles.

Chapter Notes

The chapter title comes from the lyrics to The Rolling Stones' *Gimme Shelter* (which I also don't own, nor am I affiliated with in any way). And keep in mind this is AU, which means things aren't going to play out exactly like they did on the show (I've put quite a lot of thought into the causality of the series, just so y'all know). Mainly, it seems as though (mage abilities of this John aside) the writers simply forget John's a doctor. Grr.

**Warnings:** All warnings from chapter one still apply. And, considering this is the chapter for *The Great Game*, do I really need to advise a cliffhanger warning? Good, I thought not, too.

Once more, I'd like to give major thanks and unlimited kudos to Ariane DeVere for her work in getting transcripts of the show up over at livejournal!

Nov. 11, '13 ETA: I finally found a fic utilizing the hover-to-translate option and pulled up the source code on the sucker. Now, I also have that nifty addition to my fic! I still left the footnote translations, just in case my novice HTML skills fail me (and for those of you who, for whatever reason, can't 'hover' a cursor).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Four: It's Just a Shot Away

*Mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself, but talent instantly recognizes genius.* – Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Valley of Fear*

"How long's Sherlock going to be away?" Mary asked, dodging a piece of chewing gum on the pavement. She and John were on their way from her new apartment to a quiet little café a couple of blocks over.

John shrugged. "Depends on how interesting the case is. Could be there a couple of hours, or he could take a week." He let out a small chuckle. "He only went because he'd never been to Belarus before, and Mr. Berwick's family paid the airfare."

Mary paused and stifled a yawn. "God, I hate this new dig," she grumbled.

Knowing that the dig the institute had her working on meant she had to work around the tide – low tide had been running on the middle-of-the-night/early afternoon schedule for more than a week now
John gave her a sympathetic smile. "It's just until they finish the cofferdam around it, though, right?"

Mary shook her head. "Ruddy MI6 is giving us a hard time about the dig. They've delayed the permits for a cofferdam three times now, with no end in sight." She yawned again. "You gonna think I'm a horrible person if I begged off?"

Chuckling, John reached up and tucked a loose strand of Mary's hair behind her ear. "Go home and get some sleep," he said. "We'll have dinner some other time."

"Thanks, Johnny," Mary said, kissing his cheek, then the pair turned to walk back to her place.

John waited until she was safely inside her new apartment building before looking back in the direction of 221B. Home or a walk? He glanced up at the leaden grey skies as a chilly gust of air blew down his coat collar. Home. He hailed a cab and none too soon – the skies opened up with large, splatting pellets of rain. Sure, he could – and often did – walk through rain, slipping between the drops to avoid getting wet, but he simply couldn't bother with it right then. Besides, it's coming down hard enough to mist up from the cement. Mist is almost impossible to slide around. It's nearly as bad as fog.

By the time he returned to Baker Street, late evening had become full-dark. The rain managed to let up to a barely-there sprinkle just as the taxi pulled to a halt. John paid the cabbie, then heard what sounded suspiciously like gunshots coming from his flat. Sprinting, he burst through the door and up the stairs, only to skid to a halt in the living room. He glanced at his watch, inwardly astonished at the sheer level of mind-numbing destruction Sherlock managed in a little less than two hours; the remains of three separate newspapers were spread across the living room, a precariously-stacked pile of books next to Sherlock's armchair had toppled over into a haphazard line leading to the desk, and there was a bright yellow smiley-face spray-painted on the wall above the sofa with a handful of bullet holes peppering its surface. "What the hell are you doing?" John shouted the question.

"Bored," came the sullen reply.

John blinked. "What?"

"Bored!" Sherlock repeated the word with more emphasis than was strictly necessary, leaping out of his chair. "Bored!" he punctuated his word by shooting the wall again. "Bored!" and again. The slide locked back on John's Browning, indicating it was empty. John let out a breath, stepped over, and pulled the gun out of Sherlock's hand. The younger man let out an explosive sigh, then flopped onto the sofa. "Don't know what's got into the criminal classes. Good job I'm not one of them."

"So you take it out on the wall?" John said, ejecting the empty clip from the gun.

"Ah, the wall had it coming," Sherlock said, picking at the edge of the lowest bullet hole.

"I didn't give you the combination to the lockbox," John said, tucking the gun and its magazine into a dull grey metal safe that had been brought out of his room and sat on the desk, "just so you could use it to alleviate your frustrations at not having something to do!" He slammed the door shut and spun the combination lock dial. "Don't make me change the combination."

Sherlock scoffed and sprawled out on the sofa like an overlarge housecat. "There isn't a lock I can't open in under ten minutes with the right equipment."

John reached up and rubbed lightly at his temples with his fingertips. "I gave you the combination for emergencies, Sherlock. For emergencies, of which 'bored' most definitely does not qualify!"
Dropping his hands, he stripped off his coat.

"I fail to see the distinction," Sherlock said, tucking his face into his elbow.

"Of course not," John muttered, laying his coat over the arm of his chair. "You're acting like a spoiled five year old," came out at a louder volume. "D'you know what my parents used to tell me and Harry when we started acting like this?"

Sherlock lifted his arm a little to peer at John. "No. How could I?"

"They used to tell us 'the world doesn't exist simply to entertain you','" John continued, unconsciously mimicking his dad's inflection.

"What a narrow definition of the world's purpose," Sherlock retorted, lowering his arm back down to cover his eyes.

Choosing to ignore the sheer level of selfishness that comment revealed, John decided to change the subject. "What happened in Belarus?"

"Open and shut domestic murder. Not worth my time," Sherlock dismissed the conversation before it had fairly begun.

Perhaps I ought to just leave him be for now. John, determined to ignore his flatmate until he could stop acting like a spoiled kid, headed to the kitchen. He paused on seeing the mess on the kitchen table. How...? I was only gone a couple of hours! He hadn't even gotten back yet when I left! He looked at the mess again. Right. He nodded. I am not cleaning this up! Sidestepping around the table, he headed for the fridge. Opening it revealed a severed head, facing John with a cloudy-eyed, slack-jawed expression. Momentarily startled, he closed the fridge door. Taking a deep breath, he inhaled the strong scent of cinnamon oil. I wonder why I didn't notice it before? He let his breath out slowly, then mentally counted to ten. Opening the door once more didn't change anything; the head still sat on the bottom shelf, balanced upright on a stump of a neck in an unfamiliar shallow bowl. I really hope the bowl is one he bought himself and not one he borrowed from Mrs. Hudson. Grabbing a plate of leftovers from dinner the night before, he shut the door once more.

After cautiously checking the microwave – empty – he set it to reheat his meal, then wandered back into the living room. "Why do we have a severed head in the fridge?"

Sherlock shifted position on the sofa again, dropping his arm from his face and pushing himself into a slightly more upright posture. He still managed to take up all three cushions, though. "Well," he said, "where else was I supposed to put it?"

John shook his head and tried again. "Not the point, Sherlock. Why is it here?"

"I got it from Bart's morgue – I'm measuring the coagulation of saliva after death."

"Of course you are," John said in an undertone. "You do realize our fridge has auto-defrost, right?"

Sherlock blinked and looked over at John. "What does that have to do with anything?" The way he asked the question was enough to tell John that he had no idea what auto-defrost did.

"It keeps frost from building up on the cooling mechanisms," John explained. "It's why, if you don't put them in an air-tight container, grapes turn into raisins so quickly in our fridge. If you're looking for actual coagulation rates from that head, it shouldn't be in the fridge – it'll dry out quicker than it normally would."
"So I'll need to run an evaporative baseline and compensate for the defrosting mechanism." Some of the boredom managed to leech out of Sherlock's voice at the prospect.

The microwave dinged, and John retrieved his leftovers. "Who was it?" John asked, taking a seat in his armchair. The leyline tendril appeared and curled around his ankles before he could take a bite.

"Hmm?" Sherlock absently picked up a magazine and leafed through it.

"The head. Who was it?"

Sherlock shrugged. "Don't know. Molly said it was a donation to the university, though."

That meant there was a record, somewhere, of who it had been. A little of the tension leaked out of John's shoulders. *Though I doubt this is what his family had in mind, at least they know, sort of, what happened to him.* A twinge of guilty disappointment flickered through John. *It's good they know what happened to him, but... I'm pretty sure I could have distracted Sherlock for at least a solid hour with that Interview with a Corpse Spell.*

He let his mind wander while focusing on his meal; the leyline purring contentedly at his feet. *I wonder if the auto-defrost was something Sherlock ever bothered to learn in the first place, or if it's something he's gone and 'deleted'? A small smirk tugged the corners of his mouth. I have to admit, even if only to myself, that 'deletion' knack of his could come in handy every now and again. The smirk faded. Then again, the horrible stuff I've seen and lived through are partly why I'm me. I don't know who I'd be without the bad memories, and I actually like who I am. Probably for the best not to go mucking about with trying to remove anything.*

Just as he finished the last of the leftover risotto, the downstairs door opened. A moment later, Mrs. Hudson's voice echoed up into the flat. "Yoo-hoo!"

John got up and paused long enough for the leyline to release him, then took his empty plate to the kitchen sink. Mrs. Hudson arrived in the kitchen just as he turned the water on. "Good evening, Mrs. Hudson."

She smiled at him and lifted a pair of plastic bags onto a rare sliver of open space on the table. "Hello, John. I thought you were spending the evening with Miss Morstan?"

"That had been the plan, yes," John agreed with a small shrug as he rinsed off his plate. "But she's been working too much lately – I told her to get some sleep. We'll have dinner together some other time."

"That was kind of you," she replied, pulling a receipt out of one of the bags. "Sherlock," she called out. "They were out of the lemon-flavored biscuits you like so much, so I picked up raspberry instead." She stepped into the living room and halted, looking around at the mess with wide-eyed disbelief. John sat his now-clean plate in the rack next to the sink to drip-dry, then wandered over and leaned against the frame of the sliding glass doors.

Sherlock had levered himself off the sofa to stand at one of the windows, peering out at the darkened cityscape. He spoke, more to himself than to either of his companions, "Would you look at that? Quiet, calm, peaceful." He breathed in, the lines of his back and the set of his shoulders caught somewhere between irritation and frustration and, yes, boredom. "Isn't it hateful?" he nearly hissed the last word.

"Oh, I'm sure something'll turn up, Sherlock," Mrs. Hudson replied, her eyes slowly tracking across the toppled books, to the spread-about papers. "A nice murder – that'll cheer you up." She started to
let out a small chuckle, but it seemed to catch in her throat as her eyes landed on the smiley-face on the wall.

"Can't come too soon," Sherlock longingly replied.

"What have you done to my bloody wall?" Mrs. Hudson rarely got angry, but when she did, even John winced a bit. Sherlock just spun in place and grinned manically at his handiwork. "I'm putting this on your rent, young man!"

Any further conversation or discussion was halted dramatically by the sound of a massive explosion. John, reacting with instincts honed over eight years of living with the constant threat of car-bombs and IEDs, found himself on the floor, curled over and around Mrs. Hudson, his ears ringing and his pulse thrumming. Taking just a moment to re-orient himself, he pushed himself off of her, then asked, "Are you alright?"

Mrs. Hudson, a little pale, closed her eyes for a heartbeat, then nodded. "I think so."

John stood, gave her a hand up, and looked to his flatmate. The sound of car alarms began overtaking the tinnitus in relative levels of volume. Sherlock looked inordinately pleased, peering once more out the window. He lifted a long finger and traced a tiny little engraving in the corner of one pane. "More of your handiwork, John?"

Knowing he was asking about the anchor-points John had etched on the windowpanes, the ex-RAMC captain nodded. "Yes, though this wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I put those particular setspells in place," a light layer of dry irony dusted his words. He'd been intending to avoid any further incidents like what had happened when the jackdaw had cracked both windowpane and its own neck. "You okay?"

Sherlock nodded. "I'm fine. The building across the street, however…" a lazy, slow grin surfaced on his face.

John crossed the room to see for himself. The townhouse directly opposite 221B was little more than a gaping chasm, shrouded by smoke and dust. "It was empty, right?" he couldn't keep the concern from his voice – not that he'd tried.

"Undergoing renovations," Mrs. Hudson replied from the vicinity of his elbow.

John allowed her words to sink in while he scanned the pavement for any sign of casualties. He didn't see any, but that didn't mean much – dust and smoke were thick enough it was difficult to make out the street just below the window, let alone any further afield. Ripping himself from the surreal, horribly familiar yet still wholly alien view, he grabbed his jacket. He slid into it and grabbed his first-aid kit out of the kitchen cupboard. "I'm sure someone has already called 999, but would you, Mrs. Hudson? I'm going to see if anyone needs help." Not bothering to hear a reply, he rushed down the stairs.

There were three people huddled against the steel roller that had shielded Speedy's from any significant damage. Two young men in their twenties, and a girl who was likely only a year or two younger. None of the three had any visible injuries, though all three complained of the ringing in their ears and were coated in a fine layer of brick dust. John got them settled more-or-less comfortably on the stoop to 221B, then continued scouring the rubble-strewn street for anyone else unlucky enough to have been caught by the blast. Sirens sounded in the distance, coming closer with every passing moment.

John reached the outermost edge of the blast radius on 'his' side of the street without encountering
anyone else, then crossed over to the side on which the former townhouse had stood. He'd been relying more on his othersense than on sight – the blast had managed to knock out most of the streetlamps and the ringing in his own ears, coupled with the incessant blaring of car alarms, made more mundane senses rather useless at best.

The first police car screeched to a halt at the end of the block just as John spotted a slightly familiar – and rapidly fading – aura, mostly buried under brick rubble caught against the side of a mid-sized car, like snow piled up against a wall after a blizzard. He wouldn't feel the abrasions until much later, and wouldn't notice the holes torn in the knees of his jeans until he got around to doing the laundry, but he'd wind up thinking it a small price to pay, considering. The first-aid kit was abandoned on the dented bonnet of the ruined car. "Mrs. Turner! Can you hear me?" he yelled, hurriedly clearing broken brick and splintered wood off the trapped woman.

She didn't reply.

_Could just be she can't hear me._ Mrs. Turner and Mrs. Hudson were within a couple of years of being the same age, but where Mrs. Hudson had 'a hip', Mrs. Turner had grown incrementally more hard-of-hearing as the years wore on. Coupling that with the inevitable tinnitus from the blast… _Please let it be she just can't hear me right now._ Some part of John noticed that the first officer on the scene had managed to locate the kids on the stoop of 221B; that same part of him was pleased that they were being looked after.

He tossed the last of the brick out of the way and his breath caught in his throat. Mrs. Turner's glasses had shattered, the right side still hanging haphazardly from her ear, the left lost amid the debris. An all-too-angular divot deformed her left temple, a crack in the skin clogged with brick dust was bleeding sluggishly into her iron-grey hair.

Dr. Watson knew this was bad. This was beyond bad. This wasn't something Dr. Watson could fix. Dr. Watson would be lucky to keep her breathing long enough to get her to a hospital, and if that should happen, the chances of her ever waking up again – to say nothing of actually being a _person_ again – were slim to none.

Captain Watson also knew it was hopeless and compared it to the other civilian deaths he'd seen, mentally noting that this was – by far – the worst one, simply because he _knew_ her.

John could only think a mind-numbing litany of _no no no no no_, coupled with half-formed musings, _What do I tell Mrs. Hudson…? What if…? But I…_

It was the mage who took matters into his own hands.

John's hands simultaneously dipped into his pockets. His right quickly sorted through his collection of charms and found his mistletoe-and-iron ring by touch. His left seized the medallion he'd absently been carrying around with the intent of checking it with one of the many museums in the area – not that he'd doubted Mary, of course, he just wanted more information if at all possible.

His eyes flicked up and saw the policeman still preoccupied with the kids. His ears heard another car come to a tire-squealing halt at the opposite end of the block from the original officer.

Othersight stretched and seized the leyline, a frantic plea for _help_ surging along the connection.

An answering reply of _always and forever my child/master._

Deeply buried confusion took root, but was immediately ignored.

The mage slid the ring into place on his left middle finger.
He held the medallion in the same hand.

Then focused.

Power surged through John. He was drowning. He was being electrocuted as the winds of a hurricane swept through him. He was immolated in lava. He was buried in sand. He turned to glass to ice to pure thought.

He ceased to exist.

Gradually, the feeling faded.

John returned to himself by degrees.

Before he could do more than think, What was that? Mrs. Turner coughed harshly and let out a blistering string of curses that would have made him blush if he hadn't already been so shaken. "What on Earth happened?" she asked, struggling to sit up.

John automatically helped her into a sitting position. The divot in her head, the split line of skin, the blood lost – none of it was there. Nothing remained of the wound. Mrs. Turner simply looked like those kids had, covered in dust, a couple of superficial scrapes, and slightly dazed by the blast.

Nothing to worry about.

John still worried, but he pushed it aside with the ease of long practice and focused on the not-quite-elderly woman. "Mrs. Turner, are you alright?"

"Of course I'm not alright, you blasted nitwit! A building just exploded!"

John winced and half-expected her to start beating on him with a handbag or an umbrella or even a chunk of broken brick. "I meant, are you hurt anywhere?"

Mrs. Turner made a visible effort to calm herself. "I have a bit of a headache and my ears are ringing something awful," she managed after a long minute of silence. "But nothing unduly horrible."

For the rest of his life, John only had brief flashes of memory concerning the rest of that night. He could recall helping Mrs. Turner to her feet. He could remember speaking with a policeman he didn't know, though he couldn't remember what he'd told the man. He also had a vague memory of being informed that there weren't any casualties while a now-dressed Sherlock curiously poked around the rubble. But other than that, the rest of that night remained a blank in his personal timeline.

After crawling into bed several hours later than was his usual, and receiving little actual rest – every time he closed his eyes, dreams that weren't quite nightmares started up, featuring the face of every soldier he hadn't been able to save hurling accusations at him, demanding to know why her and not me? – John eventually gave up. His watch claimed it was already half-ten, but that seemed impossible. I was only asleep a few minutes, surely! But the level of light streaming through the window in the hallway confirmed he had indeed received a bit more sleep than he felt like he'd gotten.

He padded across to the bathroom and went about his morning routine until he came to the washing-his-face bit when he stopped and stared at his reflection in the mirror: His hair – which had been going steadily grey since he was eighteen, particularly at his temples – was as unkempt as it ever was on just waking, but those grey patches… They weren't grey any longer.

They were white.
Not the metallic no-color brought about by age. Not the dark dishwater-blonde he'd been born with. Not the honey yellow his hair bleached out to when he spent long hours under a desert sun. White. Sunlight-on-fresh-snow white.

He had no idea how long he stood there, staring in disbelief, before the distant sound of rumbled conversation punctuated by plucked violin strings invaded his consciousness, but he was pretty sure it was an embarrassing amount of time to be spent locked up in the bath. John dragged his eyes away from the mirror and rushed through scrubbing his face, forewent the morning shave, and hastily scrubbed his teeth.

Still wearing his long-sleeved t-shirt with the black and white stripes and his black track pants, he made his way down the stairs. About halfway down, the voices resolved into clarity.

"I can't." Sherlock said, sounding both bored and irritated, plucking at the strings of his violin.

"'Can't'?” Mycroft's voice was incredulous; the tone John knew, albeit in slightly subtler doses, from having told the man any variation of 'no'.

"The stuff I've got on is just too big," Sherlock replied, still plucking away. "I can't spare the time."

John carefully poked his head through the open living room door. Mycroft had usurped John's chair and was idly spinning his ever-present umbrella on its point next to his right knee. "Never mind your usual trivia," Sherlock's brother said. "This is of national importance." His tonality conveyed a million shades and nuances of meaning. No doubt that Sherlock can read all that, but I'm really only catching the bits where Mycroft considers Sherlock's 'hobby' to be a waste of time. John decided to avoid them and entered the kitchen through the side-door.

Sherlock plucked at the Stradivarius some more, creating 'notes' that were rapidly setting John's teeth on edge. "How's the diet?" the detective asked, undisguised venom laced through the words.

"Fine," Mycroft replied, the single syllable clearly indicating that he didn't want to talk about it. John ignored it and filled the kettle. At least, that was his intention, until Mycroft said, "Perhaps you can get through to him, Dr. Watson."

Setting the filled kettle on the counter and flicking it on, John sidled over to the open doors between the kitchen and living areas. "Excuse me?" he did his best to pack the words with as much sarcasm as he possibly could. "Don't drag me into your family squabbles – I get enough of my own with Harry." Captain Watson also found his way into John's voice, again without his permission – it was proving to be a standard defense mechanism against the older Holmes brother. The subtle change of his normal tone was enough to earn a sharp look from Sherlock, though John supposed that could also have been caused by the sudden lightening of the grey in his hair. He moved slightly, so that Mycroft could twist his head around to look his way without dislocating his neck. "And didn't I tell you to leave me alone when you bloody kidnapped me?" Captain Watson made a much stronger showing in that particular question than he had in anything else said thus far.

Mycroft did adjust his position slightly and looked at John, his eyes flicking to the swan-feather patches over either ear. "This is not interference, Dr. Watson – this is a legitimate petition for assistance on a particularly sensitive case."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Sherlock's expression shift oh-so-slightly as he took in what John and his brother were saying, how they were saying it, and filed it away in his mind in an instant. "If you're so keen," Sherlock said, still plucking at violin strings, "why don't you investigate it?"
"Yeah," John agreed. "You have 'people', don't you? Surely someone who actually works for you would be able to handle whatever it is you're asking about."

Mycroft grimaced. "Yes, well… The ones whom I would trust with this specific matter are all currently occupied with other assignments at this juncture."

Sherlock's left eyebrow twitched at the implication that his brother actually trusted him and he wound up plucking a sour note. He glared at the neck of his instrument, though it was unclear if he was blaming the Strad or his own fingers for the mistake. Behind John, the kettle began to boil. John retreated into the kitchen, only to find that Mycroft followed him. He very obviously set about preparing two cups of tea, shooting a look at the elder Holmes that quite blatantly said 'either come to the point or get out'.

Even without a verbal command in Captain Watson's voice, Mycroft responded to the implied order and held out a yellow manila file folder, messily packed with about a centimeter's thickness of assorted papers. "Andrew West," he said, "known as 'Westie' to his friends." John ignored the folder in favor of adding sugar to Sherlock's cup and levering the toaster into action. "A civil servant, found dead on the tracks at Battersea Station this morning with his head smashed in."

John picked up Sherlock's mug and carried it to the living room. Mycroft trailed behind like an overlarge child eager for an adult's attention. "I suppose you're not hungry?" John asked, handing the mug to Sherlock.

Sherlock shook his head. "Ta, though."

Mycroft, unused to being ignored, continued speaking. "The M. O. D. is working on a new missile-defense system; the Bruce-Partington Program, it's called."

"They find out yet what happened last night?" John asked his flatmate, making a gesture towards the street.

"Apparently, it was a gas leak," Sherlock replied, carefully maneuvering his violin to a less precarious position across his lap so that he could drink his tea without damaging the priceless instrument.

Mycroft paused, finally noticing that neither John nor Sherlock were paying him any mind at all. "The plans for it were on a memory stick," he said, somewhat more forcefully than was necessary.

"The street should be reopened to traffic sometime this afternoon," Sherlock – always delighted to wind his brother up like a cheap watch – continued playing along with John's 'maybe if we ignore him, he'll go away' line of reasoning.

"That's good," John said, smiling a little. "I'm just glad nobody was seriously injured. Can you imagine what might've happened if it'd gone up during the lunch rush down at Speedy's?"

Mycroft cleared his throat; frustration evident in every tiny detail. Even with his back to him, John could practically feel it pouring off the man in waves. "We think West must have taken the memory stick. We can't possibly risk it falling into the wrong hands."

Sherlock let a small smile surface. "Had that happened, it could only serve to improve the food served there."

John opened his mouth to argue the point, but the toaster ka-chinked in the kitchen. "Possibly so," he settled on instead, then slipped around Mycroft in the exact same manner he used to sidestep the small mound of books next to his armchair.
Though he wasn't in the room any longer, John kept a sharp ear on the living room as he buttered his toast and coated one slice in a thick layer of orange marmalade. Mycroft let out a noise that was somewhere between a huff of frustration, a resigned sigh, and something slightly indescribable that hinted at anger. "You've got to find those plans, Sherlock," he said. "Don't make me order you."

Simultaneously, Sherlock looked up from his tea and John arrived in the doorway – his own tea in one hand and his breakfast in the other – and said, "I'd like to see you try." The only differences were in tone: Sherlock's voice carried the petulant 'you're not the boss of me' shading that only younger siblings were well-schooled in, while John's Captain Watson indicated he would be highly amused to see just such an attempt since he knew who'd come out the 'winner'.

Mycroft looked from his brother to John and back again. He laid the file folder on the arm of John's chair. "Think it over," he said, his voice back to its typical level of self-importance. He strode out without another word.

John sank into his chair with a relieved sigh. "Why'd you lie about having stuff to do?" he asked.

"Why didn't you tell me you'd met my brother?" Sherlock countered.

John took a bite of his toast-and-marmalade sandwich and shrugged. "Didn't seem all that important. Does he always kidnap people instead of, y'know, calling them?"

"Depends on the person," Sherlock said. "He's yet to try to kidnap Mrs. Hudson."

John let out a chuckle. "If he's half as smart as he likes to think he is, he'll never even try." At Sherlock's questioning eyebrow quirk, John clarified, "Hey, I may have been a soldier and all that, but I'm pretty sure Mrs. Martha Hudson could lay me flat in a heartbeat if she really wanted to."

Sherlock laughed at that, but before he could say anything his mobile rang. He retrieved it and answered. "Sherlock Holmes… Of course. How could I refuse?" He stood, returning his phone to his pocket with one hand and setting his violin gently in his chair with the other. "That was Lestrade. I've been summoned. Coming?"

John looked down at his pajamas. "Can I get dressed first?"

Sherlock had already reached the door and was in the process of pulling on his coat when John asked the question. He halted and blinked. "If you must," he replied, then resumed motion. John sprinted up the stairs and was dressed in nearly no time at all. Grateful he'd taken the time to reorganize, he also grabbed his leather satchel – working with Sherlock's input, he'd managed to put together a pretty comprehensive 'magic on the go' kit. He swung back by the living room to pick up his abandoned breakfast and his own coat, then met Sherlock in the foyer.

A taxi ride later and John was trailing after Sherlock, who in turn was following DI Lestrade through NSY. "You like the funny cases, don't you?" Lestrade said, striding purposefully across the open area cluttered with lower-ranking officers. "The surprising ones."

"Obviously," Sherlock agreed.

"You're gonna love this," Lestrade said, leading the way into what John quickly realized was the man's private office. "That explosion –"

"Gas leak, yes?" Sherlock interrupted as the door swung shut behind John.

"No," Lestrade countered.
"No?" there was no mistaking the curiosity in that one syllable.

"No," Lestrade repeated with a definitive little nod of his head. "Made to look like one."

John frowned. "What?"

The DI glanced over at John, almost as though noticing him for the first time. Just as quickly, he returned his attention to Sherlock. "Hardly anything left of the place except a strongbox," he said. John was mildly amused that the man had a habit of talking with his hands when worked up about something. "A very strong box." John also approved of the subtle punning, though to admit as much out loud was likely to end with groans of irritation. He didn't know why, but puns just didn't seem to appeal to most people. "And inside it was this," Lestrade ended by indicating a white envelope sitting on his desk.

"You haven't opened it?" Sherlock asked, picking it up off the desk. John stepped a little closer and saw, written across it in blue ink, were the words Sherlock Holmes.

"It's addressed to you, isn't it?" Lestrade dryly replied. Despite the DI's somewhat floundering impression of their first meeting of two months ago, John found himself liking the man's sense of humor. "We've X-rayed it. It's not booby-trapped," the DI said.

"How reassuring," Sherlock replied, his sarcasm barely held in check. He peered closely at the envelope while carrying it over to an adjustable lamp in the corner. After a brief spate of rapid-fire deductions about the origin of the paper, the lack of fingerprints, the gender of the writer, and her pen-of-choice, Sherlock finally slit the envelope open.

It took John a moment to place the importance of the object his flatmate pulled from within. "Isn't that supposed to be in an evidence lockup somewhere?" he asked.

Lestrade maneuvered around a precariously-stacked pile of folders and looked around Sherlock's shoulder. "That does look awfully familiar…"

John glanced at Lestrade's face and realized that though the dead woman in her matching pink ensemble was indelibly inked in his own memory, to the DI she'd been just another case -- and one he'd needed help to solve, at that. "That's the pink lady's phone," he said, unsure whether or not Lestrade would remember her name had been Jennifer Wilson.

A few moments later, after some clarification from Sherlock that it wasn't the actual phone from the case John had titled 'A Study in Pink' on his blog and some light teasing by Lestrade at Sherlock's expense and to John's mild embarrassment – because, seriously? people other than his friends were actually reading it? -- Sherlock powered up the phone.

After a maddeningly obtuse 'warning' coupled with a photograph, John found himself back in a taxi, headed straight back to Baker Street. Had I known this would be the result, I wouldn't've bothered tagging along. He had to suppress a small smile all the same. Come on, Watson -- at least admit it to yourself. The unpredictability is part of why you like this. Arriving at Baker Street, they got Mrs. Hudson to let them into 221C -- an apartment which John hadn't even been aware existed, though he wouldn't have admitted as much, regardless of the amount of prize-money to be had. John followed Sherlock into the flat to find it appeared precisely as it had in the photograph, save for a pair of blue-and-white trainers resting in the precise center of 221C's living room.

A sudden recollection of a seemingly-innocent child's teddy bear abandoned in a ditch alongside the rough road linking Kandahar to a small village desperately in need of both protection and a decent doctor flashed through his mind. His shoulder sent out a stab of remembered pain. As Sherlock made
to step closer, John grabbed his elbow. "Careful," he said, his voice a little hollow, the word nearly strangled.

Sherlock halted and scrutinized John's face for a moment. John had no idea what he saw, but it must have explained more clearly than his vocal cords were capable of doing just then, because he nodded. John released his elbow and Sherlock circled the shoes. "They don't appear to be hiding anything inside," he said, sounding like he might have just been airing his thoughts, but John knew better. A little tension evaporated from the ex-soldier's shoulders. Kneeling, Sherlock took a closer look. "Definitely just a pair of trainers," he said, once more using the same general inflection. He reached down to pick one of them up when a shrill ringtone, modeled after the old-fashioned rotary phones John remembered from his childhood, cut through the air.

Leaping to his feet, Sherlock pulled the new pink phone from his pocket and answered the call, making sure it was on speakerphone so that John and Lestrade could listen, too. "Hello?" he said, his voice hardly loud enough for the microphone to pick up.

A halting, sobbing woman's voice answered, "H-hello, s-sexy."

The words were at such odds with her voice that John couldn't help but be momentarily confused. He glanced over at the DI to see what was surely a mirrored expression on the man's face.

"Who is this?" Sherlock asked.

Still crying, still peppered with odd pauses, the woman ignored the question and said, "I've sent you a little puzzle just to say 'hi'."

"Who's talking?" Sherlock tried again. "Why are you crying?" That was something John wanted to know, too, though he was absolutely certain his own reasons and Sherlock's were worlds apart.

"I-I'm not crying, I'm typing," the woman said. "And this stupid bitch," she sniffled noisily, "is reading it out." John closed his eyes. Shit. The leyline below Baker Street responded to his sudden stress by sending up the tendril, but John lanced out at it with his inner magic. No. Not right now. I need to think clearly.

The woman's voice continued, even as John – in complete stillness – magically coerced the leyline into leaving him be. "Twelve hours t-to solve my puzzle, Sherlock, or I'm going to be so naughty."

The call ended.

John opened his eyes. Sherlock was staring at the phone in his hand, his face sporting a determined expression masking a far subtler one hinting at pleasure. Lestrade was staring at Sherlock. The DI cleared his throat. "I'll need the phone," he said, holding his hand out.

Sherlock shot a him a look which clearly said 'are you joking?'. "Certainly not, Inspector," he quickly sorted through the menu on the gadget. "I'll give you the phone's numbers, but the phone itself? What if our mystery guest decides to check in? Would you rather have Anderson attempt to mollify whomever is at the other end?" He looked up from the phone to see that Lestrade hadn't really been expecting anything else. "John? Some paper and a pen."

Already on the same page, John had his pocket notebook and a mechanical pencil out. He handed them to Sherlock, who quickly scribbled down both the telephone number and the phone's serial identification number. He ripped the page from the notebook, then handed the pencil and notebook back to John while handing Lestrade the loose page. "Keep me informed, Sherlock," Lestrade said, taking the note. "I mean that..."
"I know you do, Inspector," Sherlock replied. "And should anything else happen, I shall."

The two stared at each other for a long minute, then Lestrade all but ran for the door. As soon as he was gone, Sherlock turned to John. He opened his mouth, but John held up a hand to forestall him. "Yes, I'll do what I can to help, but we are not bothering Mary with any of this – do you understand? She's got enough on her plate as it is, we don't need to be cutting into what little time she gets to sleep."

John could literally see Sherlock's brain compile innumerable data-points before his expression morphed into a slight grimace. "Of course – MI6 would despise having an archaeological site so close to their headquarters, so your friend would be forced to work around the tides," it came out as a 'note to self'. Sherlock shook his head, wiping the irrelevant data, then refocused on John. "It occurs to me that working this from both ends would be best," Sherlock said.

John nodded, "Makes sense. This building is definitely old enough I should be able to talk to her – mostly since she's been overtop a leyline her entire life. Buildings like these, their spirits tend to mature a little faster than average."

"It's a building. Quit anthropomorphizing."

"I'm not!" John insisted. "I told you before, everything humans create or build carries echoes of who we are in them. The older something is, the more self-aware the object becomes, particularly if it's especially complex." The blatant skepticism on Sherlock's face made John sigh and scrub a hand across his own. "Look – let's just deal with this. After the othersight spell's had time to mature, if you're up to it, I'll bloody show you what I'm talking about, okay?"

"You're right – this isn't the time to get sidetracked. Find out whatever you can here. I'll take the shoes back to Bart's lab and see what I can find." Without another word, Sherlock disappeared from the room.

John took a deep breath, held it for a long count of ten, then slowly let it out. He was just about to reach out to the townhouse's spirit when Sherlock reappeared with an unused plastic garbage bag. He carefully bundled the shoes into the bag, then hurried out again. John waited until the front door slammed shut before attempting to reach the house-spirit again. He found her, tense as a cat just before a thunderstorm.

"Show me, he thought at her. "Show me how those shoes came to be here."

The room with its peeling wallpaper faded away. He found himself standing in Mrs. Hudson's kitchen. The only light came from a lamp on in her living room. The sound of nearby sirens and the faint flicker of reflected police and fire engine lights filtered through the gauzy yellow curtains over Mrs. Hudson's sink. Last night, he realized. Mrs. Hudson is probably giving her statement to the police. I'm outside, doing likewise, and Sherlock's poking around the rubble. There was a nearly-inaudible scratching noise coming from the townhouse's garden door; the door that served as Mrs. Hudson's private entrance.

The door unlocked and John made a mental note to install a chain at some point in the future. A man, approximately three inches taller than John, and a solid twenty or thirty pounds of muscle heavier, slipped in. He wore a pair of trainers, worn-out jeans, a rugby jersey, green hooded sweatshirt, and a dark-colored canvas coat, with a backpack slung over one shoulder and a knit beanie covering his hair. Anyone spotting him on the street would immediately assume him to be a college kid, unless they took the trouble to get a close look at the man's face – he was about ten years older than John. All these little details washed over John's awareness without leaving much of an imprint. What caught his attention wholeheartedly was the man's face. It might have been twenty years since he'd last laid eyes on it, but that face… Moran. He clenched his jaw as an echo of long-ago injury shot
down his back. A string of explicit Pashto flashed through his mind as he watched his old enemy slink through Mrs. Hudson's apartment, grabbing her keyring out of a dish on the bookshelves next to her television.

Moran paused at the door to the rest of the building and listened intently before slipping into the hall. He quickly had the door to 221C unlocked. The man moved rapidly, but economically and – above all – silently down the stairs. He removed a shoebox from his backpack, from which the trainers were removed. Taking care to ensure they were perfectly arranged, Moran then left the same way he came in, going so far as to lock Mrs. Hudson's garden door behind him.

The images faded and John absentely thanked the house-spirit, his mind reeling from the fact that Sebastian Moran had been in his house. It may have been twenty years, but in John's mind, it could have happened only yesterday. All the old anger came rushing back. He stalked out of 221C, taking the stairs two at a time all the way up to the top floor. Barely pausing, he opened the gate to Ajay's and stepped through.

He found Ajay in the store, dusting off figurines of Egyptian gods and goddesses. "Why didn't you tell me Moran was back in London?"

Ajay nearly dropped the ceramic statuette of Isis he held. "What?" he leveled a hard look at his protégé. "Moran isn't in London – that's something I'd tell you, you know that!"

"The hell he isn't in London!" John's voice had dropped about three octaves, a dead giveaway to anyone who knew him well that he was so far beyond mere anger there wasn't a good enough word in the English language to describe it. "He was in my house last night!"

Ajay winced and slowly settled Isis on the shelf among her brothers and sisters. "No, John – he's in Iraq. Has been for a solid year now, and not due back for another eight months or so."

Unnoticed by John, he was 'sparking' to othersight. Ajay could feel the untamed magic rolling off of the younger man. John scoffed. "And I wasn't supposed to be back from Afghanistan until next year, Ajay! Plans change. He's here. I want to know where and I want to know now."

With every facet of his personality working in unison, the unconscious thread of magic wound around the words was almost impossible to disobey, but Ajay had seen John like this before. It hadn't ended well then, either.

Marshalling his own inner magic, Ajay straightened and leveled his eyes directly at John's. "You need to calm down, kid," he used the same tone of voice he'd been forced to adopt when he agreed to begin teaching a pair of headstrong fifteen year olds in the ways of magic. In many ways, it wasn't unlike John's Captain Watson voice, though its origin stemmed from a nearly-paternal concern rather than the pressing urgency of a firefight. "Breathe."

John, for all that he was thirty-nine, couldn't help but revert to his fifteen year old self in the presence of Ajay's 'teacher' voice. He made a visible effort to calm himself, and wound up only partially successful: He quit 'sparking', but he was still recklessly angry. "He was in my home, Ajay." John didn't notice, but there was an underlying quaver to his voice that belied long-buried fear. "In my home and I didn't know."

Ajay sighed a little, then took John's elbow and led him to the coffee nook. "Come along, John," he said softly. Once behind the beaded curtain, he pushed John into the orange-and-yellow chair, then handed him a mug of coffee. After the warm beverage had done all it could, coupled with the familiar and comfortable environment, Ajay settled himself in his own chair and asked, "First off, how do you know it was Moran?"
"Got caught up in another of Sherlock's cases – the house across the street blew up last night," John explained.

Ajay nodded. "Saw something about that in the paper." He gestured for John to continue.

"Whoever set the bomb that blew the house sent Sherlock a message. They set up a puzzle for him to solve. If he solves it, another bomb – according to Sherlock – won't go off. The clue for the puzzle was left in the empty basement flat of the building we live in."

"What was the clue?" Ajay asked.

"A pair of trainers. Sherlock took them and asked me to find out how they wound up in the basement. I spoke with the house-spirit. It showed me Moran, sneaking in through the garden door."

Ajay's eyes narrowed. "Don't tell me you haven't placed setspells on a place you've been living for two months!"

"I have, I swear," John insisted. "I don't know how he got past them!"

"Hmm…" Ajay thought hard for a long moment, then asked, "What sort of setspells did you put up?"

John shrugged. "The standard sorts. Ones against pests, fire-suppression, anti-burglary. The main defensive setspell is intention-based. Sherlock's got too many clients in and out in any given week to key it to identity."

"Ah," Ajay's eyebrows twitched upwards in understanding. "There you go – I'm assuming you set it so that someone with ill intent would be unable to enter, right?" John nodded. "Then – whyever Moran was there, it wasn't to cause harm to anyone. I'm betting he just broke in, dropped the shoes, and left, right?"

John nodded again. "Why, though? He had to have noticed my signature all over the setspells. I never credited him with an overabundance of brains; surely, he would have done something."

Ajay shook his head. "Not necessarily, John," he said. "Sebastian isn't stupid, for all that you like to think otherwise. But he's also not particularly gifted with othersense. It's quite possible that he only knew a mage lived in the building, but not specifically who." A fond smile was aimed at John. "You keep forgetting that not all of us are as in-tune with magic as you are." It was hopelessly true. In all of Ajay's sixty-some years, he'd met nearly a hundred mages from around the world, and John was, by far, the single strongest mage he'd ever even heard about, though it hadn't started out that way. "It could also be," Ajay added after a long, thoughtful pause, "that magic has abandoned him."

A grim smile split John's face. "Serves him right for trying to kill me." The phantom sense of spellfire racing along his nerves, consuming him from the inside out, sent a shiver down his spine.

"But," Ajay cautioned, "we don't know that for sure, so don't get too cocky, kiddo." Ajay made sure his warning was taken to heart before concluding with, "I'll look into things, see what I can find out, alright?" John nodded. "If I find anything urgent, I'll have Bea ring you, otherwise, I'll drop by your place tomorrow morning."

John knew he needed to calm himself, so he walked to St. Bartholomew's Hospital. It took him nearly two hours to do so from Ajay's shop, but it helped to clear his head. On reaching the corridor to the lab Sherlock favored, he was very nearly run over by an irate Molly Hooper. "Whoa," he skidded on the tile floor as she rounded the corner less than six inches from his face.
She startled and likewise nearly fell. "Oh! I'm so sorry," she apologized. "Um…"

He could tell she was desperately trying to remember his name. "John," he took pity on her. "John Watson. And don't worry about it, Dr. Hooper. Are you okay?"

She nodded, chewing on her lip. "Yeah," she said, though he could tell she really didn't mean it.

John sighed internally. "What's Sherlock done now?"

She shook her head. "No. Nothing. He's just being himself, after all. I suppose he can't help it." The 'being an insensitive prick' went unsaid, but not unheard.

This time, John allowed the sigh to actually escape his mind. "I'm sorry for that," he said. "And I think you're right – he honestly can't seem to help himself, can he?"

Molly managed a tremulous sort of conspiratorial smile. "Yeah. He can't," she agreed, then glanced at her watch. "I really need to get back to work, though. It was nice chatting with you."

"You too," John replied. "I wonder if she'll manage to remember my name this time?" he mused, watching her hurry off. Shaking his head, he pushed it aside and finished making his way to the lab.

He found Sherlock sitting on a stool in front of a digital binocular microscope, his arms crossed over his chest, staring intently at the trainers on the tabletop just to his right. "Any luck?" John asked, walking into the room.

"Some," Sherlock replied, not bothering to look up. "You?"

"Know how they were left – during the chaos last night, a guy picked the lock on Mrs. Hudson's door and left them," John said, walking around the table to stand on the far side of Sherlock.

Sherlock turned his head and looked at John. "That's not all."

John shook his head. "No, it's not. The man… I know him. Well," he grimaced, "I knew him. A long, long time ago. He's not a particularly nice man, but the setspell on the flat let him in because he wasn't there to do any damage – just to leave the shoes."

"And?"


"Hardly a productive use of two and a half hours. There is more you're not telling me. The man – who is he?"

"Sebastian Moran," John didn't see the harm in naming him, but he was slightly unsettled at the level of scrutiny Sherlock was aiming in his direction. "Another London-based mage."

One of the consulting detective's eyebrows twitched slightly. "Ah, the mysterious fifth London mage. I was wondering if you'd ever bring him up."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Simply that. You'd already mentioned that only five mages live in London. There's you, one. Mr. Singh is two. Mary is three. The elderly woman you spoke about makes four. And now the fifth. Up until this point I'd been assuming that this person was either too young for you to have met – a probability factor of only seventeen percent, by the way – or that you had a bad history with him or her, probability of ninety percent. It's always reassuring to see I'm right."
John snorted. "Yeah – 'bad history' about covers it. Da dammay zo tried to bloody kill me." (1)

"Why?"

John shook his head. "It's not important. Moran's supposed to be in Iraq – Ajay's looking into why he's back in London ahead of schedule." He wrenched the topic back around to Sherlock's side of the investigation. "What about you? What've you found?"

"In a moment." Sherlock gestured absently towards the shoes. "Go on, then."

"Huh?" John looked from Sherlock to the trainers and back.

"You know what I do," he made a little 'hurry up' motion. "Off you go." John stared at him. "An outside eye – a second opinion – is very useful to me."

"I can't see how someone with your skills would need an outside opinion."

"Though I would indeed be content to hear what you see, John, you yourself possess certain skills of which I am only just beginning to comprehend." Sherlock leaned forwards and pulled the shoes to the edge of the table directly in front of John.

"Ah," John said, getting what Sherlock was after. "Okay, then. Seeing first. Ajay always told us to start with the mundane because problems are rarely magical." He picked up the left shoe. His memory supplied him with a quick flash of discussing the graffiti case with Sherlock. He went ahead and stuck with his earlier advice of sticking to what was known. He cleared his throat. "They're a pair of trainers," he began, looking closely at them. "Well cared-for – they look nearly new, but the sole's pretty worn down." He spotted a trace of ink inside the tongue of the shoe. "Bigger than my own feet, but there's traces of a name inside, so they probably belonged to a kid; doubly so since they're rather eighties-looking and those styles seem to be making a comeback." He flipped the shoe over and looked a little closer at the sole. "There's a bunch of grit caught in what's left of the treads, so they weren't just gym shoes – they were worn outside a great deal."

"You're in sparkling form," Sherlock said, amusement lurking about the corners of his eyes and mouth. "What else?"

John shook his head. "They're not magical," John replied, "but that's it for strict observation. Want me to trace their history for you?"

"In a moment," Sherlock said, picking up the right shoe. "You certainly managed to see more than most people do, even not using your rather unique talents."

Something in his voice made John aware that though his flatmate was being completely honest, John had also managed to miss something. "So what do you see when you look at them?" A lightning-quick flash of a pleased smile flitted across Sherlock's face as he delved into a mile-a-minute spiel concerning whitening and changed laces, eczema and weak arches, and how pollen analysis indicated the shoes originated in Sussex. As he wound to a conclusion, John let out a little huff. "One of these days, you're going to have to tell me exactly how it is you can tell shoelaces or watchbands have been changed out however many times."

"Agreed," Sherlock said, returning the shoe to the table. "But first…"

John nodded. "Yeah. History. Okay," he closed his eyes and pulled his magic to the forefront of his focus. "Dreams of sights, of sleigh rides in seasons," he whispered to the shoe in his hand, "where feelings, not reasons, can make you decide, as leaves pour down, splash autumn on gardens, as colder nights harden, their moonlit delights." (2)
It was always a little tricky using that particular spell, but John felt the lab fall away, signaling it had worked. He opened his eyes. Bits and flashes of the shoes' memory played out in black and white, silent strips of film confirming everything Sherlock had deduced about their origin. And one more important detail: Their owner, in his first year of secondary school, had joined the swim team. The shoes were left in a locker, then collected by another boy and shoved into a sports bag. From there, they were wrapped in tissue by the same not-the-owner boy and tucked into a box. The next time the shoes were removed from the box was when Moran deposited them in 221C.

John fell back into himself with a gasp, startling Sherlock badly enough that the younger man very nearly tripped over the stool he'd abandoned. "A little warning next time!" Sherlock didn't shout it, but the force was enough to tell John he hadn't been kidding.

A wash of pins-and-needles flooded John's entire body. Wincing, he looked at his watch. He'd been out of it for closing in on a full ten minutes. "Yeah," he said, "well, same goes for you, you know. The shoes aren't a new copy of an old design."

Sherlock resettled himself on his stool. "Yes, I know – didn't I say?"

John shook his head and glared a little at the detective. "No, you most certainly did not say; if you had, I wouldn't've used that particular spell!" With new oxygen racing through his body, the pins-and-needles feeling rapidly faded.

"How was I to know it would turn you into a statue?" Sherlock defensively retorted. "You weren't even breathing."

"Side-effect of timewalking, Sherlock – I wasn't even here. The older the object, the more history it has, and the longer it takes to timewalk through it. It's why you simply don't use that spell on anything older than a handful of years!"

The pair glared at each other for several long seconds before Sherlock sighed. "Very well, should we have need of this timewalking of yours again, I will endeavor to ensure the item involved is relatively new. However," he nodded towards the shoe John still held, "what did you find out?"

"You were right about everything you said about the shoes," John replied.

Sherlock nodded. "Always good to hear."

"And the kid they belonged to left them in a locker at a swimming pool during his first year of secondary school. I suspect someone pinched them, because the boy who took them home wasn't the one who owned them."

Sherlock became utterly, utterly still at the words 'swimming pool'. "Carl Powers," he breathed out.

"Sorry," John said. "Who?"


"Who's that?"

"Where I began," came the rather cryptic reply, then Sherlock exploded into action and slid into his coat and scarf. He didn't speak again until they were in the taxi on their way back to Baker Street, and then he revealed that – at the ripe old age of twelve – he'd spotted something fishy with the death of Carl Powers, only to be thwarted by the ongoing insistence of policemen not taking children's claims seriously.
With six hours remaining on their twelve-hour countdown, John took to pacing the living room. Sherlock had commandeered the kitchen, doing god-only-knew-what, and all John had to do right then was wait. Wait for Sherlock to figure out what was going on with the trainers. Wait for Lestrade to show up with information on the origins of that morning’s phone call. Wait for Ajay to get back to him with more info on Moran. *I hate waiting. You’d think I’d be used to it by now, but nope. Doesn’t matter if it’s queued up at Tesco, or standing in the Tube, or stretched out on that god-awful rack back in the lounge of the hospital in Kandahar – waiting is the dullest thing a person can possibly do.*

John halted and slid open the colored glass door. "Can I help?" he asked, poking his head into the kitchen. Sherlock was sitting at the table, paging through computer printouts of archived newspaper articles concerning Carl Powers' death. "I want to help. There's only a few hours left." His mobile chimed a text alert. He pulled it out of his pocket and checked who it was from, hoping it would be Ajay – *well, Bea* – with more information. He was disappointed to find it was an unfamiliar number. He opened the message, fully expecting to see something intended for his sister, but had to blink in surprise.

Any developments?
Mycroft Holmes

"Why is your brother texting me?" John asked.

"Because I've been ignoring him," Sherlock replied, adding a black-and-white photo to the stack of papers. "He's being dreadfully dull about Andrew West's death. I simply don't have time to deal with that right now, not when someone else is being so delightfully interesting." Sherlock looked up from his work. "If you're that anxious for something to do, you might consider looking through the file Mycroft left."

"Hm..." John looked over his shoulder at where the file still rested on the arm of his chair. "Could do, I suppose. Beats just sitting around, at any rate."

As much as he disliked Sherlock’s older brother, John's curiosity had been prodded by the man's uncharacteristic plea that morning – he'd simply forgotten about it with the arrival of the pink phone and the mystery of the shoes. He picked up the file and paged through a handful of the papers it contained before realizing that it was a chaotically-collected mound of information. Sighing a little at that – he'd assumed Mycroft would be a little more organized than Sherlock, but no, chaos seemed to be the general rule of thumb when it came to a Holmes – he headed up to his room and grabbed a small jar filled with sparkling purple powder. The powder was treated, crushed amethyst. Returning to the living room, he opened the file and laid it on the coffee table, then took a pinch of the powder out of the jar. He sprinkled it liberally over the mess of papers, then incanted, "Out of chaos, show me order."

Spellfire, tinted blue and crackling like a sparkler, raced across the pages. When it faded a couple of seconds later, John tapped into his othersight and was rewarded with a rainbow of colors. Each page in the file had acquired a color, with pages dealing with similar or related information all glowing in the same shade. Now that he had a starting point, John made short work of sorting the papers into some semblance of order.

The yellow pages all had to do with the plans that had gone missing. The blue ones were all about Andrew West's history and other personal information. The green ones all had to do with Battersea Station. And the pages that glowed red were all concerning West's death, including photos taken at the scene.

John grabbed a yellow pad of notepaper off the desk and a pen, then started reading, skimming most
of the information, but reading in detail where he thought necessary. At the end of two hours, John had three pages full of notes and a list of questions.

1. The photographs don't show enough blood-loss for that to have been the cause of death, nor are there any overt signs of a broken neck. Has West's autopsy been done yet?

2. Paper trail indicates West had an Oyster card, but it hadn't been used between the time his fiancée claims to have last seen him and the discovery of his body this morning. Was a ticket found on the body?

3. File also indicates no known terrorist affiliations or sympathies – if he stole the plans, how would he know how/where to sell them?

4. Is it possible the memory stick was simply mislaid? If so, then why was West killed?

5. Could West's death have been an accident? A case of a slipped grip during a train-hop? (3)

Retrieving his phone, he opened the message from Mycroft once more. Might as well see if I can get the answers to the first two questions tonight. He hit 'reply'.

What were the results of West's autopsy? Was there a train ticket found on his body?

The reply came nearly a full minute later.

Why does Sherlock need the autopsy report? He and Dr. Hooper seem to have an agreement in that regard. Mycroft Holmes

John rolled his eyes. He hit 'reply' again, and typed, Sherlock told you he's busy. I'm looking into it. So – was there a ticket? What did the autopsy show? He had to wait nearly half an hour before the reply came.

Interesting. The preliminary autopsy report will arrive within the hour. No ticket was found on the body. Keep me updated.

Mycroft Holmes

John sat his phone on the stack of 'personal info' papers. His stomach growled as he leaned back against the sofa, so he immediately snagged his mobile up again. He called the Chinese place he and Sherlock both favored and placed an order for takeaway, then idly sifted through the file again while he waited.

The promised report and his dinner managed to show up at precisely the same time. The beautiful woman who'd kidnapped him from his shopping trip handed the file over without a word. The kid who delivered his pork fried rice and sesame chicken nearly suffered whiplash in watching her slide back into the Non-Descript Vehicle™ parked at the curb. Chuckling slightly, John paid for his dinner, then headed back up to the living room.

Reading through the autopsy report, John all but inhaled his meal; the vague queasy sensation he'd had the very first time he saw a cadaver back in medical school was nothing more than a forgotten memory. The preliminary toxicology panel revealed nothing out of the ordinary – no drugs or alcohol. Cause of death was listed as blunt-force trauma to the head. So, either he fell off the train, or someone bashed him over the head a tad too hard. John was beginning to understand just why Sherlock loved his job so much. Sure, he'd always been fond of mystery novels and spy movies, but to actually be involved with a real-life example? John smiled to himself and stretched back against the sofa cushions.

He heard Mrs. Hudson come up the stairs. She bypassed the living room, though, and headed directly into the kitchen. What's that about, I wonder? John stood and wandered over to the still-open sliding doors. Mrs. Hudson smiled up at him, setting a mug of tea on the kitchen table next to

Sherlock was seated at the side-table, peering into his microscope. "Poison," he said, seemingly out of the blue.

Mrs. Hudson looked at him. "What are you on about?" she asked.

"Clostridium botulinum!" Sherlock emphasized his declaration by hitting the tabletop with the flat of his hand. Mrs. Hudson grimaced, shot an apologetic look at John, and retreated. John gave her a 'don't fret' smile. Sherlock looked around and spotted John. "It's one of the deadliest poisons on the planet."

"Yeah," John drew out the word. "So?"

"Carl Powers!"

A light dawned in John's head. He blamed the exceptionally good chicken for him being slightly slow on the uptake. "You're saying he was poisoned."

Sherlock nodded. "It'd be the easiest thing in the world to introduce the poison to his eczema cream. It would have killed him anyway, but by the time the paralytic effect had taken hold, Carl was halfway across a swimming pool, so he drowned and nobody bothered looking any further."

"Why would they?" John asked. "It's not every day an eleven year old is poisoned, at least not intentionally."

Sherlock ignored the comment and stood. Leaning over his laptop, he typed furiously. John leaned over a little to see around him. Sherlock had his own website pulled up and was posting to the forum.


Sherlock hit send and turned around to face John. "How do we let the bomber know you solved it?"

John asked.

Smiling a little, Sherlock jerked his head towards the message he just left. "Get his attention."

Stifling a yawn, John nodded. "Makes sense, I suppose." He looked at the disassembled trainers hanging from strings spread across the width of the kitchen. "Hard to believe the killer kept the shoes all these years."

"Not so unbelievable. He wanted a trophy of his first kill."

"First kill? You think he's killed others?"

Sherlock nodded. "Undoubtedly. Now, ask yourself this: If Carl Powers' killer kept his trophy, how did they come to be in the flat downstairs?"

John's eyes widened a fraction. "The killer's the bomber – or they're working together."

Admitting John had a point, Sherlock nodded. "The second option's statistically unlikely, but I'd lay money on the first."

Any further discussion was halted as the pink phone rang. Sherlock scooped it up and answered the call before it could ring a second time. The same sobbing woman's voice from that morning reverberated through the room. "Well done, darling you," she seemed to be hyperventilating more
than just a little. "Come and get me."

"Where are you?" Sherlock asked. "Tell us where you are."

As the woman described her location, John asked Sherlock for his phone, mouthing the words. Sherlock pointed to where it sat, partially buried by a printout, next to his computer. John scrolled through the contacts and located DI Lestrade. John hit 'send' and the call was answered before the first ring could complete. He then relayed the information on where the woman could be found and that the bomb-disposal unit would also be needed.

"John! You home?" Ajay's voice sounded over the shower.

"Yeah! Be out in a minute!" John hurriedly rinsed soap from his hair and shut the water off. He dried off, tossed the damp towel over the shower curtain rod, and wrapped his terrycloth robe around himself before opening the door. Ajay was standing in Sherlock's favored position, leaning against the balustrade. "What did you find out?"

Ajay ambled over and leaned against the bath's door frame while John stepped over to the sink. "Official sources have Moran listed as AWL as of February eighth," Ajay replied as John set about preparing to remove two days' worth of stubble.

"And unofficial sources?" John asked, checking the sharpness of his straight razor.

"Unofficially, it's only been since March first," Ajay said.

"Black op…" John whispered the words. "Do we know where?" He glanced at Ajay and saw the man nodding slowly. John resumed his morning ritual while Ajay spoke.

"Yes. Prague," Ajay replied while John applied shaving foam. "Couldn't get any of the details, not from Cassie –"

"Which means she didn't know," John said, a hint of humor in his voice. Though Cassie Gladwell wasn't a mage, she was to Ajay what Mary was to him; someone closer than family.

Ajay shrugged with one shoulder. "Could be, or it could be one of the ones that simply don't get archived."

"Or if so," John agreed, "they're so redacted all you're left with is a page of solid black lines with a couple of bits of punctuation."

Ajay let out a humorless chuckle. "I see you're familiar with those kind."

"More than I should be," John finished with the foam and picked up his razor. "What did you find out through your other usual channels?"

"He's gone mercenary," Ajay said without preamble.

"Doesn't surprise me any," John replied, scraping a clean line down from his right sideburn. He rinsed the razor under the tap. "Do we know for whom?"

"Got a name," Ajay said, retrieving a battered memo book from his back pocket. "Don't recognize it myself, though."

"What's the name?" A matching clean line on the left side of John's face made an appearance.
"Moriarty," Ajay replied, reading it from his notes. "A James Moriarty, to be precise."

What sort of man not only gives hints and tips to serial killer cabbies, but hires someone like Moran? John quickly finished shaving. "You find out anything else?"

Ajay shook his head. "Not yet." The pair looked at each other for a long minute. "You watch yourself, John – I've got a bad feeling about all this."

"You're not the only one," John replied. "I'll be careful."

Shortly after Ajay left, John climbed into a set of clean clothes and headed down to the kitchen. Halfway through his breakfast, his mobile chimed a text-alert.

First test passed. Second to commence immediately. SH

Before he could reply, his phone chirped again. It was another text from Sherlock, giving him an address just off the river. Wasting no time, he grabbed his satchel and headed outside, leaving another half-finished meal to cool on the coffee table.

A taxi ride later and John knew he was in the right place – there were numerous police cars parked around a derelict building with a large sign out front that indicated the property was the future home to an exorbitantly expensive block of flats that had yet to be built. Sherlock was leaning against the sign, looking slightly cross. John paid the taxi driver, then hurried over to his flatmate. "What did I miss?"

"Not much," Sherlock replied. "Another voicemail on the pink phone of the Greenwich pips – four this time – and a photo of an abandoned car. The car was found in the early hours this morning, just around back." He pushed himself off the signpost and started walking. "What did you find out?"

"Moran's been listed as AWL since mid-February," John explained hurrying to keep up with Sherlock's longer legs. "Pretty sure that bit's a cover, though – Moran's been on more than one black op in his career. Unofficially, he's only been missing since the beginning of March. Went off-grid in Prague. Ajay says he went mercenary."

"Do you know who hired him?"

John nodded. "James Moriarty."

Sherlock halted and looked at John. "The same –"

"Yes," John agreed.

"So, instead of giving advice to fledgling serial killers, he's now providing me with delightful little puzzles…"

Any further discussion on the topic ground to a halt as Lestrade approached, a small notebook in hand. "Morning," he greeted John, then indicated that they should follow him. As they headed towards a car surrounded by police tape, Lestrade reiterated what Sherlock had already said – the car had been found early that morning, its photo messaged to the pink phone.

After ducking under the tape, Donovan joined the group. Lestrade consulted his notes. "The car was hired yesterday morning by an Ian Monkford. Banker of some kind. Paid in cash. Told his wife he was going away on a business trip, but he never arrived."

Sherlock and Lestrade headed to the passenger door, but Donovan kept John from joining them.
"You're still hanging 'round him."

John wasn't sure who he disliked more – Sally Donovan or Mycroft Holmes. "Stellar observation, that," he replied sarcastically, making sure to keep Captain Watson leashed. "You should work for the police." He stepped around her and peered around Lestrade. The interior of the car was spattered with blood. *Not enough for it to be a lethal injury. Debilitating and painful, certainly, but not immediately lethal.*

"Before you ask, yes, it's Monkford's blood. The DNA checks out*," Lestrade said while Sherlock rummaged in the car's glove box.

John walked around the front of the car and looked at the driver's side door. *No blood on the door, but with the rain, it might have washed away.* It had been drizzling on and off since midnight. He looked at the ground. *Still should be some sign, though, what with that much blood inside.* He didn't see any spatters or smears on the pitted concrete.

"You should get yourself a hobby. Stamps, maybe. Model trains. Safer," Donovan's voice came from right behind him.

"I have plenty of hobbies, Sergeant," John replied. "I haven't the room for trains and have absolutely no interest in used postage." He backed away from the car, nearly walking over Donovan, his eyes scanning the pavement.

"No body?" Sherlock asked, straightening from his examination of the car's interior.

"Not yet," Donovan volunteered, her voice carrying an accusatory note that set John's teeth on edge. *Nothing at all. Not even in the puddles. It's rained enough it might've washed the car off, but not so much as to erase all evidence outside.* John stopped his reverse motion, and strode over to the car once more. He opened the driver's door and leaned down. Closing his eyes to focus on his sense of smell, he breathed deeply of the interior.

"Get a sample sent to the lab," Sherlock said, though the words barely tugged on John's awareness. *New car, leather, industrial cleanser common to taxis and hire-cars.* He opened his eyes. *No trace of cinnamon.* He glanced around and saw Sherlock speaking to a woman. Faintly, he heard him refer to her as 'Mrs. Monkford'. Lestrade was speaking to Donovan over by the police tape. No one was paying him any mind.

He tugged off one of his gloves and reached up under the console. He felt around for a moment, then his fingers found a bundle of wires. *Okay, now let's see if you've had enough experience to be at all helpful, or if I'm going to need to do this the hard way.* Using his othersense, he reached into the car, groping for some spark of awareness. He was disappointed. *Too new.* He sighed a little, then knelt on the concrete. The lower portion of his jeans quickly wicked up moisture. He moved his ungloved hand from behind the instrument panel surrounding the steering wheel and reached under the car. Resting his fingertips on the car's frame, he glanced around again. Nobody was watching. He focused on his othersight and quickly recited the incantation for timewalking.

The history of the car played out quickly; the benefit of timewalking something which had only existed for a few short months. A check of his watch when he returned to himself confirmed it had only taken a solid thirty seconds or so. John got to his feet and walked in Sherlock's direction, tugging his glove back on. His flatmate finished his conversation with Mrs. Monkford and headed his way. They reached the police tape at the same time.
"Anything interesting?" John asked as they headed back out to the main road.

Sherlock nodded. "People hate telling you things, but love to correct you. I referred to her husband in the past tense and she joined right in. Bit premature – they've only just found the car."

The pair walked past Donovan, who called out, "Fishing! Try fishing!"

John scowled at her, then jogged a little to catch up to Sherlock. "I presume you found something as well," Sherlock said, his volume pitched so that only John would hear.

John nodded. "Car's too new to speak directly, but I traced it like I did the sneakers. Two guys drove it out here, parked it, and then dumped a unit of blood across the controls. I don't know if they had someone following them in another car or if they took a taxi, but I doubt either was Mr. Monkford. The one fellow was far too young to be married to the woman you spoke with – he was barely out of his teens. The other was large, over-muscled, dirty, and most definitely not anyone's image of a banker." He concluded his descriptions as they arrived at the road.

Sherlock, using a brand of magic John didn't understand, managed to flag down a cab within moments. Once they were settled inside, Sherlock gave an address John didn't recognize. "Where are we going?"

"Janus Cars," Sherlock replied, handing John a business card. "I found it in the glove box."

A longer-than-usual ride later, and the pair were dropped at Janus Cars. While waiting for Mr. Ewert, the company's day manager, to see them, John stood at a bank of windows that overlooked the garage. Sherlock was leaning against them, looking at the waiting area for the business. John nudged Sherlock's shoulder. When his flatmate's eyes landed on him, John nodded. "Don't see the big guy, but the kid's in there. Changing the tires on the car in the back," he whispered.

Sherlock glanced over his shoulder and quickly spotted who John was talking about. The smallest of smiles quirked the corners of his mouth. The secretary spoke up, derailing any further comment. "Mr. Ewert can see you now, sirs."

After being shown into the man's office, Ewert himself strode in. "Can't see how I can help you gentlemen," he said, sitting at his desk.

John settled himself in one of the empty chairs facing Ewert while Sherlock looked through the wall of windows. "Mr. Monkford hired the car from you yesterday?"

While Ewert answered what was likely to be an odd – from Ewert's perspective – series of questions, John watched as Sherlock gathered his much-needed data. On finishing, they headed back outside, where the on-again, off-again drizzle had started up once more. "The blood sample should be back at the lab by now," Sherlock commented. "Yes, yes," he held up a hand to forestall any argument, not that John had intended to interrupt. "We both know the blood – DNA or no – did not come directly from Monkford, but through an intermediary, however since Lestrade's already in on this, he's going to insist on having documentable proof. The tests themselves will take only a modicum of attention, and I've other things to think on."

Concentrating at the back of his mind on avoiding the rain, John asked, "So… I take it you want me to see if I can't track down Moriarty himself?"

Sherlock nodded and once more hailed a cab from nowhere. He paused before climbing inside. "Location only, John."

John smiled. "No problem," he said. Sherlock's words might have been an order, but the underlying
tone clearly said 'be careful'. John waited until the taxi pulled away before looking around and walking in the opposite direction. Only a couple of blocks from Janus Cars he found what he was looking for: An empty, abandoned building. Though it was circled by chain-link, someone else had decided the abandoned petrol station was worth investigating and had cut through the fence. John borrowed their entrance and jogged around the back of the building, where he got a piece of chalk out of his satchel and gated home.

Wasting no time, he hurried into his study. His satchel and jacket were deposited on one of the armchairs near the fireplace, along with his gloves. John sat in his office chair, grateful it hadn't been given away or sold before his last deployment, and retrieved his spellbook from its cubby within the roll-top. He flipped through it. "Ah! Here it is." He read through the list of components and mentally compared them with what he had on hand.

"Everything but the bloody map," he grumbled.

Ten minutes later, and he was arguing with a sales clerk at WH Smith. "No, I'm not looking for a bound atlas, just a regular folding map!" The kid tried again with a cheaper edition of the exact same book he'd just pointed out. John pinched the bridge of his nose and hoped the headache that really, really wanted to erupt managed to stay away. "No – not a book," he repeated. "Just a map."

It took forty minutes and a check with a manager before the shop located what John was looking for. On the way home, he couldn't help but think, I wonder what's going to happen in a few years – what with GPS getting more and more popular, will they stop printing maps altogether?

Shelving his irritation with the shop, John hurried back up to his room and quickly located the other items he'd need. Various gems and herbs and oils were crushed and mixed into a paste, then spread in a thin layer over the surface of the map. Later, he couldn't really say why he'd done it, but he used the medallion to focus the incantation. The sizzle-flash of spellfire danced across the map in a cheerful yellow before fading. Returning the medallion to his jacket pocket, John picked up the unfolded map and checked a nearby road he knew had only recently been adjusted from a dead-end to a through street. The map – printed three years earlier – showed the change.

"Success," he said to himself, then sat the map down. "Next up – finding Moriarty."

A little over two and a half hours later, John heard Sherlock's footsteps on the stairs. His flatmate appeared and energetically removed his coat. "Monkford's been relocated to Columbia, Lestrade's in the process of arresting Ewert and Mrs. Monkford." He hung his coat on the hook behind the door and turned around. He paused, his eyes flicking from John – sitting on the sofa, braiding the stems of amaranth together – to the large map of London pinned to the wall above the sofa – obscuring part of the yellow smiley face – and back. "What is that?"

"Map of London," John replied, reaching for another piece of amaranth. "Self-updating, too. Took me a bloody age to convince the shop I wanted an actual map and not an atlas."

Sherlock filed away the 'self-updating' bit to ask about later, and clarified, "No. What are you doing now?"

"The little green dot on the map's Moriarty," John said, pausing in his work. "Won't be able to track him if he leaves London, but I'm not about to try to set that particular spell on anything else."

Sherlock peered at the map, easily spotting what looked like a single splotch of green wax just off a corner intersection in Islington. He reached up to touch it, but John's hand darted out and grasped his wrist. "I wouldn't – that wax dot isn't going to come off unless Moriarty dies. If he buggers off for somewhere else, it'll retreat to the edge of the map until he's back in London."
"Hmm…” Sherlock jerked his wrist out of John's hand. "Intriguing." He took a seat at his desk and powered up his laptop. "You'll need to explain it to me sometime," he commented. "However, I had been asking about the flowers. Where did you find fresh amaranth blooms this early in the year?"

John let out a chuckle. "Oh – that." He finished with the braid and coiled it around on itself. "Mum's the head of the nursery over at Regent's Park. Has been since Dad died, oh, ten years ago now." Using a piece of fishing line that had a half-dozen quarter-karat cat's eye gems strung on it, he secured the braid into a wreath. "Any time I need flowers in a hurry, I ask Mum."

"And what are they for?" Sherlock asked, inspecting the purple-red wreath from where he sat.

"Invisibility," John replied. "The fiddlehead charm I've got works well enough, but not against other mages. This one, once I've charged it, will make it so that not even another mage will know I'm there, not even if they trip over me." He knotted the string and examined his handiwork. Should do. He ran a hand over the tight braid. Yes, should do quite nicely. He sat it on the papers from West's file on the coffee table, then stood and stretched.

The clacking keys of Sherlock's computer drew John's attention. John stepped up behind his flatmate and read over his shoulder.

*Congratulations to Ian Monkford on his relocation to Columbia.*

Heartbeats after the message was posted to Sherlock's website, the pink phone rang. Sherlock quickly answered the call. A tear-choked young man's voice said, "He says, he says you can c-come and fetch me. Help. Help me, please."

The next morning, Sherlock paced the length and breadth of the living room until John was ready to bean him with Yorick. He wasn't in the best of moods to begin with – the mirror in the bath had revealed that, in addition to the formerly-grey patches at his temples, the streak of grey in his fringe had also turned snowy white – and the pacing was just one more unneeded irritant. Grabbing his jacket and satchel, he threw Sherlock's coat at the man, so that it landed draped over the younger man's head.

"We're going somewhere?" Sherlock's voice asked, muffled by the wool of his Belstaff.

"Breakfast," John replied.

Later, ensconced at a table in John's favorite café several blocks from the flat, John tucked into his breakfast with relish. "Feeling better?" Sherlock asked.

John made a hmm noise of assent around a mouthful of scrambled eggs. He swallowed and said, "You realize we've hardly stopped for breath since this whole thing started?" He wolfed down another bite and chased it with a mouthful of tea. "Has it occurred to you –"

"Probably," Sherlock interrupted.

John cleared his throat and repeated, "Has it occurred to you that you're being toyed with? Everything he's done – the pink phone, the shoes – it's all meant exclusively for you." Sherlock smiled in reply. John sighed. "Look –" The pink phone beeped.

Three of the Greenwich pips sounded, then an image appeared. John blinked at it for a moment, then realized just who was in the photo.

Sherlock scowled at it. "That could be anybody," he complained.
John let out a small chuckle. "Could be, sure, but it isn't. Lucky for you I've been more than a little unemployed."

The detective leveled a narrow-eyed gaze on John. "How d'you mean?"

Still smiling, John replied, "Lucky for you, Mrs. Hudson and I watch far too much telly." He stood and crossed the café to where the remote for the television sat next to the cash register. He turned on the gadget and flicked through the channels until he found what he was looking for. The sound of Connie Prince's makeover program chased him back to his chair. "See? Not 'anybody'."

The pink phone rang.

Sherlock immediately snatched it up and answered. "Hello." He was silent for a long minute, then said, "Why are you doing this?" Another long minute of silence echoed across the table before Sherlock lowered the phone. "Twelve hours," he said to John.

"What was the answer?" he asked. "Why is he doing this?"

Sherlock just shook his head and headed for the door; the pink phone clutched in one hand while the other shot of a rapid-fire text on his own phone. John looked at his nearly-cleared plate, shook his own head, then sprinted after Sherlock. One of these days, I'll actually finish a meal while he's on a case and I'll die of shock.

Twenty minutes later, Lestrade met them at Bart's morgue. Reading from a file folder, Lestrade led them into the room; Connie Prince's body was laid out on one of the tables, covered up to her armpits with a stark white sheet. "Connie Prince, fifty-four. She had one of those makeover shows on the telly. Did you see it?"

Sherlock, focusing on the body, simply replied with a curt, "No."

"Very popular," Lestrade said. He looked at the dead woman. "She was going places." John could see a splash of empathy on the DI's face.

"Not any more," Sherlock countered. "So, dead two days. According to one of her staff, Raoul de Santos, she cut her hand on a rusty nail in the garden." He stopped next to where her right hand rested on the table. "Nasty wound." He inspected the gash between her thumb and forefinger. "Tetanus bacteria enters the bloodstream – good night Vienna."

While Sherlock had been speaking, John helped himself to a pair of nitrile gloves from a box on a tray of equipment. "Something's wrong with this picture," Sherlock said, taking a step back from the corpse as John approached.

"Eh?" Lestrade asked.

John picked up the woman's hand and inspected the gash much more closely. Sherlock stepped to the head of the table and looked at Lestrade. "Can't be as simple as it seems, otherwise the bomber wouldn't be directing us towards it. Something's wrong."

"Hmm… Can't say as I disagree," John said, laying the woman's hand back on the table.

"Excuse me?" Lestrade said.

"A fatal case of tetanus takes, on average, about two weeks to develop. She would have had the classic 'lockjaw' symptoms from anywhere between two and seven days after the injury. Nobody with a television career would simply ignore muscle spasms in their jaw, and tetanus is so common, a
half-asleep GP can spot it in an instant." John glanced down at the cut in her hand. "Besides, that
cut's far too fresh. Even if it'd been a rapid-onset case – most typically seen in those with
compromised immune systems – the cut should have had time to develop a scab. No," he shook his
head. "I'd lay good money on that wound being postmortem."

"If it wasn't from the cut, then how did the tetanus enter her system?" Sherlock asked, pulling his
magnifying glass from his pocket and examining the corpse in closer detail.

"That's just it," John argued. "It wouldn't have been tetanus. The symptoms are too well-known.
Hell, I knew the symptoms for tetanus by the time I was ten – first hand. Had a run-in with a barbed-
wire fence," he smiled at the memory. "Is that the autopsy report?" he asked Lestrade, gesturing to
the file folder he still carried.

"Yeah," Lestrade replied. He handed it over.

John flipped through the papers until he came to the printouts for the lab tests done on the woman's
blood. "Hmm," he said, finding a convenient patch of wall next to the coolers to lean against. He got
out his mobile and scrolled to Mike Stamford's number.

"Hmm what?" Lestrade asked.

"Two minutes," John replied, hitting 'send'.

Mike answered just as the call was about to be routed through to voicemail. "Hey, John! What've
you been up to?"

"Nothing much – it's all on the blog," John said. "But I didn't call just to chitchat. D'you have
George's number?" A thought struck him, and he quickly backtracked. "Wait, is he still doing
cosmetic?"

"George? Yeah, he's still doing cosmetic procedures. Lucky bastard's making a bloody mint at it,
too."

John let out a sigh of relief. "Good. D'you have his number?"

"Yeah, gimme a second." A series of beeps sounded through the line as Mike accessed his contacts.
"Okay, you ready?"

"Shoot," John said, grabbing his pen from his pocket. Mike read the number and John jotted it down
on the back of his hand. "Thanks, Mike."

"Hey, what's this about?"

"I'll tell you later."

"Beer at Hemley's this Saturday?"

John grinned. "Sounds like fun. See you then. Thanks again."

"Any time," Mike replied.

John disconnected the call, then quickly dialed George Peters' number. Sherlock finished examining
the corpse with his magnifying glass and joined Lestrade in watching John. George answered the call
on the second ring. "For the love of god, Dallas, tell her that we don't finance!"

John laughed. "Good morning to you, too, Georgie."
"Johnny-boy? That you?"

"The one and only, George."

"God damn! It's been, what, nearly six years since I heard from you?"

"Yeah, thereabouts," John replied. "Been doing well for yourself, I hear."

George snorted, "Mike's just jealous he didn't think about cosmetic surgery as a specialty. Hear you're done with playing soldier. How's real life treating you?"

John rolled his eyes. "I wasn't 'playing soldier', George, and if you try calling it that again, I'll break your nose — again."

"I'll consider myself warned," George let out a small sigh. "However, I've only got another minute or two before my next appointment swans in with delusions of becoming the next runway star. What has you calling in the middle of the workday?"

John cut to the chase. "What should the blood tests show for a woman who's been having regular botox injections?"

"Hmm… Age?"

"Fifty-four. About five-foot-six, twenty stone."

A cheeky noise of disgust echoed through the line. "Just a moment, I have to check it." Twenty seconds later, George came back and gave John a base-range for what the toxicology reports should show.

"Thanks, that actually helps a lot," John said.

"You gonna tell me what this is about?"

"Sure," John replied. "Beer at Hemley's this Saturday, with Mike."

"Just like old times, then," George chuckled.

"You bet," John said, disconnecting the call.

Lestrade looked at him expectantly. "Well?" he asked.

John used his pen to circle a number on the toxicology report, then handed the file back to Lestrade. "According to George, that number's about fifty times higher than it should be for a woman of her age and size."

Lestrade looked at the circled number than back at John. "George? George who?"


"We were in med school together," John said simply. "Weren't for me and Mike, he would've flunked gross anatomy and been kicked out."

John’s phone rang at that moment. He pulled it out, glanced at the caller-ID, and stepped away from
Sherlock and Lestrade. "Yeah?"

"Hey, John – it's Bea."

"Yeah, I've got the store's number in my contacts. Ajay need me?"

"Yeah. He said it's not an emergency, but you weren't home. Since he actually went over, I'm guessing it's urgent, though."

"I'll be by shortly. Hopefully within the hour, but I'm not certain how long what I'm doing right now will take to wrap up."

"Okay," she replied. "I'll let him know."

John hung up and returned the phone to his pocket as he rejoined the DI and his flatmate. "…out there somewhere, some poor bastard's covered in semtex and is just waiting for you to solve the puzzle. So just tell me – what are we dealing with?" Lestrade said.

Sherlock smiled at him, the same cold, manic grin John had last seen when Sherlock had admitted to ensuring Mrs. Hudson's late husband was executed. "Something new," he said, then left the DI to gape at his rapidly-retreating back. Unaware he was wearing a similar expression, John jogged after him.

"Ajay's got more info for me," he said as they headed out of the hospital. "I'll go see what it is."

Sherlock nodded, then glanced around. In a quiet voice, he said, "Our mystery guest is becoming repetitive." He let out a disappointed sigh. "Good job on finding the botox overdose. Now I've the murder weapon, it should be relatively simple to track the killer. Meet you back at Baker Street."

John, unwilling to waste time by utilizing more polite methods, stepped up to the curb and finger-whistled to hail a taxi. He saw Lestrade finally catch up to Sherlock as the cab pulled away, unaware he was still grinning like a loon.

It didn't take long at Ajay's, but instead of returning to Baker Street immediately, John headed outside. So Moran's using constructs. He allowed his feet to take him where they willed. Makes sense, I suppose – you build a construct, it can only be 'programmed' to do a limited number of things, not the least of which is to hold a gun on some poor sod wrapped up in a bomb. He doesn't have to take the risk of being caught, not even accidentally. They probably planned this weeks ago. Wouldn't take much to pick a good place, get it all set up, put the construct in position, and simply wait for all the preprogrammed requirements to be met. How would he keep it from firing, though? John took a shortcut through an alleyway. When Sherlock solves the puzzles, I mean. John rolled his eyes at himself. Come on, Watson – how would you do it? Cut the magic, that's how. You know you can leave a construct be, let it follow its programming, or you can step in and consciously direct it, especially if you need it to do something new, something it wasn't programmed for.

He stopped to wait for a traffic light. Now the downside to constructs are how bloody easy they are to track. Case in point: Ajay was able to sense the magic from his flat, and Ajay's not the most sensitive when it comes to animation magics. I'd probably be able to sense it, too, if I'd not been so bloody busy lately. The light changed and John crossed the street. A small café with several sidewalk tables was coming up. Ducking inside, he ordered a tall insulated glass of tea and an almond scone, then seated himself at one of the outdoor tables. He made short work of his snack, then sipped at his tea. Closing his eyes, he focused on his othersight and reached out, looking for the distinctive hard lemony flavor of construct-linked magic.
He found it, all but blaring its intensity across the whole of the city. *It's surprising I've not noticed it before now.* Carrying his half-empty tea with him, he kept the majority of his awareness funneled through othersense as he followed that brightly shining beacon.

It was rapidly approaching three in the afternoon before he felt he was actually getting close to the magic's origin. Pausing near a bus stop, he looked around. It was a rather rundown neighborhood. Blocks of shoddily-constructed flats flanked most of the visible road, dotted here and there with small shops. He followed the lemon of constructs into a narrow alleyway between a pair of identical – save for the graffiti – buildings. The building on the left had a fire escape some enterprising soul had ensured would make a decent secondary entrance by chaining the base of the stairs to a broken cement pylon. John ducked behind a nearby rusted-out skip piled to overflowing with garbage and withdrew his amaranth wreath from his satchel. He held it for a moment, letting the cool wash of his own magic erase a little of the cloying taste of lemon, then placed it on his head. "I am not here," he said. "No one, and nothing can sense my presence; they are blind and deaf to my existence, othersight will skip blithely by me."

A sensation not unlike being caught in a stampede of ants spread down from the wreath. Luckily, it lasted only a moment. John stepped out from behind the garbage, then headed up the fire escape stairs. The citrus stench was getting thicker and thicker. He paused to catch his breath at the eighth floor, casting about with his othersight. Two more stories. Maybe three. He very pointedly kept himself from looking down. Come on, then. No sense in wasting time.

It wound up being only two floors, very obvious as the window was broken out. John slid through it, avoiding splinters and shards of glass still caught in the putty around the frame. Once inside, it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the lack of light. The room in which he found himself was the kitchen of an empty flat. It lacked a stove and refrigerator, and was in the middle of being refurbished – if the putty knife and stack of new tiles on the countertop were any indication. John exited the room, following the lemon stench into the flat's living area. The lemony tang was almost thick enough on John's tongue to keep him from breathing.

Or it could be that I just now remembered that, invisible to mages or not, there's no way to mask your presence from a construct. The construct was an animated mannequin, holding a high-powered sniper's rifle. As John entered the room, it leapt into action, standing and swiveling the rifle in John's direction. Without thinking, John ducked back into the kitchen. Luckily, they aren't programmed for curiosity. Knowing that, without him in line-of-sight, the construct would return to its primary objective, John commandeered a spot of the half-tiled counter and sat his satchel down. Okay, so how do I deactivate it? He scrubbed a hand across his face. More than that, though – how do I shut it down without Moran realizing what I've done?

Looking through what he carried with him, a slow smile split his face. I don't have to deactivate the construct. It's programmed to shoot, be that at Moran's order or to protect itself, or to kill whomever's across the alley in that other block of flats wrapped in semtex. No, not quite accurate, Watson – it's programmed to pull the trigger. It won't care one way or the other if it actually manages to shoot anything. Remove the bullets from the equation and it becomes harmless. Now – how to go about that…?

Spotting a vial of black sand, John's smile brightened. That's just the thing. He quickly mixed a few grains of the sand with a drop of High John the Conqueror oil. "Time stand still, I order you. Not a single second pass until I'm through doing what I have to do. Time stand still I order you," he incanted the time-stop spell. The sand/oil mixture flashed black indicating it was successful. John raced out of the room – despite the wording of the incantation, it would only give him a minute, maybe a minute-and-a-half, before time resumed.
The rifle the construct held was an Accuracy International AS50. John let out a sigh of relief at that – he knew this particular gun. As a result, it only took him about forty-five seconds to remove the clip, divest it of its explosive ammunition, return the clip, and eject the round from the chamber, he wasted another ten seconds looking through the scope and verifying that yes, it was aimed at an old woman dressed in a flannel nightgown and a semtex wrapper. Depositing the bullets in his satchel, he was in the process of making his way back to street-level on the fire escape when time resumed its normal function.

He fumbled with his mobile, figuring out how to block the number, then called 999 and reported the location of what he'd seen, taking care to adopt a particularly horrible accent. He hoped it would be enough to keep Lestrade from recognizing who called in the tip. Next, he returned the amaranth wreath and pulled out his trusty piece of chalk. John gated home before anyone could spot him.

"Sherlock! You home yet!" John called out, all but sprinting down the stairs.

He skidded to a halt on seeing Sherlock, Lestrade, and Mrs. Hudson in the living room. The DI looked startled. "Holy hell! When did you get back?" he asked. "I thought you were out, but I didn't hear the door open."

Mrs. Hudson smiled at him. "I'll go see about some tea, shall I?" She headed downstairs before John could say anything.

John shot a helpless little look at Sherlock. Sherlock shrugged and made a tiny gesture to the wall above the sofa. John glanced at it – the map was mostly-covered by notes pertaining to the cases Moriarty had 'gifted' him, but the telltale green dot was visible between notes on Carl Powers and a photo of Connie Prince, and it was moving slowly south. John let out an explosive sigh and flopped onto the sofa.

"It's just been that sort of day, hasn't it?" John muttered. He looked up at the confused Lestrade and sighed. "I just got back. You wouldn't've heard the front door open – I've got a back entrance upstairs."

Lestrade blinked. "Don't tell me you climbed up the bloody fire escape," he said, sounding scandalized.

"Nope, not even close," John replied, setting his satchel under the coffee table. "I hate heights."

"But there's no other way in up there! You don't even have any skylights."

"Doesn't mean there isn't a door," John countered. The leyline poked a tendril up through the floor, reminding John of nothing so much as a small child peeking around a door to see if the coast was clear. Oh, all right. Fine. Just... Quit buffering my emotions, please. It perked up and shot straight for John, wrapping around his middle in an odd sort of hug.

Sherlock glared at John, the expression concerned. "You're not seriously considering…?"

John looked at Sherlock. "I am," he said, twitching a little as the leyline's purring vibrated strangely against the ticklish bundle of nerves in his side. "If I couldn't trust him with it, he wouldn't have noticed anything; he would've come up with his own reasons for not hearing the door."

"Let it be noted," Sherlock said, "that I think this is a phenomenally bad idea."

"Done," John dryly replied. "But your opinion wasn't asked for, nor is it needed."

"What in the bloody hell are you two on about?" Lestrade interrupted the aside.
"In a moment," John said, then returned his attention to Sherlock. "First things first – Moran's using constructs to do his dirty work. Essentially, it's an animated object capable of fulfilling one or two simple tasks, unless the mage takes conscious control of it. He's using mannequins programmed to pull a trigger unless he steps in and deactivates them." Sherlock nodded to show he was following along.

"What?" Lestrade insisted. "Who's Moran? Constructs? Mage? What the bloody fuck are you talking about?" The last bit was shouted. His mobile phone rang, interrupting any possibility of him getting the answers he desired at that moment.

While Lestrade stepped into the kitchen to answer it, John continued speaking with Sherlock. "Construct-magic is extremely easy to trace. It's like a spotlight on a night with just a hint of fog – you can see it from a long way off and follow it back to its source with minimal effort. It's why I'm so late getting back from Ajay's place. Ajay told me what Moran was using, so I followed the magic back to a flat that's in the process of being refurbished. In its living room, I found a mannequin holding a sniper rifle. I can't deactivate the construct without it being noticed, so I did the next-best thing and divested the gun of its ammunition."

Sherlock frowned. "Though I can understand why you felt the need to do so, that rather tips our hand."

John shook his head. "There's no way Moran could know it was me. I was using the amaranth wreath to mask my presence."

"How easy is it to tinker with a construct?" Sherlock asked. "Wouldn't that alone indicate that a mage is involved? And with so few of you in London, wouldn't it be relatively simple for Moran to realize just who was involved? Particularly since you've said yourself that the two of you have a history?"

John paled a little, then swallowed hard. Didn't really think this through, did you, Watson? A slightly quieter voice at the back of his head argued, But it's better if he comes after me. At least I can take care of myself. That old woman… She wouldn't stand a chance.

Lestrade strode back into the room. "They found this round's victim. Old blind woman in her eighties. Bomb squad's working on dismantling the bomb she was wearing. Apparently, it came through an anonymous tip." He pinned his brown gaze on John.

John relaxed a little into the sofa cushions, mentally prodding the leyline to move. It uncoiled, then flopped itself across his shoulders, humming happily. "So she's okay?"

Lestrade nodded. "A bit shaken, but otherwise fine."

"Good." John looked over at Sherlock. "Can I ask you something, Sherlock?" His flatmate nodded. "We know what's going on – why are you still playing? We know the who. We know where he is. Why keep on with the games and puzzles?"

Sherlock didn't answer, not immediately. Instead, he sat at the desk and typed in his laptop.

"What do you mean, you know what's going on?" Lestrade asked, running a hand through his hair.

"Have a seat, Detective Inspector," John said, indicating the armchairs by the fireplace.

Sherlock let out a loud sigh. "Raoul de Santos, the house-boy, botox," he read aloud from his website, then clicked 'post'. 
"Pardon?" Lestrade asked, sinking into John's chair.

"The Princes' houseboy, Raoul de Santos. Among other things, Raoul de Santos was employed to give Connie her regular facial injections. My contact at the Home Office said he's been bulk-ordering botox for months. He bided his time, then upped the strength to a fatal dose." Sherlock sounded unaccountably bored as he recited the information.

"Why?" Lestrade asked. "Why would the houseboy kill her?"

"Revenge," Sherlock said. "Dull. He's been sleeping with Kenny Prince for quite a while. He was sick of how his lover was treated by his sister. When Connie threatened to disinherit Kenny, Raoul took steps to ensure it wouldn't happen."

"You're sure about this?" Lestrade said, then shook his head. "Of course you're sure. Question is – do you have the proof to back it up?"

"De Santos' internet records will be here in about half an hour if you want to go through them yourself," Sherlock replied.

With the present case wrapped up so neatly, Lestrade half-expected a tidy little bow to appear, he returned his gaze to John. "What was all that about, then?" he made a groping gesture with his hand, like he was physically trying to reach out and grab the right words. "Construct? Magic? Mage?"

"What does it sound like?" John retorted, sinking even more into the cushions. The leyline's purring and not-quite-solid heat was rapidly leaching any residual stiffness out of his neck and shoulders.

"Honestly? It sounds like you're in line for a stay at Bedlam."

John chuckled. "You're not the first to say as much," he said. "And I'm pretty sure the lot of you are at least a little right – I've not met a mage who was entirely sane. We're all a little off to begin with."

Lestrade glanced at Sherlock to see a small smile of agreement on the consulting detective's face. It was the most human expression Lestrade had seen on the man since his last jaunt through rehab. "Far be it for me to disagree with the expert on such matters," Sherlock said, "but from what I've seen, any diagnosis of neuroses would be mistaken; when dealing with impossibilities, a little instability is warranted, yet you, John, only display an appalling tendency to order, though not so severe as to be classed OCD."

The DI ran that through his internal Sherlock-to-English translator and came up with 'you've got all reason in the world to be mad as a hatter, yet you're as sane as anybody, so shut up about it'. "I'm still lost," he said out loud.

"Short explanation," John said. "Magic's real, but it's not quite how books and films portray it. I can use magic, therefore I am a mage. The door upstairs is a gate – with the right components, I can walk through it from anywhere."

Lestrade just blinked. Sherlock looked to be fighting back laughter. "Perhaps a demonstration is in order, John," he said. "I presume the othersight liquid won't work on Lestrade, of course?"

John shook his head. "No, it has to be made new for everyone. But yeah, a demonstration just might work." He nudged the leyline off his shoulders with a promise to return in a moment, then headed to the kitchen. He grabbed his RAMC mug out of the dish drainer then brought it over to Lestrade. Handing it to the man, he asked, "What do you see?"

Lestrade's eyes darted from John to Sherlock and back. "You've been hanging out with him too long,
John shook his head. "I'm not asking you to tell me what I had for breakfast; if I wanted that, I would've asked Sherlock. Just tell me what you see."

Lestrade examined the mug. "It's a coffee mug. You were RAMC?" John nodded. The DI looked at the mug again. "The handle's been broken off and glued back on." He flipped it over. On the bottom of the mug was an angular design etched into the enamel. The design matched the etching in the panes of window glass, with the sole exception that it was much larger than the ones on the windows. "What's this?" Lestrade asked.

"That's a setspell anchor. The handle broke two years ago, and I glued it back on, but it kept breaking every time I washed it. I got sick of repairing it, so I put a setspell in place to make it unbreakable."

"Unbreakable?" Blatant skepticism poured off of the DI.

John smiled and took the mug from Lestrade, then hurled it with as much force as he could against the hearth. A small chip of dark stone went flying, bouncing off of Lestrade's left leg. The mug bounced onto the red rug and tumbled under Sherlock's chair. John stooped and retrieved the mug, then handed it back to Lestrade. "Unbreakable."

"I am not taking the blame for the chipped hearthstone, John," Sherlock announced.

"You won't have to, dear," Mrs. Hudson said, entering the room with a tray full to overflowing with steaming teacups and a plate of corned beef sandwiches.

Lestrade ran his fingers over the RAMC mug. "Un-bloody-believable," he breathed.

"I know, dearie," Mrs. Hudson quickly exchanged John's empty mug for a full one and offered him the plate of sandwiches. "It takes a bit of getting used to, that's for certain!"

John returned his favorite mug to the kitchen, then accepted a sandwich and tea from Mrs. Hudson before resuming his seat on the sofa. "Ta, Mrs. Hudson – I think I walked clear across London this afternoon. I'm famished."

"John! You home!" Ajay's voice drifted down the stairs.

"Yeah! Living room!" John called back. Two pairs of footsteps sounded briefly on the floor above, then rapidly descended the stairs. Ajay, with Mary close on his heels, arrived.

"John! You stupid man!" Mary immediately began berating him. "You should have bloody told me Moran was back in town!" Ignoring everyone else, she took his teacup, then smacked him across the back of his head. "You are not going after that tosser without me, you hear?"

"Ow!" John reached up to rub where she'd hit him. "I never said I was! Jesus, Mary," he complained, taking his tea back from her.

"Oh," she said, a little mollified, then flopped onto the couch next to John. "It's just… Last time you two squared off, he damn near killed you."

"I remember," John said, staring at his closest friend. "I was there, you know."

"Aside from thwacking my flatmate," Sherlock interrupted the argument, "is there any particular reason the two of you dropped by?"
Mary suddenly focused on the rest of the room. A faint blush stained her cheeks. "Um, sorry. Hi, Mrs. Hudson. How's the hip?"

"Same as ever, Miss Morstan," Mrs. Hudson replied. "Tea?"

Mary shook her head. "Thanks, though, I'm good," she held up an unopened can of Emerge. "Sherlock." She nodded at him and got a nod in reply. Then she spotted Lestrade. Bouncing to her feet she crossed the room. "I don't think we've met yet."

Lestrade looked up at the petite woman, her hair in a messy braid down her back, wearing a grey tank top under a blue canvas jacket with the sleeves rolled to her elbows, jeans, and heavy work boots. "Greg Lestrade, DI with Scotland Yard," he introduced himself, taking her offered hand.

"Mary Morstan," she said, shaking his hand firmly. "Officially a field researcher for the UCL Institute of Archaeology. Unofficially, that one's," she hooked a thumb at John, "handler."

"Hey!" John protested. "I don't need a handler!"

Mary snorted. "Then stop doing dumbass things, Johnny."

John picked off a piece of the crust of his sandwich and threw it at her. "Joining the army wasn't stupid."

Mary rolled her eyes and let go of Lestrade's hand. "So you keep trying to tell me, but it directly led to you getting shot!"

"Oh, not that again," John muttered.

Ajay met Sherlock's eyes and the pair shared a companionable moment of commiseration, then Ajay lifted his fingers to his mouth and split the air with a shrill whistle. "Enough! Mary, sit!"

Flinching, Mary meekly said, "Ham, siksaka," and did precisely as she was told. Even John straightened a bit hearing the no-nonsense tone of Ajay's voice.

"You can go back to arguing later," Ajay said. "We did, indeed, have a reason for dropping by. Well," he amended the thought, "I had a reason – Mary just tagged along." He handed John a handwritten pile of notes. "That's everything I could scrape up. If you need more info, you're going to have to find other sources – it's going to take a month for me to recharge after all that."

John unfolded the papers and quickly scanned through them. "Thanks, Ajay – this is more than I could've hoped for."

Ajay stifled a yawn. "No problem," he replied. "Now, if you all would excuse me, I'm going home. I still haven't finished my inventory yet." He headed back upstairs.

"You should head home, too, Mary," John said. "Caffeine is no substitute for sleep."

"Says the man who lived on it all through uni," she scoffed.

"Right," John agreed. "That's why you should listen – I know what I'm talking about, after all."

"Oh, fine," she said. "I'll behave like a good little girl." John laughed outright at that. She elbowed him in retaliation. "But," her tone turned serious, "you gotta promise me you won't go after Moran. Not alone."

"I promise I won't go after Moran alone," John said it easily, knowing that there were a million
different ways to get around it, should the need arise. It appeased Mary, though.

"Good boy," she patted him on the head, then tugged lightly at the white patch on his right temple. "Be careful with the leylines, too – you already look older than you should." She kissed his cheek, then sprang off the couch. "See you later, John, Sherlock. Mrs. Hudson. Greg."

Total silence reigned for almost a full minute after the front door slammed shut behind her. Eventually, John cleared his throat. "And that is why we don't feed Mary caffeine."

He managed to keep a straight face until he met Sherlock's eyes, then they both dissolved into giggles. "You might have been right about all mages being a little off, John," Sherlock said, once he could breathe again.

John snickered again, then wrestled the amusement away. Lestrade still looked like he'd been slapped with a dead fish. "You alright, Inspector?"

Blinking, Greg pulled himself out of his headspace and took a drink of the tea Mrs. Hudson had been so kind as to supply. "I don't know what's harder to wrap my brain around at this point – the whole magic-is-real bit or the Sherlock-Holmes-laughing bit."

John quickly finished his sandwich and drained the last of his tea. "Ajay came through for us, though, Sherlock," he said, reading his mentor's notes a little more closely. "According to him, you're being courted."

"Courted?" Lestrade asked. "What, like some Victorian virgin?"

It earned him a glare from Sherlock and a nod from John. "Exactly. Moriarty is showing you what he can do," John said.

Sherlock sighed. "How boring. Did he not bother to do any research at all?"

"Yes, we all know you like not knowing everything up front," Mrs. Hudson said, bustling about and collecting empty cups and generally tidying up the living room. "You very nearly refused me when I asked because of that."

Knowing she was referring to when they'd first met, her husband about to be released due to a lack of evidence, he nodded. "It's dull having all the pieces ahead of time," Sherlock agreed.

"Wait," Greg said. "This Moriarty fellow – he's trying to lure you into joining him? In doing what, exactly?"

"What he's been doing," John said, still reading through the pages of Ajay's messy, cramped handwriting. "He's the one behind this string of bombs."

"It doesn't take that much talent to set up a suicide bomber," Lestrade said, taking a drink of his tea.

"You miss the point," Sherlock said, leaning back in his chair. "The puzzles? He's showing me what he's capable of – he's the mind behind them. He gets points for originality, certainly, but expecting me to be enticed by the idea of setting up a crime? He's running in negative points for that – it would be far too easy."

The pink phone chimed an alert before anyone could reply to Sherlock's comment. Sherlock pulled it out of his pocket and read it aloud.

Why is it so difficult to locate good help? You don't get any points for the old woman; there was outside
"Certainly sounds like he's coming on to you," Greg said, rubbing lightly along the side of his face, his elbow propped on the armrest of the chair. "Why does the name Moriarty sound so bloody familiar?"

"He's the one who told that taxi driver how to go about killing people," John replied.

"What, so people go to him wanting their crimes spruced up?"

John nodded. "Like booking a holiday," he said, then looked up at Sherlock. "When you were looking through Carl Powers' history, did you come across anyone by the name of 'Timorray'?'"

"No, not as yet," Sherlock replied. "Why?"

"'Cause Ajay's got it circled three times, with a bunch of little stars around it." He handed the pertinent page to Sherlock to see for himself.

Sherlock took the note and sat it next to his laptop. Lestrade finished his tea; Mrs. Hudson took the cup from him. "I'll speak with you all later, dears," she said, heading back down to her own flat.

Lestrade watched her leave. "Why is he doing this? I mean, I get that he's showing Sherlock what he's capable of, but… Why?"

"If my company is so distasteful, perhaps you ought not come by, Inspector," Sherlock leveled a glare at him.

"I wasn't saying that," Greg argued. "I was just trying to see… Well, why you, specifically."

"That's something only Moriarty himself can answer," Sherlock replied. John made a hmm noise and stood on the sofa. He began taking down the photos and notes obscuring the map he'd worked so hard on. "What are you doing?" Sherlock asked.

"Well, the map shows us where Moriarty is, right?"

"Yes," Sherlock drew the word out. Lestrade kept quiet for the moment; he was still having difficulty internalizing all the information that had been dumped on him in the last forty minutes or so.

"That leaves the only wild card as Moran."

"Yes," Sherlock repeated the exact same tonality as before, rising to his feet and stepping over to stand just behind John.

"I'm not sure if it will work or not, but I can try to map his location, too." John finished removing the last of the notes and handed the stack to Sherlock.

"What do you need?" Greg did a double-take at the serious question from a man he'd never before seen offer help outside a crime scene.

"Red candle – there should be some in the box under the kitchen counter – and the bottle from the shelf upstairs marked 'mapmaker's oil'. Everything else is in my satchel." John unpinned the map from the wall and spread it atop the mess of papers on the coffee table.

Sherlock glanced at Greg. "Get the candle, would you?" he said, then headed for the stairs.

"Bottom drawer, next to the cupboard under the sink," John explained, settling back into a more
traditional posture on the sofa and peering at the map.

Lestrade easily located a drawer filled with assorted colors and sizes of tapered candles. There were half a dozen red ones; two tiny ones roughly the same size as would be used on a birthday cake, one that was about half again longer than a traditional taper like would be used to light a romantic dinner, with the remaining three falling somewhere between the two extremes. "Just one of the little ones!" John's voice drifted in from the living room.

Grabbing one of the 'birthday' sort, Greg closed the drawer and headed back to the living room. John had his ever-present leather satchel open on the sofa cushion next to him and was rummaging around inside it. "Thanks," John said, not looking up. "Just set it on the map." Greg did so, then 'stole' Sherlock's desk chair. Positioning it directly across from John, he sat and watched. A moment later, Sherlock returned with a small glass bottle filled with a translucent, opalescent white liquid, the handwritten label read Mapmaker's Oil. Sherlock handed it to John, who sat it on the map next to the candle, then perched on the arm of the sofa wearing an unabashed expression of intense curiosity.

Lestrade had to admit, if only to himself, that he'd been wondering how anyone could tolerate living with Sherlock 'I know your entire life just by looking' Holmes. The utter fascination on the consulting detective's face as he watched Watson ricocheted off the memory of Watson's expressions of amazement during the case with the woman in pink; understanding began to surface in his mind. It's a case of mutual fascination.

John sat a small metal bowl – it couldn't possibly hold more than a couple of teaspoons' worth of liquid – on the map, along with a vial of powder in an intense, dark blue shade. A second vial joined it, containing a number of tiny grains of a clear grayish blue, followed by a calligraphy pen and a strip of parchment paper. John double-checked the supplies he had laid out, then nodded and sat the satchel under the coffee table. "One grain iolite," he said, opening the vial of grayish blue granules. It landed in the dish with a tiny plink noise. "A pinch of crushed lapis lazuli." The powdered stone whispered into the dish. "And two drops of mapmaker's oil," John measured them out with the eyedropper stopper in the bottle. As the second drop fell into the dish, the contents began glowing – reddish-orange light, not unlike that of a banked fire, spilled from the metal bowl, casting odd shadows across John's face.

Greg was pretty sure he was going to need to scrape his jaw off the floor, but pushed the thought aside to deal with later. The light from the dish slowly faded over the course of about five seconds or so, and when it faded entirely, Lestrade saw that the little bowl now contained a couple of drops of a dark blue liquid. A fleeting observation that it looked like India ink, only more blue, was validated when John scooped up the calligraphy pen and dipped it into the liquid.

Working quickly, John scrawled something on the scrap of parchment paper. Almost unwillingly, Greg leaned closer and read it. Colonel Sebastian Moran. John had to re-load the pen halfway through the man's first name, and when he finished, there was no evidence the little metal bowl had ever held anything within its shallow confines. John sat the slip of paper aside, then quickly bundled the various bottles and vials and the little dish back into his satchel. Reaching into the pocket of the black jacket he was still wearing, he pulled out a basic butane lighter and a bronze oval. He sat the disc on the table and picked up the parchment. Flicking the lighter, John took a deep breath, then said, "Fire sprite, fire sprite, burning brightly in the night, as you glow, consume and feed, kindly please don't hurt me," the words tumbling out fast enough that Lestrade was surprised he didn't trip over them.

John touched the lighter's flame to the parchment. He allowed it to burn to ash, cupped in the palm of his hand. Greg had once seen a street performer do a similar trick with flash-paper, but though the effects were similar, he somehow doubted the parchment slip had been treated in the same manner as
that long-ago performer's prop. Even though, John showed absolutely no discomfort from the tiny
flame.

Cupping the small pile of ash in his right hand, John picked up the bronze medallion – Greg idly
noticed it sported the raised design of a Celtic knot – and used it to delineate a circle around the edge
of the map. John's forehead was furrowed in concentration, his eyes half-closed, and tiny beads of
sweat were popping up on the man's neck. He completed the circle, then crushed the pile of ash in
his hand. John then raised his palm to his face and blew the ash out over the map.

Greg blinked, looked away, ran a hand over his eyes, then looked back. The ash was hovering in a
fine cloud over the map. Next, John picked up the candle and lit it with his lighter. He raised the lit
candle over the cloud of ash and tipped it sideways. A single drop of red wax fell, then was caught
by the hovering dust. It halted its fall three inches from the surface of the map. "Track him, little dot,"
John said. Something underlying his voice raised gooseflesh on the back of Lestrade's neck. "Find
him for me, by right of guardian of London, find him."

The cloud of ash dust whirled around the globe of wax; the wax seemed to suck it in, reminding
Greg of a documentary he'd once seen concerning black holes. When the last of the ash disappeared,
the little globe of wax took flight, lazily crossing the map in a chaotic manner. It then halted directly
above the green dot on the map and splatted itself right next to it.

A long moment of total silence descended on the room, then John broke it by yawning. The doctor
stretched, then leaned in and examined the map. "Oh, good," he said, the indefinable quality that had
made Greg uneasy suddenly gone from his voice. "It worked."

"So it would seem," Sherlock dryly replied. "You've more white in your hair."

Scowling, John stood and stepped around the table, nearly knocking Sherlock off his perch on the
arm of the sofa. He headed for the mirror above the fireplace. Damn it. John sighed, prodding lightly
at the wider stripe of white in his fringe – where it used to only be about half a centimeter, it was
now a full centimeter wide. "Must be a side-effect of channeling leyline magic. Makes some sort of
sense, I suppose – the grey didn't appear until Moran tried to burn me out from the inside, last time
we met." Sighing again, John turned around and asked, "Anyone else starving?"

Later, after the map was re-pinned to the wall, and Indian takeaway had been delivered, it had been
agreed that – until a decent plan could be put into place, preferably with solid evidence backing it –
they would allow matters to continue unfolding as Moriarty had planned, though Sherlock did agree
to quit postponing posting the solutions to the puzzles just to buy more time – not that it was all that
difficult, mind, the eternal showoff hiding inside the consulting detective had loathed the necessity to
hold off on the 'big reveal' in order to procure time to do additional research.

The next morning, John was digging into a bowl of cornflakes topped with a sliced banana when
Sherlock wandered into the living room. "You eat far too much," he complained.

Swallowing, John shook his head. "Not at all – I've lost three pounds in the last two days, and I
wasn't exactly chubby to begin with."

Sherlock detoured to the kitchen long enough to help himself to a mug of coffee, then flopped
gracelessly into his armchair. "I assume that's to do with the magic, then?"

John nodded. "Yeah – the energy involved doesn't come from nowhere, Sherlock."

Clicking on the television, Sherlock flipped through the channels. "From what you tend to eat, I
would assume carbohydrates are better suited to replenishing your energy levels than is protein."

"And sugar's even better," John agreed, then slurped the milk out of his bowl.

"Hmm…" Sherlock stopped flipping channels. The morning news played quietly as background noise. "Glucose is the energy substrate for the brain – this indicates that, regardless of other factors, the usage of magic is first and foremost a *mental* exercise."

"I could've told you that," John said, getting up to take his bowl to the sink. "If we wind up with me needing to do magic like I've been doing these last couple of days, it wouldn't hurt to stock up on some candies."

"I know a confectioner who owes me a favor," Sherlock volunteered. "Could get you a decent discount on chocolates."

John refilled his coffee mug and returned to the living room. "Nah, never been one for chocolate. Ta, though."

Sherlock closed his eyes and thought, John ignored him in favor of watching the news. The screen showed a dingy-looking smallish landscape. A banner along the bottom of the screen read *Lost Vermeer to be shown at Hickman Art Gallery – Opening Tonight*. "…experts are hailing it as the artistic find of the century. The last time a Vermeer was up for auction, it fetched over twenty million pounds. This one is anticipated to do even better…"

"Ah!" Sherlock exclaimed. "Peppermint lozenges, right?"

John wrinkled his nose. "Not on your life. They remind me of Great Aunt Milly."

Sherlock's face fell. "Spearmint, then."

"Nope," John countered. "Not really a big mint fan – I don't even like mint jelly with lamb."

That earned him a sharp look and a scathing, "Plebeian."

"No, I just don't like mint."

"Well, it can't be cinnamon – not with what you said about associating the scent with death."

John made a disgusted face at the mere thought. "No – not cinnamon, either. To be honest, unless I've got a sore throat, I don't like lozenges all that much."

Any further speculation on John's sweet-of-choice was derailed by the chiming of the pink phone. Sherlock opened the message. Two pips sounded, then the photo showed. "View of the Thames. South Bank, somewhere between Southwark Bridge and Waterloo." He showed the photo to John. "You check the papers; I'll look online."

John grabbed the bundle of newspapers Mrs. Hudson was kind enough to bring up that morning. "Hmm… Archway suicide," he said, scanning the headlines of the first paper in the stack.

Sherlock didn't even look up from his phone. "Ten a penny."

John flipped through the newsprint. "Two kids stabbed in Stoke Newington." That didn't even earn him a verbal response. "Man found on train line – that'd be Andrew West."

Exasperated with the lack of helpful information online and in the papers, Sherlock let out a cry of, "Nothing!" He hit a button on his phone and lifted it to his ear. "It's me. Have you found anything on
Half an hour later, John and Sherlock were in a taxi, heading for a newly-discovered body on the bank of the Thames. "Caramels?" Sherlock said, halfway there.

John chuckled. "Not even close."

"Candy floss?"

John looked at Sherlock. "Oh, come on. You're just guessing now." Sherlock glared at the accusation, but fell silent and went back to staring out the window.

Not long after, the taxi let them off at the right place. Sherlock and John made their way down to the police cordon and were met by Lestrade. "Morning," he greeted them.

"Morning," John replied. Sherlock ducked under the tape and strode over to where the body of an unhealthily-overweight man in black slacks, white shirt, and no shoes. Lestrade followed at a slightly slower pace.

Leaning over the body, Sherlock pulled on a pair of latex gloves. "Licorice allsorts?"

"In a word – yuck," John replied.

"What?" Lestrade looked lost, glancing from Sherlock to John and back.

"Not important," John assured him.

Greg let out a small sigh and stepped closer to the body. "D'you reckon this is connected, then?"

"Obviously," Sherlock replied. "Odd, though – he hasn't been in touch yet."

"But we must assume that some poor bugger's primed to explode, yeah?" Greg said.

"Yes," Sherlock agreed, taking a step back from the body and cocking his head to the side.

Lestrade asked, "Any ideas?"

"Seven, so far," Sherlock replied, pulling his magnifying glass from his pocket.

"Seven!" Lestrade echoed.

John took a position to Greg's left as they watched Sherlock examine the body in closer detail. Once finished, Sherlock pulled out his phone and gestured for John to take a look for himself, tossing him a pair of latex gloves. John removed his leather ones and pulled on the latex, mutely asking for permission from Lestrade. At Greg's nod, John crouched next to the corpse. Picking up the man's hand, he examined the nails, then laid it back down. Next, he moved up to the man's face and lifted an eyelid. "Dead about twenty-four hours; maybe a bit longer, no more than thirty-six, though." He retrieved a penlight from his pocket and used it to look into the man's mouth. "Asphyxiated, but didn't drown – there's no foam in his throat."

"The coroner agrees," Greg said.

John glanced up, then returned to looking at the body. "There's quite a bit of bruising around the nose and mouth," he said, turning the head to the side. "More bruises here and here," he indicated a line of roughly circular marks near the corpse's left ear.
"Fingertips," Sherlock said, still focused on his phone.

John blinked and looked at the bruising again. "Yeah, I suppose so. Must have hands the size of dinner plates, though," he could picture the hand in his mind, digging into the man's face, the thumb pinching his nose closed. John stood, more to get away from the sickeningly strong stench of cinnamon than the equally-putrid odor of death as scented by anyone else. "In his late thirties, I'd say. Not in the best condition."

"He's been in the river long enough the water's destroyed most of the data," Sherlock said, finishing his phone-based research. "But I'll tell you one thing: That lost Vermeer painting's a fake."

"What?" Lestrade often felt that was his 'catchphrase' when dealing with Sherlock.

"We need to identify the corpse, find out about his friends and associates --"

"Wait, wait, wait," Lestrade held up a hand to stall Sherlock. "What painting? What are you on about?"

"It's all over the place," Sherlock replied. "Haven't you seen the posters? Dutch old master, supposed to have been destroyed centuries ago, now it's turned up. Worth thirty million pounds."

"Okay," Lestrade said. "What has that got to do with the stiff?"

Sherlock grinned. "Everything," he said. "Have you ever heard of the Golem?"

"Golem?" Greg felt the conversation had taken a very wrong turn somewhere, but as was typical around Holmes, he had no idea how to get it back to where it needed to be.

"Early recording of someone's construct," John muttered. "I'd say it was fictional, though whoever first came up with it had likely seen a construct in action."

"Really?" One of Sherlock's eyebrows twitched, then shook his head. "It's also the name of an assassin. Real name of Oskar Dzundza. One of the deadliest assassins in the world." He flung a hand to indicate the dead man as a whole. "That's his trademark style."

"So this is a hit?"

"Definitely," Sherlock agreed.

Greg felt he was finally getting some decent answers, but was still unclear on a few details. "But what has this got to do with that painting? I don't see --"

"You do see," Sherlock bit out the words, his tone all but outright saying 'you're an idiot', "you just don't observe!"

John stepped forwards to interrupt the argument before it could actually warrant the name. "All right, all right, girls. Calm down." Both Greg and Sherlock leveled glares at him. John ignored them. "D'you wanna take us through it, Sherlock?"

While Sherlock ran through his latest chance to show off extrapolating details from the smallest of oft-overlooked clues, John – as he had been doing since adding Moran's dot to the map the night before – was going over possible scenarios and disqualifying them nearly as quickly as they formulated within his mind.

Half an hour later, he and Sherlock were back in a taxi on their way to the Hickman Gallery. "Why
hasn't he phoned?" Sherlock asked, turning the pink phone over and over in his hands. "He's broken pattern. Why?"

"Might be because the old woman yesterday was saved. Possibly, he doesn't want another good Samaritan interfering," John replied.

"Possible," Sherlock said, though he obviously didn't think it likely.

Later, after a brief stop off near the Waterloo Bridge to 'invest' – in what, exactly, Sherlock never said – Sherlock sent John on to check out the gallery attendant's home while he headed into the Hickman Gallery for more information on that side of things. John arrived at Alex Woodbridge's, the dead man’s, home in time to see Sergeant Sally Donovan climb into her car and drive away. John let out a small breath of relief that he wouldn't be forced to endure her company, paid the cabbie, then headed up to where a corpulent brunette woman stood on the front stairs, staring sadly down at her hands.

"Morning," John called out, startling the woman a little.

"Oh, sorry," she said. "Morning."

"You've heard about Alex?" he asked, tapping his best Dr. Watson empathic tone while walking up the path through her front garden.

"The police told me they just found his body this morning," she said. "D'you work with Alex, then?"

John shook his head. "No, my name's John Watson. I work with the," mad child who consults with the police flashed through his head, but he said, "police," after only a slightly awkward pause. "I'm helping them find out what happened to him."

After being shown into Alex's attic room, and a lengthy conversation during which John was beginning to sympathize with Sherlock's perpetual irritation with people in general, John wound up having two things of interest: Alex Woodbridge had an unhealthy obsession with astronomy, and a transcript of a phone message left for him the night before by a woman by the name of Professor Cairns. His irritation, though, was mostly aimed at Mycroft. The elder Holmes sent him another text while in the middle of his fact-finding for Sherlock.

RE: BRUCE-PARTINGTON PLANS
Have you spoken to West's fiancée yet?
Mycroft Holmes

John's irritability increased when he wound up needing to walk nearly fifteen blocks before finding a suitably deserted alleyway in which to gate home. He headed down to the living room to find Sherlock reading something on his laptop at the desk. "Find out anything useful?"

John plopped onto the sofa and shifted through the piles of papers from West's file. "Not a whole lot, no." Sherlock cleared his throat. John looked up to see an expectant look on Sherlock's face. "Woodbridge's only hobby – to the point of obsession, really – was astronomy. The woman he rented a room from indicated they'd had a break-in last night, but nothing was taken. And a Professor Cairns left this message on their answerphone," John handed Sherlock the piece of notepaper on which he'd transcribed the voicemail.

Sherlock took the transcript, read it once, then focused on his computer, typing rapidly. John ignored him, and looked through the papers on West's death once more. You know what, Watson? From what Mycroft said, he's only really worried about that memory stick with the plans on it. I don't think
he cares at all about West's death. Find the blasted stick and get him off your back, then you can
look into how he died. He selected a page of heavily-redacted information concerning the Bruce-
Partington program. "I'm gonna go find that memory stick before Mycroft's phone melts from
impatience."

Sherlock let out a small laugh. "Been bugging you about it, has he?"

"Not much, considering, but…" John stood. "I really don't like him."

"You do realize," Sherlock said, typing, "that if you successfully return the memory stick, he will see
that as an open invitation to meddle in your life in the future."

John let a cold smile cross his face. "I'd like to see him try," he said.

Sherlock looked over and echoed John's smile. "I think I would, too. Mycroft needs brought down a
peg or two."

"Or even three," John agreed, digging his broken compass out of his satchel. Sherlock returned to his
own task as John made short work reducing the page of redacted information to ash while holding
the image of a generic memory stick in the forefront of his mind. Dusting the ash over the outside of
the compass, he said, "Show me the way to that which I need." He opened the compass and found
the needle pointing away from the other paperwork on the coffee table. "Good, that worked, then.

John headed outside, holding the compass in his hands. Remembering the extraordinarily long walk
he was forced to endure while tracking down graffiti the previous week, John decided to shortcut
things a little. He headed for the Tube.

It wound up being a good idea; instead of taking all day to triangulate the neighborhood he needed, it
only took about three hours. After a brief pit-stop for some fish'n'chips at a conveniently-located shop
just outside the Tube entrance, he pressed onwards. As the rare sunlight crossed the boundary from
midday to afternoon, the compass lead him to a front door. The name above the buzzer read Joe
Harrison.

That name's vaguely familiar… John closed his eyes, trying to place it. Damn it, sometimes I wish I
had a photographic memory. He abandoned the train of thought and rang the bell. He heard it buzz
loudly inside, but after waiting nearly five minutes, it became clear that no one was home. Glancing
around to ensure the coast was clear, he retrieved his chicory charm and held it against the lock. "I
command you to unlock; remove this obstacle from my path." The door snicked open.

John let himself inside. The flat was obviously a bachelor's place – it was a mess no matter where he
looked. Glancing at his compass, he found the needle spinning slowly. Must be right under it, he
thought, then hurried up the stairs to Harrison's bedroom. On a bedside table, positioned directly over
the door downstairs, was a memory stick. John hadn't even needed to check the compass in order to
spot it.

He was halfway down the flight of stairs leading to the flat's living room when he heard the front
door open. Shit, shit, shit, buggerry and fuck, he pressed himself against the wall, reaching for his
amaranth wreath, but stillled. No, not bad, Watson – how about we get the rest of the story while
we're here? Instead of 'disappearing', John quickly and quietly arranged himself in a pose against the
wall at the foot of the stairs. He heard Harrison grumbling to himself, "Thought I locked that damn
thing?" followed by footsteps coming up the short flight to the living room.

He stepped onto the landing, and John held up the memory stick. "Think we need a chat, mate," he
said, infusing his voice with Captain Watson. Joe Harrison was tall, lightly muscled, and fit. He wore the close-fitting and highly-visible clothing of a professional bicycle courier. He also looked at John, paled drastically, then turned tail and ran down the stairs. "Oh for the love of," John grumbled, quickly tucking the memory stick into his pocket with one hand while retrieving the black sand vial and his High John the Conqueror oil. It only took him heartbeats to mix the two ingredients. He heard Harrison let out a loud curse as he tripped over something on the front stoop. "Time stand still, I order you. Not a single second pass until I'm through doing what I have to do. Time stand still I order you." The components flashed black, and John strode after Harrison.

The courier had tripped over a plastic bag of rubbish that hadn't yet been disposed of, and was frozen in the act of pushing himself off the brick safety rail that enclosed the stoop. John idly wished he had a pair of handcuffs, then decided it didn't matter. Using a trick learned from his mother – both he and Harry had often been on the receiving end – he grabbed the man's left ear in a firm grip and waited for time to resume its normal pace.

"Ow!" Harrison shouted.

John increased the pressure and tugged him back inside. "Now, none of that, mate. Don't need the neighbors getting an eyeful, now do you?"

"Who the bloody hell are you?" Harrison asked, once John had shut the door behind him. "I didn't even hear you come after me!"

"Best you forget that bit," John said, once again marveling at how he'd managed to get tucked into a spy novel. "I want you to tell me how you found this?" he held up the memory stick again.

Harrison wilted, for lack of a better term. He sank onto the stairs. "God," he said, scrubbing a hand across his face. "What's Lucy gonna say? Jesus."

West's fiancée, John recognized her name. Ah! That's where I read Harrison's name – he's her brother. "Why'd you kill Andrew West, Mr. Harrison?"

"It was an accident," Harrison insisted.

"I don't believe you."

Harrison blinked up at John. "No, it really was. I swear it."

"Convince me. Tell me what happened."

While Harrison went on about how his prospective brother-in-law had spilled about the plans, how he thought they might be the fortune he needed to dig himself out of some highly illegal debts, and how West was killed in a fall down the front stairs, John took a moment to verify the man's story by asking the house-spirit of Harrison's flat. Though it surprised him, what the spirit showed him matched Harrison's story. As the man came to a conclusion, explaining how he'd stashed the body on top of a passing train, John chewed his lower lip.

"…and that's it, I swear it. I didn't mean for Westie to die. He was a good bloke." Harrison hit his head against the wall. "Him and Lucy both're good people. Too good to have a screw-up like me in the family."

"Tell your sister what happened," John advised. "She might hate you for it, but at least she'd know the truth. You owe her that much."

John turned to leave. Harrison said, "So that's it, then?"
John looked over his shoulder. "I have what I came for."

"What about me?"

John shrugged. "Not my decision, unfortunately. You might consider turning yourself in, though." He packed as much coercive power as he possibly could into the 'suggestion', then left without looking back again. He walked back towards the Tube station, pleased with how his first solo case had worked out.

He waited until he was back on Baker Street before getting out his phone. He scrolled to Mycroft's most recent text and hit 'reply'. Why would I speak with West's fiancée? He hit 'send' and headed into 221B, whistling tunelessly.

"You had a successful day," Sherlock commented from his chair at the desk. John could see he was still doing research on the computer.

"Yeah," John agreed. "Your brother should be happy – I got his bloody memory stick back."

"Have you told him as much?"

"Not yet," John said, setting his satchel down on the end of the sofa, then stripping his jacket. "Still trying to decide what to ask for in getting it back for him. I mean, you might work for free, but I don't."

"Hmm…" Sherlock turned away from his computer. "That's an avenue I never fully explored. Surely the prospect of having to compensate for these favors he asks would deter him from asking about frivolities in the future…"

John's phone chimed a text-alert. Retrieving it from his jacket, John saw it was a reply from Mycroft.

If you are having difficulties, I am sure my brother would be happy to assist.
Mycroft Holmes

"How is it that git can sound condescending through a text?" John mused. "Oh, and he says if I'm stuck, I should ask you."

Sherlock snorted. "Typical."

"I think my fee just upped itself," John muttered, flopping into his armchair. "Think we can convince Mrs. Hudson to make shepherd's pie for supper?"

"Not likely," Sherlock replied, returning his attention to the computer. "She's gone to visit her sister for the next three days."

John sighed. "Takeaway again, then."

"You could cook," Sherlock said.

John let out a laugh. "No way! I once melted a pot just trying to boil water for noodles. Mum banned me from the kitchen for that." He chuckled at the memory. "There's a reason I'm grateful our kettle's electric and I live on takeaway, you know."

"And here I thought your avoidance of the cooktop was because you were assuming I'd used the pots and pans in an experiment."

"That, too, but mostly it's the whole I-can-burn-water thing." He glanced at the text still displayed on
his phone. "What should I reply?"

"Anyone can burn water, all it takes is a DC current and a receptacle into which the separated hydrogen and oxygen can be collected," Sherlock commented. "And Mycroft? Hmm… What, exactly, did he tell you?" John read the text to him. "And that was in reply to…?"

"Here," John said, handing him his phone. "Read it for yourself."

Sherlock scanned through the short texted conversation between his brother and his blogger. Scowling, he typed his own reply, then handed the phone back to John. The former soldier couldn't resist and checked to see what Sherlock had sent.

No, I wouldn't be 'happy to assist'. I told you no. I meant it. Besides, John is doing well. SH

"To the point, I suppose," John said, tucking his phone into his jeans pocket.

"I can hear his blood-pressure rising from here," Sherlock said, smirking. He paused in his work at the computer and looked at his flatmate. "Turkish delight," he said with finality.

"Mum and Harry's favorite, but I never cared for it myself," John replied, picking up a medical journal he hadn't yet managed to finish.

"Toffee?"

John shook his head. "Nope," he said, quickly paging to the article he'd left off reading.

"Taffy?"

"That a guess?" John looked over at his flatmate, more amused than he should be that the man was having so much difficulty deducing his favorite sweet.


John laughed. "Yeah, cola bottles. Been nuts about them since I was a kid."

With a muttered, "Cola bottles," like the worst of expletives, Sherlock returned to his computer.

Several hours later, just as John finished his magazine and was starting to debate what he wanted for dinner, Sherlock closed the lid of his computer and stood. "Come along, then," he said, grabbing his coat off the peg on the door. John grabbed his own jacket and his satchel and followed him to the street. "Get us a taxi," Sherlock ordered, heading towards the same homeless girl from earlier that day, who was standing just outside Speedy's, begging change off of passersby. John managed to flag the second cab that went by, just as Sherlock returned, holding a slip of paper. They climbed in, Sherlock telling the cabbie, "Vauxall Arches."

John grimaced. "Wonderful part of town, that. You wanna explain?"

Sherlock settled back on the seat. "Homeless network really is indispensable. They're my eyes and ears all over the city."

Suddenly, the reason for the fifty-quid 'investment' became clear. "Oh, that's clever," John said. "So, you scratch their backs and –"

"Then I disinfect myself, yes."
Smiling in amusement, John watched the scenery slip past the windows for a bit, casting his mind back over his rather long day. "Hmm…"

"Yes?"

"We're headed after that Golem character, right?"

Sherlock nodded. "Of course."

"You might've warned me before we left the flat," John grumbled. "No matter. It's what, nearly an hour's ride this time of the evening?"

"Thereabouts."

"You carry a cigarette lighter, right?" John asked, settling his satchel on his lap and digging into it. The ingredients he needed were close to the top.

"Yes," Sherlock replied. "Why?"

"Thought so," John sounded a little smug. "Next time you nip out to sneak a cigarette, you might wanna remember you're not the only one with a nose." He pulled a small stack of parchment slips out of the satchel, then closed the lid. Using a regular ball-point from his jacket pocket, he began to write several incantations down, one per slip.

"I'll keep that in mind," Sherlock said. "What are you doing?"

"Trapping spells," John quietly replied. "Any spell – well, nearly any spell – can be caught in paper. You burn it to activate it. And yes, anyone can activate a trapped spell, just like with the othersight liquid – the magic's already been set, all it needs is used."

"Fascinating," Sherlock muttered, looking at the slip John was writing on. "That one," he gestured at the slip, "does it really do what the words say?"

"Sort of," John hedged. "It really does, but it only gives you a minute or so before regular time kicks in again."

John managed to imbue ten slips of parchment with the black sand and High John the Conqueror oil needed to activate the spell before the taxi pulled to a halt outside the entrance to Vauxhall Arches. He handed eight of them to Sherlock. As the cab pulled away, John leveled a stern look at Sherlock. "Timestop can be very disorienting the first time you use it. I have no idea if you'll hear the magic about to end or not, but when I use it, a very high-pitched whine sounds roughly two seconds before regular time restarts. It's best if you freeze completely right then and let time rush back around you."

"If not?" Sherlock asked, remembering John's vague warnings regarding the gate and keeping his eyes closed.

"You ever get sick on a carnival ride?"

Sherlock winced and grimaced. "More than once as a child."

"Then take that feeling and multiply it by about ten or so. That's why." John handed him one of the spelltraps he'd kept. "Go on, then. Let's see how you do." Sherlock dug his lighter out of the pocket of his Belstaff and light the paper on fire. It burned with no heat and a black flame. John waited patiently. *Hope he doesn't get any ideas.* He rolled his eyes, and before he could complete the gesture, Sherlock had instantaneously moved about three inches to the right. *What am I saying, it's
Sherlock. *Of course this will give him ideas! "How about it, then?"* John asked.

Sherlock blinked and looked around. "*Brilliant,*" he breathed, a frighteningly gleeful grin surfacing on his face. "The noise you mentioned was there, by the way," he commented, almost absentmindedly. He retrieved a penlight from his pocket and started walking. "This way."

John followed, tucking the spare spelltrap in his jeans pocket, and made a mental note to make sure Sherlock was well-supplied with spelltraps in the future. *Besides being a practical use of magic for times when I'm unavailable, it actually manages to distract him. Wish I'd thought of this before he started shooting the wall... Never mind the fact I wasn't home at the time.*

A few, short minutes later, and the pair located who they were looking for. Sherlock immediately lit one of the timestop spelltraps and disappeared from view. John barely had time to register flicker-stops of Sherlock's shadow against the brick wall just ahead. *He must be lighting the next one just as the noise sounds that ends the previous one.* By the time he emerged into an open, fire-lit area, only a few second of his own time had passed, but Sherlock had made good use of the extra minutes of outside-time the spells had granted him.

An enormously tall – and John didn't consider that description to be exaggeration, as the man, had he been standing, would have towered over even Mycroft – man was bound with three separate lengths of rope, the condition of which indicated it had been scavenged from the surrounding area, as well as a pair of handcuffs. "Does Lestrade know you stole those?" John asked, indicating the cuffs with a nod of his head.

"He will shortly," Sherlock replied, lifting his phone to his ear. "Evening, Inspector. Care to pick up one of Interpol's most wanted?" he said, grinning into the phone. The bound giant at his feet growled something through the gag. John really didn't want to think what might have been on any handy scrap of cloth located nearby.

It took an hour for the police to arrive and cart off the Golem. While waiting for Lestrade to give them the go-ahead to leave, Sherlock logged into his website from his phone. As he thought about what to type, Greg ambled over. "Do I even want to know how you found him? Or subdued him?"

John shook his head, "It wasn't me, if that's what you're thinking. This one's all Sherlock."

"Well, mostly," Sherlock corrected. "You might want to send someone after Miss Winceslas at the Hickman Gallery, too. I don't know if she's part of it or not, but she stands to win a rather big cut of that thirty million. Wouldn't hurt to be thorough and check." He nodded to himself, then typed. John peered over his shoulder – *Well, around his shoulder, at any rate* – and read the latest entry.

*The Vermeer painting is a fake. The VanBuren Supernova was not visible during the 1640s. The Golem sends his regards.*

"When did you work that out?" John asked.

"Today, while you were out dealing with Mycroft's little problem. The key was Woodbridge's astronomy obsession. It took a bit of digging, but I eventually found that Vermeer's trademark was his accuracy in depictions of the night sky. How else would a security guard have been able to see that it was fake?" Further exposition from the consulting detective was halted as the pink phone rang. Sherlock quickly answered it on speakerphone. "Hello?"

"Please," a little boy's voice drifted out of the speaker. "Somebody help me!"

Sherlock handed Greg the phone. "Find out where he is and pick him up."
Another hour and a half later, and John and Sherlock were unlocking the door to 221B. The lock snicked open with a turn of Sherlock's key just as John's stomach rumbled noisily. "That pizza parlor down the block's open until midnight," Sherlock pointed out.

John glanced at his watch. It was rapidly approaching eleven at night. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Sherlock nodded, smiling a little.

"Back in a bit, then," John said, heading further up Baker Street. He didn't see Sherlock drop the smile and sprint up the stairs. *Four pips down, one to go.* John turned his mind towards the problem of Moran. The scent of garlic and onion and melted cheese grew heavy in the air as he drew closer to the pizza shop. *He's a clever one, and ruthless, too.* The phantom sensation of spellfire crackling along his nerves and veins sparked and sizzled. Forcibly pushing aside one memories of the second-worst experience of his life, John found his thoughts circling themselves.

Damn it. Can't think right now.

Setting spelltraps took half again as much energy as simply casting it to begin with; it's why he didn't tend to make many.

After three slices of his favorite, paired with a tall glass of sparkling lemonade, he felt much better. His thoughts were actually forming lines, rather than circles. *Could I trap him somehow?* he wondered, focused on Moran to the exclusion of all else.

He really ought to have known better.

If he'd been paying attention, he might have noticed something off.

If he'd been paying attention, his othersense might have tripped a warning.

If he'd been paying attention, he mightn't have taken that particular path home.

If he'd been paying attention… The what-ifs started up as soon as he felt a stinging sensation in his neck. John maintained consciousness long enough to pull the tranq-dart and recognize it for what it was before he collapsed in the entranceway of the alley halfway between the pizza place and 221B.

Blearily, John peeled his eyes open. Blurry, bright light stabbed his brain. "Now, then Johnny-boy, I'm sure you know your part to play in the next act." An unfamiliar male voice with an Irish accent all but laughed the words. His brain throbbed in time with his pulse. His eyes felt like they were coated with sand. Creakily, he rolled his head in the direction of the voice. He blinked several times to clear his vision. Standing only three or four feet away was a slim man, wearing a very expensive suit, and sporting short, nearly-black hair. "Usually, I have people who handle this part – act as my voice and such – but this is a red-letter day! Special occasions warrant special actions, after all."

It took longer than it should for John's brain to connect with his voice. "Who… Who are you?" he asked, his tongue thick and clumsy.

"Jim Moriarty," the man replied. "And the tranquilizer should wear off completely in the next few minutes, Johnny-boy. Wouldn't do to have you stumbling your way through the final act." Moriarty reached up onto a shelf above John's head and retrieved a bottle of water. "Drink up," he said, holding out the bottle. "It'll help."

Thirsty didn't even come close to how John felt at that moment. He couldn't have been able to refuse the offer, even if he'd tried. So, he reached for it, only to find that his hands were handcuffed together. Looking down at himself, his heart stopped for a full five beats on seeing bricks of semtex wired around his person. Moriarty sighed and leaned over a little more, placing the icy bottle of spring water in John's hands. "I meant it, Johnny-boy. Drink up. We've a show to put on, and you're
His mind still running sluggishly, John twisted the cap off the bottle. A satisfying crunch of the plastic safety-tab letting him know that – drugged kidnapping or no – the water was safe enough. He chugged half the bottle at one go, the icy water making his stomach cramp in alarm.

"Easy there, Johnny-boy," Moriarty sing-songed. "She said a bit of water wouldn't hurt the wiring, but I've no idea what stomach acid would do. I don't know about you, but I'm not willing to find out the hard way, eh?" His tone was conspiratorial and friendly, like he and John were suddenly the very best of buds.

As much as John hated that Moriarty was right about anything, the water did, indeed, help. It wasn't long before he felt more like himself and less like a wet rag tossed in the bottom of the laundry basket. He tried his best to keep this fact from the man who was staring at him with the same expression John had last seen on Sherlock's face when presented with a particularly engrossing slide of diseased liver tissue. An unfamiliar dinging noise penetrated the air. Moriarty pulled his mobile out of his pocket and checked it, then grinned gleefully.

The expression made John's blood run cold.

"Darling Sherlock just arrived, Johnny-boy. Places, people!" he hollered the last bit. "Curtain's up in five!"

John was unceremoniously hauled to his feet. "Now, then, Johnny-boy, I'm gonna let you in on a little secret: I've got snipers out there in the gallery. You try to bolt, they're gonna be sponging you up with a napkin, understood?" Despite the water, John's mouth was desert-dry. He nodded.

"Good," Moriarty said. "You deviate in even one syllable from what I tell you to say, same thing happens. Got it?" John nodded again. "Fantastic," Moriarty punctuated the word by lightly slapping John's cheek. His manic smile resurfaced. "Show time!"

Moriarty unlocked the cuffs. "Wait here until I tell you to step out." He didn't wait for an affirmative reply; he simply turned on his heel and strode out of the curtained cubicle in which John waited. The hollow thud of echoing footsteps rapidly faded.

John took the opportunity to take a look around. From the strong stench of chlorine, he knew he was at an indoor swimming pool. The room itself was a changing cubicle, with a low bench – the 'shelf' he'd come-to underneath – and a couple of pegs set into the brickwork. His black jacket hung from one peg, and his satchel hung from another. Not knowing how much time he had, he grabbed the medallion from his jacket pocket and tucked it between his palm and the leather glove of his left hand.

He heard the sound of a door squeaking open, followed by a measured, even tread. "Brought you a little getting-to-know-you present," Sherlock's voice echoed through the building. Damn it, damn it, damn it, John thought, hurriedly checking the other pocket of his jacket. "Oh, that's what it's all been for, hasn't it? All your little puzzles, making me dance. All to distract me from this!"

"Johnny-boy," Moriarty's voice came through the earpiece John hadn't been aware he'd been wearing. "Close the anorak around you and step out. Greet our darling Sherlock by saying, 'evening'. Say only that, mind. Unless you want to go home to mummy in a bucket."

John's hand clenched tightly around his lighter, then he hastily pulled his hand from the hanging jacket and stepped out of the cubicle, facing the direction Sherlock's voice had come from. "Evening," he said, following the instructions.
"Good boy," Moriarty giggled. "Now say, 'This is a turn-up, isn't it, Sherlock?'." Damn it, John couldn't yet see a way out of this, so he followed the bastard's instructions.

Sherlock's face was a study in denial, dusted with shock. "John," he whispered. "What the hell…?"

"Tell him, 'Bet you never saw this coming'. Be sure to stress the 'this'." You know, I think being someone's puppet is actually worse than having been shot. It's not as bad as the life-sucking pain, but it comes a close second. John did as he was told. Sherlock began to slowly walk in his direction. "Open the anorak," Moriarty said. "Show him what's really going on." John had only ever wanted – truly wanted with every fiber in his being – to kill one person in his entire life. Now, I can up that count to two. "Then repeat after me, Johnny-boy: What… would you like me… to make him say… next?" John even made sure to keep the unnatural pauses. Warmaig da math sha, da spi zo, John thought, unsure if he was aiming the curse at Moriarty or the bastard – Moran, it's gotta be Moran – holding the rifle and making the little red dot-of-death dance across military-grade high-explosives.

Next, Moriarty had him rattle off a string of what might've been Gaelic, but was equally-likely to be nothing more than gibberish. Daga me ra wazbaisha, tatoo, Khaow ray da ookhra, (5, 6, 7)

"Stop it," Sherlock ordered on the third repetition of the maybe-Gaelic.

"Nice touch, this. The pool where little Carl died. I stopped him," John relayed, then winced at the next bit. Chimjan shay, he thought, saying, "I can stop John Watson, too." He couldn't keep from glancing at the red dot. Ana de mura naighaie shori! "Stop his heart." (8, 9)

Sherlock, trying very hard to look in all directions at once, snapped out, "Where are you?"

A door behind John squeaked open. "I gave you my number," Moriarty's Irish was muted a little. "I thought you might call."

No longer expected to relay words not of his own choosing, John quickly wrestled his temper back into its box. You can come out and play once we're no longer in danger of being blown to fish-bait. He closed his eyes, keeping one ear on Moriarty's and Sherlock's conversation, then cast about with othersight. One, two, three, four constructs on the rim of the gallery facing me. Two on the rim to my left, two to the right, and three behind me. Where the bloody hell is Moran himself? This many constructs going, he can't be far. Moriarty's voice temporarily interrupted him. "Jim? Jim from the hospital?" John pulled a little more of his awareness out of the mundane world and into othersight.
A leyline trickled its way under the pool, buried more deeply than most leylines John'd ever seen. He reached for its familiar purring warmth and was greeted with a surge of recognition. The merest wisp of a tendril snaked out of the floor and wrapped comfortably around his ankle. Within moments, his headache drained away and his muscles felt fully under his own control.

"'Dear Jim, please will you fix it for me to get rid of my lover's nasty sister?',' Sherlock said. "'Dear Jim, please will you fix it for me to disappear to South America?'"

 Damn it, I used to actually like that program, John thought, then shoved the distraction away. He refocused on locating Moran. Come out, come out, wherever you are, you sodar bachiya. I got a few new tricks up my sleeve since last we met. A faint reading, nearly thirty yards away, trickled into his othersense. There you are. Hope you like this. He focused on the incantation he needed; bringing it to the front of his mind and sub-vocalizing it. Turnabout's fair play; reap what you sow; what goes around, comes around – all these and more I invoke. By right of magic, I invoke threefold balance. By right of mage, I call on London to examine you. By right of guardian of London, I call on the 'lines! (10)

 Moriarty's high-pitched sing-song shattered John's concentration. "Daddy's had enough now!"

 John aimed a mental glare at Moriarty's head, but didn't move to aim it at the man directly. Damn it, you twisted dick – I was this close! He closed his eyes again and refocused. It didn't take him as long to target Moran's distinctive aura, then bring the lengthy incantation to mind. He had to start it over from the beginning, however.

 He got as far as 'by right of guardian of London', when Moriarty's voice once again shattered his concentration. "That's what people do!" the final word shouted to echo throughout the empty building.

 "I will stop you," Sherlock said.

 "No you won't," Moriarty retorted.

 Sherlock's eyes flicked over to John. "You alright?"

 The question was so absurd in the situation that John had the sudden urge to give in to hysterical laughter. He took longer than Moriarty thought appropriate to answer Sherlock's question. Moriarty stepped right next to him and said, "You can talk, Johnny-boy. Go ahead."

 At the sound of the hated nickname, both of John's fists clenched tightly. His right nearly cracked the casing of his plastic lighter, and the left would likely wind up having an indentation of the Celtic knot on his medallion pressed into his palm. He met Sherlock's gaze. "Oh, I'm just peachy," he snarled the last word, giving vent to a tiny bit of his anger.

 He could tell his flatmate was glad to hear the anger. Means I'm still me, I suppose. Sherlock held out a flash drive and John's anger spiked. That son of a bitch! He picked my pocket! "Take it," Sherlock said to Moriarty.

 "Huh? Oh, that!" he stepped past John and took the stick from Sherlock. "The missile plans." He brought the thumb drive to his lips and kissed it.

 Damn it, I need more time! Realization dawned in a flash. Time! I've got time in my bloody pocket! Moving carefully, using Moriarty to hide what he was doing from the constructs, not knowing if any actions not dictated by Moriarty would be the trigger or if Moran was watching through his creations or not, John reached into his pocket.
It was difficult to tell through his gloves, but he managed to snag hold of a corner of the spelltrap he'd crafted earlier that evening. Closing his eyes again in concentration, he reached down to the friendly tendril and pulled it up through his leg, into his torso, and down his left arm. *Silence*, he commanded, opening his eyes and delineating a small circle with his medallion. Shifting his right hand into the space, he flicked the lighter. He quickly touched the flame to the paper.

Time froze.

Putting the lighter away in his jeans pocket, John took a quick breath to steady himself. Not bothering to even try to cast silently, John wasted no time in rechanneling the leyline's energy into his twice-aborted spell. "Turnabout's fair play; reap what you sow; what goes around, comes around – all these and more I invoke. By right of magic, I invoke threefold balance. By right of mage, I call on London to examine you. By right of guardian of London, I call on the 'lines! Judge the mage on whom I sight, see for yourself, Lady Magic, and punish as ye deem fit! As I will it, so shall it be!"

The leyline lanced out, crossing the distance in a moment. It wrapped around Moran's aura, stretching layer upon layer, until no shred of Moran could be sensed through the thick cloud of magic. A high-pitched humming noise invaded his hearing. *Damn it!* He tugged a little on part of the bomb-jacket that wasn't directly covered in explosives or attached to wires. *I was going to get out of this blasted thing!* He stillled himself as time rushed back around him.

Moriarty shifted slightly. "Boring!" he exclaimed. "I could have got them anywhere." He tossed the memory stick into the pool.

John's anger spiked again. *That ruddy fuckwit! I spent hours tracking those damn plans down!* Wrestling the anger away, John took a calming breath and assessed his options. *Construct-snipers surrounding us in the upper gallery, trigger mechanisms unknown. Moran...* He took a look now that he was out from under the influence of timestop. Magic sparked and sizzled and surged, both the leyline and the magic with the distinctive flavor/color/scent of burned steak/sullen orange/stick candy cinnamon unique to Moran. *If they're under conscious control, they won't fire. But if they're not...* Getting shot once was enough. John had no desire to try it again anytime soon, particularly not when covered in a solid ten pounds of plastic explosive.

"D'you know what happens if you don't leave me alone, Sherlock, to you?" Moriarty asked.

"Oh, let me guess," Sherlock said in his best 'you're boring the snot out of me' voice. "I get killed."

"Kill you?" Moriarty grimaced. "No, don't be *obvious*. I mean, I'm gonna kill you anyway someday. I don't wanna rush it, though – I'm saving it up for something *special*. No, no, no, no, no – if you don't stop prying, I'll *burn* you." He eyed Sherlock from head to toe. "I'll burn the *heart,*" he snarled the word, "out of you."

"I have been reliably informed that I don't have one," Sherlock said, his voice even and controlled.

"But we both know that's not *quite* true," Moriarty countered. He glanced down for a moment. "Well, I'd better be off. It was so nice to have had a proper chat."

Sherlock raised the gun, John's gun, though he figured he could forgive Sherlock stealing it this once – *after all, if this isn't an emergency, I don't know what is.* "What if I was to shoot you now? Right now?"

The thick ozone stench of a forcibly-failed spell sizzled into the air from directly behind John. Half a heartbeat later, it was followed by another, and another, and another, until the pool's chlorine was but a fond memory. The shrill sound of screaming coming closer and closer halted Moriarty's and
Sherlock's conversation in its tracks. "This wasn't in the script," John heard Moriarty mutter to himself.

The door through which Moriarty had walked just a few minutes earlier squeak-slammed open, bouncing off the wall and letting an ear-piercing decibel-level of screaming reverberate around the pool.

Chapter End Notes

All Pashto phrases are taken from nawcom.com/swearing/pashto.htm. Any other language's phrases are courtesy Google Translate.

1.) da dammay zo – Pashto for 'son of a whore'.
2.) 'dreams…delights' – lyrics quoted from The Lightning Seeds' Pure off of the Cloudcuckooland album.
3.) 'train-hop' – train-hopping ('catching out' in my part of the world) is to hitch an illegal, free ride on a train, typically by riding on the couplings between cars, inside open freight containers, or along the top of the cars. Not recommended for subways (the tunnels for most of which are far too close to the trains themselves to allow enough space for a person to safely ride).
4.) Ham, siksaka – Hindi for 'yes, teacher'.
5.) Warmaig da math sha, da spi zo – Pashto for 'I hope your neck breaks, you son of a bitch'.
6.) Daga me ra wazbaisha, tattoo – Pashto for 'suck my dick, you horse/donkey crossbreed'.
7.) Khaow ray da ookhra – Pashto for 'may the earth swallow you whole'.
8.) Chimjan shay – Pashto for 'may you be infected with worms'.
9.) Ana de mura naighaie shori – Pashto for 'your grandmother's dead and her pussy is still moving'.
10.) Sodar bachiya – Pashto for 'son of a pig'.

Something that kinda surprised me in writing this episode: When not jetlagged, this universe's version of Mary Morstan is something of a force of nature. She wormed her way into the scene with Lestrade and took complete control. I hope she doesn't keep doing that, it makes me have to go back and redo my notes. Sigh.

*This is impossible, according to the rules governing real life - unless the car had been sitting there with CSI techs swarming over and around it for far longer than we're lead to believe. DNA tests in the real world take a minimum of 24 hours to process, and that's excluding any sort of backlog/wait time for the samples to be processed (this is solely the general amount of time it takes to run one sample through the current accepted lab processes).

One of the things I've been attempting to do with this story is to put John and Sherlock on more equal footing. I like to think I've managed to make them more partners than Hero&Sidekick, but I'd appreciate a second opinion on the matter. Thanks in advance.

ETA: Thanks to Michelle for noticing a slight issue with a teacup in this chapter. It's now been corrected.
12/9/18: Killed a typo.
Then and Now

Chapter Summary

A Scandal in Belgravia in this magical world.

Chapter Notes

A Scandal in Belgravia covers such a large amount of time that I felt the need to – once again – utilize dates as section headers. At some point, I may go back and post oneshots covering the cases on John’s blog from this rather lengthy timelapse of an episode, but not just yet; I’ve far too much on my plate already to hand out promises. In any case, there are also a few flashbacks in this chapter, easily spotted by their date-headings.

Writing this chapter gave me more trouble than trying to herd an entire score of rabid felines – it’s why this one took so long. Just thought y’all ought ta know.

Warnings: All warnings from chapter one still apply.

Thanks, gracias, dankon, grazie, merci, and danke to Ariane DeVer for her work in crafting usable transcripts of the show and posting them at livejournal!

Nov. 11, '13 ETA: I finally found a fic utilizing the hover-to-translate option and pulled up the source code on the sucker. Now, I also have that nifty addition to my fic! I still left the footnote translations, just in case my novice HTML skills fail me (and for those of you who, for whatever reason, can't 'hover' a cursor). Special thanks to Arty Diane over at FFN for correcting the Dari in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Five: Then and Now

Women are naturally secretive, and they like to do their own secreting. – Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

July 8, 1990

Tink. The noise pulled John out of dreamland. A second tinking noise followed the first. "Psst! Johnny!" a whisper-yell drifted through the window, followed by yet another tink.

John slowly peeled one eye open and blurrily blinked at his wind-up alarm clock. It was a quarter after five in the morning. "Johnny! Get your arse outta bed!" Another tink of a pebble bouncing off the glass of his half-open window punctuated the command.

Rolling out of bed, he padded over to the window, shivering a little in the early morning chill. Mary stood just fifteen feet away, leaning against the oak that spread its leaves over the narrow dirt path that wound around the house from the garage to the converted barn where his mum tracked her
research on apple cross-pollination in the old hayloft while his dad built sturdy wooden furniture that bordered on art for the tourist shops in town on the main level. "What?" he whisper-shouted back to her. "It's too early, Mary! Lemme go back to sleep."

"No way, Johnny! It's Sunday!"

John shook his head, yawning. "Can't be," he said, "was Sunday just a coupla days ago!"

"Yeah, last week. Come on, Ajay's expecting us!"

"You sure about that? I coulda swore –"

"No school for two weeks and you've already lost track of the days, haven't you?" Mary giggled. "No, I'm sure it's Sunday. Get dressed, Johnny."

While John changed out of his pajamas and into a pair of jeans, comfortably-worn trainers, and his rugby jersey, he added up the days. Wow. Guess Mary's right. It is Sunday again already. "Johnny! Hurry up or we'll miss the train!" John quickly scrawled a note for his mum and left it on the desk.

Out with Mary. Back by ten tonight.

He slid into his denim jacket, then grabbed his backpack and ducked through his open window, pulling himself into the branches of the oak tree; the vertigo he felt at being off the ground negated by long familiarity with this particular move. Moments later, he'd lowered himself to the ground next to Mary. She grinned at him. "Race you to town!" she said, then took off at a run through the golden, orange, and pink tones of sunrise. John spared a moment to look around at the early morning fog beginning to burn away. It's going to be a good day, he thought, then sprinted after his best friend.

April 2, 2011

A flaming, screaming bipedal figure rushed through the door and leapt into the pool with a sizzle and a flash of combined steam and smoke. Both Moriarty and Sherlock took three steps back from the edge of the pool at the sudden appearance of the figure on fire. While they were distracted, John quickly stripped out of the semtex vest and tossed it aside. The thick, cloying stench of cinnamon assaulted John's nose, overlaid with burned flesh and melted plastic.

After a solid minute of total silence, punctuated only by the sound of water lapping against the sides of the pool, Moriarty's mobile phone rang; the noisome opening notes of the Bee Gee's Staying Alive piercing the air, startling both Moriarty and Sherlock. John barely heard it. He was staring too intently at the charred remains floating on the pool's surface. From the corner of his eye, he watched Sherlock back away from Moriarty and raise the gun in his direction once more. Much, much later, it would dawn on John to describe the interruption of the flaming thing as a parent suddenly stumbling into an argument between to rivals on a playground, though he knew better than to share that particular comparison with his flatmate.

Moriarty answered his phone with an insecure-sounding, "Hello?"

John decided to let Sherlock handle Moriarty as he narrowed his eyes at the figure floating facedown over the pool's deep end. Looks like a body, but… Something's not quite right with it. "So I noticed," Moriarty's voice said behind him, sounding dryly amused. "Clean up the mess and let her know I won't be needing her tonight; I'm done here." Footsteps receded, followed by a squeak-slam subtly different than the door at the far corner of the room. Neither John nor Sherlock followed; partly
because they knew that without irrefutable proof that Moriarty was behind everything they couldn't do anything, but mostly because both were dealing with their own brands of shock regarding the events of the evening.

"What just happened?" Sherlock was confused, and it manifested by making his voice sound all of six years old, and a sulky six at that.

John tore his eyes away from the body in the pool and looked over his shoulder at Sherlock. "Apparently, I screwed up his plans for the evening. Thought I was going after Moran, but that doesn't seem to be the case." He spotted a particularly useful piece of equipment leaning against the wall in the nearer corner of the deep end side of the pool: a telescoping rescue hook. "Give us a hand?" he asked, heading for the hook.

Sherlock followed John over to where the hook leaned. "Care to explain?" Sherlock asked as John grabbed the hook and fiddled with it.

John loosened the screw-style clamps that held it in its shortest configuration. "I had that spare timestop in my pocket. He was so interested in you, and standing where he did blocked most of me from view of the constructs upstairs, that neither he nor any of the constructs noticed what I was doing." He eyed the distance from the body to the edge of the pool and adjusted the hook's handle to a corresponding length. "I sent a spell after what I'd thought was Moran – turns out, I was wrong," he indicated the body in the pool with a small gesture. "Seems that bastard's learnt a few new tricks since we last met," he muttered while fiddling with the screw-clamps on the pole. He locked the handle into place and strode over to the edge of the pool.

"Such as?" Sherlock asked, providing a counterweight on the spare five feet of pole sticking out from behind his flatmate while John hooked the body.

"Decoys," John replied as they worked the body over to the edge of the pool. Dropping the hook and kneeling, he pulled the inordinately stiff 'body' out of the water and onto the floor.

"A polystyrene mannequin?" Sherlock looked at the partially-melted figure. "Sewn to what appear to be the legs and arms of at least two distinct cadavers?"

"Cheaper than hiring someone to carve a figure out of wood or stone, and it meant he got a level of dexterity that using an inanimate source for the limbs simply can't recreate," John said dismissively. "It is a construct, but not just a construct – he's added something to it," John clarified, obviously not meaning the body-parts, and flipped the charred mannequin over to reveal a hole cut into its chest. Nestled in among melted tape and soggy, partially-burned cotton batting, was a glass jar, filled with a black viscous liquid. "This would be the 'Moran' I felt through othersense," he tapped the jar with his fingernails. "A jar of goo.

John looked up at Sherlock and saw the taller man was blinking at him in a way that clearly meant 'explain'. "Yes, 'a jar of goo'. Specifically, a jar filled with his blood and a few specific other ingredients that, when they're all combined, wind up doing double-duty. Firstly, it's..." he cast about for an appropriate metaphor. "Ah, yes. It's like a relay station for wireless communication. It increases a mage's range on spells, particularly when that mage isn't very well-liked by the local leyline system."

Sherlock nodded to show he followed. "And the second thing it does?"

"To othersight, it reads as the mage it's working for," John replied, then sighed. "Basically, it means
that I managed to give him a major case of backlash, but he's still out there…"

Sherlock frowned and looked thoughtful for a moment. "If it's nothing more than a piece of magic, then why did it run screaming into the water?"

"Moran was in conscious control of this particular construct when I hit it with my spell," John explained, rising to his feet. "He would have literally felt like he was on fire, since that's what happened to the construct. It takes a while to disengage from a construct when you're consciously controlling it, and even longer if you're distracted." John headed in the direction of the cubicle in which he'd awoken.

"What were you trying to do with the spell you sent after Moran?" Sherlock asked, following John.

"London's leylines have cause to hate him as much as I do," John said. "I was – in essence – giving them the go-ahead to eliminate him." He paused as they reached the cubicle and grabbed his jacket and satchel. He needed to only glance at Sherlock to know what the younger man was going to ask next, so John went ahead and explained. "Magic can't do anything on her own – nothing big, at any rate, and particularly nothing against a mage. She needs a mage to direct that sort of attack." The adrenaline that had been flooding his system since he awoke was beginning to wear off, and John stifled a yawn. He glanced at his watch. It was half-past midnight.

"You alright?" Sherlock asked, as though the thought had just occurred to him.

Nodding, John said, "Yeah. Just tired." He slid his coat on, then tucked the strap of his satchel across his chest. Exhaustion ambushed him so swiftly, he only had partial recollections of Sherlock contacting Lestrade to tell him the game was over, of climbing into a taxi back to Baker Street, and of flopping onto his bed once home. By the time he awoke the next morning – still wearing his jacket and shoes – both dots of wax on the map had retreated to the margin, letting him know that neither Moriarty nor Moran were still in the London area.

John fixed himself a breakfast of tea and toast after a long shower and a change of clean clothes, then sat in his armchair while Sherlock poked about on his laptop at the desk; the leyline below Baker Street coiled lazily around his shoulders the instant his backside hit the chair cushion. He went to rest his RAMC mug on the side-table when he spotted the memory stick he'd liberated from Joe Harrison, who had, in turn, stolen it off of Andrew West. Letting go of the mug, John picked the memory stick up and stared at it. "Thought this was at the bottom of the pool," he said.

"Don't be absurd, John – I needed to know what it looked like, so I could hand Moriarty a copy." Sherlock didn't even look up from his computer.
"Oh," John said, then looked at Sherlock. The leyline let out a small vibrating hum that began
draining the accumulated tensions of the previous few days from his muscles more effectively than
the most-talented human masseuse.

"I may not like Mycroft," his flatmate said, turning to face him, "but I'm not about to let something
like that," Sherlock nodded at the stick, "into the hands of someone like Moriarty just to spite him."

"Never thought you w-would," John's voice hitched a little on the last word – the leyline wrapped a
microtendril around the thickest knot at the base of his neck and started deftly unraveling it.

One of Sherlock's eyebrows crept a little higher than the other. "Oh?"

John flinched a bit, both in response to the accusatory syllable and to the painful pleasure of the knot
in his neck dissolving. "Well… Maybe I did, but –"

"What else were you to think when you checked your pocket and found it missing, yes?"

John nodded. "Yeah. Something like that." He took a sip of his still-too-hot tea, then returned it to
the side-table while asking, "When will Lestrade want us for statements?"

"He said he'd drop by sometime today. I think he's going to want the unedited version of events, and
doesn't want anyone else to hear it."

John let out an amused huff. "Yeah, I could see how the constructs would tend to make a bloke
curious. I wonder what he would've made of it had he not found out about what I do?" The last of
the knot faded and the leyline moved on to another one, situated just below and between his
shoulders.

"Well, positing that he was unaware of your… uniqueness, I would assume he still would have
sought my input on the scene, even had I not actually been there," he chewed lightly on his lip for a
moment, then sighed. "And I am forced to admit, were I unaware of your singular abilities, even I
would have been forced to admit defeat – something which, I am sure you realize, is a bit of a rarity."

"'A bit of a rarity'?" John chuckled. "I've yet to see you actually stumped. Sure, every now and
again, I've seen you get details wrong, but I've never seen you truly at a loss." He couldn't help it –
his curiosity had well and truly been poked. "So… What would you have thought, had you not been
involved in what went down at the pool last night? Assuming you and I never met, of course."

Sherlock thought about it for several minutes. "In this hypothetical situation you've dreamt up, my
initial assessment would be that it was a prank of some sort; perhaps some slightly disturbed youth's
attempt at 'art'; excluding the fact the bomb in the middle of it all would show the same design
specifications of the rest of the ones seized over the past few days. However, the supposition of it
being so would hinge solely on whether or not the body parts attached to the mannequin in the pool
were murder victims or harvested from less interesting sources." A thought seemed to occur to him.
"If you were to have need of body parts like that, how would you go about retrieving them?"

"Easy," John replied. "I'd ask you, and you'd take advantage of Dr. Hooper's crush on you to get
them for me from an unidentified corpse in her morgue or from one of the cadavers donated to Saint
Bart's." The knot under his shoulder blades faded away and he was – barely – able to stifle the urge
to let out an appreciative groan. Why is it that no leyline I've ever lived near prior to now has acted
this way before? I'm not complaining, mind, just curious. Though he'd not expected an answer, the
leyline provided him with a mental image, a sort of aerial view of London through othersight,
superimposed over his own magical imprint, and infused with a cyclic sense of mine/yours,
child/master.
"Presume, as I am doing for this mental exercise, that we are not acquainted. How would you acquire them?"

Considering he'd had the – very rare – need of just such ingredients a time or two in the past, John didn't have to think too hard on the answer. "I'd keep an eye on the obituaries and trade for what I need after a funeral. It's always easiest to dig already-disturbed ground, and fresh ingredients, unless otherwise specified, are likewise best." Internally, he leveled a giant neon question mark at the leyline.

"'Trade'? Not 'take'?"

The leyline seemed to shift it's vibrational tone to include fond irritation. John nodded. "Trade," he repeated, then nibbled on his toast. "Necromatic spells are only really evil if you don't care at all for the person 'donating' the parts used. If you just take what you need, without leaving something behind as repayment, there's several possible consequences, not the least of which is winding up with the owner of those parts coming after you."

"A… ghost." The sheer level of cynicism packed into that single word clearly conveyed Sherlock's beliefs on the matter.

John quirked an eyebrow at his flatmate. "You yourself used a spelltrap – several, in fact – to work outside the normal flow of time in order to disable an international assassin yesterday evening, then you saw a construct run under its own power, and yet you have trouble with the concept of spirits?"

John's own incredulity was possibly stronger than Sherlock's.

The world's only consulting detective waved a hand as though John's point were an irritating mosquito. "Quantum theory can easily explain the effects of the spelltraps you gave me."

A small smile tugged on John's mouth – he couldn't help noticing that Sherlock had sidestepped the issue of the construct. "Quit looking for logic in magic, Sherlock – it simply isn't going to work. You'll only wind up giving yourself a headache." And me, too, he added mentally. The leyline tendril coiled up and petted his head, providing him with a rapid-fire series of images: A gargoyle peering from the eaves of a gothic building, the othersight representation of London superimposed over the building, with John's imprint over the gargoyle; a pair of stone lions standing to either side of a museum entrance, London as the museum, John as the lions; a viscous storm (London) sending down a spike of lightning (John); all flavored with the sense of 'almost, but not quite'.

"But… A ghost?" Sherlock repeated.

"Yes, yes, a bloody ghost. And before you ask: Yes, you can talk to them and they'll answer any question they know the answers to, but won't – or can't – talk about what comes after death." John took another bite of his breakfast and washed it down with a swallow of his now-perfect-temperature tea; the majority of his attention now focused inwards, trying to make sense of what the leyline was attempting to tell him. The irritation coming from the leyline rapidly switched to frustration.

Sherlock made a gesture that put John in mind of how someone in a hurry might physically reach out to maneuver another person out of their way in a crowded area. John correctly assumed that meant his flatmate was setting aside the topic of ghosts – for now. "What sorts of items would be left in such a 'trade'?"

John quickly swallowed the last of his toast and sent a tendril of his own to the leyline. Hush, no need to get upset. Wait a bit, then I can fully pay attention, and hopefully understand what it is you're trying to say. "Well," he said, "it's got to be something important to you, and I don't just mean 'great-grandpa's watch' or anything like that. It needs to be symbolic of you – you're leaving the spirit a
piece of yourself in exchange for a piece of who they used to be."

"So, in this case, were you to need a pair of arms…?"

"Then I'd need some physical object to stand for myself, prepared ahead of time, in order to ensure the spirit was placated." The leyline let out an impatient little hum, but settled back to slowly unkinking the knots along John's spine.

Sherlock brushed an errant curl of hair out of his eyes. "Not what I –"

"No," John interrupted. "I know what you want, but I can't really say exactly what would be needed – it's different for each instance. Say I use your example: For whatever reason, I need a pair of arms. Okay, well since that's a pretty hefty request for anyone, living or dead, to grant, the object used in exchange would have to mean as much to me as those arms meant to their owner. And say I need to redo the spell again next year. Whatever I left this time wouldn't be suitable then, because I'd be a different person. With any luck, the change in me wouldn't be as pronounced as the switch I've gone through from a year ago to now, but it would still happen."

"How would you know what to leave, though?"

"Same way I can tell when timestop's about to expire, or how I know that Yorick's," he gestured to the skull on the mantle, "been used for some sort of magic in the past, or how I know that I'm not the first mage to live at this address – though the last was about a hundred years ago. Othersense tells me, one way or another."

"The skull's been used by a mage before?" Sherlock actually looked surprised. "Can you tell why? Who it was?"

John shook his head. "No, not really. It just shines to othersight is all. I can tell by its color – kinda bright cream with golden specks – that it was freely given to the mage who owned it, but other than that, I can't tell much."

"What of the spell you used on the trainers?"

"No – that's specific for inanimate objects. It won't work on something that was once living, not unless it's been processed, like leather." He shrugged a little. "I've no idea why, but apparently processing something like that makes it no longer qualify as formerly-living. I get the same sort of read from leather that I do from specific types of wood, and both read differently than their unprocessed counterparts."

"And what do you mean by 'freely given'?" Sherlock's face sported the endless fascination John was rapidly becoming used to seeing whenever he spoke about – or provided real-life examples of – magic.

John drank the last of his tea and sat the mug on the side-table. "Just exactly what I said – it was freely given to whomever spelled on it."

"Leaving aside the potential misuse of grammar for the moment," Sherlock ignored John's light glare, "was your meaning somewhere along the lines of the donations of cadavers to medical schools, or was it something more specific?"

John chuckled at the mental image he had of someone leaving a clause in their will that their body be 'donated to magic', then shook his head. "No, it was likely something more specific. An exception to the 'trading' thing I mentioned is if you use parts of family members – it's likely the skull once belonged to a parent or grandparent of the mage who used it. Once deceased, if they didn't already
know about their descendant being a mage, they find out rather quickly," a small, rueful smile flashed across his face at the admission. John could see a dozen deductions popping into existence in Sherlock's mind and quickly derailed the potential line of enquiry. "Where did you get him?"

"An estate sale," Sherlock replied, his expression clearly indicating that though he'd humor John's desire not to delve more deeply into the offered topic, he reserved the right to come back to it at a later date. "It came in a box with several books which had seemed promising at the time, but wound up being rather uninspiring. Yorick was the only redeeming feature of that particular box." Sherlock twisted back to his computer.

John figured that meant the conversation was over – *For now, at any rate* – and refilled his tea. Grabbing the memory stick and tucking it in his shirt pocket, he moved over to the sofa. He quickly had the file Mycroft had left collected and collated into some semblance of order. He included a note at the top, and wondered if the elder Holmes would even see it, and if so, what his reaction would be.

*I would have assumed you to be more ordered than this. Whoever you've got that put this file together initially might do with some lessons in organization.*

With the file neatly stacked and tucked within its folder, John sat back, twirling the memory stick around the fingers of his right hand, while his left painstakingly pecked out a text message. *Found the stick. Drop by around noon to collect.* He hit 'send', then tucked the stick back into his pocket. *Okay,* he thought at the leyline. *Now we can chat.*

The leyline surged around him in an enthusiastic embrace, then coiled itself around his shoulders. A sense of *focus* emanated from the 'line, then it caressed his brow, leaving behind another image: the othersight aerial image of London, superimposed over John's magical aura, with another image of London overlaying him. An odd sense of motion encompassed the image, with the outlines of John, then London, rapidly fading with distance, only to be overtaken by the other image, until both blurred into a single amalgam. The image then swung to the side and pulled away, revealing a circle. As the image faded, the leyline shot a sense of *do you understand?* at John.

*Maybe,* John replied, settling back against the sofa cushions. He sipped at his tea, idly wondered if perhaps coffee might have been a better idea, then discarded the thought as unimportant. He focused on what the image might mean. He was still pondering it roughly half an hour later, when the sound of the front door opening drifted up the stairs.

In short order, Mycroft waltzed into 221B's living room as though he belonged there. *Well, that won't do at all,* John thought, setting his mug on the coffee table. *And did we forget to lock the door, or did he come up with a key?* He picked up the file on Andrew West and thrust it in Mycroft's direction, without stirring from his place on the sofa. "Here. Won't need it any more," he said, before Mycroft could open his mouth.

Mycroft crossed the three steps to John and took the file. "And the memory stick?" he asked.

John glared up at him. "You might be able to bully your brother into working for free, but I've put up with far worse than you; some in med school, sure, but most were wearing uniforms at the time. I *had* to put up with them. You? Not so much."

"Of course," Mycroft replied, his expression caught somewhere between 'sucking on a lemon' and 'polite smile for appearance's sake'. "Money. How… vulgar."

John's mind flashed to his bank-balance – still comfortably padded after Sherlock had evenly split Sebastian Wilkes' fee with him. He stretched back against the sofa cushions, linking his fingers
together behind his neck. "Did I say 'money'?” He glanced at his flatmate, who had shifted slightly to surreptitiously watch John and Mycroft. Sherlock was smirking faintly. "Sherlock, did I mention money?"

"No, you simply implied you don't work for free. Mycroft is the one who brought up money." His smirk broadened a bit on seeing his brother grow steadily more uncomfortable.

John gave a little nonchalant shrug. "There you go; I never said 'money' – you did."

It was patiently obvious that this encounter was not going according to Mycroft's plans. The older Holmes cleared his throat and straightened his already impeccable posture. "Then –"

"What do I want?" John interrupted. "Simple. A really good friend of mine works for the UCL Institute of Archaeology. They've got a new site on the banks of the Thames, just outside MI6 HQ. Right now, she's being forced to work around the tide, because MI6 keeps stalling the permits for a cofferdam around the dig."

"And you wish the delays to cease," it wasn't a question.

John nodded. "That site's important to Mary. And since this is the first time in more than ten years we've been in the same city at the same time for more than just a day or two, it would make my life a lot easier if she could get on something approaching a regular schedule."

"Do you realize the danger inherent in this game you're attempting to play?" Mycroft asked, his voice carrying thinly-veiled threats alongside a dash of amusement.

John grinned. "That's what makes it fun."

"You're mad."

"Could be," he agreed, then glanced at Sherlock. The younger Holmes was outright smirking now and not even attempting to hide it. "I do live with Sherlock, after all – a little madness is in the job description, don't you think?" The line, still wrapped haphazardly around his shoulders, shivered in amusement.

Had Mycroft been less self-contained, the question might have startled a laugh out of him. As it was, the man simply gave vent to a tight smile. "Consider it done," he said, then held out his hand.

John retrieved the stick from the breast pocket of his blue-checked flannel and handed it over. "Joe Harrison had it – West's fiancée's brother. Just in case you were, you know, curious."

As Mycroft's hand wrapped around the stick, a small – nearly unnoticeable – fragment of tension faded from the furrows in his forehead. "Noted. He shall be… dealt with."

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July 8, 1990

Forty-five minutes after leaving home, Mary had paid for their tickets into London while John'd hunted down something that vaguely resembled breakfast, and they were settling themselves into a pair of seats. "Your dad still giving you a hard time about missing church?" Mary asked, picking at her bacon-and-egg sandwich while the train pulled away from the station.

John shook his head, washing down the last bite of his own sandwich with a swallow of hot tea.
"Nah. Mum talked to him, said it was my choice. Harry's angry with me – she's still gotta go with him." John's mother was a devout atheist, but his dad was a strong supporter of C. of E. and had endeavored to pass his beliefs along to his children with little to no success.

"She'll get over it," Mary replied.

"Maybe," John reluctantly agreed. "You don't know her, though. Last time she was this angry –"

"She hid a dead frog under your mattress," Mary interrupted. "Yes, I recall."

John wrinkled his nose at the memory. "By the time I found it, it had gone all slimy."

"Yeah," Mary said, only a little mocking. "But aren't frogs generally slimy to begin with?"

"You know what I meant!" he protested, elbowing her.

She giggled and nodded. "Yeah, I do." They sat in comfortable silence for a while. Then Mary asked, "You gonna ask Ajay about what you told me?"

John nodded. "That's the plan. It's… Really, really weird."

" Weird like when you tried the bridge or weird like when Ajay first showed up?"

"Neither. It's like she's crying, and has been since Monday."

Mary brushed a loose lock of hair behind her ear and tightened the elastic holding her ponytail. "You said that before, but I don't really get it."

"Ever been in the house when someone else is sad, even though you're not?"

She quirked an eyebrow at him. "Have you met my dad?"

"Point," John sighed – as long as he or Mary could remember, Mr. Morstan had been chronically depressed about the loss of his wife when Mary had still been a baby. "But it's like that; like being in the room next to Harry when she had chickenpox and was so miserable, only…"

"Only what?" John frowned and looked away. Mary laid a hand on his shoulder. "Only what, Johnny?"

"The only thing I can really compare it to is that it's like two summers ago, only this time, I'm fine, and the person crying for help isn't bleeding." John had to force the comparison out; his mind flooded with memories of that wet ditch, the jagged ends of Mary's tibia and fibula poking through her skin, too deep in his own shock of a broken humerus to notice it immediately, quiet noise of rushing air that would have been screams if any volume had been possible, underscored by birdsong and sunshine and gurgling stream.

Mary wrapped her arm around John's shoulder. She remembered the magic failing, she remembered falling, but she didn't remember anything after that until she woke from the anesthetic the next day with surgical pins holding her leg bones together. She forced his face to look at her. With her left hand still cupping his jaw, she said, "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

John nodded and took a deep breath. "I know," he said, pulling her hand from his face and holding it. "I know," he repeated, his voice barely audible. "But I still dream about it sometimes."

"I just wish I could remember. It's unnerving, having a full twenty-four hours just missing from my memory."
John let out a small laugh and let go of Mary's hand. She allowed him to shrug her arm off his shoulders, too. "Hell, Mary, not everyone can remember everything they've ever said, done, and experienced since they were three bloody years old!"

Mary huffed. "If I knew how to forget things, I don't think I would. I can't quite wrap my head around the fact that you can. So, excuse me for being a little weird."

"One of these days, your head's gonna explode from the sheer amount of memories you store up there," he lightly flicked her forehead.

April 18, 2011

John mumbled something that he wasn't even sure what it was supposed to mean. He did manage to convey the indignant irritation, however, and whatever had been poking rudely into his right shoulder went away. Good. Sleep more.

An impatient huff of air puffed into existence at a distance John's not-quite-conscious mind identified as 'within the room, but not a threat – sleep is still on'. The insistent prodding returned.

Peeling one eye open, it took several moments for his optic nerve to check in with his brain and inform him that he was currently staring at a drape of pillowcase. "John!" Sherlock's voice jarred his contemplation of the green-and-blue stripes.

Slowly – mainly because he hadn't had near enough caffeine for rational thought as yet, but also partially because some part of himself recognized that irritating Sherlock wasn't necessarily a bad idea – John stretched and dislodged the pillow from off his head. "Coffee?" He blearily blinked at his flatmate, though just why said flatmate was holding the handle of a broom was anybody's guess. A couple of more neurons came online and actual thought kicked in. Oh, yeah. Last time he tried to wake me, didn't I wind up blacking his eye?

"Coffee?" Sherlock repeated the word as though John had been speaking an obscure dialect of Maori. John mentally reviewed the syllables he'd uttered, just to make sure he'd not actually said it in Pashto… or Farsi, or Arabic, or any of the other half-dozen languages in which he knew that particular word. The younger man blinked for a moment. "I suppose, if you must," he made a grand gesture. "However, can it wait?"

John yawned, then scrubbed a hand across his face. "You want something?"

Sherlock held up a small glass bottle with an eyedropper stopper. The liquid in the bottle was a clear, dark green. "One month, you said."

Another yawn forced its way out of John before he could reply, swiftly followed by a rolling stretch that began in his shoulders and ended with his toes. "Coffee," he demanded, once it had finished. To his surprise, there actually was coffee ready by the time he finished getting dressed. John helped himself to a mug and one of the sweet rolls Mrs. Hudson had brought up the day before. "There any particular reason, you couldn't wait for me to wake up at my normal time?"

"It's been a month," Sherlock replied, as though that explained everything.

_Hell, it probably does explain everything, at least in his mind._ John drained his mug, then refilled it and joined Sherlock at the table. "One drop in each eye. I've been told it stings a bit, but keep your eyes closed for a good ten seconds before you open them again."
Before John could blink, Sherlock undid the stopper on the bottle, and administered the othersight liquid. With his eyes closed, he re-stoppered the bottle, then sat it gently on the table. "Doesn't sting. It's more of an odd tingling sensation. It reminds me of the ophthalmic analgesic used for eye injuries..." Sherlock opened his eyes and any further communication ceased.

John smirked a little and focused on finishing his breakfast. He knew what Sherlock was seeing as the younger man's enthralled gaze drifted from point to point around the room: The muted yellowish-green glow of wood, the paler ghost of the same color coming from plastics, the rainbow of lines imbedded in the walls like a net for the various setspells guarding the flat, and his own coruscating aura of blue and yellow threaded through with the glittery black of a night's sky.

It was nearly an hour and a half before Sherlock said anything. When he finally spoke, John was reading the paper in the comfort of his arm chair. A whispered, "Fascinating," came from the kitchen. Shortly thereafter, Sherlock joined John in the living room.

Another flood of questions managed to waste the majority of the day. Two nights later, John went upstairs to get ready for bed and found a five-pound bag of Haribo Cola Bottles sitting on his pillow.

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July 8, 1990

A chain of bells jangled as John pulled open the door to Ajay's place. "That you, Mary? John?" Ajay's voice echoed through the cluttered mess of stacked boxes and haphazardly-distributed empty shelving units.

"Yeah!" John called back. "Where are you?"

"Back by the loo." There was a sizzle-pop noise and the overhead lights flickered. "God damn it!"

Mary and John exchanged a look, then hurried through the mess. They found Ajay exactly where he'd said, standing just outside the short corridor that separated his soon-to-be office from the downstairs loo. He was sucking on the first two fingers of his right hand and glaring at the wall sconce. The jagged remains of a blown lightbulb jutted up from the socket. "You alright?" Mary asked.

Ajay nodded and withdrew the fingers from his mouth. "Yeah – I'm fine. Ruddy bulb snapped off in
my hand." He had a small cut across the mid-digit of his index finger and a quickly-rising blister of a small burn on the pad of the middle one.

Mary tutted at him, then ducked around him and retrieved the first-aid kit from under the loo sink. John just shook his head. "You really need to see about hiring someone sooner rather than later, Ajay." He reached up and gingerly unscrewed the remains of the bulb from the socket, then stooped down and picked up the undamaged half-bulb that had landed on the carpet-runner of the hallway.

Ajay nodded in agreement. "I know, I know," he said as Mary took his injured hand and applied a dab of antibacterial ointment to the cut, followed by a pair of sticking plasters. "I've got a couple of ads out, but haven't heard back yet." While Mary returned the kit to its place under the sink, Ajay let out a little helpless laugh. "I wonder if I could get away with candles? Would suit the ambience, I think."

John gave a 'hell-if-I-know' shrug, but Mary sighed. "Fire code won't permit it, Ajay. You could probably get away with a few displays, like restaurants do, but not as the only source of lighting."

Ajay sighed. "Yeah, I know. Still – it's nice to dream about."

Further conversation was interrupted by the sound of the door bells. A hesitant female voice called out, "Hello?"

"We're not open!" Ajay shouted, but John's curiosity had him quickly dodging back around the collected mess. Ajay sighed again and looked at Mary. "You really need a leash for him, don't you?"

Mary snickered. "Probably, but that would give people the wrong idea, don't you think?"

John skidded to a halt next to a pile of boxes sporting 'books' labels. A girl about his and Mary's age, wearing a pretty summer dress all done up in white with tiny polka-dots of fruit and a pair of heeled sandals, stood just inside the door. Her strawberry-blonde hair was extremely curly, and the only attempt to tame it was a small barrette holding it back from her face on either side. John smiled. "Hi. Can I help you?"

"Oh, I hope so – can I use your phone?" she asked, rummaging in her purse.

John quickly ran a hand through his hair. Clearing his throat, he said – in a half-octave lower than normal – "Sorry. It hasn't been connected yet. Did you need a cab?"

Mary and Ajay arrived in time to hear this and Mary rolled her eyes. "There's a phone box at the corner," she volunteered. Ajay had to physically cover his mouth to keep from laughing at the glare John leveled at Mary for her unasked-for interruption.

The newcomer shook her head. "It's not working, and I don't need a cab. I'm trying to find this address," she held out a scrap of paper. "My boyfriend asked me to meet him there for breakfast, and I'm running late."

John let out a disappointed sigh and faded back among the boxes and shelving units. Mary stepped over to the girl and read the address aloud. "Ah, that's just around the corner," Ajay said. "Go out the door, turn right. At the light, it's another right, and it'll be just across the street on your left."

"Oh, thank you!" the girl gushed, then quickly left.

"Thanks for that," John snarked, idly flipping through the contents of a box.

Mary scowled at him. "Oh, like it's any different from that time you distracted Jerry when he'd finally
gotten up the nerve to ask me out."

John scoffed. "That's different – Jerry Harper's a twat."

"And that girl has a boyfriend already."

"So? They could break up. Jerry's gonna be a twat for the rest of his life."

Ajay pierced the air with a shrill whistle. "Enough, children! I don't sacrifice my Sundays just to hear the two of you bicker about your love-lives. Can we get to work?"

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May 1, 2011

The bus swayed sharply as Sherlock took a right turn a touch too fast. John checked the driver's pulse once more. Still steady. He's going to need to be checked at the A&E, though – Martin hit him altogether too hard. "…Underground was built in 1863," Sherlock said over the loudspeaker. "It was the first public transit system in the world. Today, however, if you wish to get to your destination on time, might I recommend using one of the nineteen thousand taxis registered for service within the greater London area? I'm nearly positive the Tube hasn't been updated since they opened."

A collection of strained laughter punctuated the comment. John glanced at Martin, who was sitting directly behind Sherlock and wriggling. The zip-ties they'd used to restrain him would hold. "Stop that," John said. "You're not going anywhere." Martin had been using the tour buses for the last three years as his own personal hunting ground.

The bus swayed through a left turn, then squealed as the brakes were applied. "And now we're at our destination – New Scotland Yard. Interestingly enough, when the site was selected and construction began in 1888, the headless torso of a woman was discovered. To this day, that woman's identity is still unknown."

Lestrade met them at the bus' door. "Do I even want to know?" he asked, watching John and Sherlock manhandle Martin down the stairs. While Sherlock went off on a detailed description of just how and why they'd helped themselves to a tour bus, Donovan replaced the zip-tie with her handcuffs and took Martin into the building.

A light tap on his shoulder caused John to turn around. A woman – roughly an inch taller than him, with short black hair and large brown eyes – stood on the bottom step of the bus. "Um…" she said, "the driver's waking up."

"Thank you, Miss…?" John followed her back into the bus.


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July 8, 1990

By the time lunch rolled around, they had managed to get most of the shelving units arranged to Ajay's satisfaction. When Cassie Gladwell arrived with a box full of greasy fish and chips and a six-pack of Coca-cola, all three were more than ready to take a break. Conversation meandered from
topic to topic, sticking primarily to sports – Cassie was an avid rugby fan – and politics, before coming to an organically natural conclusion at the same time that only crumbs remained of the meal. Once Cassie had left, with a promise to return around sixish with supper, Ajay, Mary, and John retreated to the tiny two-room flat Ajay had wedged in behind the storage rooms upstairs.

"Okay," Ajay announced, flopping onto his sofa. Mary gracefully lowered herself to a cross-legged position on a massive floor-cushion. John settled himself into the room's only armchair. "What's the main thing to keep in mind with magic?"

"When you really need it to work, it won't," Mary said.

John nodded in agreement, "And that if you try too hard, it won't work either."

"Exactly," Ajay confirmed. "Now, with that in mind, why use magic at all?"

John and Mary winced simultaneously, then exchanged a glance. "You want this one?" Mary asked.

"Sure," John said, knowing she was referring to the fact that he had more practical experience with what he was about to explain. John looked to their teacher. "Magic *likes* being used. More than that, I think it *needs* to be used. And if you don't give it some sort of direction, it'll use *you* however it sees fit."

"Like making a lamb grow pink wool," Mary muttered.

"Or turning the contents of the liquor cabinet's bottles into colored water," John added.

Ajay nodded, but was frowning while he did so. "Yes, magic *likes* and *needs* being used, however, if she doesn't receive directed purpose – essentially, if we don't tell her specifically what we want done with our spells – it's not so much that she does as she likes, but more that she will attempt to provide her mages with what she thinks *they* want. Mary, the lamb incident… You said you were what, ten years old at the time?" Mary nodded. "And that your grandmother had promised you a new jumper for your birthday, right?" She nodded again. "And that – at the time – pink was your favorite color. Right?"

"Yeah," Mary said, drawing the word out. "Oh. I think I see. Magic took a peek inside my head and saw that I'd rather have a pink jumper than the green one I was sure Nan would make for me, so it tried to give me what I wanted by 'dying' that lamb's wool the color I wanted."

"Spot on," Ajay said, then turned to John. "And both of us know how much you hate your mum's drinking, so that particular occurrence doesn't need much in the way of explanations, does it?"

John shook his head. "No, though I wish magic had thought a little harder about it. Harry'n'me got blamed for the missing liquor."

May 30, 2011

Sherlock was off at Bart's; Molly had gotten a particularly interesting corpse in – John thought she'd mentioned situs inversus totalis – and Sherlock couldn't say 'no'. So, John had the flat to himself for a few precious hours. He made himself a sandwich, then kicked back with his laptop. He logged in to his blog, then stared at the blinking cursor for a solid twenty minutes before he began to type.
I'm not particularly sure where to start. It's been a busy month. I suppose I ought to apologize for not having posted much before now, but like I said, it's been a busy month. I'll go into more details later, I promise, but for now I'll just put up a quick run-down of just why I've not updated recently:

On 6 May, Sherlock took a case for a uni student who works down at Speedy's on the weekends. His laptop had melted. The kid called it 'spontaneous laptop combustion' and had only wanted to know if such a thing was possible when he waylaid Sherlock on his way to NSY. Of course, there's no such thing as 'spontaneous laptop combustion', so Sherlock was immediately interested; he texted his enabler over at NSY and told him he'd look into the cold case later. And what started out as a simple question wound up dragging into a solid six days' worth of investigating. I hope to have the full case notes posted either later today or tomorrow.

I'm pretty sure everyone knows, or thinks they do, what happened during the 19th-24th of May. It was in the papers, after all. But what the papers had to say were, to borrow Sherlock's words on the matter, "ridiculous inflammatory speculation devoid of any logical reasoning and dusted with hearsay for the sole purpose of selling papers." Yes, he really does talk like that. It's going to take me a few days to sort out all my notes, but look for another post, say sometime next week, that'll explain what really happened during the Tilly Briggs pleasure cruise.

And I've seen a few rumors about Sherlock stealing a bus in the comments. We didn't steal it. We just borrowed it after the driver was rendered unconscious. That was back on the first. And aside from the whole bus-borrowing thing, it was a pretty straightforward case. The details on it should be up in a day or two, but I want to post the melting laptop one first – that one really is interesting. The only reason I'm even thinking about posting the bus one is because I met a very interesting woman right at the end. We're having our fifth date tonight.

July 8, 1990

Mary had found one of Ajay's collection of journals – not one he'd written, of course, but one written by a mage during the 1950s – and was curled up on her floor cushion happily reading. John leaned against the window sill, eyes watching a projection of the building's memory of a London populated by nearly as many horses as people; the memory was from when the building was newly-completed.

"John?" Ajay's voice interrupted his concentration, and the image dissolved.

"Yeah?" John looked at Ajay.

He jerked his chin to the window. "See anything interesting?"

"Not really. Just enough to be grateful we've moved on from using horses as a primary means of transportation," John smiled.

Ajay chuckled. "Can't say that I disagree." His expression grew more serious. "Mary tells me you've sensed something."
John nodded, then ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah… Yeah, but…” He wasn't sure how to describe it.

"When did you first sense it?" Ajay asked, knowing John well enough that they might wind up taking all day unless he was given some sort of direction.

"Monday evening, just after sunset," John replied. "Thought it might've been Harry, upset over something-or-other, but she was fine. Mum, too."

"Why'd you think it was your sister?"

"Sounded like a girl, a crying girl, in the next room over," he leaned against the wall next to the window. "Could it be a ghost, d'you think?"

"Could be," Ajay allowed.

"But you don't think it is, do you?"

Ajay shook his head. "No, I don't think it is. Been sensing something off myself this last week, and there's never been a ghost powerful enough to be heard thirty-some miles away."

"Then… What is it?"

Ajay leveled an odd look at his student. "That's a good question, John. A very good question."

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**June 19, 2011**

For all that he could get Indian or Italian or Chinese or even Ethiopian food delivered, and three of the four delivered until two in the morning, there wasn't a single listing for anywhere that delivered old fashioned English fare. John sighed and scrubbed a hand across his face. In the past, it hadn't mattered. Either it was Army food – usually that horrible pre-made glop or the swill from any of the canteens of any of the bases in which he'd been stationed – or Harry or his mum had cooked and rendered the question a moot point. *I'm beginning to wish I'd actually sat in on the lessons with Harry*, John thought, trying one last time to coax Google into giving him an address that could deliver a decent lamb roast. *At least long enough to learn how to make Dad's favorite*. He sighed when, after checking the links the search engine had provided, he found nothing even remotely resembling what he was looking for. *Though, if I want to pay roughly twice what I do at Tesco, I can actually have groceries delivered.*

"Regardless of how fiercely you scowl at it, the internet is not going to oblige you by suddenly providing you with whatever it is you're searching for so earnestly," Sherlock's dry irony was not lost on John.

Giving up, John closed his computer. "You know – or seem to know – everything there is to know about London. Care to give me a hand?"

"On what?" Sherlock asked, pausing in his perusal of a thick book which lacked any identifying markings on its plain brown leather cover.

"Know anywhere that delivers English food? Specifically, a place that'll do justice to lamb roast?" Sherlock's eyes unfocused for a moment, then he shook his head. "No… None that will deliver, not
without exorbitant unofficial fees. However, I know a number of restaurants that fit the criteria and allow takeaway orders." He glanced at his mobile. "It's only half nine in the morning. Why worry about supper this early in the day?"

John ran a hand through his hair, causing it to stick up in disorganized spikes. "Lamb was Dad's favorite, especially if paired with mashed turnips and carrots."

Sherlock's eyebrows twitched, and when the motion finished, one was ever-so-slightly higher than the other. "And…?"

"He died ten years ago today," John replied. "Car wreck," he clarified on seeing the eyebrow inch a little closer to the younger man's hairline. "Blew a tire going around a sharp corner and lost control. The pickup truck flipped eight times before it landed upside-down in Red Pond."

"Sentiment," Sherlock said, his tone caught somewhere between 'dismissive' and 'disappointed'.

"It's not a dirty word, you know," John replied, unable to keep his temper from sparking.

"That would, of course, depend entirely upon your point of view," the detective closed his book with a snap. "I never did understand all the fuss with marking anniversarial dates, regardless of the event memorialized."

"Yes, well, I'll keep that in mind when your birthday rolls around."

"Please do," Sherlock seemed to have missed the sarcasm in John's voice. "Though you will undoubtedly be the only one to actually follow my wish that my birthday go unremarked."

*Mental note: Find out when Sherlock's birthday is, then plan a surprise party for him. John took care not to let any echo of his thoughts show on his face. "Noted. But you were saying about places that'll do takeaway?"

Sherlock rattled off a list of six restaurants in the immediate vicinity that would suit both John's stated desire for roast lamb and his constant puzzling worry about money then returned to his book. While John pondered the list, looking up the restaurants online and finding the earliest any of them opened was eleven, the leyline below Baker Street poked up through the floor.

Over the course of the past few months, the leyline's visual representation had slowly been mutating and shifting from a simple tentacle-like tendril into a vaguely humanoid figure; the antithesis of a shadow, formed of light and given a three-dimensional shape. The most recognizably-human portions of it were also the first to have reshaped themselves – the 'line's hands – and were also the most-developed portions of the 'line's 'anatomy'. She had long, narrow hands, with equally long and narrow fingers, well-shaped and, had she not been invisible to anyone not utilizing othersight, might have done well as a hand model for lotion commercials. The rest of the leyline's figure was vague, but every time she showed, John noticed a little more detail.

*Morning, John greeted her. She waved at him, then settled herself next to him on the sofa. Her latest 'detail' was a subtle redefining of the general shape of her figure. John now readily thought of the leyline's representation as 'her' or 'she' rather than 'it', and her figure had shifted to accommodate his ideal, from the straight childlike androgynous lines of 'humanoid' to a recognizably feminine outline, though still 'blurry' on detail. She maintained her connection to the main 'line by means of a 'tail' – a thin, cordlike connection that ran from her lower back down through the floor to the 'line itself.

She wrapped one arm around John's shoulders, humming in content, then used her other hand to tap the piece of paper on which John had jotted down Sherlock's suggestions. The mental image of a
question mark surfaced in his mind. I want to see if I can do a proper Dumb Supper spell. All my previous attempts failed, for one reason or another. As the name might suggest, a Dumb Supper spell had to be completed in silence. In the ten years since his father's death, he'd only had the opportunity to attempt the spell twice, but the first time was interrupted by a phone call from his sister, and the second by the arrival of a half-dozen critically wounded soldiers caught by an IED.

She tapped the paper again, then pointed to herself. Her meaning was clear – why not ask me?

John shrugged. Didn't think you'd really know what I was looking for.

She let out an irritated buzz, then thwacked the back of his head, depositing an image of her current form on the right side of an equals sign, with an image of a map of London on the left.

_Hey! Don't hit me! You're magic, for crying out loud. How was I supposed to know you'd be aware of restaurants in the area?

The equals sign image resurfaged in his mind. John was pretty sure that the 'line would have glared at him, had she a defined face.

Okay, okay – I give up! Which restaurant should I pick?

She purred, then tapped the fourth one on the list.

_Thanks_, he thought at her, then looked up their phone number. _Now all I need to do is figure out how to get Sherlock out of the house for a bit this evening._

A tingle of smug amusement shivered through the arm wrapped around John's shoulders. She pointed to herself.

Leave that to you, eh? What d'you plan on doing? Or should I not ask?

She reached up and tapped his brow. The image of a steaming cup of perfectly-brewed tea flashed into his mind.

_That does sound good_, he thought at her, climbing to his feet and heading to the kitchen. _But I don't see how tea is going to get Sherlock out of the flat for my supper with Dad._ He filled the kettle and switched it on.

The smug amusement ratcheted up a notch. She tapped his head again, leaving an image of chocolate biscuits behind.

Without realizing exactly what he was doing, John rummaged around in the cupboards until he located the package of chocolate biscuits he'd purchased on his last run to the shops. Two were removed before he replaced the package. He nibbled on one while waiting for the kettle to boil.

A buzzing, humming vibration filled the air around her. It took a moment for John to realize she was laughing at him. _What?_ he asked, honestly puzzled.

She tapped his forehead again, this time pulling up his memories of events just transpired. Tap, tea. Tap, biscuits.

Understanding dawned. _You can do that to anyone?_

She nodded.

John grinned. _Excellent._
Much later, after Sherlock had inexplicably developed the urge to go bother Molly at work, John was just settling into the rhythm of the spell, when his phone shrilled, shattering it. Unlike most spells, a Dumb Supper spell could only be attempted at very specific times, and if broken before it was fully cast, it couldn't be attempted a second time for that same date.

It was a text from Sherlock.

John sighed and typed a reply. He glanced over his shoulder at the leyline. "You couldn't make him forget his phone?"

She shrugged, and John got the distinct impression that it was his fault for not telling her precisely what he wanted. He hit 'send'. "Better luck next year, I suppose," he muttered, then plopped down and ate his dinner.

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*July 8, 1990*

The statue was nearly a full four feet high, made of bronze, and cast in the figure of Ida. As a work of art, it was beautiful, with painted jewels and silks, but it still made the hair on the back of John's neck stand up. He didn't like it, not one little bit. Even so, he'd helped Ajay move it the weekend before, after Ajay had found it at a little junk shop over near his old flat.

"What're we doing here?" John asked, watching Ajay move around the small, windowless room that took up but a small portion of the shop's basement, lighting candles and oil-lamps.

Ajay grinned at him. "We want to know what's going on, don't we?"

John nodded. "Yeah, but –"

"Lovely Lady Ida will be able to help us with that."

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*July 31, 2011*

It was a brightly beautiful day. Strips and swaths of eye-stabbingly brilliant blue formed a chaotic patchwork of connections around a motley collection of high-altitude feathery clouds and lower bursts of popcorn-style ones. A light breeze swept through the air, just stiff enough to keep the air fresh without being irritating in its own right. The only downside to the weather was that the temperature was unseasonably chilly; it felt far more like late October than mid-summer.

Lestrade led John and Sherlock past the police tape and towards a silver car parked at an odd angle on a gravelly spit of land. "There was a plane crash in Düsseldorf yesterday. Everyone dead," Lestrade said.

"Suspected terrorist bomb," Sherlock interjected, derailing Lestrade's thread of conversation. "We do watch the news."

"He said 'boring' and changed the channel," John clarified Sherlock's point as the trio arrived at the car. The lid to the boot was open, revealing a dead man within.

Lestrade gave a little 'you're not going to believe this' nod of his head. "Well, according to the flight
details, this man was checked in on board. Inside his coat, he's got a stub from his boarding pass, napkins from the flight, even one of those special biscuits.” He thumbed through a collection of evidence baggies containing the items he'd mentioned. "Here's his passport," he paused at it and gave the bag a little jiggle, "stamped in Berlin Airport. So this man should have died in a plane crash in Germany yesterday, but instead he's in a car boot in Southwark." All while Lestrade had been speaking. Sherlock had been examining the contents of the car boot and the dead body it contained. "Any ideas?” Lestrade asked.

"Eight, so far," Sherlock replied, using his magnifying glass to get a closer look at the man's hands. A small frown flitted across his expression as he straightened up. "Okay, four ideas."

"What about you?” Lestrade asked, sotto voice, to John.

John shrugged. "Not my area," he replied, his voice equally quiet.

Sherlock overheard the soft aside and knew that Lestrade had asked if this was magical in any way, to which John had indicated it wasn't. He turned around and looked at the passport and ticket stub in Lestrade's hands, then looked up at the sky. "Maybe two ideas," he said, watching a passenger jet pass overhead.

Sherlock spent the majority of the day pursuing both possibilities he'd thought of, only to be met with nothing but dead ends. A third idea dawned on him at some point during the night, but John was pretty sure Sherlock was reaching. He settled himself at the desk in the living room and logged in to his blog, then began typing.

Sherlock Holmes Baffled

The body of a 45 year old man was found in a car on wasteland in Surrey yesterday.

"No, no, no!” Sherlock interrupted him, peering over his shoulder. "Don't mention the unsolved ones!”

John paused and looked up at his flatmate. Said flatmate was wearing a pair of safety glasses, a pair of leather work-gloves, and his second-best dressing gown over his black button-down and trousers. In one hand, he held an Erlenmeyer flask containing green liquid, and in the other was a small blowtorch. "People want to know you're human," John said, ignoring Sherlock's odd costume – it was nothing new, after all.

"Why?"

"'Cause they're interested," John replied, returning the majority of his attention to his blog post.

"No they're not," Sherlock said, disbelievingly, then immediately amended it with, "Why are they?"

John smirked a little at his laptop. "Look at that," he said, nodding to his hit-counter. "One thousand, eight hundred, and ninety-five."

"Sorry, what?” Sherlock asked, taking off the safety glasses to more clearly look at what John was seeing.

John looked back at Sherlock. "I reset that counter last night. This blog has had nearly two thousand
hits in the last eight hours. This is your living, Sherlock – not two hundred and forty types of tobacco ash."

"Two hundred and forty-three," Sherlock corrected, replacing his glasses and punctuating his comment by firing up the blowtorch.

Shaking his head a little, John returned to his typing.

**Sherlock Holmes Baffled**

The body of a 45 year old man was found in a car on wasteland in Surrey yesterday.

I genuinely never though I'd see the day. Sherlock is BAFFLED! He hasn't got a clue! He's flummoxed! He's bamboozled!

He's stuck.

As you know, there was a plane crash the other day, just outside Dusseldorf. Everyone died. Obviously, it's a real tragedy but there's something very strange about one of the passengers.

He was found in a car boot in Surrey!

According to the flight details, he was checked on board. They found the stub of his boarding pass and napkins etc on his body. His passport has been stamped in Berlin Airport. He should have died in the plane crash. But he didn't.

He was in a car boot. In Surrey.

Obviously, I haven't got a clue but neither does Sherlock. He just can't work it out. It's actually and literally impossible.

Any suggestions, feel free to leave them below. I'll be sure to pass them ALL on :)

He hit 'post', then sat back and waited. He didn't have to wait long. His computer let out two chimes in quick succession. Grinning, John leaned forward and read the first comments.

**Could it be a case of quantum tunneling?**  
C Melas 01 August 10:12

Did I leave my wallet at your flat two days ago? I can't find it anywhere! As to the case, well... I don't have any ideas. Maybe the man was only supposed to be on the flight? And all the records and such are wrong? After United lost my luggage by sending it to *Rome* that time I went to Sydney, I have little faith in the truthfulness of airlines.

MaryMaryQuiteContrary 01 August 10:12

He was halfway through Mary's post when his computer chimed again. And again. He quickly disabled the 'alert' option and refreshed the page.

**Could it be a case of quantum tunneling?**  
ETA: I got first post! Fistpump!
John let out a little chuckle at Chris's enthusiasm, then frowned at one of the new comments.

This was why you had to cancel our lunch date? For a dead body in a boot?
Natalie Howe 01 August 10:13

He sighed to himself, then fished his phone out of his pocket. He pulled up Natalie's number and composed a text-reply to her message. Yes, this was why I cancelled our date. Not every case can be rescheduled. Dates can. He hit 'send'. It took only three minutes before a reply came back.

I don't think this is working out. Don't call me again.

Disappointment flashed through John, followed swiftly by a giddy sense of relief – he agreed, his relationship with Natalie wasn't going anywhere. Then it all was superseded by a sudden realization. Did I just get dumped via text-message?

July 8, 1990

"So, what's a power-sink?" Mary asked, looking at the page of haphazard notes Ajay had penned down during his 'conversation' with Ida.

"What's it sound like?" Ajay replied, rubbing lightly at his temples.

"Like something more suited to being hooked up to a computer mainframe than something attached to why John's been hearing the leylines crying," Mary replied, glancing over at her best friend.

John was poking through the collection of handwritten tomes stacked on the shelves that separated Ajay's living room from his bedroom. "I'm with Mary on that one," he agreed.

Ajay gave a sideways shrug. "You're not far off – it's what is, in essence, a magic-battery. Ever have a day when you're overflowing with energy? So much so that you have trouble focusing on anything?"

"Yeah," John and Mary answered simultaneously.

"Basically, a power-sink's designed for those kinds of days. It's supposed to let you drain off the extra energy, for use on one of those opposite kind of days, the kind where you can't seem to wake up at all, no matter how much tea or coffee you drink."

"If that's the case, then why'd the leylines even care that some mage out there was making one?" John asked, running a hand through his hair.

"Because," Ajay said, springing to his feet and heading for the small fridge in the corner, "they're not designed for anything but one person's use."

"So, you're saying that if I made one, John couldn't use the energy from it?" Mary asked.

Ajay grabbed the small pitcher of lemonade he always kept on hand. "Exactly. You couldn't use his, he couldn't use yours, and I couldn't use either of yours. Only the mage who fills a power-sink can use the energy drained into it."

Mary blinked at him, but John could easily see the issue. "I'm starting to see how this could be a
problem," he said. Mary looked at him. "Think about it, Mary – only the mage who fills a power-
sink can use the energy it contains. What would happen if a mage drained a leyline into a power-
sink?"

"He'd be the only one able to use all that energy," Mary said. "Why would anyone do that, though?"

Ajay poured himself a glass of lemonade, then retuned the pitcher to the fridge. "A misinterpretation
of the guardian legends, I would imagine," he said, folding himself onto the end of his sofa, his feet
tucked under him and between the cushions. At the very blank looks leveled in his direction by his
students, he clarified, "Ever notice how many fairytales are about a 'chosen hero'?"

"Yeah, but you've ripped apart fairytales so often that, to be honest, I've simply quit listening," Mary
admitted, looking unrepentant for that fact. "You almost destroyed my love of Disney flicks."

"I don't have a clue what you're talking about," John said, abandoning the bookshelf to sit at the
opposite end of the sofa. Mary was still sprawled on her floor cushion. "Most of the fairytales I
remember are all about the handsome prince rescuing the damsel in distress. Or about beautiful girls
outwitting evil little gnome-like creatures."

"Odysseus? Hercules? Jason? Any of those ringing a bell or two?" Ajay retorted.

"Harry'd smack you into next week for calling Greek myths 'fairytales'," John said.

Ajay shrugged, idly worrying the Band-Aid wrapped around his middle finger with the nail on his
first. "Don't care," he said. "Personally, I never understood why we call the fairytales of other
cultures 'myths', not when they all boil down to the same thing." He took a drink of his lemonade.
"Anyway, lemme explain about guardians, then you'll be able to see for yourself why I brought up
myths and fairytales. Every leyline that's in close proximity to people has a tendency to choose a
'favorite' mage. One mage for whom she won't arbitrarily decide to not work for no good reason.
The trade-off is that, since the leyline's magic won't fail, it'll get used far more often, which makes the
leyline happy. For the mage, they're guaranteed a source of magic that won't fail, but only when
they're working with energies from their own leyline. If the guardian for the leyline under
Manchester goes on vacation to, say New York or some such, then any magic they perform there
will be under the same will-it-won't-it rules as anyone else. With me so far?"

The teenagers nodded.

"Good," Ajay took another drink. "Okay, now leyline magic tends to be tricky under the best of
circumstances. I've told you this before. However, for a guardian, it's almost easier than using their
own energy."

"What's the downside to all this?" John asked, interrupting. He ignored the irritated look on his
teacher's face. "I mean, it sounds too good to be true – a nearly unlimited supply of energy, spells
that won't fail... What's the drawback?"

The irritation on Ajay's face evaporated. "There are a couple. Firstly, magic picks who she wants.
She can't be swayed, bargained-with, or bribed. It's all her decision. Secondly, a guardian winds up
having some... odd characteristics."

"How so?" Mary asked.

"The constant use of leyline energy tends to... well, bleach a person. Their hair and eyes, if exposed
to it enough, will eventually fade to white and the faintest possible color, respectively; though their
skin generally remains unaffected. Only guardian I ever met had snow-white hair and eyes that were
almost pastel yellow – she'd been born with black hair and brown eyes," a fond smile flashed across his face. "With her Nubian skin, she made a very handsome and striking figure, even at close to eighty years old."

"Doesn't sound too bad," John commented, ignoring with practiced ease the aside on the woman Ajay'd known. "What else?"

"They can't ignore othersight. They wind up seeing magical energies all the time, with no way to shut it off," Ajay took another drink of his lemonade. "They also wind up with a need to perform enduring magics. Spells that last. All together, it usually gives the mage in question a bit of a dodgy reputation."

"I suppose I can see why that might be," John said, remembering the innumerable number of childhood psychiatrists his parents had dragged him to before he'd learned how to tell them what they wanted to hear. It hadn't been until the previous summer, shortly after meeting Ajay, that he'd learned to 'turn off' his othersight.

Mary let out a humming noise. "I think I get it. This Moran fellow – he's trying to force the London leyline system into picking him as a guardian by default, isn't he?"

Ajay nodded. "Exactly. And nobody – not even magic – likes having their choices dictated to them."

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August 13, 2011

"You know I don't mean anything when I do that, right?" Greg said, handing John a glass of bitter.

John shrugged and plopped onto the barstool next to the DI. "You do realize, don't you, that when you're looking for some bit of evidence he's absconded with, you could just phone me for it. You don't need to keep staging these 'drugs busts'. It's really not fair."

"Fair?" Greg blinked at him.

John nodded. "Fair," he repeated. "You and I both know that 'once an addict, always an addict', but – aside from the smoking, which he seems to think I don't know about – he's been clean as long as I've known him."

"You two met back in January, right?"

John nodded again and sipped at his drink. "End of, but yeah."

"He'd just gotten outta the last rehab clinic just before you met, then. Round about, oh, the fourteenth or fifteenth or so. Can't remember the exact day." Greg paused to take a drink of his own beverage. "That last run was after six months of cocaine. IV use. He'd lasted all of eight months clean before starting up again. It's a never-ending cycle with him. He's clean for the better part of a year, then he hits a lull and gets bored and tries something new for a few months, winding up with ODs at least twice, then his brother wrestles him into rehab and it starts all over again. Longest stretch he was clean since I met him has been eleven months." He sighed and traced a finger lightly around the rim of his glass. Looking up at John, he stilled. "You didn't know?"

John shook his head. "Oddly, the fact that he can go several days in a row without speaking was something he mentioned, but the drugs? No. He never mentioned it. Wasn't until back in April, when you-all invaded the flat for the first time, was the first I'd ever heard about it." He took a long pull off
his glass. "So, not stopping anytime soon, then?" he asked it in a resigned tone.

"I will if he can make it a whole year," Greg agreed. "Think he might actually do it this time. Sure, he's had flatmates before, but you're the first one who's lasted longer than a couple of weeks, and none of the rest were in any way medically-trained. You'll be able to spot using, if not immediately, then in enough time to maybe keep his arse outta hospital for a change."

John quirked an eyebrow. "Why wouldn't I notice immediately?"

Greg frowned at him. "Not to be disparaging your abilities none, mate, but Sherlock's a tricky bastard. When I met him, he'd been staying with his brother for a bit, and managing to hide a heroin habit from him. And you know what his brother's like."

"Yeah," John agreed, "just like Sherlock, only not nearly so personable."

Greg let out a laugh. "God, that's something, isn't it? That there's someone less likable than Sherlock out there."

John just shook his head. "Don't know about that. I actually consider Sherlock a friend, you know. Even when he's in a mood."

"Like today?"

"I don't know what's worse – his frustration with not finding the solution to this case, or his constant bitching about 'that hat'," John chuckled a little, even though it wasn't particularly funny. Sherlock in a mood was enough to make the most patient and understanding person scream in frustration before committing homicide.

Greg echoed the laugh with a bit more enthusiasm than was necessary, grateful for the change of subject. "God, the poncy git. I'm sure he's just thrilled about all the photos in the papers!" He drained the remnants of his current glass and flagged the bartender for another. "Could be worse, I suppose," his laughter faded into an amused grin.

John wasn't altogether certain he really wanted to know what Greg was thinking. "You don't live with 'im, mate – it can't be bloody worse."

"Don't know how you do it," Greg replied. "He crashed on my sofa about four years ago. Twelve hours was my limit; two minutes was Donna's." He chuckled again at whatever his mind was showing him. "Weirdly enough, Rosie an' Jack get along with 'im."

"Rosie's what, fourteen?" John asked, poking his own memory for details on Lestrade's kids.

Greg nodded. "Yeah," he said, "an' Jack's eleven."

"There you go, then," John said, as though that actually meant anything to the off-duty DI.

"Huh?"

"Rosie thinks he's cute, and Jack's got a case of hero-worship. Typical kids."

Greg let out a snort of amusement. "Pro'ly helps he's all of eleven most days himself."

John laughed. "God! You're right!"

Grinning, Greg lifted his new glass of ale to his mouth. "Good then," he said, then took a swig. "What am I right about?"
"It could be worse. Can you imagine what he was really like at eleven?"

Greg considered this for several long seconds. "I'm gonna find his mum an' send that woman a medal." Their paired laughter was enough to garner odd looks from almost everyone else in the pub. After the laughter finally faded away, Greg drained the last of his current glass, then looked at his watch. "Ay! That the time?"

John looked at his own. "Yeah, it's coming up on eleven."

"Promised Donna I'd be home by now – gotta run, John." He laid some cash on the table and pushed himself to his feet.

"See you later," John said. I'll finish this, then hope Sherlock's managed to calm down some by the time I get home. He kept an eye on Greg long enough to see the man hail a taxi, then returned his attention to the half-empty pint of bitter in front of him.

"Hi," a new voice intruded on his solitude.

John looked up and saw a pretty brunette sliding into the seat Greg had just vacated. "Hi…?"

She smiled at him. "I'm Fiona Kavanagh," she slid a new glass of bitter across the table, keeping her own beverage – something alarmingly blue and garnished with enough fruit to stave off scurvy for a solid month – in her other hand. "You have a name, cutie?"

His lingering irritation at Sherlock faded from his mind. "John," he replied. "John Watson."

July 8, 1990

"What're we going to do about it?" John asked, helping himself to some of Ajay's lemonade.

"'We'?"] Ajay lifted an eyebrow at the eighteen year old.

John returned the gesture, chugging half a glass of lemonade in one go. "Yeah," he said, wiping off his mouth. "We. We can't just let this go on."

Ajay's expression shifted until it resembled the one used most often by adults attempting to instill younglings with healthy fear, be it of their deity-of-choice, the law, or death itself. "'We' will do nothing! You will head on home with Mary this evening and I will deal with it."

"How?" Mary asked, attempting to diffuse the potential flare-up between John and Ajay – both men were far too stubborn for their own good, and John had never been particularly good at holding his temper.

Ajay and John both startled a little and looked at her. John blinked, his expression trying to tell her that her interruption wasn't appreciated. Ajay forcibly released some of the tension that had built up in his shoulders. "Gonna call on Annie, to be honest."

John scoffed; he'd met Annabel Holt once, not long after Ajay'd walked into his and Mary's lives, and John simply couldn't imagine what possible use the frail-looking ancient crone could be in this type of situation.

Ajay returned his glare to John. "Don't," he said, holding his hand up in the universal 'stop' gesture. "She's a helluva lot stronger than she seems."
"She's half-blind!" John protested.

"And?" When John simply stared incredulously at him, Ajay shook his head. Mary could easily see the 'save me from stupid kids who think they know better' in the movement – she'd seen it often enough on her dad's face – but knew it slipped right past John. Ajay sighed. "Seeing or not seeing normally isn't a problem, Johnny," he purposefully used the hated nickname. "Which you'd know, if you stopped for half a second and thought about it. D'you need your eyes to see auroras and leylines? Or can you 'see' them, even if your eyelids are closed?"

John's shoulders slumped, admitting defeat. Ajay looked away, but even though he missed it, Mary caught the quick flash of 'planning something' surface in her friend's eyes before he shoved it down and hid it behind a disappointed expression.

September 14, 2011

"John."

"Lmme lone," John pulled his pillow tighter over his head.

"John!"

"Sleep."

"It's seven-thirty, John. I've a question."

"Go 'way, Sh'lock."

"You've had a solid nine hours' worth of sleep; one more than the so-called experts deem necessary, and a full five more than personal experience indicates as the true level of need. Wake up."

"One of these days, I'm gonna put lorazepam in your tea, Sherlock," John unwillingly pulled his pillow off his head to glare at his flatmate, "just so I can sleep until I'm done sleeping."

A faint thudding noise came from downstairs, immediately followed by Mrs. Hudson's voice, "Boys! You've got another one!"

"Are you wearing a sheet?" John asked. Sherlock grinned, then all but sprinted for the door, without bothering to answer the question. John sighed. Might as well get dressed. Tentatively, he climbed out of bed. The explosive agony of his knee had faded during the night. Relieved, he walked over to his wardrobe and quickly dressed. Don't know for sure, but I'm guessing that the nerve damage is only mitigated while I'm in range of London. Well, of the leylines here, at any rate. He'd spent the day before in an attempt to meet up in Dublin with some of his army buddies on home for leave; he'd only managed to get halfway there before his knee gave out and the sheer agony of it had him returning home to the promised relief of his bottle of oxycodone.

By the time he'd dressed and ventured downstairs, Sherlock – still wrapped up in a sheet – had their latest client settled on one of the desk chairs. John flopped onto the sofa behind the man. Sherlock seemed not to notice, but John knew better. "Tell us from the start. Don't be boring."

Two hours later, John shifted his position in the taxi. "We nearly there?" he asked the driver.

"Yeah, just ahead," the driver replied.
"I'm gonna kill Sherlock one of these days. His knee was aching again, but through the thick haze of prescription-strength painkillers it wasn't as bad as it could have been, and wasn't nearly as bad as it had been the day before. The taxi crested a low rise, and John spotted the CSI techs' van parked on the verge of the road. Off to the left, several techs were working in a roped-off segment of the field, ignoring the lead-colored clouds and their threat of rain. The taxi pulled to a stop next to the van.

A young man – Likely his first real job – wearing a waterproof high-visibility jacket that both contrasted horribly with the lad's ginger hair and lent him an air of 'dressing up in daddy's clothes' hurried over while John rolled down his window. "I need to speak to the DI in charge, please."

"May I ask who you are, sir?" the boy asked.


A confused expression flashed across the kid's face. "One moment, okay?" He turned around and spotted his boss heading towards the car. "Sir, this gentleman says he needs to speak to you."

"Yes," the DI spoke over the boy's last few words, "I know." He strode past the kid. "Sherlock Holmes?"

John climbed out of the car, his knee twinging in protest at the movement. "John Watson," he said to the DI, shaking his hand. "Are you set up for Wi-Fi?"

Ten minutes later, John was hooked into the proper signal, and a Skype call initiated. While the sheet-draped figure of his flatmate disappeared offscreen for a moment, John couldn't help but snark, "You realize this is a tiny bit humiliating?"

"It's okay," Sherlock's voice was a bit tinny with distance. "I'm fine." He quickly reappeared onscreen and the image wobbled as he picked up his laptop. "Now, show me to the stream."

"I didn't really mean for you," John all but sighed, aiming his own laptop at the appropriate area.

"Look," Sherlock argued, "this is a six." The doorbell buzzed, its noise coming through the laptop speakers loud and clear. Sherlock ignored it. "There's no point in my leaving the flat for anything less than a seven – we agreed. Now, go back. Show me the grass."

The young policeman offered to take the laptop as John awkwardly juggled both it and his cane. John shook his head. "When did we agree that?" He aimed the camera at the grass between the body and the stream.

"We agreed it yesterday," Sherlock said. "Stop!" John halted and made an effort to straighten the somewhat cockeyed cant of the computer. "Closer."

John let out a tight breath through his nostrils and flipped the laptop around. "I wasn't even at home yesterday!" After the aborted trip to Dublin, he'd spent most of the rest of the evening at Ajay's before gating home and heading straight to bed, with only a pause in his bathroom long enough to down an oxycodone tablet.

"It's hardly my fault you weren't listening," Sherlock replied. The doorbell sounded once more. "Shut up!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"D'you just carry on talking when I'm away?" John asked, honestly curious.

Sherlock returned his attention to the Skype call. "I don't know," he said. "How often are you
away?" He is extraordinarily lucky I'm not there right now – I think I'd hit him for that. Nah, wouldn't make enough of an impression. John resolved to think on an appropriate revenge at a later time. "Now, show me the car that backfired," Sherlock ordered.

John flipped the laptop around again and aimed it in the right direction. "It's there," he said.

"That's the one that made the noise, yes?"

"Yeah," John replied, once more returning the laptop so that he could speak into the camera. "If you're thinking gunshot, there wasn't one. He wasn't shot; he was killed by a single blow to the back of the head from a blunt instrument, which then miraculously disappeared along with the killer." He paused, turning to hobble back up to the road. "That's gotta be an eight, at least."

The DI followed along, closer than John would have liked. "You've got two more minutes, then I want to know more about the driver."

"Oh, forget him," Sherlock replied. "He's an idiot. Why else would he think himself a suspect?"

The DI stepped even closer to John and leaned over his shoulder. "I think he's a suspect!" he objected.

Sherlock frowned and leaned closer to his end of the connection. "Pass me over."

John stopped in his tracks, nearly causing the DI to crash into him, and adjusted the camera, saying, "All right, but there's a mute button and I will use it." After one too many demands, he gave up and thrust the laptop in the DI's direction. "Okay, just take it. Take it."

The DI took John's laptop, thus triggering a rapid-fire monologue from Sherlock. "Having driven to an isolated location and successfully committed a crime without a single witness, why would he then call the police and consult a detective? Fair play?" The level of sarcasm lacing his last two words could have qualified as a nonlethal weapon in some districts.

The DI sneered, "He's trying to be clever. It's over-confidence."

An exasperated sigh twanged through the speakers. "Did you see him? Morbidly obese, the undisguised halitosis of a single man living on his own, the right sleeve of an internet porn addict, and the breathing pattern of an untreated heart condition. Low self-esteem, tiny IQ, and a limited life expectancy – and you think he's an audacious criminal mastermind?" There was a brief beat of silence, followed by a somewhat muted, "Don't worry, this is just stupid."


Back at his normal volume and level of derision, Sherlock said, "Go to the stream."

"What's in the stream?" the DI asked.

"Go and see," Sherlock repeated his 'suggestion'.

The DI returned John's laptop to him before striding off towards the stream, grumbling under his breath. John felt a quick wave of amusement. Maybe I ought to have t-shirts printed up. 'I survived Sherlock Holmes'. Give one out to everyone who manages not to mirror Himself's asshattery back at him. John noticed the sound of a helicopter approaching, but ignored it in favor of making sure he reached the road without mishap. As he made his way through the knee-high grass, he heard Mrs. Hudson through the laptop's speakers. "Sherlock! You weren't answering your doorbell."
Another voice came through the speaker, a man's voice he didn't recognize. "His room's through the back. Get him some clothes." As he reached the collected vehicles, John stopped at the nearest one and sat the laptop on its roof. The display revealed not much of note, just Sherlock facing away from the camera, and a hint of someone in an expensive suit just behind him.

"Who the hell are you?" Sherlock asked.

The newcomer's voice sounded again as he said, "Sorry, Mr. Holmes. You're coming with us."

"Sherlock? What's going on?" John asked, only mildly alarmed. He had a strong suspicion that Mycroft was involved in this. An unknown hand – by positioning on the screen, it belonged to the voice John didn't recognize – came into view. "What's happening?" John said, then the screen went black as the hand closed the lid of Sherlock's computer.

Just in case it wasn't what it appeared to be, John tried to reestablish the connection. He was interrupted by the young ginger-haired lad. "Dr. Watson?"

"Yeah?" John didn't bother looking up from his task.

"It's for you," the kid said.

"Okay, thanks," John said, glancing briefly at the kid. The kid had a mobile pressed to his ear. Assuming the call was for him, he held his hand out.

"Uh," the kid shook his head. "No, sir. The helicopter."

John twisted his neck around to watch it come in for a landing. Bloody Mycroft. He suppressed the urge to roll his eyes as he closed his own computer and secured it in his ever-present leather satchel. He finished just as the chopper touched down. Has to be Mycroft. Who else would send someone to abduct me without bothering to call first? Wonder what he'd do if I just ignored it? He gave the matter some serious contemplation, then shrugged to himself. Nah – he'd just grab me on my way to the shops again, and that's simply not on. Particularly since his interruptions tend to make me forget half of what we're out of by the time he returns me to my regularly mis-scheduled day. Of course, he pointedly ignored the small voice at the back of his head that said he wouldn't have that problem if he bothered writing down the shopping list before he left the flat to begin with.

Fifteen minutes later, the helicopter took off again, with John aboard. "Where am I going?" he asked over the headset. The pilot ignored him. Had it not been for the fact that said pilot had glanced in his direction when he'd uttered the question, John would have assumed the microphone on his headset to be faulty. I will not hum 'The Song that Never Ends'. I will not hum 'The Song that Never Ends'. I will not hum 'The Song that Never Ends'. Luckily, Surrey wasn't that far from London, not when traveling at a solid 140 knots, so he didn't have to suppress the urge for long, though he focused on it with all of his attention, primarily to keep the vertigo of being several hundred feet above his comfort-zone at bay.

His desire to irritate the incommunicative pilot evaporated on seeing where the helicopter was set to land. Buckingham Palace? Seriously? A man, roughly the same age as John, but standing a solid three or four inches taller, greeted him once the chopper landed. "If you would follow me, please, Dr. Watson," he said, turning on his heel and striding towards the nearest set of doors. John followed him, trying hard not to gawk like a tourist. However, I'm pretty sure I'm failing miserably at that. He was shown into a sitting room furnished with a pair of brocade cream sofas facing one another across a similarly-Victorian coffee table, atop a rose carpet. Additional examples of authentic antiques lined the room, complementing the luxurious décor without crossing the line into the ostentatious. The general ambience of the room barely made an impression as the whole of John's attention narrowed
on Sherlock.

His flatmate was seated on the sofa to John's left, still wrapped in his sheet. A small pile of Sherlock's insanely-expensive clothing sat on the coffee table. Pausing in the doorway as his guide walked away, John sent a WTF look to Sherlock. Sherlock shook his head and shrugged in reply. John nodded and walked over to where Sherlock sat, then took a seat on the opposite end of the sofa. Biting back laughter – at what? mainly the absurdity of the moment, but part of it was thanks to the oxycodone he'd downed on the way to Surrey – he took a slightly closer look at Sherlock. He isn't… No, he would be, wouldn't he? "Are you wearing any pants?" he asked, focusing mostly on the window, framed by artwork, across the room.

"No," Sherlock replied, likewise not meeting his friend's eyes.

"Okay," John said, moving his gaze around the room. He settled his cane next to him. Almost by accident, he and Sherlock ended up meeting eyes and promptly dissolved into giggles. "At Buckingham Palace, fine." He tried, but failed, to get himself under control. "Oh, I'm seriously fighting an impulse to steal an ashtray." Sherlock chuckled in response. "What are we doing here, Sherlock? Seriously, what?"

"I don't know," the consulting detective replied, still grinning.

"Here to see the Queen?" John hazarded a guess.

Footsteps heralded a new arrival. Sherlock glanced over. "Apparently, yes." The newcomer was Mycroft.

The pair cracked up. Mycroft crossed the room, a sternly disapproving look on his face. "Just once, can you two behave like grown-ups?"

John snickered. "We solve crimes, I blog about it, and he," John tilted his head in his flatmate's direction, "forgets his pants, so I wouldn't hold out too much hope."

While Sherlock and his brother engaged in the latest round of one-upmanship which defined their relationship, John took the unprecedented opportunity to see whether or not his personal theory was correct. It wasn't – there wasn't a single thing within the entirety of his range of othersense that had any sort of magical signature, save for a few small charms, a couple of areas carrying echoes of having been touched by death, and the merest trickle of a leyline at the outermost reaches of his ability to sense and far too distant to be of any use to his aching knee. The spirit of the building, on the other hand, was one of the most coherent he'd ever met. Unfortunately, since Mycroft was there, he couldn't trance long enough to speak with him. Odd, he thought, while the Holmes brothers traded stubborn regarding clothing, but I would have assumed the soul of such a… pretty building to be female. Then again, it's the peacock that's the more-decorated of the two, so I guess it makes sense.

John was pulled from his othersight and thoughts when Sherlock stood. "And my client is?"

"Illustrious," a new voice came from the door through which John himself had entered, "in the extreme." The man was a couple of inches taller than Mycroft, wearing a similar suit – down to a tie sporting identical shades of navy and golden yellow, though the newcomer's tie's was done up in stripes whereas Mycroft's was primarily yellow with navy dots. I wonder if there's some sort of coding there? John stood and shoved the urge to bury his face in his hands away. I've been spending far too much time around Sherlock. "And remaining," the man continued as he crossed the room, "I have to inform you, entirely anonymous." He stopped at the end of the sofa and smiled pleasantly at the elder Holmes. "Mycroft."
"Harry," Mycroft greeted the man with a quick handshake. "May I just apologize for the state of my little brother?"

"Full-time occupation, I imagine," Harry replied good-naturedly. Both John and Sherlock scowled at that. Harry's attention shifted from Mycroft to John. "And this must be Dr. John Watson, formerly of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers." He held his hand out. John shook it out of reflex. "My employer is a tremendous fan of your blog."

John had been prepared to detest this man as much as he did Mycroft, but that last comment startled the seedling hate right out of him. "Your employer?"

"Particularly enjoyed the one about the aluminium crutch," Harry confided, though his smile said that he'd also liked the entry. Apparently, my blog's got a far, far, far wider readership than I'd ever suspected. He couldn't quite make any noise as his mouth gaped open. Harry ignored it and stepped closer to Sherlock. "And Mr. Holmes the younger. You look taller in your photographs."

"I take the precaution of a good coat and a short friend," Sherlock said, his distaste for the situation coming through loud enough that John decided not to take offense. "Mycroft," he looked to his brother, "I don't do anonymous clients. I'm used to mystery at one end of my cases. Both ends is too much work." With a sarcastic-polite nod to Harry, he dismissed everything with a curt, "Good morning."

As he started to walk away, Mycroft let out a small, exasperated sigh. He shifted and stepped firmly on the trailing edge of Sherlock's sheet. Thankfully, Sherlock managed to halt before revealing his lack of pants to all and sundry. "This is a matter of national importance," Mycroft hissed. "Grow up."

"Get off my sheet!" Sherlock all but growled the command.

"Or what?"

"Or I'll just walk away." He would, too, John thought, recognizing the tone underlying his friend's words that made promises rather than threats.

"I'll let you," Mycroft's voice carried a similar tone.

Sighing mentally, John tapped his cane on the floor. It made a satisfying metallic thud against the carpeting. "Boys, please, not here," Captain Watson threw his two cents' worth into the brewing argument. "Sherlock, though I'm certain you wouldn't mind wandering about naked, I'm pretty sure the others who might catch sight of your bony arse might take exception to it. So, do us all a favor and get dressed, yeah?" Though the words themselves were merely polite, even bordering on humorous, the thread of compelling magic wound around them ensured Sherlock's undivided attention.

"Oh, very well," Sherlock somehow managed to make it seem as though he was doing John, specifically, a favor on par with donating a kidney.

Half an hour later, a tea service was delivered and Sherlock was, thankfully, dressed. After a bit of brotherly snark that John couldn't bother listening to, Harry brought up the reason why they'd been brought to the Palace. "My employer has a problem,"

Mycroft picked up the 'heavy lifting' of explaining more fully. "A matter has come to light of an extremely delicate and potentially criminal nature, and in this hour of need, dear brother, your name has arisen."

"Why?" Sherlock asked, staring at Mycroft. "You have a police force of sorts, even a marginally
Secret Service. Why come to me?"

"People do come to you for help, don't they, Mr. Holmes?" Harry asked.

"Not to date anyone with a navy," Sherlock dryly replied.

Mycroft shifted slightly. "This is a matter of the highest security, and therefore of trust."

"Meaning you trust your brother more than you do your minions," John commented. "Interesting."

He tried, but feared he wasn't entirely successful, at wrestling down a small smirk. A small flicker of surprise flashed across Mycroft's expression, almost so quickly that John wasn't entirely certain he'd seen it. Why does he always seem surprised when I say or do something he perceives as intelligent? Is it some sort of genetic malfunction with Holmeses that they're incapable of admitting that someone with whom they don't share genes might actually have a brain of their own?

"I do think we have a timetable," Harry interrupted John's musing.

"Yes, of course," Mycroft nodded. He picked up a briefcase that had been brought in with the tea service and clicked it open. He handed a photograph to Sherlock. "What do you know of this woman?"

Sherlock looked at the picture. "Nothing whatsoever." John glanced at it. Pretty, part of his mind acknowledged. Do I know her from somewhere…? It took a moment for his mind to dredge up the details. Natalie! Natalie knew her – has a picture of them together on holiday back when they were attending uni. Small world, indeed.

"Then you should be paying more attention," Mycroft chided. "She's been at the center of two political scandals in the last year, and recently ended the marriage of a prominent novelist by having an affair with both participants separately."

"You know I don't concern myself with trivia," Sherlock said, handing the photo back to his brother. "Who is she?"

"Irene Adler, professionally known as The Woman," Mycroft replied, taking the photograph. "There are many names for what she does. She prefers 'dominatrix'."

John immediately inhaled tea into his sinuses. That actually explains rather a lot about Natalie's… collection, he thought while coughing and sneezing the tea from where it didn't belong. "Pardon," he eventually managed, evenly meeting the others' eyes. He made a 'go on' motion with the hand not still holding his mostly-empty teacup.

Mycroft reached back into the briefcase while Harry asked John, "Are you alright?"

"Quite," John replied. Glancing at Sherlock, he saw 'explain' writ large across the man's features. Later, he mouthed.

"These are all from her website," Mycroft handed a thick bundle of glossy printouts to Sherlock.

"And I assume," Sherlock said, thumbing through the photos, "this Adler woman has some compromising photographs."

"You're very quick, Mr. Holmes," Harry said.

"Hardly a difficult deduction," Sherlock replied, looking up at Mycroft's 'friend'. "Photographs of whom?"
"A person of significance to my employer," the man said. "We'd prefer not to say any more at this time."

Sherlock's gaze narrowed and he sat the photos on the coffee table. John had to wrestle with his seeming instinct to use Captain Watson's voice when in the presence of the elder Holmes – *Don't need it, the doctor voice will do just fine* – he finally managed to get the right tone. "You can't tell us anything?" he asked, returning his used teacup to the service on the tray. He waved away an offer for a refill.

"I can tell you it's a young person," Mycroft said, speaking to John. "A young *female* person."

"How many photographs?" Sherlock asked.

"A considerable number, apparently," Mycroft refocused on his brother.

"Do Miss Adler and this young female person appear in these photographs together?"

Mycroft nodded minutely. "Yes, they do."

"And I assume in a number of compromising scenarios."

"An imaginative range, we are assured."

"Can you help us, Mr. Holmes?" Harry asked, sounding the teeniest bit desperate.

"How?" Sherlock fired the question back at the man.

"Will you take the case?" Harry clarified.

"What case? Pay her, now and in full. As Miss Adler remarks in her masthead, 'Know when you are beaten'." Sherlock twisted around to grab his coat.

"She doesn't want anything," Mycroft said, halting his brother's movements. Sherlock turned his head to look at him. "She got in touch. She informed us that the photographs existed. She indicated that she had no intention to use them to extort either money or favor."

A small smile tugged at the corners of Sherlock's mouth. "Oh, a power play," he said, finally showing an interest in the conversation since being forced to abandon his sheet in favor of proper clothing. "A power play with the most powerful family in Britain. Now that *is* a dominatrix." The smile quickly became more obvious. "Ooh, this is getting rather fun, isn't it?" He grabbed his coat. "Where is she?"

"In London currently. She's staying —"

Sherlock stood. "Text me the details," he said as he started to walk away. "I'll be in touch by the end of the day."

Sounding a little startled, Harry asked, "Do you really think you'll have news by then?"

Sherlock paused and turned around while the others stood. "No," he said. "I think I'll have the photographs."

"One can only hope you're as good as you seem to think," Harry said.

John saw Sherlock give the man a quick once-over, wondering, not for the first time, what it was that Sherlock saw when he did that. Sherlock smirked a little, then looked at his brother. "I'll need some
equipment, of course."

"Anything you require," Mycroft replied, "I'll have it sent to –"

"Can I have a box of matches?" Sherlock cut Mycroft off while looking directly at Mr. Harry-Who-Never-Was- Properly-Introduced.

"I'm sorry?"

"Or your cigarette lighter. Either will do," Sherlock held his hand out to the man.

"I don't smoke," Harry said.

"No," Sherlock agreed. "I know you don't, but your employer does."

The man blinked, then reached into his pocket. "We have kept a lot of people successfully in the dark about this little fact, Mr. Holmes," he said, handing a small silver butane lighter to Sherlock.

"I'm not the Commonwealth," Sherlock replied, pocketing the man's lighter, then striding away with a definite overtone of 'self-satisfied' in his footsteps.

"And that's as modest as he gets," John quipped, somewhat exasperated. "Pleasure to meet you," he nodded at Harry-With-No-Last-Name, then hurried as fast as he could after Sherlock.

A short while later, John and Sherlock managed to catch a taxi and headed back to 221 B. "By any and all definitions of the word, it is later," Sherlock said, splitting his attention between gazing disinterestedly out the window and looking something up on his phone.

"Yeah," John agreed. "So it is."

The comment managed to wrench Sherlock's attention away from both mobile and window. "Were you meaning a specific 'later'? Because if so, you ought to have said as much."

John chuckled a little. "No, not really. Isn't all that important, not in the grand scheme of things, just a little surprising to me, personally." Sherlock blinked at him. "Natalie knows – or knew – that Adler woman. At least, I assume so. Nat's got a photo of the two of them on holiday together during uni."

"Natalie, Natalie, Natalie," Sherlock whispered the name with his eyes closed. "Ah," he opened them. "The depressingly mousey one who dumped you via text, yes?"

"No to the first bit, yes on the second," John corrected. "Your turn."

"My turn?"

"The smoking? How'd you know?"

Sherlock gave a small smile while shaking his head. "The evidence was right under your nose, John. As ever, you see but do not observe."

"Observe what?"

His flatmate reached into his coat's inner pocket. "The ashtray," he said, revealing the leaded crystal object that had been sitting on the coffee table between the two sofas. He returned the ashtray to his pocket as John laughed, then resumed his information-hunt on his mobile phone.

"Why'd you ask him for his lighter? We both carry one."
Not looking up from his phone, Sherlock smirked. "Mainly to prove to him that I'm as good – or better – than my reputation."

"You said 'mainly', so what was the rest of your reason?"

Sherlock glanced over at John. "What, we're not both allowed souvenirs?"

There really wasn't much John could say in reply, and so he let the topic drop.

A short while later, the taxi arrived at Baker Street. Sherlock stripped his Belstaff and scarf, hanging them on their peg behind the living room door. John didn't bother taking off his own jacket, but did set his satchel on the coffee table before stretching out on the sofa, his knee propped on a couple of small pillows. The leyline didn't waste any time in responding to John's silent summons; the glowing female figure showed up and immediately began working on his knee. John let out a small hum of content as the stiffness and last vestiges of pain drained away under her ministrations. *I swear, you get better at that every day,* he thought at her. He received a humming purr from her as a reply, though he was nearly sure the undertone of *smug* had to have been his imagination. Sherlock perched on the corner of the desk, echoing John's hmm noise, though his was tinged with thought. "Ideas?" he prompted, after several long minutes of silence.

"On…?" John asked, opening his eyes and looking at his flatmate.

"Oh, do keep up, John," Sherlock's exasperation was tangible. "On how to retrieve the photographs, of course. How would you go about it?"

Knowing Sherlock was trying to find out if John knew any spells that would be of help, John stretched and gave the leyline a mental caress of thanks as he sat up. She let out a chirrup that seemed to impart the sense of *Hey, I'm not done with you just yet!* He ignored it in favor of responding to his flatmate. "Well… I won't be able to use the compass spell – I don't have anything available that's connected to them."

"Simply knowing the individuals pictured won't be enough?"

John shook his head. "Nope. Maybe if this was a hundred years ago, back when it was still a big deal to have your picture taken, it might've worked, but in this day and age? When you wind up on how many CCTVs just walking to the grocer?" He emphatically shook his head again. "Won't work." The leyline's avatar scooted a little closer to him and attempted to reach around to massage his shoulders. John sent a mental 'slap' of *not right now* at her.

"Pity," Sherlock said, his forehead's thought-lines making a reappearance. The leyline slid across the surface of the sofa and curled up in the corner furthest from John. John was pretty sure, had she a defined face, she would be glaring at him. "D'you know if the photos are film-based or digital?"

"Just how should I describe her? She's one-part mother-figure, but I've got a mum; one-part servant, though I don't much care for the idea; and at least three-parts cat. Something of his thoughts must have reached the avatar – she let out an othersense noise akin to a growling dog.

"Does that make a difference on how you would go about retrieving them?" Sherlock's question jerked John's thoughts away from his pet/masseuse/other-flatmate.

He shook his head. "Not really, not at this stage of the planning, but it would come in handy to know *what* I was looking for once I was in a position to start searching."
Sherlock gave a little sideways nod of assent, acknowledging that John had a point. "I imagine it would be safe to presume the photos are digitally stored. She may have physical prints of one or more of them, but unless she Photoshopped the images from her website, she has no personal interest in film photography, and the photos themselves are of such a nature I doubt she'd be willing to trust them to a professional developer."

"So, we'll be looking for something along the lines of a digital camera or memory stick." He tried focusing on Sherlock, but the low thrum of irritation emanating from the glowing female figure to his right kept distracting him.

Sherlock nodded, "Or a laptop – possibly even a desktop – computer, SD card, or even a mobile phone. Her website photos utilized just enough soft-focus that her hands didn't show enough detail to determine which sort of computer she favors; and that's assuming she hasn't simply hired someone to run her website for her." His phone chimed before he could continue. He checked it. "Have her address. It's in Belgravia."

John let out a low whistle. "Doing rather well for herself, isn't she?" The avatar slid back to John's side and insinuated herself under the arm John had propped knee-to-elbow, exactly like a stubborn cat intent on lap-time. *Damn it, I said not now!* he enforced his order with a small bolt of magic, akin to a spectral static shock. She jerked back with an othersense noise like a hiss.

Shrugging, Sherlock returned his mobile to his jacket pocket. "Possibly. It's more likely she's living off her father's money – Nigel Adler had a considerable amount invested in North Sea oil before he died."

*Now I know what he was looking up on his phone,* John thought. "Just means she's likely got staff of some sort at her house, is what I meant." The leyline retreated back to the far corner of the sofa; the irritation flooding off of her had increased in intensity to the point where John was having difficulty keeping himself on an even emotional keel.

"Very probable," Sherlock agreed. "At minimum, a general domestic or personal assistant and likely a chauffeur as well."

*It's not that I don't appreciate what you do for me – my knee and shoulder, especially – but now is not the time.* "Think there'd be more than five or six people total?"

"No; her address indicates a townhouse, rather than one of the more extensive estates."

"In that case, then Sleep of the Dead might work." Sherlock blinked at John; a skeptical huff came from the avatar. John glanced at her to find that she was curled up on the cushion, her arms crossed over her chest, in a posture John had last seen in person when Harry had been all of sixteen and in the midst of a major teen-angst-fueled-strop. "It's a pretty simple spell, if I'm remembering correctly – I've only used it once or twice before, and not since I was about seventeen or so – but it'll knock up to about half a dozen inhabitants of a single structure into an instant, deep sleep. Lasts for about three hours."

The leyline stretched out a leg and kicked his side. The contact tingled like the area had suddenly been coated with novacane, but it had also lodged a mental image of his collection of magical oils firmly in his mind. "Hmm… Mix a little Confusion Oil into an incense base and set it to burn itself out as we leave, and they won't even question why they were sleeping in the middle of the day. Still doesn't answer how we're going to find the photos to begin with, though."

"Leave that to me," Sherlock said.
John nodded, then climbed to his feet. "Back in a mo," he said, heading for the stairs to his room. The leyline's avatar let out a frustrated sigh – or something so close as to be indistinguishable – and faded back through the floorboards. John, his knee back to its pain-free levels of normality, sprinted upstairs, grabbed his leather-bound spellbook from its soapstone box on his desk, then hurried back to the living room. He paged through it, idly noting for the umpteenth time that he ought to see about recopying it into another journal, taking care to put some sort of order to the contents. He stopped on the right page. "Here we go. A handful of dirt from a fresh grave, preferably from a graveyard not more than a mile or two from her place," he said, not looking up from the instructions printed in his own painstakingly neat handwriting. "That's the only ingredient I don't already have."

Three hours later, all preparations had been made, and John and Sherlock were back in a taxi heading through town to Adler's address. As the taxi turned onto a side-street only a few blocks away, Sherlock cleared his throat. "Here will do," he told the cabbie. The taxi driver nodded and pulled over.

After paying, John took a look around. "Over here, I think," he said, leading the way to an alley that opened between a travel agent's shop and one of the expensive sorts of clothing stores where all shopping was done by appointment. In the shelter created by two dumpsters – notably lacking in any foul aromas – John dug into his satchel. He came up with his wreath of amaranth flowers and his small, sweat-stained, white cotton pouch of fiddlehead fern spores. "The notice-me-not charm for you, I think," he muttered, unwinding the pouch's necklace-string. "I'll take the true invisibility charm. Keep in mind that I'll be able to see and hear you, but you won't even be able to feel me."

"Yes, yes, you've gone over this already – three times." Though Sherlock sounded annoyed, he couldn't quite keep the gleam of anticipation out of his eyes.

"God grant me patience," he thought, and not for the first time, while placing the fiddlehead charm around his flatemate's neck. "It'll take a solid five minutes for Sleep of the Dead to take effect once we're there, so I won't unlock the door until I'm sure it's working." That got him an eloquently raised eyebrow of impatience. "Just reminding you," John defended his nearly-pathological need to make sure his mundane, yet entirely insane genius of a friend knew exactly what to expect.

"Can we just get on with this? I'd like to finish up before Mycroft heads home for the night."

John repressed the urge to sigh. _Milady_, he aimed the thought at the nearest leyline – a small trickle of a 'line, located almost directly underfoot – if you could, anything you can do to make sure this works smoothly would be much appreciated. Thanks in advance. He closed his fist around the small charm hanging from Sherlock's neck, then recited, "You're not here. Neither sight, nor sound, nor scent, nor sense of touch shall betray your presence. You are a hole in reality. Eyes aside, ears closed, you are not here."

Typically, the amount of magical energy needed to trigger the stored power in a charm was negligible, on a level with the amount of energy needed to stand from a seated position, but trying to get the charm to work on someone completely lacking in any sort of magical energy of their own caused a sudden drain in John's energy levels that sent his head spinning. Opening his eyes, unsure as to when he'd closed them, he focused on the slightly-blurry outline of Sherlock. "We're not doing this again, not unless it's absolutely necessary."

"Why?"

John reached for the leyline below him to even out the expenditure of energy the fiddlehead charm was causing. "Ever been awake while losing blood at the same rate it's being pumped in?"

Sherlock shook his head. "Can't say that I have, no."
"'Cause that's awfully close to how this feels – the charm's got no magical traces to work off of on you, so it's pulling the full force of it from me. Lucky for me," John let light sarcasm dust his last few words.

"Lucky?"

"Yeah. Lucky. Lucky that I've got a fair hand with leyline energies. Lucky that London likes me. Lucky that I can refill on the magic as it's bleeding out, 'cause if I couldn't, then I'd likely end up passed out in about half an hour from magical exhaustion," he explained, feeling somewhat steadier as the leyline's energy refilled his own 'battery'. Grasping his wreath with his right hand, he made an 'after you' gesture with his left. "Lead on," he said, settling the wreath in place on his head as he muttered the wreath's activation phrase. Between one step and the next, even the sound of John's footsteps had slipped out of synch with reality.

A short walk, made all the shorter by Sherlock's impossibly long legs, had the pair arriving at Adler's address. John couldn't help but be a little disappointed: It was just a large townhouse, identical to the ones on either side of it save for the numbers painted on the pillar near the front door, and looked more like the residence of a corporate CEO or a bank manager than that of a hooker, no matter how well-paid.

Probably just an aftereffect of having seen Buckingham this morning, he thought, then shelved further opinions for a later date.

Noticing Sherlock impatiently checking the time on his phone while leaning against the left-handed pillar, John stepped around his flatmate. He used the half-wall railing as a makeshift table long enough to retrieve a small jar and a brand-new paintbrush from the depths of his satchel. The jar contained a viscous liquid, slightly thicker than tempura paint, of a red shade so dark it appeared black unless held up to the sunlight. Working quickly, he used the paintbrush and 'paint' from the jar to inscribe ὑπνός on the townhouse's door. (1)

After finishing, he tossed the used paintbrush into the street – having been used for this particular spell, it wouldn't be usable for anything else magical, and it wasn't as though he had much artistic talent himself – and capped the jar. He returned the jar to his satchel, then triggered the Sleep of the Dead spell. The additional drain on his energy sent him dizzy for a moment, before he compensated his pull on the leyline.

Spellfire sizzled slowly across the painted command, sending out delicate yellow flame and sparkles of black and red, visible only to the othersense spectrum. All told, it took somewhere between five and eight minutes to fully burn through the word painted on the door; John wasn't altogether certain about the timeframe, he hadn't paid attention that closely.

If it matters, I'm sure Sherlock knows how long it took, down to the microsecond. Next, he used his chicory 'lockpick' to open the door. The door silently popping open managed to yank the notice-me-not-cloaked figure of his flatmate from his pointed examination of his mobile.

D'you think he actually was timing me? John pushed the thought aside and waited for the insane genius to enter before following, taking care to shut the outer door behind them. Sherlock had halted in the entryway. It didn't take long for John to realize just why he hadn't went ahead and entered the second door – Sherlock was examining the house's security keypad with his pocket magnifier, muttering vital stats regarding the installed system. "Five digit code… Two attempts before the silent alarm is triggered… First two digits are clearly nine and three, last is obviously five… Other two are one and seven, but the order is muddled… Nine, three, one, seven, five? Or nine, three, seven, one, five?" He shrugged and returned the magnifying glass to his coat pocket. "As though it matters excessively." He tried nine, three, one, seven, five and was rewarded by a weak-sounding triple-beep as a small red light switched to green on the keypad.
Sherlock pushed the door open, a slight smirk of victory tugging at the corners of his lips. John followed close on his heels. After the second door was firmly shut behind them, Sherlock strode to the center of the foyer and turned in a small circle, examining his surroundings with his typical keen gaze. "Presuming she keeps any clients from her private space, the most-likely location for her to keep the photographs would be her bedroom. However, with her demonstrated audacity, I doubt she would have any compunctions against keeping the photos in whichever room she uses to entertain clients. Yet that would hinge on whether or not she views her profession as merely a job or if she truly enjoys her work. If it is the former, then it is unlikely she would keep the photos in an area she only visits with her clients – the same illicit thrill would be found in keeping the photos in a more public area of the house, without the tedium of having work interfere with time off. But, if it is the latter, then the photos would be stored in the area she devotes to work. Now the question is: Does Miss Adler consider her work to be just a job, or a calling?"

John ignored Sherlock's audible thinking, deciding to focus on making sure the spell had taken hold as it should – there had been a couple of occasions when he'd been a teenager, using it to sneak out of the house at odd hours, wherein it hadn't quite worked properly. He worked his way from the front of the house to the back, checking each room as he went along. He wound up in the kitchen. A pretty redheaded woman wearing a white blouse and black skirt was slumped over the breakfast table, a small stack of mail resting between a laptop computer even more underpowered than John's own and a mostly-empty cup of coffee.

John took a quick glance through the papers. Mobile bill and what seem to be at least six different party invitations. How come we never get any good mail? Might actually tackle the stack more than once a week if we ever got anything but bills and advertisements. He pushed the stray thought aside as he checked the woman's pulse. "Nice and strong. Nothing to worry about, miss – but I don't know if you'll notice the missing time or not. I've only ever really used Sleep of the Dead on folks who were already sleeping – or should have been, at least," he said to her, then exited the kitchen and headed towards where he'd last seen Sherlock.

Sherlock was just coming down the stairs. "...and so, as you probably hadn't noticed, the state of the restraints and other assorted paraphernalia indicate Miss Adler views her job as just a job. If she has any obsessions, I'd say clothes were definitely in the top three." He paused halfway to the foyer. "Well, top four. There is her jewelry box to take into account, after all." Sherlock resumed walking. And talking. Does he do this all the time? Rattle on whether I'm there or not? "However, this means she keeps the photographs in rather a more public area than her bedroom – she definitely didn't have them on her, and I spotted no areas with concealed or hidden compartments, other than the obvious, upstairs." He reached the foyer floor and peered at the floor. "Wear indicates heaviest traffic to the parlor. We should look there first."

John followed him into the cream-and-grey-with-gold-accents parlor. Think this is the first time I've ever been in a person's home where that word actually applied – there's no way you could call something this... cold and impersonal a 'living room'. She doesn't even have a telly. John leaned against the door frame while Sherlock took a sweeping look around the room, then dropped to his knees and pressed his right cheek against the hardwood floor. He then sprang up, walked to the area just in front of the room's armchair, and did it again. What's he doing? Hang on a tick... He's looking at the rug. Checking for footprints? Why? Seeing if there's a small lump from a covered latch for a hiding spot? John felt himself smirk. Wonder if I could startle him if I took off the wreath? Know I'd surprise him if I pointed out there's a safe behind the mirror above the mantle. Since John's othersense was singularly strong, all he could really do to control it was 'dial it back', but since they were searching for something he had no idea what form it might take, he'd been keeping it ramped up to normal 'non-filtered' levels; the house's wiring was easy to see, bleeding a blue-white energy through the walls. Can't be a circuit-breaker box. Doesn't glow bright enough for that. And I somehow doubt that there's a microwave set into the wall for the room on the other side. Kitchen's
three rooms away. He frowned a bit at the reminder of the woman he'd located. Wonder if Sherlock found Adler?

"Sherlock?" The man gave no reaction. John literally smacked his own forehead. "Wreath, Watson. Won't know you're here until you remove it." He deactivated the charm and took the wreath off. "Sherlock?"

John had to actually cover his mouth to keep the snicker in when Sherlock twitched violently and spun from his minute inspection of the draperies. "What?"

Still grinning, but luckily able to keep the laughter at bay, John nodded at the mirror above the fireplace. "There's a safe behind the mirror."

The younger man looked slightly puzzled for a split second before it dissipated. "Of course, you see the wiring in the walls," he said, striding across the room. It was only a matter of a couple of seconds before he located the hidden switch that lifted the mirror out of the way. Using his pocket magnifier, he inspected the number pad. "Hmm… Will your master-key open this?"

John shook his head. "Sorry, no. It's not technically a door."

Sherlock glanced over at John. "And what defines a door?"

"Something big enough that I can actually walk or climb through it. Don't think my other unlocker would work on that – it's only ever good for handcuffs and luggage locks."

Returning his attention to the safe, Sherlock let out a humming noise that bordered on a sigh. "It's clearly a six digit code, and she's not one to use anything obvious like bits of addresses or birthdays… Heaviest oil deposit's on the three, so six digits and beginning with a three…"

"Could be random," John said, not really believing it himself.

"Could be, but isn't. It would need to be something easily remembered. She's got a single household staff, female, slightly older than she is. Did you find her, or do we need to worry about her returning from the shops any time soon?"

"She's out cold, in the kitchen," John replied, not bothering to ask how Sherlock knew he had searched the main floor while Sherlock checked the upstairs.

"Good. What was she doing?" Sherlock peered a little closer at the keypad.

John blinked. "I just… I just told you – she's out cold."

Sherlock sent a glare over his shoulder at his flatmate. "Not now – what was she doing when your spell took hold?"

"Going through the mail, looked like," John said, walking over to stand next to Sherlock.

Sherlock nodded as though he expected that specific answer. "So, the code would also need to be something her maid would also be able to recall with ease."

"Part of a phone number?"

"Who bothers to remember something that your mobile will remember for you?"

John shrugged. "Oh, I dunno – in case your phone runs out of battery? In case there's no signal? In case your daft flatmate has run off with yours in his pocket with his own again?"
"Oh, dull," Sherlock muttered, which John knew was as close to an apology for the aforementioned accidental theft of his phone that he would ever get, then refocused on the safe.

"Kate?" a female voice called from upstairs.

Sherlock twisted his head to John fast enough that it triggered a vague concern in Dr. Watson regarding whiplash. "Thought you said 'hours'. It's barely been thirty minutes!" he hissed.

"Shit," John managed at the same time, then shook his head. "Know how I also mentioned that it doesn't always work as read on the label?" He reached up to resettle the wreath on his head, but heard fast footfalls in the stairwell, the light smacking noise of bare feet on wooden stair risers. Moving more quickly than he'd had call to since returning from Afghanistan, John ducked behind the sofa settled in the curved niche walled with windows furthest from the door.

"Kate? Are you alright?" the same female voice called out, sounding much closer than before. The slap of bare feet on the floorboards faded towards the kitchen. John let out a small sigh of relief, then took a moment to put his wreath back into place and activate the charm, giving himself another dizzy-fit as his magic struggled to keep up with the demand of maintaining the notice-me-not around Sherlock and activating the stored energy in the amaranth wreath. *God, that was too close. We need to get the photos and get out of here.*

"John?" Sherlock asked, finally paying attention to something other than the safe. John sighed and stood from behind the sofa. *Really need to figure out something that'll work to keep us hidden, but still allow communication.* He returned to his position next to Sherlock. "As I was saying, the code's six digits, with the first number being a three. The remainder of the numerals, however, I am having a little trouble deducing… Have you any talcum powder in your bag of tricks?"

John checked his pockets for his phone. *Ah, good.* He sent a text reply.

No. Sorry. Talc is magically inert. It'll read as mineral, but it simply won't work in any spells.

Sherlock frowned at the text. "For future reference, it might come in handy, so you ought to see about rectifying this lamentable lack of foresight on your part."

How is a lack of talcum powder in any way a 'lack' on my part? John scowled at Sherlock. "You really are a git at times, you know that, right?" He sent a second text.

If you give me a mo, I think I have an idea.

Sherlock's incredulous eyebrow twitched. "Well?"

John ramped up his othersense to its maximum and concentrated on the keypad. Overlaying the electrical underlay, a faint taint of greenish-blue lingered over three of the keys. Magical fingerprints. *Anything living’ll leave traces of its aura behind, alongside dead skin cells and bits of hair.* The corners of his mouth twitched, not quite reaching a definitive expression, then he looked harder as a shadow of putrid greenish-yellow, streaked through with red and black bled through the readings of both the fingerprints and the electrical components of the safe. A serious expression usurped the wannabe-smirk. He texted Sherlock.

Only three numbers that've been used are 2, 3, & 4. Careful. Booby-trapped.

"How?" Sherlock asked. John wasn't sure if he was asking how the safe was booby-trapped or how John knew that only the two, three, and four numerals had been used. John replied to the former assumption and hoped Sherlock would save his question on the latter until they were safely back at Baker Street.
John returned his mobile to its normal resting place in his jacket pocket and headed for the still-open door to the room. Faintly, he could hear Adler and, presumably, Kate chatting quietly in the kitchen. He couldn't actually make out any of their words, but it didn't seem that they were going to be headed in their direction any time soon.

"Oh! Of course!" Sherlock exclaimed behind him, then rapidly beeps in the safe's combination. The lock disengaged with a slight hissing noise. John looked over his shoulder to see Sherlock open the safe from behind the door, standing a full arm's length away from the small rectangular opening. The distinctive thwa-ping noise of a suppressed bullet, almost immediately followed by it smacking into the wall, silenced the conversation in the kitchen.

"Did you hear that?" Adler's voice came through the corridor.

Sherlock grabbed the only item in the safe not a part of the trap – a mobile phone – and grinned. "That's the knighthood in the bag," he gloated, examining the phone itself.

The smack-slap of bare feet sounded from the hall. John scrambled for his phone once more.

Adler coming. Time 2 go.

Sherlock's own phone beeped, and he fumbled it out to check the message, only to drop it just as a very naked Irene Adler poked her head into the room. "Kate! We've been robbed!" she shouted over her shoulder, then sauntered into the room, her eyes glued to Sherlock's dropped phone.

John could see his flatmate was slowly stooping, trying to reach his phone. Never gonna work, he thought, then took decisive action. He grabbed Sherlock's wrist and tugged the man behind him as he beelined for the door.

His heart hammering in his ears until Sherlock's voice finally broke through it. "John! I think we've gone far enough!"

John skidded to a halt in the middle of the same alleyway in which they'd begun this particular misadventure, between the travel agent's and the posh shop. He let go of Sherlock's wrist and leaned against the brick wall of the alley, breathing hard. After a moment of catching his breath, he deactivated his invisibility charm. "Never," he panted out, "do that!"

"Never do what?" Sherlock didn't even seem all that winded.

Then again, he hasn't been draining himself dry trying to keep a notice-me-not wrapped around a non-mage. John took another couple of deep breaths. "Never, but never try to pick up anything you've dropped while under a notice-me-not, not while someone's looking right at it!"

"Why not? What's the worst that could happen?"

"Oh, I don't know," John's heartbeat was finally starting to slip back down to normal registers. "How about the spell failing in a truly spectacular fashion and giving the mage who placed it a case of backlash?"

"That's not the first time you've mentioned 'backlash'."

John nodded, then gestured for Sherlock to stoop a bit. He deactivated the charm hanging around his flatmate's neck and removed it. "No, it isn't, and it probably won't be the last."
Sherlock watched as John secured both the grubby little pouch and the wreath of dried amaranth flowers into their places in his satchel. "Going to explain in more depth?"

John looked up, latching his case by feel. "Can't you simply deduce it?"

An expression so very similar to one John had last seen on Mycroft's face flitted across Sherlock's, and for a moment, John could actually physically see the family resemblance. "I've found that there is little of logic in magic," Sherlock admitted. The words sounded painful, like they were catching on barbed wire imbedded in Sherlock's throat.

"Just like I said," John grinned a bit. The 'sucking on a lemon' expression morphed into an outright Sherlock-scowl. John took pity on him. "Backlash is what happens when an actively-controlled spell is halted, interrupted, or snapped by an outside force. All the energy involved has to go somewhere, and ninety-nine percent of the time, the easiest place for it to go is back down the connection into the mage doing the casting. Mildest forms include a crippling headache that even the strongest prescription-strength painkillers won't touch."

Sherlock's scowl faded as his eyes narrowed in thought. "And the more severe…?"

John's eyes drifted to a long-ago memory. A small shiver chased itself down his spine. "Are like being burned to ash from the inside out," he said, the words quiet and containing a haunting presence that could only be attributed to having lived through it. He gave himself a little shake, forcibly shelving the decades-old memories, and changed the subject. "Gonna hail a cab?"

"Could," Sherlock sighed, heading for the main road, "I suppose. However, you could do so as easily as I."

John shook his head. "Nope," he argued. "One thing I've noticed about you that's completely inexplicable is how taxis miraculously appear whenever you need one."

"Nonsense," Sherlock said on reaching the pavement. He glanced either direction and spotted a cab half a block away, letting out a fare at the small solicitor's office on the corner. Catching the driver's eye, he held a hand up and beckoned to the cabbie.

John managed to refrain from rolling his eyes. Case in point right there. The taxi pulled up to them about half a minute later. After getting settled, Sherlock removed Adler's phone from his pocket and examined it more closely than he'd had the chance to thus far. After hitting the power button, John saw that the screen displayed a message:

"Where to, lads?" the cabbie asked, interrupting their perusal of Adler's mobile.

"Two-two-one B Baker Street," John replied. As the taxi pulled away from the curb, Sherlock
frowned, then tucked the phone back into his pocket. "Mycroft should be happy," John commented.

Sherlock let out a derisive snort. "I doubt it." John let his slightly puzzled expression do his talking for him. "My phone, John! My phone was abandoned. Just left behind like a piece of dead skin!"

"It's just a phone, Sherlock. Get Mycroft to replace it – I'm sure he can expense it if he has to."

"That's not the point. Mycroft will undoubtedly be insufferably smug that we were incapable of retrieving the photographs without managing to leave no traces behind. Sloppy work, John. Mycroft loathes sloppiness."

"And he isn't the only one," John muttered under his breath. "Look, I told you why you couldn't grab it – she was looking right at it. Had we stuck around, we probably would've seen her picking it up."

Almost as though his words were a cue in his own personal theater of the absurd, Adler's phone let out a tinkly, sparkly little chiming noise. Sherlock leveled a look at John that could have meant 'care to take that back?' or 'you have got to be joking' or even 'I'm downgrading your apparent intellect from housecat to fishing lure' as he once more pulled the phone from his pocket. John craned his neck to read over Sherlock's shoulder.

NEW TEXT MESSAGE
From: Sexy
17:22 14/09/2011

Even with the phone itself locked, the option to open the text was available. Sherlock quickly hit the button to open the message.

How about a trade? Perhaps over dinner?

John could see that Sherlock was sorely tempted – not by the offer of supper, mind, but by the thought of so easily getting his own phone back. However, the knowledge that Mycroft would truly become inconsolably tiresome if he ever found out they'd had the phone only to give it back kept the younger Holmes brother from replying in the affirmative. Instead, he typed out a question of his own.

They are phones, not hostages. Why would I be interested in trading?

The reply came back nearly-instantaneously. The phone is locked. The info is useless to you.

Sherlock smirked. It is a four-digit code. There are only 57 possible character choices, excluding spaces. 10,556,001 total possible combinations.

John's brain hurt trying to figure out how Sherlock had managed that particular bit of mathletics. He nearly missed the reply. True. But you only have 4 chances.

Perhaps if I were entering them in manually. A computer should only take about half a minute.

The irritatingly-chipper noise sounded out once more. Go ahead. Hook it up to a computer. I dare you. Make sure you call 999 first tho.

Sherlock's smirk faded and he flipped the phone on-edge. "The case is aftermarket, obviously, but it's been soldered into place." He let out a tight sigh through his nose.

"And what's that mean?" John asked.
He got his answer as Sherlock typed another question into the phone's text-messenger. Acid, I presume? Or explosives? Or did you attempt the moderately more clever route of a computer virus?

Again, the reply came back with nearly no lag-time. Explosive. It's more me. It was tagged with a smiley-face emoticon.

John winced. Depending on what she used, it could wind up simply frying the circuitry, or it could take a person's hand off at the wrist. I'm not altogether keen on seeing either outcome, personally. "Let's not mess with it, shall we?"

That earned John Sherlock's 'Don't Be an Idiot' glare. "I'm hardly going to give my brother the satisfaction of handing over unusable data, no matter how tempting it might be."

The phone chimed again. I'm taking your silence on it as a good sign. For me. Now, how about that dinner?

Returning his – their – attention to the phone, Sherlock scoffed at Adler's latest message. Not interested. All of the photos are on here, of course?

The taxi driver let out a low string of cussing. John glanced up and saw they'd hit a small snarl of slow-moving traffic around a construction site. The grating chirpy chime dragged his attention back to the phone. I have copies.

Sherlock wasted no time in replying. No, you don't. You'll have permanently disabled the camera uplink. Unless the contents were provably unique, you couldn't sell them.

The cabbie laid on his horn, thankfully drowning out the next chime. Who said I'm selling?

"She has a point," John said. "Didn't Mycroft tell us that she'd said she didn't have any intention to use them for blackmail?"

Sherlock looked up from the phone to twitch an eyebrow at his flatmate. "Didn't you notice the dark blue car, half a block down from Adler's house?" John's forehead wrinkled in thought. "The one with the tinted windows?" Sherlock clarified.

John just shook his head. "Sorry, but no. What about it?"

"Distinctly chosen to 'blend in', yet managing not to simply by virtue of diplomatic plates."

John blinked. "So… What country…?"

"Mmm, most likely CIA or NSA. They're the only two foreign agencies that can be simultaneously so competent and incompetent. So, whatever else might be saved to the phone, clearly it isn't just photographs."

The sparkly strangled-chicken alert noise interrupted any further discussion. That phone is my life. Anything you want and it's yours.

Sherlock glanced down. "Dull," he said, then typed, You have nothing I could possibly want. He hit 'send' and tucked the phone back into his pocket, then spent the remainder of the journey back to Baker Street staring out the windows.

After returning home, Sherlock divested himself of his Belstaff. "Contact Mycroft, won't you," he 'asked' John, while rapidly immersing himself in something on his laptop. I'm not your personal secretary, you know, John thought, but sent a text to the elder Holmes anyway.
Close to an hour later, unnoticed by either occupant in 221B, a black Mercedes-Benz saloon pulled
to a stop alongside Speedy's, parking just behind a nearly-identical Non-Describe Vehicle™ with
government plates. Irene climbed out of her car just as Mycroft Holmes let himself into the dark
green door of 221B. Hurrying in a way that failed to appear as such to anyone watching, Irene
managed to grab the door before it shut on her. "Mr. Holmes," she said, greeting Mycroft.

Mycroft paused partway up the stairs to his brother's flat and turned around. "Miss Adler, I
presume." It wasn't a question. "What brings you to Baker Street?"

She smirked at him. "As if you didn't already know, Mr. Holmes." She fidgeted a little with her
purse, sliding a hand inside. "Your little brother has stolen something of mine." She paused in her
blind rummaging as her fingers slid along the case to Sherlock's phone, her index finger nudging the
other item she was carrying. She'd had no intention of using it when she grabbed her purse on the
way out of her house, but…No sense in letting a golden opportunity get away from me. She ignored
the phone and wrapped her fingers around her tiny Miyako. "And I want it back," she said, bringing
the dart gun out of her purse and leveling it at Mycroft.

Mycroft's right eyebrow twitched slightly – a dim echo of a similar expression Sherlock tended to use
to exhaustion – and he slowly descended two stairs so that he stood on the third one up from the
bottom. A small, condescending smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "And just what do you
intend to do with that?"

Irene's smirk morphed into something a touch more feral. "Isn't it obvious, Mr. Holmes?" She pulled
the trigger and a teensy silver dart, barely bigger than a pencil-lead, flashed across the short distance
separating them, lodging in Mycroft's neck. "I intend to get my property back," she said, as the
sedative the dart contained rapidly took effect.

Mycroft's right hand flew up to the dart even as his knees slowly buckled. "Wha-" he tried, but
couldn't finish what he'd meant to say before gravity deposited him at the bottom of the stairs with a
loud thump of flesh meeting painted wood.

Smiling, Irene took the three steps needed to stand at Mycroft's head, her ears telling her that the
occupants of 221B would be making an appearance in short order. Before the footsteps above her
managed to show, the old woman who owned the property poked her head out of the frosted-glass
door to 221A. Irene aimed her Miyako at the woman. "This is none of your concern, madam. Kindly
return to your flat.

Mrs. Hudson's eyes grew large and round at the sight of the gun, but did as Irene ordered and
returned herself to her own living room with a loud slam of her door. She hoped it was enough to let
the boys know something was going on that needed their attention. Heartbeats later, she relaxed
minutely as she heard the thundering of two pairs of feet clattering down the stairs.

Back in the entrance hallway, Irene likewise heard the steps on the stairs and quickly traded her
Miyako for Sherlock's cell. She rested her right hand on the newel post, her left holding the phone
up, and then gently laid the edge of her left spike-heel against Mycroft's temple.

John crashed into Sherlock's back as the taller man halted partway down the final twelve stairs to the
entrance hallway. Sherlock ignored him and took another few steps down, revealing the tableau to
John's line-of-sight. "Miss Adler," Sherlock said, his back and shoulders tense in a way John recalled
last seeing during the confrontation with Moriarty at the swimming pool. You'd never know what she
does for a living if you passed her on the street, John thought – Adler was wearing a tasteful navy
suit with white trim along the edge seams.

"Care to trade?" Adler said, giving Sherlock's phone a little waggle with her hand. Sherlock slowly
lowered himself one more stair, but halted when Irene let out a negative, "Uh-uh-uh." Her white heel pressed slightly into Mycroft's temple, denting the scant flesh available, the threat implicit. "You stay right there. The lapdog can run after it."

Sherlock glanced over his shoulder at John. John caught a slightly bewildered expression on his friend's face before Sherlock's attention returned to Adler. "John," Sherlock said, his voice containing an odd undertone, "do as she says."

"Get the phone?" John asked, somewhat incredulous. _After all the work we went to in getting it to begin with, he just wants to hand it over?_ His conscience poked him. _Yes, yes, Mycroft._ He let out a mental sigh. _I don't like him. Still, even he doesn't deserve a spike-heel in his brain._

"Yes," Sherlock all but hissed, "the phone!"

John turned around and headed back up the stairs, seeing no reason to hurry. _As long as she thinks we're complying, she's not going to hurt Sherlock's brother any._ He paused at the landing, her voice clear. "So, while we wait... Care to tell me how it was done?"

"How what was done?" Sherlock asked.

"The hiker with the bashed-in head. I need to know. How was he killed?"

_How does she know about that? It hasn't had time to be in any of the papers yet!_ John frowned and only started up the remaining five stairs when he heard Sherlock say, "That's not why you're here," in as puzzled a voice as John had ever heard from him.

"No, but I assume your lapdog's going to try to pull something, and since we've time to kill before he realizes it's futile..." She sighed. "Besides, I like detective stories. Brainy's the new sexy."

A strange series of indecipherable syllables issued from Sherlock's throat, making John halt two stairs from the door to their living room. _What the hell was that?_ he thought, resuming his climb. The sound of Sherlock clearing his throat, the stairwell lending it and the words that followed an odd reverberation effect, coincided with John reaching their living room. "Er, the position of the car relative to the hiker at the time of the backfire. That and the fact that the death blow was to the back of the head. That's all you need to know."

John patted the pockets of Sherlock's Belstaff. _Illusion magic might work, but do I have anything I can use to anchor the illusion?_ While he mentally reviewed the contents of the drawer of dead electronics in the kitchen, the conversation downstairs continued.

"Okay," Adler said. "Tell me how he was murdered."

"He wasn't," Sherlock replied, his voice carrying a light dusting of the smug know-it-all with which John was intimately familiar.

"You don't think it was murder?" Adler's voice carried flavors of skepticism.

John's hand closed around Adler's phone as Sherlock replied, in something approaching his normal tone of voice, "I know it wasn't."

"How?" Adler asked.

"The same way that I know the victim was an excellent sportsman recently returned from foreign travel," Sherlock replied while John stared at Adler's black-and-gold Blackberry.
“Okay, but how?” Adler’s voice had rapidly taken on the same ‘get to the bloody point’ tone that Lestrade typically used at crime scenes. It had John forcing down a small smile. Wonder if Greg would find that his reaction isn’t atypical a comfort or not, considering.

“Imagine, if you will, the scene,” Sherlock said. “Two men alone in the countryside. They stand several yards apart, the one focused on his malfunctioning vehicle, the other staring at the sky in the opposite direction. Two men, a car, and nobody else. Any moment now, something’s gonna happen. What?”

John, as quietly as he could, moved into the kitchen to peruse the contents of their junk-drawer. *The hiker's gonna die*, he thought. He grimaced a little as Adler said his thought aloud.

“No, that's the result. What's going to happen?” Sherlock's voice, though still possessing a faint echo of the oddness which had defined his first verbal exchanges with The Woman, was nearly the same as when he addressed Anderson at crime scenes – prior to the start of insults.

“I don’t understand,” Adler admitted.

“Oh, well, *try* to,” Sherlock replied.

John carefully removed bits of what looked like a disassembled motherboard for a tower-PC. *I wonder how long they'll go on like this before Adler starts getting antsy for her precious phone?*

“Why?” Adler asked.

“Because no matter how high-class your clientele, you're still just a prostitute. Stop boring me and think – it's ‘the new sexy,'” the scorn on the last phrase practically oozed up the stairs.

*Careful, Sherlock,* John thought. *No sense in making her angry.* He needn't have worried, because a short pause preceded Adler's reply of, "The car's going to backfire."

"There's going to be a loud noise," Sherlock corrected.

“So what?” Adler asked. John winced as the contents of the junk-drawer rattled noisily.

“Oh, noises are important. Noises can tell you everything," Sherlock said. John didn't bother repressing the urge to roll his eyes. *No doubt he, at least, heard that. Don't think Adler did, though.* He shifted a tangled bundle of multi-colored wire out of the way.

"Dr. Watson!" Adler called up the stairs. "You are sorely testing my patience!"

John gave the junk-drawer a look like it had personally betrayed him for not housing any bit of gadgetry that would suit his needs, then hurried back down to where his flatmate stood next to the feet of his brother. He placed Adler's phone into Sherlock's waiting hand without a word.

Sherlock brought it around his side and looked down at it, but Adler spoke before he could. "That camera phone is my life, Mr. Holmes. It's my protection. I'd die before I let you keep it. Hand it over," she ordered, holding Sherlock's phone out on her upturned palm.

Stiffly, Sherlock reached out and traded her phone for his. "Ah, thank you, dear," she said, immediately focusing the majority of her attention on the gadget. "Be a darling and tell that sweet little posh thing the pictures are safe with me. Not for blackmail, mind, just for insurance." She smiled and looked up at Sherlock, the hand containing the phone dipping down to her purse.

"Besides, I might want to see her again."
"How do you expect to leave?" Sherlock asked, a rough edge flavoring his tone. "As soon as you remove your shoe from my brother's skull, even you have to realize you lose your bargaining edge."

A truly diabolical expression melted into place on Adler's face. "The thought had occurred," she said, then brought her hand out of her purse. A Miyako SDW was aimed in Sherlock's direction.

Sherlock let out a low chuckle. "And you expect to do what with that, Miss Adler? That particular model carries but a single dart, which you've already used."

A frown flickered across her face. "Hmm... I suppose you're right." The Miyako disappeared back into her purse. As her now-empty hand made a reappearance, she sighed. "I guess –" she said, then whirled into action, kicking her stiletto off and into Sherlock's face before turning and sprinting towards the door. Her other shoe was kicked off en route.

"Mycroft, John!" Sherlock shouted, then leapt over his prone brother and after The Woman.

John knelt next to the elder Holmes' head as the front door slammed shut behind Sherlock. He removed the dart from Mycroft's neck as the sound of squealing tires reverberated through the hallway. He was simultaneously putting light pressure on the dart-wound while counting Mycroft's pulse when Sherlock slammed his way back into the hallway.

"She got away." John said, the sentence not quite a question.

"Yes," Sherlock growled. "She got away."

At that moment, Anthony and the beautiful woman who followed Mycroft around entered. "What happened?" the woman asked, her eyes quickly assessing the situation. John couldn't help but notice how the hand not carrying her mobile twitched towards the telltale bulge of a shoulder-holster and the gun it contained.

"Anthea," Sherlock greeted the woman, inadvertently providing John with her name at last. "The situation is under control. Tell the driver he can stop being so twitchy."

Anthony had also taken in the situation, but hadn't hesitated in drawing his sidearm. A bit more used to sit-reps, John let Captain Watson take over. "He was hit with a diazepam dart," he explained, using his right hand to carefully lift Mycroft's eyelids one after the other to check the man's pupil-reactions. "He have any problems with his blood-pressure?" he asked, glancing up at Anthea, Anthony, and Sherlock.

"No," was their simultaneous reply.

"Good," John said, carefully removing his fingertip from the puncture mark left by the dart. It didn't start bleeding. "I'd put a sticking plaster on the injection site, but he should be fine in about an hour, maybe two hours at the outside."

"Likely longer," Sherlock volunteered as Anthony put his gun away. "Mycroft's abnormally sensitive to benzodiazepines and other GABA-inhibitors." He pointed at Anthony. "You – help me get him up the stairs."

"At once, sir," Anthony replied, stepping around Anthea – who was rapidly typing on her phone – to nudge John out of the way. John retreated up to the landing, giving Sherlock and Anthony room enough to hoist Mycroft up between them, then haul the unconscious man up the steps; Sherlock carrying his brother's upper half, with Anthony in charge of Mycroft's legs.

Eventually, the pair managed to get the elder Holmes settled on the sofa, his jacket and waistcoat
stripped and folded neatly on the coffee table, with his shoes under it. "His meetings for the rest of today have been rescheduled," Anthea announced, her focus briefly leaving her phone in favor of her employer.

"You might want to add his morning appointments as well," Sherlock said, his tone dismissive, but John could still read the worry in his friend's posture. He had to smother a completely inappropriate smile at his realization that though they had as antagonistic a relationship as John had ever seen, they were still brothers.

"Will do," Anthea agreed. "Will you need anything more?"

Sherlock shook his head. "I'm sure he'll contact you when he's ready, though I doubt that will be any earlier than seven tomorrow morning."

"Come along, Anthony," Anthea ordered. The man fell into step behind her as she left the flat.

"Tomorrow morning?" John straightened from his kneeling position next to the sofa – he'd been placing an Elastoplast over the injection site. "Should I be worried?" he asked, meaning, 'if that's the case, shouldn't he be in hospital?'.

Sherlock shook his head. "No. Assuming he follows his typical pattern, it will take approximately five hours for the diazepam to wear off, after which he will simply delve into a normal sleep. And since Mycroft could sleep through a football-riot, he'll wake at his usual time of six o'clock in the morning."

"So I won't need to contact the chemist's for a dose of flumazenil?"

"Shouldn't," Sherlock agreed, settling into his armchair and into the Sulk to End All Sulks.

Despite Sherlock's reassurances, John proceeded to check on Mycroft every twenty minutes until signs of REM sleep surfaced – right on schedule, at nine-thirty – even while explaining to Mrs. Hudson just what had happened that afternoon when she'd shown up with supper and a veritable herd of questions.

Once Mycroft had proven he'd be fine, and with Sherlock's mood being what it was, John didn't linger overlong in the living room. Instead, he had one last cuppa, then headed for his own bed.

The next morning, he drifted downstairs to the sound of Sherlock rattling around in the kitchen. Hope he isn't going to do anything to make the flat stink today. Not after yesterday's escapade. Don't think I'd handle it. Not today. His sleep-blurred brain caught sight of Mycroft, sitting on the couch and frowning into a cup of coffee. It took him a moment to recall that the elder Holmes had spent the night on their sofa. "Good morning, Dr. Watson," Mycroft said, glancing up at John.

John prodded a few more neurons online. "Morning," he replied. "Sleep well?"

"Rather so," Mycroft said with a grimace of distaste.

"Good," John mumbled around a yawn, then stumbled towards the kitchen and its promise of caffeine. Sherlock was sitting at the kitchen table with his own cup of coffee, flipping through a newspaper. A plate of scones indicated that Mrs. Hudson and been to visit, though she wasn't there any longer. John helped himself to one of the scones and a cup of the likewise Mrs.-Hudson-provided-coffee. "Your brother alright?" he asked, sitting at the only other marginally-clear space on the table, to Sherlock's left.

"Why ask me? He's in the living room."
"Yeah," John took a drink. "But I figure you'd be more honest than he would."

Sherlock's 'that was astute of you' expression flashed across his face. "He will be fine. Likely has a touch of a headache, but he deserves it."

"How d'ya figure?" John asked around a mouthful of scone. "He had the worst day of all of us yesterday."

"Had he not insisted on collecting the phone personally, Irene would not have been able to wheedle her way into retrieving it." Sherlock turned a page. "It was yet another –" A rather obscene-sounding female sigh emanated from beneath the remainder of the newspaper on the table, interrupting what he was going to say next. Sherlock twitched, then retrieved his own phone from its hiding place. John leaned over and read the text message. I've got it! So the car's about to backfire and the hiker's staring at the sky. The car backfires and the hiker turns to look which was his big mistake. Sherlock let out a sound that was somewhere between a strangled groan and a huff of irritation, then laid the phone on the discarded portions of the paper. Moments later, the orgasmic 'ah' echoed through the kitchen again.

This time, the message read, I've got it! So the car's about to backfire and the hiker's staring at the sky. The car backfires and the hiker turns to look which was his big mistake. Sherlock let out a sound that was somewhere between a strangled groan and a huff of irritation, then laid the phone on the discarded portions of the paper. Moments later, the orgasmic 'ah' echoed through the kitchen again. This time, the message read, By the time the driver looks up, the hiker's already dead. What he doesn't see is what killed him because it's already being washed downstream. A third 'ah' sounded even before Sherlock could dismiss the previous message. An accomplished sportsman recently returned from foreign travel with a boomerang. You got that from one look? "definitely" the new sexy.

Mycroft, carrying his empty mug in one hand, entered the kitchen just as Sherlock's phone sighed a fourth time. Good morning, Mr. Holmes, it said. John saw Mycroft shoot a disgusted glance at his brother before crossing the room to deposit his mug next to the sink. "What are your plans to reacquire the camera phone?" he asked without preamble.

Sherlock slowly looked up from his phone. "Who says I'm planning anything?" Mycroft merely looked at his brother, an air of expectation flowing off him in waves. "I had the phone. It was your fault it got away. That makes it your responsibility to retrieve it, don't you think?" Mycroft opened his mouth to argue the point, but Sherlock continued before a single syllable could escape. "Besides, the photos are perfectly safe."

"In the hands of a fugitive sex-worker," Mycroft finally got a word in edgeways.

"She's not interested in blackmail," Sherlock said, setting aside the newspaper in favor of toying with his phone. "She wants..." he frowned at something on the screen and John leaned over again to read it. Code incorrect. Try again. "Protection for some reason," Sherlock concluded the thought while entering something on the keypad.

"How can we do anything while she has the photographs? Our hands are tied."

"She'd applaud your choice of words," Sherlock wisecracked with another frown at his phone. "You see how this works: that camera phone is her 'get out of jail free' card. You have to leave her alone. Treat her like royalty, Mycroft."

"Though not the way she treats royalty," John couldn't help but quip.

"There's nothing you can do and nothing she will do as far as I can see," Sherlock said, finally setting his phone aside.

"I can put maximum surveillance on her," Mycroft argued.

"Why bother? You can follow her on Twitter. I believe her user name is 'TheWhipHand'."

Mycroft's phone let out a strangely-cheerful chiming noise. "Yes, most amusing," he said, retrieving
his mobile from his jacket's inner pocket and looked at the screen. "'Scuse me." He exited through the
door to the stairs.

Sherlock's phone sighed orgasmically yet again. This time, Sherlock just shot a glare at it. Once his
eyes flicked off it, they landed on John. "About yesterday – how was she able to do what she did? I
was under the impression your alterations would have precluded it."

John let out a small sigh of his own, though his was tinged with frustration rather than sexual bliss.
"I'm not a hundred percent certain, mind, but I think it's a combination of factors. Firstly, I doubt she
intended to do what she did when she entered the front door. Compounding that, Mycroft doesn't
live here – the protections are specifically crafted to keep residents safe."

Sherlock nodded in understanding while his hands sought out the next of that day's papers for
perusal. The action didn't disguise the quick flicker of Sherlock's 'so that's why' expression, but John
wasn't sure he wanted to know. A couple of companionably silent moments later, Mycroft returned.
"Bond Air is go, that's decided. Check with the Coventry lot," he said into his mobile. "Talk later,"
he finished the conversation, then returned his phone to its place in his pocket.

Sherlock leveled a hard look at his older brother. "What else does she have?" Mycroft blinked at
him. Sherlock rolled his eyes. "Irene Adler! The Americans wouldn't be interested in her for a couple
of compromising photographs. There's more." At the indescribable expression on his brother's face –
one that even John could tell meant that Sherlock was completely and totally right about his
assumptions – Sherlock let out an afterthought-sounding, "Much more." Mycroft quickly schooled
his face into impassivity. "Something big's coming, isn't it?"

Mycroft cleared his throat. "Irene Adler is no longer any concern of yours. From now on you will
stay out of this."

"Oh, will I?" Sherlock challenged.

"Yes, Sherlock, you will." Mycroft's tone and expression promised dire retribution should Sherlock
fail to comply. "Now, if you will excuse me, I must be getting on with my day; beginning with a
long and arduous apology to a very old friend." He left with Sherlock's eyes trying to burn holes in
his back.

That was the last said on the topic of Irene Adler for quite some time, though those highly-sexual
alert noises kept sporadically echoing throughout the flat a couple of times a week for the next few
months. As far as John could tell – though he never again saw the content of them – Sherlock never
replied. It didn't stop John from keeping a running tally of the number of times She called.

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July 8, 1990

Ajay hung up his archaic rotary telephone receiver with a click. "That's settled, then," he said to
himself, then looked at his students. "Hate to cut the lessons short, guys, but this takes precedence."
He jerked his chin towards the door. "Time for you two to head on home. I'll see you next week,
same time as always."

"Sure," Mary agreed.

"Yeah," John said, only slightly less agreeable. "You positive you don't want our help?"

Ajay blanched a little, though neither teen would have noticed had they not known him so well.
"No," he said. "Absolutely not. You two go home. If you're that worried about it, I'll call you tomorrow to let you know what happened."

"Alright," Mary said, grabbing John's right elbow in a no-nonsense grip. "See you next week, Ajay."

John echoed the goodbye and allowed Mary to pull him down the hall and stairs and out the shop's door. Half a block towards the subway station, he shook her off. "I can walk perfectly well on my own, you know."

One of Mary's eyebrows crept towards her hair. "Yeah – I know. Just like I know you. Spill it, Johnny."

"Spill what?"

"You're planning something, I can tell."

"No, I'm not," John insisted, even though he'd yet to successfully lie to Mary.

"Yes, you are," Mary yelled at him, drawing the attention of nearby pedestrians. She adjusted her volume to a venomous hiss, "Now, spill it!"

John closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He reached for his magic, not intending any specific spell, but wanting to force Mary to believe him. *Forgive me for this, Mary, but I know why Ajay doesn't want us there – it's the same reason why I don't want you there.* "I promise, Mary," he said, magic threaded through his words, "I'm not. Well, not what you think. Wanna go see that new horror flick with me?"

A slightly dazed expression flitted across his best friend's face, disappearing when he finished his question. "Which one?" she asked, completely ignoring her previous line of enquiry, almost as though she didn't remember her suspicions.

"Tremors," John replied. "S'posed to be about these giant man-eating worms or something like that."

She made a disgusted expression. "Gag me with a spoon! I'd rather go see Joe versus the Volcano, if you wanna go to the cinema."

John scratched the back of his head. "That's that new rom-com with whatshisface from that film Harry loves so much – you know the one I mean, with the blonde mermaid?" Sensibly, he left off from further clarifying 'with the spectacular arse' – honestly, that scene was the only reason he ever sat through the film with his sister.

"Splash," Mary provided the title with a nod. "And yeah, that guy. What d'ya say?"

John wrinkled his nose and started walking towards the subway. "To use a direct quote, 'gag me with a spoon'. I may watch that type at home when Harry's got possession of the remote and there isn't anything better to do with my time, but I'm not gonna waste money to see it in theater."

"Well, I don't wanna see anything with guts'n'gore."

"Looks like – as per usual – the cinema's right out. Too bad we're not in New York."

"Why?" Mary asked.

"The second *Die Hard* came out last week. It won't be shown here for at least another coupla months."
"Too bad," Mary agreed. Hardcore action were about the only films the both of them could agree on, and both had loved the first Die Hard movie. "So, what else d'ya have in mind?"

John shrugged, then reached for his magic again. "Really wanna see that horror flick – and you know it pro'ly won't still be showing next week. I don't mind going alone. Really. You can go do whatever or go on home." It wasn't as strange as it was the first time, weaving it in around his words, and was slightly easier to accomplish.

This time, the dazed expression did little more than flit across Mary's face before she shrugged. "I suppose. Won't kill either of us to spend an afternoon apart. See you tonight?"

John shrugged again. "Maybe tomorrow. Dad was making noises about going out to eat tonight, so if I get home in time, we'll just be heading right on out again. Tomorrow morning?"

The pair paused at the entrance to the subway. "Sounds like a plan, Johnny-boy. See ya." Mary turned and headed down to the station with a little wave of her hand. John turned and headed for the nearest bus-stop. He had absolutely no intention of going to the cinema – not immediately, at any rate – but the same bus that would have taken him to his and Mary's favorite cinema would also take him to another shop he knew well.

October 31, 2011

"You going?" John asked, flopping onto the sofa. For the sixth day in a row – excluding Sunday, of course – he'd been out filling in applications and dropping off résumés as a direct result of his bank balance reaching a panic-inducing low.

"Where?" Sherlock asked, not bothering to look up from the slide he was examining through his microscope.

"Molly's fancy-dress party."

Sherlock paused and even though his back was to John, John could read the frown on his face. "Fancy-dress party?"

"Yeah, for Halloween."

"Is that today?"

"Yes," John said, idly wondering how long it'd been since Sherlock had bothered checking the date. "So, are you?"

He let out a huff of air. "I think not. Costumes are for children."

"Says the man who I personally have seen don any number thereof in the pursuit of wheedling information out of suspects and witnesses."

"Those aren't costumes," Sherlock corrected, twisting around on his chair to glare at his flatmate. "Those are disguises. There's a difference."

"If there is, I'm sure it's solely inside your head." John held up a 'stop' hand to keep Sherlock from expounding on his ideas. "No, don't. You could've just said, 'no, John, I don't want to go, but have fun and tell Molly I said hello'."
The Holmesian 'sucking-on-a-lemon-because-you're-right' expression surfaced, the same way it always did when John took it on himself to teach Sherlock socially-acceptable methods of human interaction. Sherlock sniffed disdainfully. John glared lightly at him. Sherlock let out a small sigh. "No one's here but you."

"Doesn't matter."

"Fine," Sherlock spat with a roll of his eyes. "'No, John, I don't want to go, but have fun and tell Molly I said hello'. Happy?"

John grinned. "Your tone could use some work, but I'll take what I can get."

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**July 8, 1990**

He paid for a six-pack of the largest firecrackers the shop sold, then checked his watch. *Think I'd better actually go see the bloody flick, elsewise Mary's gonna be suspicious.* He didn't want to. *But it's best to be prepared, I'm sure.* John left the fireworks store and set off for the nearest cinema.

It was his lucky day – *Tremors* began another showing just minutes after he arrived.

It was the longest hour and a half of his life to date, and on leaving the cinema, he wasn't entirely certain how effective his ruse would be; he couldn't remember large portions of the film.

It wound up rather a moot point.

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**November 22, 2011**

As it turned out, the locum position he'd landed at a local surgery managed to be something of a sanity-saver; true, Sherlock had managed to land a string of paying clients when it became obvious John hadn't been kidding about the money, but money wasn't entirely the issue. *I need to get out of the flat for something other than crime scenes and criminals from time to time.* It helped that he would only have a handful of shifts in any given month, and then only if they were busy or severely short-staffed. *Dr. Sawyer isn't too bad, either. I've had worse bosses,* John smiled at the memory of Sarah flirting lightly with him the day before – at the close of his second-ever shift. They were going to dinner come Saturday. He hadn't stopped grinning since.

It had taken six thrown objects bouncing off his forehead before he'd managed to quit whistling.

He was still grinning when he picked up the telephone to order his and Sherlock's dinner. Before he could punch any buttons, however, a voice called out from the pavement below the flat's living room windows. "John! Johnny-boy! You home?" The shouted question was punctuated by a solid ten seconds of steady pressure on the door buzzer.

John's good mood shattered on the floor. "Damn it," he grumbled, heading out the door and down the stairs, Sherlock's curious gaze following him.

The buzzing switched over to constant knocking on the wood, and any lingering hopeful doubt as to just who was visiting fled John's mind. He opened the door and his sister fell – literally – into his arms amid a cloud of vodka fumes and other less savory scents. "Johnny!" she shrilled in an overly-
enthusiastic greeting, then promptly puked on his shoes, and dissolved into sobs.

"Oh, Harry," John sighed, unfazed by his sister's actions. "Come on, up you get," he pulled her into a semi-upright position and slung her arm around his neck. By the time they'd taken two steps, he realized it was a pure miracle she'd managed to walk over – even if it had only been the few short paces needed to get from a cab to the door – and simply scooped her up. Thank god she's tiny. Harry stood four-eleven and weighed all of six stone sopping wet. The sentiment came mostly from the scar tissue in his shoulder and knee. His inner doctor, however, was appalled that she'd lost close to fifteen pounds since he'd last seen her, back in mid-August, particularly since she'd been unhealthy-skinny even then.

Mrs. Hudson's eternal curiosity had her poking her head into the hall way. "Oh, my… Is she alright?"

"She will be," John said, resignedly. He had to raise his volume a little to be heard over the sound of his sister's keening. "I'm going to toss her into the shower. Be back in a few minutes to clean up the mess."

Mrs. Hudson shook her head. "No, dear – you take care of Harriet," she said. "I'll deal with… it."

Even though Mrs. Hudson hadn't met Harry before, it didn't take Sherlockian levels of deductive capability to suss out that they were related – Harry's hair was longer and didn't sport quite so much grey – white – and she was shorter, of course, but otherwise she looked like a female version of John. "Thank you," John said. "You're a real peach, Mrs. Hudson."

She smiled at him and made a shooing motion. "Go on then. I've got this," she said, ducking back into her flat for – presumably – cleaning supplies.

On arriving in the living room – the shorter path to the downstairs bath through the kitchen entrance was temporarily out-of-order until Sherlock found a new place to store the dorm-sized fridge John had purchased secondhand for his flatmate's experiments after finding his yogurt invaded by strange orange slime for the fifth week in a row – he leveled a strong glare at Sherlock. "Not now," he said, inadvertently using Captain Watson.

Sherlock's jaw snapped shut with a clack of teeth.

John had managed to wrestle his incoherent sister into Sherlock's shower, removing only her leather coat and shoes. The puddle she'd left on his shoes obviously wasn't the first time her overindulgences of the day had managed to make a reappearance. About the same time that the spray began running cool, Harry's loud wailing had tapered off to silent tears and hiccups.

A polite rap sounded on the frosted glass door that opened into Sherlock's room. More than a little curious, John temporarily abandoned his hawk-like observance of his sister and cracked the door open. Sherlock handed him a pile of folded clothing without saying a word. Confused, John took the clothing and shut the door. The shower turned off and he looked to his sister. She'd curled up on the bottom of the tub. "Was gettin' too col'," she slurred. Disturbingly, there were still tears.

John unfolded the towel on the top of the pile Sherlock had handed him. The next item in the stack surprised him – it was a set of pajamas, adorned with little pictures of a skull'n'crossbones flag and teeny pirate ships. They were far too small to fit his lanky flatmate, until John realized that they were probably a childhood favorite, kept for nostalgia's sake alone. Despite his sister, the mental image of a child-aged Sherlock, ten years old or so, wearing these pajamas made him smile. He sat the flannel shirt and pants on the closed toilet lid, then wrapped the towel – Sherlock's favored insanely-expensive light blue Egyptian cotton – around her shoulders and helped her to sit up.
"Better?"

"Than?" Harry bitterly asked.

"Than when you showed up."

"Clara's getting remarried." She hiccupped. "To a man."

_Shit._ That explained everything. "Come on," he briskly rubbed her upper arms through the rapidly-moistening towel and her t-shirt. "Let's get you into some dry clothes."

_I'm not even gonna lecture her. Not this time. Not for at least a week. Then if she's still hiding in a bottle, we'll have words. But not tonight. Not tomorrow, either._

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*July 8, 1990*

John spent nearly two hours in the library, reading through their lamentably small occult section before finally – _finally!_ – locating what he was looking for. Dutifully, he copied the spell over into his notebook, then spent a few minutes looking up 'fiddlehead fern' only to find out it was another name for bracken. He smiled. _Shouldn't be too hard, then_, he thought, rushing out of the library to catch the next bus.

By the time his watch indicated that it was coming up on the time he'd told his mum he'd be home, he had all the ingredients he needed. He paused at a public phone box long enough to call his parents. His mum answered. "Hey, Mum. It's John. I'm gonna be later than I thought gettin' home – I met up with a coupla mates an' we're gonna go see _Tremors_. It'll be over in time for me to catch the midnight train, if that's okay."

"That's fine, Johnny, but you be careful coming home so late. Mary going with you?"

"Nah – she didn't wanna see the flick. Headed on home without me."

"Call if you're –"

"Gonna stay over at someone else's place – yeah, Mum, I know." John smiled, both at the fact that he'd manage to get double-miles out of the film and at his mother's predictability. "See ya when I get home." He hung up before she could get side-tracked on a tangent. Had it been anyone but his mum, he would've felt guilty hanging up without saying goodbye, but he knew his mum too well – had he remained on the line, she would have talked his change out, going over all the boring little details she'd done in her lab that day.

Whistling somewhat tunelessly, he turned away from the phone box and set out looking for a decently private place where he could assemble what the book had touted as an honest-to-god _invisibility_ charm.

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*December 24, 2011*

Even though Sarah had needed to work – she refused to pawn off the holidays onto others, it was 'her year' according to the rotating schedule she'd established six years prior, and nothing was going
to make her break her word to her other employees, not even a new boyfriend in the guise of one adorable Dr. John H. Watson – John was still having a reasonably good time. The party hadn't been planned. Mrs. Hudson had brought up a massive pot of steaming wassail along with her gifts for her tenants, and not even half an hour later, Greg had shown with his own version of a present for Sherlock in the form of a manila file folder from NSY. That had led to Sherlock wanting an opinion on a seemingly-genuine Egyptian statuette at the edge of one of the photographs, so John had called Mary, who arrived minutes later, dragging Ajay along with her. Ajay stuck around for nearly an hour before pleading bookkeeping duties, but by then Sherlock had needed the autopsy report, so Molly was on her way over.

Mrs. Hudson managed to coerce Sherlock into picking up his violin with 'it always makes you think more clearly, doesn't it?' and, surprisingly, Sherlock, either in a fit of holiday cheer or thanks to three cups of the insanely-strong wassail, managed to stick to music in keeping with the season, though he drew the line at donning the antler-headband Mrs. Hudson mentioned having in her flat. Currently, he was playing *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*. He brought the tune to a close with a flamboyant flourish and bowed only a little mockingly to the assembled group.

"Lovely, Sherlock. That was lovely!" Mrs. Hudson exclaimed while Lestrade clapped politely and John let out a quick whistle – his hands were carrying another cup of wassail for Mrs. Hudson and a pair of beer bottles for himself and Mary and so couldn't clap without spilling something. Mrs. Hudson let out a small giggle and said, "I wish you would have worn the antlers!"

"Some things are best left to the imagination, Mrs. Hudson," Sherlock replied, for once managing to keep the scorn he no doubt felt at such a suggestion from coloring his words.

John handed the wassail to the slightly-soused landlady, "Mrs. H."

"Thank you, John," she replied, taking the cup.

John then turned to Mary and handed her the second bottle of beer. "Cheers," he said, clinking his bottle to hers.

"Got anything to nosh on?" Mary asked, then swigged half the bottle in one go.

"Yeah," John said, pointing with his own bottle. "There's a gigantic platter of cake and mince pies that Mrs. H brought up yesterday…." A thought suddenly struck him. He turned to their landlady. "Did you plan this?"

"Plan what, sweetheart?" Mrs. Hudson asked, her smile just a touch too innocent for John's peace of mind.

"The --" he belched. "'Scuse me – this. Did ya plan this," he gestured to the people gathered in their living room.

"Why no! It's just a happy coincidence!" Mrs. Hudson was a little more convincing that time, but not enough to put the alcohol-buzzed suspicion completely out of John's thoughts.

"Mmm-hmm," John layered the syllables with a thick dusting of cynicism, but decided not to say any more on the subject.

"Ah, who gives a shit if it was planned or not?" Mary said. "It's Christmas! Parties are part'n'parshel – parchel – peersell – fuck. Think I've… dranked? Drunked? Dranken?" She sighed and gave up, downing the rest of the bottle of beer. "Damn but this is good, Johnny-boy. Got any more?"

"Think you had it right the first time – you've had enough," John said, laughing at her vocabulary
"Tai-ten tem!" Mary argued, then ruined it by giggling madly. (2)

John rolled his eyes. "If you're gonna babble in whatever the heck that was, I'm gonna stick to Arabic the rest of the night."

"Was 'Gyptian, Johnny. Said it before to ya – ya jus' never lissen!" She grinned at the room in general. "'Sides, I never did believe ya."

John snorted. "A'yaad meelad Saeedah," he said with a grin to rival Mary's. "In keeping with the season, o'course."

"And that was…?" Greg asked.

John repeated it. "Means 'merry Christmas'. Wanna know the most useful phrase ever in Arabic? 'A'dar adfa gharāma al'ān?,'" he repeated it more slowly and Greg echoed him until he managed to mimic John exactly.

"What's it mean? I'm not asking for something I shouldn't, am I?"

John shook his head. "Nope. Means 'Can I just pay a fine now?' You say it any time a policeman starts hassling you. And yeah," his grin brightened, "it is a bribe you're offering with it. Standard practice, particularly if you wind up in the company of a whole half-squadron of drunken Americans." He laughed. "Surprised I made it back to base that night with any cash left on me! Was a night to remember," he sighed fondly.

Greg joined in on John's laughter. He might not have ever been in the military, but he spent a year backpacking across Europe between secondary and uni and had had a few of 'those nights' as well.

"What's another one?"

John thought for a moment, then said, "'Aḥtāj qahwa'. Or 'Aḥtāj shay'. First one's 'I need coffee'. Second's the same for tea. But if you're ever in Baghdad, don't drink the tea." He emphasized it with a melodramatic shudder. "The coffee's bad enough, but the tea, man, the tea! It's sacrilege, what they do to it."

Further conversation hiccupped as footsteps approached. Molly quickly showed in the doorway.

"Hello everyone!" She smiled shyly at the group. "It said on the door just to come up." She sat a pair of paper gift-laden bags on the table that stood to the side of John's armchair.

John returned her smile, but chalked up another point in the 'Mrs. Hudson ruddy well planned this' column in his head. While everyone greeted Molly, Sherlock muttered, "Oh, everybody's saying hullo to each other, how wonderful." His sarcasm was thick enough to cut with a knife.

Everyone ignored him. Mary gestured to the empty sofa cushions off to her right. "Have a seat! Don't think we met yet." She attempted to drink from her empty bottle, glaring at it when it proved to contain no more beer. "I'm Mary Morstan," she said, setting the bottle on the coffee table with exaggerated care. "Known Johnny-boy there since we was li'l kids."

"I trust you brought the autopsy file?" Sherlock interrupted.

Molly nodded, then gestured to one of the bags she'd brought with her. "Yes. Did you want it now, or –"

"Ah, give it a rest for tonight, Sherlock. Case's waited three years. One more day isn't going to
matter," Greg said.

Sherlock grimaced, then sat his violin back into the case on the desk and plopped onto 'his' chair. He grabbed John's laptop and opened it, doing his best to ignore the room now that he'd played the obligatory carols.

Molly shucked her coat to reveal a black dress edged with silver and more suited to dinner at a posh restaurant than an informal not planned party at a friend's home. John's brain skidded to a halt. He was so used to seeing her in hideous jumpers and her stalwart white lab coat that the dress derailed all thought processes. The lack of thought didn't stop his mouth, however – he'd had just enough booze that there was no filter. "Kheyli khoshgel shodi," he breathed, taking her coat and laying it across the seat of a kitchen chair with Greg's without looking away from Molly. (3)

"Hey!" Mary protested, not knowing what he'd said, but all-too-familiar with his tone. "You got a girlfriend, Johnny-boy! Quit flirtin' wi' m'new BFF!" To Molly, she said, "Come on, sit here," she patted the sofa next to her. "Tell me where ya got your dresh."

"That wasn't Arabic," Sherlock commented, his gaze zeroing in on his flatmate.

"Nope," John cheerfully agreed with a tip of his beer bottle. "Dari."

"Jesus, John – how many languages do you know?" Greg sounded a little awestruck.

John frowned. "Lemme think – Latin was required in secondary and despite me tryin' my best, it stuck, an' not just the medical bits. Then I learnt Arabic at uni. Picked up on Dari and Pashto from the better part of livin' in Afghanistan for eight years. Know enough Mexican to be gettin' on with. Oh! And a handful of Farsi, but not enough to feel comfortable wi'out a translator handy." He counted quickly, using his fingers. "So that makes five an' a half."

"Don't you mean 'Spanish', not 'Mexican'?" Molly asked.

John shook his head, but Mary answered. "Hah! No way! They might call it 'Shpanish', but it's like the 'Mercans callin' what they speak 'English'. 'Specially the slang."

Molly tittered politely, then asked, "Do I smell mulled wine?"

"Wassail," Greg nodded. "Did you want a cup?"

"Please," she said. "You made it?" she aimed the query at Mrs. Hudson.

"Of course! Christmas is the one day a year where the boys," it was clear she meant Sherlock, specifically, "have to be nice to me, so it's worth it."

The computer finally booted up. Sherlock pulled up the web-browser and frowned when the home page finished loading. "John?"

"Hmm?" John strolled over and leaned down against the back of Sherlock's chair to see what had captured his friend's attention.

"The counter on your blog still says one thousand, eight hundred, and ninety-five."

"Oh, no," John mocked. "Christmas is canceled!"

Sherlock glared, lightly at first, then more seriously as he caught sight of the photo of himself that John had posted above the 'photo links', which in turn was situated directly above the counter in
question. "And you've got a photograph of me wearing that hat!"

"People like the hat," John replied.

"No they don't. What people?" Sherlock looked honestly confused, but John ignored him.

Molly took a cup of wassail from Greg, sipped at it, then turned to Mrs. Hudson. "This is really good. How've you been?"

"Thank you. Hip's as horrid as ever, but thanks for asking," Mrs. Hudson smiled at her.

"I'm sure I've seen worse, but then I do post-mortems." Her joke fell flat, though Mary let out an undignified snorting noise. "Oh, god, sorry," Molly said, her face pink.

Sherlock glanced up from the computer. "Don't make jokes, Molly," he said. Even though he didn't actually give voice to the rest of the thought, everyone present could hear the rest of his statement, 'you're not very good at it'.

Molly nodded, a little resigned. "No, sorry," she said, then turned to Greg. "I wasn't expecting to see you. I thought you were gonna be in Dorset for Christmas."

"That's first thing in the morning. Me and the wife – we've patched things up – are gonna take the kids to see their grandparents."

"No," Sherlock commented to the laptop. "She's sleeping with a P.E. teacher."

John noticed Greg's grin becoming rather fixed, but Mary snorted again. "You're an ass," she said, then climbed off the sofa, "Do you even hear the shit that falls outta your mouth? But," she said, maneuvering so that she was leaning heavily across the back of Sherlock's chair, "I'm thinkin' ya can't help it." She smiled brightly at Sherlock's face, which was edging ever-closer to the 'lemon-sucking' one of intense distaste. "But don't worry 'bout it none – we still like ya anyways." She landed a sloppy kiss on his cheek, which he immediately wiped off with the back of his hand. She giggled and, in a move that was far too graceful for someone who was three sheets to the wind, slipped in between Molly and Greg, wrapping one arm around either's shoulders. "I love Christmass! Don't you?" Mary then gave the pair of them quick one-armed hugs. She released Molly in favor of Greg and pulled him towards the sofa, but spoke to Molly, "You really do need ta tell me where you found that dresh – it's really pretty." Then she focused her attention on Greg. "An' you! I didn't know you was havin' problems wi' the mishus."

"No," Mary laid a finger across his lips. "Shush – jus' lissen, yeah? 'Member when we first met? Johnny really laid inta me 'bout droppin' by wi'out callin' first 'cause of that! But he tol' me he tol' ya 'bout the side-line?" She allowed Greg to nod. "Should ask Johny-boy ta help out. Bloody good at every-ruddy-thing! Charm, I'm thinkin' – you 'member the one I mean, Johnny?" she looked at John, then back at Greg. "Sure he does!"

"Mary, leave the guy alone," John wormed his way through the room and reached out to pluck her finger off of Greg's face. "Sorry," he said to Greg. "Shouldn't've let her have that last beer."

"Don't worry about it, mate," Greg said, springing from the sofa and back to his preferred place, leaning against the doorway to the kitchen. "I'd rather a friendly drunk than a belligerent one any day."

Molly looked confused. "What was –" she started to ask, but Sherlock interrupted.
"I see you've got a new boyfriend, Molly, and you're serious about him."

"Sorry," she blinked, looking from Mary to John and Greg, and back to Sherlock. "What?"

John knew that Sherlock was simply trying to keep someone else from finding out about magic, though John, personally, didn't see the harm – particularly since Molly was the only one present who didn't know. Then again, he thought, perhaps it's for the best. I'm not entirely sure Molly knows how to keep secrets. Not that it's a secret, but the fewer who know, the less likely it is I'll wind up in some government laboratory somewhere, never to be seen or heard from again. This knowledge, however, didn't keep him from feeling a stab of pity for what Sherlock was about to do to the poor girl.

"In fact," Sherlock said, seemingly unaware of both John's gratitude and his pity, "you're seeing him this very night and giving him a gift."

"Oh, take a day off!" Greg grumbled, oblivious to the underlying reasoning between the permanent residents of 221B.

"Have a drink!" Mrs. Hudson offered him her half-empty cup of wassail.

"Oh, come on!" Sherlock shook his head at his landlady. "Surely you've all seen the present at the top of the bag," he gestured towards the bags on the end-table. "Perfectly wrapped with a bow. All the others are slapdash at best."

And he takes it two steps too far. John felt a not-unfamiliar urge to smack his flatmate.

Sherlock stood and crossed over to the bags of presents, plucking the one he was talking about out of its bag. "It's for someone special, then. The shade of red echoes her lipstick – either an unconscious association or one that she's deliberately trying to encourage. Either way, Miss Hooper has lurve on her mind. The fact that she's serious about him is clear from the fact she's giving him a gift at all." John shot an apologetic look at Molly, but she wasn't paying him any mind. "That would suggest long-term hopes, however forlorn. That she's seeing him tonight is evident from her make-up and what she's wearing. Obviously trying to compensate for the size of," he glanced down and opened the card-style tag, "her mouth and," his words stuttered on seeing whatever was written, though his mouth – as always – was a bit behind in receiving the order to shut up, "breasts…"

Make that six steps too far, John thought.

Molly let out a sound that wasn't – quite – a sob, but wasn't far from it, either. "You always say such horrible things. Every time. Always," her voice was small and she looked like her dearest wish at that moment was for the floor to open up and swallow her whole. "Always," could barely be heard, even from right next to her.

The corners of Sherlock's face twitched slightly. "I am sorry," he said, managing to surprise everyone but John, who'd not only noticed the involuntary twitch, but also knew what it meant. "Forgive me." Sherlock took a step closer to Molly. "Merry Christmas, Molly Hooper," he said, giving her a light kiss on her cheek.

There was a beat of complete and total silence which shattered when Sherlock's phone let out an orgasmic female sigh. Molly went from looking a little star-struck to entirely shocked in a fraction of an instant. "No! That wasn't – I – I didn't –"

"No, it was me," Sherlock announced, cutting off Molly's unneeded denials.

"My phone," Sherlock corrected the assumption as he pulled said phone from his jacket pocket.

"Sixty-four," John said.

"Sorry," Sherlock said, looking at his phone's screen. "What?"

"Sixty-four of those texts – the ones I've heard," John extrapolated.

"Thrilling that you've been counting," Sherlock replied, stepping over to the fireplace. After a moment of quick searching, he plucked a small, red-wrapped gift from behind the Santa-hat-wearing Yorick. He stared at it for a moment, his eyes very far away from the here and now. "Scuse me," he quietly said, obviously preoccupied.

"What?" John asked. "What's up, Sherlock?"

Sherlock simply started heading towards his bedroom. "I said 'excuse me'."

"What's all that about, I wonder?" Greg asked the room at large.

Mary wandered over to John and nudged him. "Go see."

"Why me?" John asked, but was met with expressions from all and sundry which could have stood for the entry 'duh' in an illustrated dictionary. John let out a defeated sigh and trailed after his flatmate.

Sherlock's voice halted him at the door, which was partly open. "I think you're going to find Irene Adler tonight."

Since Greg's here, he must be talking to Mycroft. John might not be up to Sherlock's levels of deduction, but it didn't mean he wasn't capable of drawing a conclusion or two. He noticed that the gift Sherlock had plucked from the mantelpiece was now open. It took him a further second to realize that though Sherlock was speaking into his mobile, he held a second one in his other hand. That's Adler's phone.

"No," Sherlock said into his phone. "I mean you're going to find her dead." He ended the call and stared into the distance for a moment.

"You okay?" John asked.

Standing, Sherlock said, "Yes," then shut the door in John's face. John blinked at the door, his warm alcohol buzz evaporating immediately. Frowning, he wandered back out to the kitchen.

"So…" Greg said, startling John a little.

John had forgotten the others were there. He shook his head. "Nothing," he said. At Greg's skeptical look, he clarified, "Nothing good." He cleared his throat, then helped himself to a glass of water from the tap. "Think the party's over," he announced. He walked over to Molly. "Sorry for Sherlock."

"Don't worry about it," she said, giving him a small smile. "You'd think I'd learn…" she sighed. "Don't worry about it," she repeated. She stepped over to the bags she'd brought, then dug through them. "Here," she said, handing a silver-and-green wrapped gift to Mrs. Hudson and a similar one of a slightly different shape to Greg. From the other bag, she handed John one wrapped in the same red paper the gift Sherlock had been picking on, but lacking a bow, using a bit of green ribbon instead. From that same bag, she pulled the autopsy file Sherlock had asked for in connection to the case Greg had brought over. "Where should I leave this?" she asked.
"I'll put it with the casefile for now," John said, looking at both Molly and Greg. He received a pair of nods in reply.

Greg handed Molly her coat and took his own. "I'll walk you out, Dr. Hooper," he said, then to John, "I'll collect the files on Monday. I'm sure Sherlock will text if he finds out anything urgent."

"I'm sure you're right," John agreed. "See you two later."

After they'd gone, he turned to Mary, only to find she had passed out on the couch. "Suppose it's not going to hurt anything to leave her be for tonight."

"What's going on, John?" Mrs. Hudson asked, no trace of the wassail she'd drank in her speech.

John slowly shook his head. "I'm not entirely certain," he said. "But I'm positive it's like I said – nothing good." He took her empty cup and offered her a hand up. "I'll drop by if I find out anything."

"Be sure you do," she said, and the look she gave him promised dire retribution if he even considered holding out on her.

About twenty minutes after Mrs. Hudson had retreated to her own flat, Sherlock emerged from his room. "Where are you going?" John asked, looking up from the book Greg had given him for Christmas.

"Out," Sherlock replied, wrapping himself up in his Belstaff and cashmere scarf.

"D'you want –" John started to offer to go along, but Sherlock interrupted.

"No."

The sound of the front door slamming shut echoed through the flat like a gunshot.

John gave it a full hour before climbing out of his chair and carefully beginning to poke around the flat. I wonder if there's a way to use othersight for this? It would make my life so much easier if I could magically search the flat, rather than having to rely on my mundane senses. He checked the obvious places first – the desk drawers, inside Yorick, in the hidey-hole behind the mantle-mirror – then moved on to places less obvious, including the hollow space under the sill of Sherlock's bedroom window, the false-bottom under his socks, and the dumbwaiter in the stairwell. Afterwards, he checked behind the books on the shelves, inside the toilet-tank (for both the downstairs loo and the one in his own bath upstairs), and among the mysterious packages in the freezer. The only thing he found was a thruppenny bit from 1895, in startlingly good condition, in a crack on the stairs next to the wall.

Just to be thorough, John stood in the center of the living room and reached out with his othersense. As always, he felt/saw/smelt the setspells layered within/overtop the walls, the leyline running directly below, and the comforting glow of Yorick himself. Also, he noticed once more the strange 'ping' from somewhere upstairs – the second (third, if one counted the faint traces of setspells from the previous mage-occupant of the building… John realized on a level just shy of conscious that the unnamed ancestor of Mary's was likely the one who'd lost the threepence on the stairs) magical item in the flat prior to his moving in. Other than that, the only other things to register to othersight were those items which John already knew about – or, in two instances, were in Mary's pockets and as such already accounted-for.

Pretty sure he's clean. Just in case, though, I'm going to make sure my oxycodone is put away with my gun for now. After the last time he'd come home to find Sherlock toying with his pistol, John had
changed the safe's combination to reflect the best-kept secret he knew: Mycroft's birthday. John was pretty sure only he and Sherlock knew that particular date, and he was absolutely certain that Sherlock would never guess he'd use it for something even marginally important.

He had just finished his self-appointed task when his mobile rang. John glanced at the screen, hoping to see Sherlock's number, but was disappointed to see it was a call from the lesser Holmes. He hit 'answer'. "What do you want?" he snapped.

"Succinct as ever, Dr. Watson," Mycroft drolly replied. "I thought you ought to know that my brother is on his way back to Baker Street. We've identified Miss Adler's body in the morgue at St. Bartholomew's, though official verification will have to wait until the DNA can be tested."

John looked at his phone like it had done him a personal wrong. "What do you want? Don't think I haven't noticed you don't bother volunteering information unless it nets you something in return."

Mycroft let out a weary sigh. "Has it not occurred to you that we would do better as allies, Dr. Watson?"

"I don't like you. Not even a little."

"Unnecessary," Mycroft said. "If that were a requirement to a successful alliance, World War Two would have ended in a much different manner."

"I'll think about it," John said, then disconnected the call. I think that hell'll freeze over first, though. Less than twenty minutes later, Sherlock walked into the living room. John looked up from the novel Greg had given him. "You alright?" he asked.

Sherlock's eyes narrowed as they swept the room. "Hope you didn't mess up my sock index this time," he grumbled, heading back to his room.

The door clicked shut behind him and John let out a sigh. Hope that this black mood passes quicker than the last one did. He gave up trying to read and, after pausing to cover Mary with a fleece throw, retreated to his own room.

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July 8, 1990

John eventually found himself sitting on a park bench in Russell Square Park. It was a bit more exposed than he'd wanted, but the bench bridged a small leyline, so he was willing to overlook the downside of the location. He laid out the supplies he'd bought, then got to work. Firstly, he stripped the packaging from the six-pack of cherry bombs he'd purchased, then tucked half into either of his jacket's main pockets. The plastic cigarette lighter he'd received 'free with purchase' went into his left breast pocket.

Next, he focused on the small swatch of white cotton fabric he found in a sewing shop, in a basket of fabric ends intended for quilting. It was only six inches or so wide, but was nearly six feet long. He used the bone-handled penknife his dad's father had given him for his most-recent birthday to cut the fabric length into two pieces, one of which was nearly square. The other one went back into the small sack from the shop. He fished the packet of bracken spores he'd purchased from a gardening supply place out of his jacket's inner pocket and emptied it into the center of the fabric square, then used a new roll of Sellotape to close the fabric around the spores into a pouch. Then, he wrapped kite-string around the closure, using yet more tape to secure it in place. He cut the string from its
spool, knotted the loose ends together, and then slipped it over his head.

He quickly gathered up his trash and tossed it into the rubbish bin at the end of the bench before retrieving his leather-bound notebook from his backpack. John flipped to the page onto which he'd copied the spell details, and reread the instructions. *Okay, got it so far. Now, to activate it.* "I'm not here. Neither sight, nor sound, nor scent, nor sense of touch shall betray my presence. I am a hole in reality. Eyes aside, ears closed, I am not here," he read it from the page three times before he was sure he had the wording right, then put his notebook away. He swung his backpack on and recited the words one last time, pulling his magic into the incantation.

A wash of cool air swirled around him, starting with his beaten-up trainers and ending with stirring the ends of his shaggy, sun-bleached hair. It felt like standing directly in front of an air conditioner that was cranked up to 'max'. "Now, let's see if it worked." John looked around the park. It was only about half an hour until sunset, and as a result, there weren't as many people present as there had been when John'd arrived.

He spotted a likely test-subject and ran over to the older man wearing an outdated suit. "Hey, sir!" John shouted. The man didn't even twitch in his direction. "Hey!" The man kept on walking.

Grinning, John moved his attention to a young couple waiting at the crosswalk. "'Scuse me, but d'you know what time it is?" he said, moving to stand directly in front of them. Neither even glanced at him. He laughed a little, and backed away from them. "Seems like it's working," he said to himself, then headed back to the bench. "Now for the hard part."

He settled himself on the bench, curling his legs under him, then closed his eyes. He reached downwards with his othersense and sank into the leyline. *Milady Magic,* he thought at the leyline, *pardon the intrusion, but I've heard you calling for help. I'm here to answer your cry, in any way I may be of use. Master Singh believes the source of your distress to be someone by the name of Moran. If you would, show me where this Moran is. Please, milady. I want to help.*

The sensation of falling or of flying grabbed hold of his consciousness and pulled him rapidly away from his physical self. It was like getting caught in a fast-flowing river, complete with the feeling of not being able to breathe, of choking on inhaled water, of not being in control.

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*December 31, 2011*

A live violin lament pulled John from his sleep the morning of New Year's Eve. It was the same half-finished composition that had followed him into his dreams the night before. "For the love of… He barely knew her!" John muttered, rolling out of bed and stumbling towards the bathroom. *Wonder if the violin-thing means it's getting better or worse?*

An hour later, John was polishing off the remains of his Mrs. Hudson-supplied breakfast, but Sherlock was still standing at the window, sawing on his violin. Mrs. Hudson exited the kitchen, picked up John's empty plate and Sherlock's untouched one, shot a pointed look at John, then retreated back to the kitchen. "Lovely tune, Sherlock. Haven't heard that one before."

Sherlock paused in his work long enough to make a notation on the mostly-blank sheet music resting on the stand at his elbow, but otherwise made no indication that he'd heard her.

"You composing?" John asked the obvious, partly to see if he could get a reaction and partly because it was expected of him by this point.
"Helps me to think," Sherlock replied, returning to the music.

_Wow, four whole words, all at once, aimed at me and not the television. I guess this means he is getting better._ Rather than give voice to his frustration, John just asked, "What are you thinking about?"

Sherlock whirled around, his dressing gown fluttering with the motion. "The counter on your blog is still stuck at one thousand, eight hundred, and ninety-five," he pointed his bow at John's open laptop on the desk.

"Yeah. It's faulty. I can't seem to fix it, though Chris said he'd drop by tomorrow and take a look at the HTML."

Sherlock smirked slightly, and for the first time since Christmas Eve, John could see something of the normal Sherlock finally swimming up behind the younger man's eyes. "Faulty… or you've been hacked, and it's a message!" He pulled Adler's phone from his pocket and, after 'waking' it, hit four buttons with their corresponding beeps. One last beep sounded, immediately followed by a buzzing noise. Sherlock wilted. "Just faulty." He returned to his violin and the lament which was slowly driving John mad.

John let out a silent sigh. "Right," he muttered, then grabbed his winter coat and satchel. He joined Mrs. Hudson in the kitchen. "You know, I'd be happy to do those," he said, watching her wash the breakfast dishes.

"Don't worry about it. I don't mind," Mrs. Hudson replied, dunking a freshly-scrubbed teacup into the rinse water.

John shrugged into his coat. "D'you know if…" he trailed off for a moment, not quite certain how to phrase what he wanted to say.

"What?" Mrs. Hudson asked, looking up from her chore.

"Has he had any kind of… Well, a girlfriend, a boyfriend? A _relationship_? Ever?" He settled the strap of his satchel across his chest.

She slowly shook her head. "I don't know."

"How can _we_ not know?"

A small, sad smile surfaced on Mrs. Hudson's face. "He's Sherlock," she said. "How will we ever know what goes on in that funny old head?"

John sighed again. "Right. I'm off for a bit. Call if you need me, yeah?" He waited for her to nod, then cast one more look over at his flatmate before heading downstairs. He'd just pulled the front door shut behind him when an unfamiliar woman's voice called his name. He turned around.

"Yeah?" On seeing the beautiful woman waiting just a few steps away, he smiled, somewhat wolfishly. "Hello," he said, his voice about a half-register lower than normal. Had Mary been there—or any of the women he'd dated throughout his rather varied history—the tone would have likely earned him an elbowing. They weren't, though, so John was free to do as he pleased.

"So," she drawled, closing the distance between them, "any plans for New Year tonight?"

John opened his mouth to reply, but was halted by London's avatar materializing right next to him. She was looking more and more humanlike by the day. Right now, she was standing with a decidedly disapproving air. John's thoughts drifted towards the pretty blonde Sarah he'd been on his
way to see. His smile lost the flirtatious edge. "Sorry, do I know you?" he asked, fidgeting with his satchel-strap.

She shook her head. "No," she said. "Did you want to?"

"I've got a girlfriend already…"

"Pity," the brunette replied, as a sleek black Mercedes pulled up. "In that case, would you like a lift to wherever you're headed?"

John glanced at the car. *This isn't Mycroft. Car's too expensive to be government-funded, and this woman's definitely not Anthea. And I'd lay real money on it not being Anthony behind the wheel.* "Thanks for the offer, but I'm not going that far."

The woman lost her pleasantly flirtatious expression. "It would benefit you to get in the car, Dr. Watson."

Surreptitiously, John slid his hands into his pockets. His right hand wrapped around a small street-performer's trick, part of the traditional gift-pack he and Mary traded every Christmas. His left grabbed a hold of his notice-me-not charm. "You know, associating with Mycroft Holmes has taught me a few things, not the least of which is that climbing into a black car rarely results in anything good – at the best of times, it manages to upset my plans for the day, which I'm not willing to have happen today."

"Is there nothing I could say to convince you?" the woman asked, her eyes tracking something just behind John.

John figured it was either a muscle-bound minion, a gun-toting thug, or some combination of the two and decided it was time to make his exit. He quickly pulled his right hand from his pocket and tossed the percussive smoke bomb at the woman's feet. A loud popping noise heralded the arrival of copious quantities of lime-green smoke – a step up from year-before-last's pink – and retreated into Speedy's. He waved 'hello' to Mr. Chatterjee and ducked into the café's loo, where he quickly donned his notice-me-not. He returned to where he'd left the woman to find her speaking with a vaguely-familiar redheaded woman.

"He couldn't've just disappeared, Kate!"

"Well, he didn't run past me!" Kate replied, stamping her foot a little to emphasize her point.

"And he didn't go past me, or back into the flat. Did you check the café?"

Kate nodded. "Man inside said he hasn't seen him for a couple of days."

John resolved to buy Mr. Chatterjee a bottle of scotch. The pair bickered for another few minutes before giving up and climbing into the car. John followed the brunette into the back. The car pulled into motion and the brunette retrieved a mobile phone. After waiting for her call to connect, she said, "Sorry, but he wouldn't come… Yes, I know! It's so rare that you misread a man, but you did this time, starting with the fact that he said he's got a girlfriend… Then your sources are wrong… Uh-huh… We'll be there in about twenty minutes or so… Okay… See you soon." She ended the call with a sigh.

"Let me guess – she's not happy," the redhead commented.

"What was your first clue, Kate?" the brunette snarked.
Yet more evidence that this definitely isn't Mycroft's doing. I don't think he'd tolerate any sort of unprofessional behavior at all in his peons. John glanced out the window. They were heading roughly north, but couldn't tell exactly where. He got out his own phone and sent a quick text to Sarah, I might be late. Will that be a problem?

Five minutes later, he got a reply, no im ru6ing a bit be4nd myself woke up lbte.

John grinned at the mistake-heavy text. It was refreshing to know someone who was less technically-savvy than himself. Sarah hadn't even known how to text until he'd shown her. Should we just push it back until 13.00, then? he sent back.

This time the delay was a little longer. qmu37 go6d tn me

John scratched his head, staring at it. What? He frowned. I mean... What? It sounded good, so he sent it as his reply. Sarah was a little faster replying this time. sound7 g6d to me i hate t3ys

John figured he probably got the gist of it and decided not to torture his girlfriend any more. Okay, he sent, see you then. By the time he got another reply from her, this one just two numbers – '3' and '8', which he resolved to check against a standard keypad later – the Mercedes had pulled to a halt at Battersea Power Station. To his immense shock, Irene Adler was waiting.

Kate and the as-yet-unnamed brunette both got out of the car and began speaking at once, protesting the errand their mistress had sent them on. Never one to let an opportunity pass him by, John followed the brunette out of the car. He ducked out of sight of the triad of bickering females and removed his notice-me-not charm. Nonchalantly strolling back into their view, John idly commented, "You know, all the times I thought it'd be fun – having a group of girls fighting over me, I mean – I never imagined it to be so... disappointing."

The triad fell completely silent. The brunette and Kate both had 'fish-out-of-water' expressions. Adler, on the other hand, sported a flash of envy before recovering. "Hello, Dr. Watson. Care to tell a girl how you got here?"

John just let a tight smile cross his own face. "Trade secret, Miss Adler."

She crossed her arms over her breasts and sent quick, significant glances at her girls. They took the hint and retreated into the car with a pair of twin door-slams. "I'm sure I could get you to tell me," she said, her voice both flirtatious and threatening.

John shrugged, "I'm sure – given the chance – you could. However, you'd have a really hard time getting that chance, and then there's the question of whether or not you'd actually believe what I had to say." He glared at her, wiping the not-a-smile he'd worn from his face. "Tell him you're alive," Captain Watson ordered.

Irene proved to be made of sterner stuff than either Sally Donovan or Mycroft Holmes and shook her head. "He'd come after me."

"I'll come after you if you don't."

An expression John couldn't name flashed across her face – an odd sort of combined fear and respect and that same brief stab of envy he'd spotted already. "I believe you," she said.

John's next question appeared to take her completely by surprise. "Who was she?"

"Who?" Irene asked, a puzzled quirk to her brow lending the word a level of truth that had been, thus far, absent from her side of the conversation.
"That poor woman they ID'd as you. Do you even know? Do you even care?"

Irene sighed. "A very well-paid body-double. Her death was accidental, though fortuitous in its timing. To forestall your next query, Dr. Watson, she had no family – I was officially listed as her 'next of kin'."

John nodded slowly, the pieces beginning to formulate a complete picture in his mind. "The DNA...?"

"DNA tests are only as good as the records you keep," Irene explained.

"And you know the record-keeper." It wasn't a question.

A small smirk played at the edges of her mouth and eyes. "I know what he likes," she quipped. "I needed to disappear."

"Then why can I see you, and I don't even want to?"

Irene mock-pouted. "Way to bash a girl's ego, Dr. Watson." When he failed to react to her flirting, she let out a small sigh. "Look, I made a mistake. I sent something to Sherlock for safekeeping and now I need it back, so I need your help."

John let out a contemptuous chuckle. "You got a funny way of asking for help. Been taking lessons from Mycroft, have we?" She looked irritated at being compared to the elder Holmes, so John counted it as a success. "Here's a bit of free advice – you want help from someone, try asking them first. Attempting to abduct them generally just makes them angry and very unwilling."

"It's for his own safety," Irene said.

John shook his head. "No. Tell him you're alive."

"I can't."

"Fine," John replied, his voice indicating that he was unsurprised by her answer. "I'll tell him, and I still won't help you." He spun on his heel and began striding away.

"What do I say?" Irene called after him.

He stopped and turned around. "What do you normally say? You've texted him a lot!" It wasn't quite shouting, but it was definitely anger-laden and loud enough to echo throughout the cavernous area around the idling Mercedes.

Irene pulled a straight-from-the-box Blackberry out of her pocket and held it up with one hand. "Just the usual stuff," she said, sounding rather like a teenager trying to explain her way out of a tight spot.

John took a step closer to her. "There is no 'usual' in this case."

Looking down at her phone, she thumbed through her saved messages. "'Good morning',' I like your funny hat.' 'I'm sad tonight. Let's have dinner.' 'You looked sexy on Crimewatch. Let's have dinner.' 'I'm not hungry. Let's have dinner.'"

John blinked at her for a long moment. "You flirted with him?"

"At him," Irene corrected, then looked up from her phone. "He never replies."

"Sherlock always replies, to everything. He's..." he groped for the right descriptor and settled on,
"Mr. Punchline. He'll outlive god trying to have the last word."

Irene smiled. "Does that make me special?"

John shrugged. "Maybe it does."

Her smile took on a hard edge. Something about it put John in the mind of biting on tinfoil. "Jealous?" she asked.

"We're not a couple. For crying out loud – I've got a girlfriend!"

"Yes, you are – the one does not preclude the other," she countered, then held up her phone. "There. I'm not dead. Let's have dinner." Her thumb moved over 'send'.

"Who the hell knows about Sherlock Holmes, but, for the record, if anyone out there still cares, I'm not actually gay." He managed to refrain from rolling his eyes at the concept, but only just.

Irene finally showed something like a normal smile. "Well, I am. Look at us both."

Before he could reply, the obscene text-alert noise from Sherlock's phone sounded, echoing oddly in the open space. John just managed to triangulate the origin of the noise when footsteps crunching on gravel headed away from their location. He took a single step after Sherlock, but halted when Irene held up her hand. "I don't think so, do you?"

John could see her point. Sherlock never liked missing things on a good day, and the past week had been anything but good. "I think it's safe to assume he knows you want your phone back."

Irene huffed out a humorless little laugh. "I think you might be right, Dr. Watson." She took a deep breath and held it long enough that John's inner doctor was beginning to get a little concerned before she let it out again. She drew in another deep breath, then closed her eyes and tipped her head back, almost as though she were sending a plea up to the heavens. Again, John began to feel concerned before she blew it out in a long, noiseless whistle.

Against his will, he was actually starting to like the woman behind her flirtatious exterior. "Look," he said, startling her. He ignored the expression on her face that clearly indicated that she'd forgotten he was there. "How about you try doing this in a more normal-human fashion? I can't speak for Sherlock, but I know that he's unlikely to feel in any way sympathetic to whatever crap-heap you've landed in, but if I can, I'll help."

A bemused frown knitted together between her eyes. "But…"

John let a genuine smile out. "You're human after all," he explained. At her continued puzzlement, he threw her a bone. "I've seen that same expression on too many other faces; the one that says 'I don't know how I'm gonna get home alive'."

"That's right, you were a soldier," she said, her tone indicating she was thinking out loud. She tucked her phone back into her pocket and stripped off her gloves. "Do you think we could start over?" she asked, closing the distance between them.

"Yeah," John said, taking her hand. "Hi, I'm John."

"Hi, John," Irene said, an ironic little twist on her lips. "I'm Mels."

"Mels?" It was John's turn to be confused.
"From my middle name, Melanie. Only my friends call me that."

John grinned. "I've got a great aunt with the same name. I think she'd like you."

"Oh? Bit of a rebel?"

John nodded. "Definitely not what most people think when they hear the term 'great aunt'. Last time she bragged about it, she'd been arrested twenty times for public nudity."

Irene – Mels – giggled. "Sounds like my kind of woman."

"You know, you're better-looking when you're honest," John commented.

"Thought we were starting over?"

"Just an FYI. Won't say another word on it." John looked around. "Think we could go somewhere a bit more hospitable?"

"I know just the place," Mels said, heading for the car. She opened the door and leaned down. "Move to the front, Frannie." The brunette climbed out on the other side and moved to the front passenger seat, leaving the back door open for John. John slid into the car while Irene, her professional mask back in place, informed Kate to take them to an address in Soho with which John was more than passably familiar – it was a small bookshop half a block from Ajay's.

"Now, how about you start at the beginning," John said, settling into the leather-covered seat while the car pulled away from the power station.

"It began about a year ago," Irene said, then paused. "Well… Sort of. I've always taken discrete photos of my clients – I've a horrible memory for pinning names to faces, which, as you might imagine, is something of a hindrance in my line of work. I kept them in a database on my computer. A simple file that gave me the name they used with me, their real name if I knew it, and my own observations about them – what they like and so on."

John nodded. "I can see how that would come in handy."

"Anyway, about a year ago, I got a phone call from a man who wanted incriminating photos of one of my clients – a judge. Of course I told him to…" she glanced at him and shrugged. "Well, it wasn't particularly ladylike, but it got my point across. Next thing I knew, that same judge cancelled our next appointment, and threatened to have me brought up on charges. Not ten minutes after receiving that call, the mystery-man called back. He made it clear the threat was his doing. Said I could make it up to him by obtaining a few other photos of noteworthy clients. I enjoy my work, John, but not enough to go to prison for it."

"At some point, you're going to have to explain why you chose this particular career," John said.

"I enjoy it and am good at it. Isn't that enough?"

"I suppose," John allowed. "But, back to the mystery-man…?"

She nodded, "Yes, back to him. At first, it wasn't too bad. The pictures he wanted were of people I wasn't too happy having as clients to begin with. Not good people."

"Why have them as clients, then?"

"Like the judge, they were in positions that could either land me in prison or eliminate my client-
base. One has indirect control over the money Daddy left me when he died. I didn't have much choice. The mystery-man brought a whole new dimension to my appointments with them. I was able to take revenge on their… Well," she shifted in her seat. "I'm sure you can imagine."

"I'm not too sure I can, but I'll take your word for it."

She shot a small shadow of her flirtatious smile at him. "Vanilla, huh?"

John shrugged, "Not particularly – just not into confusing pain and pleasure. Not really my thing."

Irene chuckled, then sobered. "It went well for a few months, then his requests began getting harder to fulfill. That was back at the beginning of March. He started wanting more information on my other clients – the ones he didn't already know about."

"Let me guess," John said, "you told him off again, only to be met with another not-so-subtle threat?"

Irene nodded. "Exactly. Come the last week of March, he found out about a hobby of mine, and requested some specific items. I had no choice but to comply by that point – he had too many powerful men in his pocket, some of whom I'd put there with my photographs."

"What was the hobby?"

A small smile tugged at her mouth. "Do you know what I read at uni?"

John shook his head. "No clue. I'd guess business or drama, but that's all it'd be – a guess."

She smiled. "Makes sense, but no. I studied inorganic chemistry."

"Inorganic chemistry," John parroted her words like he wasn't quite sure what they meant. "You?"

"Me," she confirmed. "Always did like explosions, and it was a course of study Daddy approved of – not that it mattered much. He died in my final year."

"Sorry," John said.

"Don't be," Irene countered. "He was an ass." She twitched a little, dispelling memories, and resumed her narrative. "Mystery-man wanted bombs. Six of them, to be precise." John stilled completely as his memory replayed Moriarty's voice from the poolside, '…She said a bit of water wouldn't hurt the wiring, but I've no idea what stomach acid would do…' Irene continued, either not noticing his discomfort, or unwilling to dwell on it. "I value my freedom as well as my life – I gave him what he wanted. But I started working on a way out of our… association." She sighed. "Unfortunately, I can't get at him directly; we've only ever communicated through texts, phone calls, and emails. His requests – not just for photographs of people, any longer, but 'anything interesting' – have brought me to the attention of people I'd much rather not know. People as bad as he is, or worse, only with the power of nations backing them."

She fell silent, her eyes bouncing between watching John out of the corner of her eye to disinterested gazing out the heavily-tinted window. John chewed over what she'd told him, fitting it up against other bits and pieces floating around within his skull. It was similar to how he imagined Sherlock approached things, only at human speed, rather than the warp-factor-whatever that governed his flatmate's thought processes. Names or no, I'm nearly certain 'Mystery-man' is Moriarty. That means Moran, too. On the other end of things are Mycroft and his equivalents from whatever agency Sherlock said had a car outside her place back in September. "Faking your death's a pretty drastic action to take. Who was it meant to fool?" he mused, more to himself than to Irene.
She answered anyway. "Mostly, it was for the agencies who don't much care for the fact I've got more secrets than they do. I don't think it's possible to actually fool M-Mystery-man," she stumbled a little on the 'm', cementing the thought that he actually was Moriarty in John's mind. "It is as impossible as fooling Sherlock."

"You did," John dryly said.

"Not for long," she corrected. "Mystery-man's just as smart, but not nearly so… honorable." John quirked an eyebrow at that – he'd heard a lot of descriptions of Sherlock Holmes in the past year, but none that included 'honorable'. "I doubt Mystery-man would take an entire week to suss out the truth; as far as current events are concerned, he actually got the records-keeper on my side. I honestly don't want to think too hard on just 'how'."

Kate pulled the Mercedes to a halt outside Dog-Eared Pages, the used bookshop wherein John had spent far more hours over the course of his life than he was altogether comfortable admitting. "Come on," he said, resting a hand on Irene's shoulder. "Let's go inside. There's this red sofa in there all but calling my name."

"I'll call when I need you," Irene said to Kate and Frannie, then climbed out of the car. John followed. "I didn't know you knew this place."

John grinned. "A friend of mine runs Hanuman's Hideaway," he pointed across the street and up the block. "I've spent nearly as much time here as in his flat over his shop." He opened the door for her. "After you," he said.

The elderly woman behind the cash register, wearing jeans and a Beatles t-shirt, smiled brightly as they entered. "Mels! It's been too long. And you've got John with you! That goes double for you, young man!" She ducked around the counter, kissed Irene's cheek, and then squeezed John in a brief hug.

"Hey, Miss Jefford," John greeted her warmly. "How've you been?"

"Well enough, well enough, but what's this I hear about you getting shot?" she leveled her brown eyes on him in a disapproving glare.

"That wasn't my fault, you know," John objected. "It's not like I walked out with a target painted on me!"

"Mmm," Miss Jefford obviously didn't believe him, but didn't press the matter. "Now, how can I help the two of you?"

"Just need a private corner, Miss J," Mels said.

"Actually, if you've got a copy of Patterson's The Postcard Killers, I'd be extremely happy – I was nearly finished with it when I got sent home, and somehow it didn't get packed with the rest of my stuff." Her comment on his injury had triggered the request – he'd completely forgotten about the book until just then.

"I'll see what I've got," the woman replied, then, to Irene, "and the sofa's still in the same place as always."

"Thanks," John said, then led the way to said sofa – a battered old relic, but still comfortable despite its years, much like its owner. Setting his satchel under the coffee table, John took a seat on the sofa. Mels took the opposite corner. He cleared his throat. "Well, I can draw a few assumptions from what you've told me. And I don't much care for the picture they're painting."
"I don't much care for it either," Mels said, slipping her feet out of her heels and tucking them up under herself. "But I'm stuck until or unless I can find a way out of it."

"Faking your death wasn't the best way to go about it, you know."

Mels nodded a little. "As I said, my body-double died – nasty accident on the M25. I had rather a short window to take advantage of it. Unfortunately, with the time-crunch, it wasn't as well-executed as it could have otherwise been."

"Even so, when faking your death, it's common sense not to linger about in the city where you're from."

"Read a lot of spy novels?"

John chuckled a little. "No, not really. But even black-ops teams need a medic; the first four years of my military service record consist of little more than the word 'redacted'."

Mels looked impressed. "There really is quite a lot more to you than meets the eye, isn't there?"

"You have no idea," John agreed.

"And I'm not too sure I want to, save for one thing: How long's it been?"

John thought about it for half a moment, then shrugged, "Depends on whether or not a couple of things I did in Afghanistan count or not. If not, then it's been nine years. If so, about three."

"Three's my favorite number, so I'm going to say to count those 'things in Afghanistan'." She took a moment to unwind her shawl-like coat thing from around her shoulders and toss it over the back of the sofa. "So…?"

"So, moving on to specifics and attempting not to chide too much over the past – do you know what it is, exactly, that brought you to the attention of those government types?"

She nodded and shrugged. "I know what it is, but I don't know the significance."

"Going to share?"

"It's an email. The man I got it from – he's M. O. D. – claimed it would save the world."

John scrubbed a hand across his face. "I'm gonna bloody shoot Mycroft. In the knee, I think. No, no – not the knee. In the arse. Not even soldiers will admit it when they get shot there, and it tells him exactly what I think of him."

Mels giggled. "May I ask why you're planning such an indignity on the elder Holmes?"

John met her eyes. "He bloody well knows what it is you've got. His position – whatever its official designation might be – he can't not know. Yet, he told me and Sherlock he wanted the photos of whichever royal you've had as a client. Sensitive intel, sure, but not particularly in the same league as 'world-saving'." He sighed. "One of these days, I'm gonna shoot him. Maybe then he'll learn 'full disclosure'."

"Perhaps he was concerned about his brother's…" she floundered for a moment.

"Nosiness?" John offered the word. Mels nodded. "Could be. But why come to Sherlock if that's the case? He's trusted us with state intel before… You'd think he'd realize that we'd be more motivated to help out over something like that than for some naughty photos. Hell, you see scandals pop up in the
tabloids every day. Royal scandals, real or imagined, every third week or so. A couple of photos?" he scoffed. "D'you know which government is after you?"

Mels nodded. "American. Specifically, the CIA."

"Hmm… I wonder if Jason still works with them…" John muttered, thinking back nearly a decade.

"Who?"

"Jason Heckman," John said. "He owes me a couple of favors."

"Oh?" her expression clearly wanted as much detail as John could supply.

"We were in Baghdad, back in 2000. Let's just say there was a misunderstanding involving a local girl – Jase didn't speak a word of Arabic – and leave it at that."

Mels frowned in confusion. "If he didn't speak Arabic, why would the CIA send him to Baghdad?"

John shook his head, "No, he's not CIA himself, he just works with them from time to time. I don't think I, personally, know any CIA agents, though I could be wrong. I've treated a handful of people over the years where I was ordered not to ask too many questions, and a couple where the name on the chart was 'John Smith' or some other obvious alias."

"So, if Mr. Heckman still works with them, what are you planning?"

"I don't quite know just yet, but I think the first step involves figuring out just what it is in that email and why it's so bloody important."

She slowly nodded. "That's partly why I sent my phone to Sherlock. I figured if anyone could figure it out, he could."

"You should have unlocked it first, then," John said. "When not quietly angsting over your supposed demise this last week, he's been trying to figure out what the unlock code is. He tried his first guess this morning, but it wasn't right."

"I should think it was obvious," Mels said, amused.

"Apparently not."

She retrieved her new phone from the pocket of her weird wraplike coat and handed it to John. "A clue for you – remember what I said back at the power station?"

"Which thing, specifically?" John asked.

"Well, that I've flirted at him."

"Okay," John drew the word out as he hit a button to wake her Blackberry. "You use the same code for this as for the other one?"

"Yes," she affirmed.

John stared at the screen for a long moment.
Suddenly, it clicked, and he started laughing. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me!" he said, typing in 'S', 'H', 'E', 'R'. The phone made a little tweedle-le-dee noise and brought up the menu screen. He handed it back to her. "I risk death by elbowing should anyone else hear me admit this, but I approve of the pun." He waited for her giggle to pass before speaking again. "But that explains why Sherlock can't figure it out."

"How so?"

"He's got textbook knowledge of emotional motivations, but I think he gets confused with their real-life applications, at least, outside of a crime scene. I don't know if it's that he really is the sociopath he claims to be and hasn't actually felt emotions for himself – doubtful, yes, but still a possibility – or if he had a bad childhood and just 'deleted' appropriate emotional response from his brain, or if it's something more Sherlockian and thus only makes sense to him, but he tends to get… Surprised, I think, is the right word, when he finds that someone has him linked up to a positive emotion in their head." He sighed. "He's the only person I've ever met who was completely alright with being hated, but being liked? It confuses the hell out of him."

"Interesting," Mels said, re-locking the phone and returning it to her wrap-pocket. "I must admit I was wrong about you," she leveled a steady gaze at John.

"How so?" he asked.

"You're not a lapdog at all. More one of those over-trained ones that people post warning notices about."

John smiled and shook his head. "You know, you're not the first one to compare me to a guard dog."

She shrugged a little. "But back to the task at hand. Once you know what's in the email, what then? How do we get those government-types off my back and get me away from Mor-Mystery-man."

"Ah, hell, just call him 'M' and be done with it – we both know who you mean."

"Not his name?"

John shook his head. "Best not, not where just anyone could walk past and overhear. Sure, I'd trust Miss Jefford with anything, but this is still a shop."

"Point," Mels allowed. "But the question still stands. What's next, after we discover the meaning behind the contents of the email?"

"That'd depend on what it actually is, of course, but I've got a few ideas."
"Care to share?"

"Well, worst-case scenario, we run with your supposed death. You'd need to leave London, though."

"Understood, but I don't see how doing that would get me away from M."

"He's got your actual DNA profile, right?" John asked. She nodded. "In that case, you'd need to sacrifice a pint or two of blood. Question – your double's body, what happened to it?"

"Kate claimed her and had her buried."

John chewed on his lip. "Was she embalmed?"

Mels shook her head. "I don't think so. Why?"

"Because embalming fluid would be a bit hard to reason away. But since that's not a problem, we don't have to worry about it." It didn't really answer Mels' question, but she figured she could ask for clarification later. "What about her teeth? Dental records are awfully hard to fake."

"Another non-issue. The accident essentially destroyed her face, jaw included. It's why the DNA test was used to confirm identity." She peered curiously at him. "What are you thinking?"

"Well, nobody believes a death unless there's a body, which you conveniently have. Typically, they use dental records to match ID, but in this case, that's a non-starter, so they'd be forced to go with DNA. Now, I assume M has her DNA flagged somehow?"

"I honestly don't know, but that would be his style. He quite likes back-up plans and insurances."

"So, what we need is to make sure that the DNA from your double can't be tested directly – that's where your blood comes into play."

"How?"

"If you were a forensics tech and you came on the scene of a nasty single-car accident where the car caught fire, but there was blood on bits of the wreckage, after making sure there was only one victim, you'd use the blood to test for ID, not the body. Extreme heat destroys the DNA molecule and makes it impossible to use for testing." John was sticking solely to the science side of things – he didn't mention any of the magic he was considering using in this sort of scenario to ensure DNA identification couldn't be made.

"But would a car burn hot enough?"

"It would – with help. Last time I saw this ruse in action, they crashed the car into a gasoline tanker. I don't think we need to be quite as drastic."

A relieved smile crossed Mels' face. "I see what Sherlock sees in you – you're an outside-the-box thinker, aren't you?"

"Not at all," John disagreed. "I think very much inside my box. I can't help it that my box is bigger than most people's."

"So, most people think inside a shoebox, but you've got what? A refrigerator crate?"

"Nah – it's a shipping container," John quipped.

"But that – the body and fire and whatnot – you said that's just a worst-case scenario. What else have
"You got running through that mind of yours?"

"Let's see what the email is, first. That'll let me discard a few ideas and likely wind up giving me a few more."

Twenty minutes later, they arrived at 221B. Once again, Irene told Kate – John wasn't sure where Frannie had gotten to – that she'd call when she needed her again. "You ever going to tell me just how you showed up at the power station, John?" Mels asked as the Mercedes pulled away.

"Maybe someday," he allowed. "Once I know you better. Let's get through this first, though." They walked over to the door, where a note held in place by the knocker halted them in their tracks.

Reflexively, John reached for a gun that wasn't there. "Mels, go into Speedy's. If I'm not back in ten minutes, call DI Lestrade at Scotland Yard – you can reach him through the switchboard." He yanked the note from its place and tucked it into his pocket. With a quick glance over his shoulder to make sure she was following his instructions – she was – he silently pushed the door open and crept into the entranceway.

After the door clicked quietly shut behind him, John laid a hand on the wall. What's going on? he asked the spirit of the building. He received a mental image of Sherlock securing an unpleasant-looking man in a dark suit to one of the desk chairs with duct tape. What happened? A scene of three suited men breaking in and assaulting Mrs. Hudson played out behind his eyes. The setspells? They're supposed to protect us from shit like this! The man Sherlock had upstairs appeared in his mind, then zeroed in on a silver ring on his right hand. John pulled away from the building's spirit with a heartfelt thank you and cast out with his othersense. The man himself wasn't magical, but the ring was. It was made from numerous bits of silver, each of which had been crafted into a small charm. One of the charms it contained was, in essence, an anti-setspell. When it came into contact with an existing setspell, the charm in the ring channeled leyline magic to dismantle it.

John didn't much care for the application to which it had been put, but he had to admire the ring's artistry.

With the situation under control, John quit being quite so careful about noise and hurried up the stairs. Entering the living room, he saw the man with the ring right where the building had said he'd be, but Sherlock had moved to the for-once-unburied armchair that sat at an angle to their sofa. Mrs. Hudson was sitting on the couch itself, huddled in on herself and looking as upset as he'd ever seen her. John further noted that Sherlock was on his phone, holding a gun – not John's – so it was pointed in the intruder's direction.

"Anyone know he's here?" he asked Sherlock.
"Lamentably, yes."

"Too bad," John said, sitting next to Mrs. Hudson and setting his satchel on the coffee table next to a metallic basket of fruit. "Could've given Yorick a playmate." He focused momentarily on their landlady. "Are you alright?"

She nodded, then buried her face in her hands. "I'm just being silly."

"Not silly, Mrs. H – never silly." After she moved her hands, he spotted the small cut on her cheek. "Doesn't look too bad," he said, "but you'll want to put some antiseptic on it and keep it bandaged for a couple of days. Any other injuries?"

She shook her head, "Just a few bruises is all."

"I left a friend of mine down in Speedy's, d'you think you could go keep her company for a bit? Her name's Mels. Brown hair, blue eyes – you can't miss her."

He waited until Mrs. Hudson left before walking over to the tied-up man. He opened his mouth to speak, but Sherlock beat him to it. "Lestrade, we've had a break-in at Baker Street. Send your least irritating officers and an ambulance. Oh, no, we're fine. No, it's the burglar. He's gotten himself rather badly injured." John heard Sherlock climb to his feet and cross the room behind him. A clinking noise told him he'd sat the strange gun down on the desk. "Oh, a few broken ribs, fractured skull, suspected punctured lung… He fell out of a window." Sherlock waited a moment, then a soft beep told John he'd ended the call.

John let a small, feral smile surface on his face. "You really picked the wrong people to make enemies of, you realize." He leaned down and stripped the man's silver ring from his hand. "For the damage to the door and our landlady," he said, giving it a little toss before tucking it into a pocket. "I'll remove the setspell negation from it later, as well as see what else it's got wrapped up in it."

"Remind me, John, which nerve-cluster is it which renders a man immobile?"

"Any one of half a dozen, Sherlock," John replied. "Bit partial to the jugular notch, myself. It's hard to protect effectively and even if they're wearing a throat-mic it only serves to make the pressure more focused," he said, gesturing to the hollow at the base of his throat where the collar bones didn't quite touch. "Alternatively, you could always just kick him in the crotch," the man in the chair winced. "It's not elegant, but it is effective."

"True," Sherlock said. "However, as pleasant as daydreams might be, I wouldn't want to have lied to Lestrade. He seems to think poorly of liars."

"Good point," John agreed, his tone more suited to debating politics than throwing a suit-wearing moron out a window. "Kitchen window, d'you think?"

"I'm hardly going to throw him out the front windows, John."

They stepped forward, each taking one side of the chair to which the man had been tied. "Think if we aim well enough, we can land him in the glass recycling bin?"

Sherlock wrinkled his nose as they hefted the man into the air. "Tempting, but that bin's only about half-full. Besides, he's not likely to assist in any way, so I'll consider this successful if we hit the bins, full stop."

He bounced the first time, so Sherlock called a do-over. The third time, his somewhat tattered jacket got caught up on a bit of metal set into the masonry – John thought it might've once been the anchor-
point for a clothesline – and it was the former soldier's turn to call do-over. Halfway up the stairs on trip seven, John said, "Shouldn't Lestrade be here by now?" He had to speak loudly to be heard over the man's moaning. With his expression, he was telling Sherlock that this had to be the last trip – the man wasn't likely to survive too much more of this.

Sherlock nodded to the expression, but said, "I'll call and see what's keeping him."

A couple of minutes later, John was checking over their intruder. His injuries actually meshed pretty well with what Sherlock had told Lestrade, save for the fractured ankle and dislocated knee. He ripped the duct tape off the man's mouth – not that it was doing much, hanging on by a thread, but it still wouldn't have done to have it in sight when Greg showed. He'd just finished tossing the ball of tape among the scattered piles of rubbish when his phone rang.

Retrieving it from his pocket, he checked the display and grimaced. Not only was Sarah calling, but it was a quarter to two. "Hi, Sarah – I know, I'm late. I completely lost track of time, got caught up in a case with Sherlock."

"Well, I suppose that explains why I'm still waiting for you," she said, sounding irritated.

"A thousand – nay, a million – apologies, Sarah. Would you be too terribly disappointed if we rescheduled?"

"A bit, yeah, but I'll get over it," she said, her voice softening towards him. "How about next Sunday, at three?"

"Morning shift that day, huh?"

"Yeah," she replied.

"Sounds like a plan. And this time, if something comes up, I'll call ahead of time."

"Still going to cover Linette's shift on Wednesday?"

"Yeah, shouldn't be a problem. See you then?"

"See you," she agreed.

"Have fun at your sister's party tonight," John disconnected the call and looked up as Sherlock joined him. "Lestrade should be here in ten minutes," he said.

"You never actually called him earlier, did you?"

"Of course not."

John shook his head, chuckling fondly. "Shoulda known," he said, heading towards the back door into 221. A couple of minutes later, he found Mrs. Hudson and Mels sitting in a corner booth, chatting amicably about the latest episode of Eastenders. Mrs. Hudson, apart from the disheveled hair and ripped cardigan, looked more like herself. He added an underline to his mental note to get Mr. Chatterjee a bottle of scotch – the small abrasion on Mrs. Hudson's cheek now sported a small sticking plaster.

"Hey," he said, approaching the table.

"Everything taken care of, then?" Mrs. Hudson asked, her voice the same as it would have been had she been enquiring whether or not John had remembered to pick up the dry cleaning.
John nodded, then shook his head. "Well, sort of. He's not going to be any further problem, I don't think, but Greg should be here shortly. I'd wait until he heads out before going home, unless… Hey, Mels?"

"Yes, John?"

"Why don't you and Mrs. Hudson run and get lunch for all of us? I think you've got time for your car to get here ahead of Greg."

Irene smiled. "Anything in particular?"

"Chinese is always good – Mrs. H here knows our preferences."

They'd been gone all of two minutes before Lestrade pulled up. "John – what's going on?" John repeated the story Sherlock had concocted, about an unlucky burglar. Half an hour later, the ambulance pulled away. John stood at Sherlock's side as they watched it go.

Lestrade finished speaking with one of the other officers, then ambled over. "Just for my own curiosity – exactly how many times did he fall out the window?" he asked, trying – not very successfully – to keep a grin off his face.

"It's all a bit of a blur, Detective Inspector," Sherlock replied without looking at Greg. "I lost count," he said, turning to go back inside. Greg choked back a laugh, then started getting his people gathered together to leave.

Not more than thirty seconds after the last officer left, Irene's black Mercedes pulled up and let Mrs. Hudson and Mels out, laden with bags of takeaway from a Chinese food place John didn't recognize. "Did you have spies watching or something?" he asked, only partially-joking.

Mels shook her head, "Not really – we've been back for about five minutes, circling the surrounding blocks until they left. Everything sorted?"

John nodded. "As well as can be for now."

"So, first things first," Mels held up a takeaway bag. "Szechwan pork and potstickers!"

"Chicken and broccoli, dear, with crab rangoon," Mrs. Hudson interjected with a small smile.


Mrs. Hudson laughed, "Yes on noodles and soup, and we got sesame chicken with eggrolls for Sherlock."

John suddenly realized that there wasn't any possible way Sherlock would be able to know who he'd been speaking of when he'd heard him tell Mrs. Hudson to go keep 'Mels' comfortable – there was enough of a delay between the power station and their arrival back at 221B that 'Mels' could, quite literally, be anyone. And it's not like he doesn't know I've got friends scattered across the whole city. Whole world, come to think of it.

"What is it, John?" Mrs. Hudson asked, noticing that he'd halted three steps from the door.

"Just… This is gonna be… unpleasant," he said.

She looked confused, but Mels came to the rescue. "It's my fault," she said. "I did something, and though I didn't mean for Sherlock to get hurt by it…"
Mrs. Hudson proved she was far sharper than her appearance would indicate. "You," she said, the word sounding like an accusation. "You're the one he's been…"

"Yes," John replied. "But it was just a trick – and not one meant for Sherlock, though he wound up caught by it."

Mrs. Hudson nodded succinctly, then handed John the bag of food she was carrying. "In that case," she said, retrieving a set of chopsticks and two of the waxed paperboard containers from it. Holding the cartons and chopsticks in one hand, she reached into her blouse. "I think you're probably going to need this, aren't you?" she handed John Irene's mobile phone.

"Yes," John said, only a little surprised she had it. "Thank you. I'll let you know how it goes."

Mrs. Hudson shook her head. "I expect you won't need to, dear." She then headed inside.

"She's quite a woman," Mels commented. "I can see why you and Sherlock are so protective of her, though I'm certain she could take care of herself."

"Yeah," John agreed. "I imagine she could. She shouldn't need to, though." He let out a huff of air, then opened the door for Mels. "Shall we?"

Mels nodded and followed John up the stairs to 221B's living room. Sherlock was ensconced in his armchair, staring at the freshly-laid fire in the hearth, with his elbows propped on his knees, his hands in a prayer-like position just under his chin. "Mrs. Hudson is well?" he asked, not looking away from his contemplation of the flames.

"Yeah," John replied, setting the bag of Chinese on the desk, then stripping out of his coat. "She's gonna wind up outliving all of us, hip or no."

A small smile quirked the corners of Sherlock's eyes and mouth. "You're likely right about –" he said, turning to face his flatmate, then stopping entirely on seeing Irene. "What are you doing here?"

Irene smiled seductively at him. "I was invited, of course."

John sighed. "Damn it, quit being Irene for tonight, all right?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, glancing at John, but never quite taking her attention off of Sherlock.

"Don't think I haven't noticed," John said. "You're 'Irene' when you're being all flirty and manipulative, but not when you're 'Mels'. Be Mels. It'll get you farther." Switching to Sherlock, he said, "And you – try to rein yourself in. She's asked for help, and you're gonna at least listen to her, even if I've got to tie you to the chair!"

"Oh, you will, will you?" Sherlock growled, his eyes narrowed at John.

John straightened into his very best military posture and met the glare with one of his own. "Yes, Sherlock. If I have to, I will. Don't make it an issue," Captain Watson ordered.

"No, not a guard dog," Mels muttered to herself. "Beta wolf."

Neither man heard her. Sherlock broke eye-contact first, then flopped back into his chair. His eyes drifted over to Irene. "Well…?" he prompted.
"I brought Chinese," she said, lifting up the paper sack she carried.

"Yes, I do have a nose." The comment earned a terse 'Sherlock' from John. Sighing, Sherlock made a negligent gesture to John's chair. "Very well."

Interspersed with bites of dinner, Mels gave Sherlock the same story she'd told John earlier. She timed it well enough that she finished her meal at the same time she finished her explanation of events. "It wasn't meant to fool anyone but the governments who've been after me," she said, a note of apology in her voice.

Sherlock ignored her tone and said, "The email, you're certain you don't know what it was about?"

Mels nodded. "I had one of the best cryptographers in the country take a look at it – though he was mostly upside down, as I recall. Couldn't figure it out."

"Hmm… I need to see it, of course," Sherlock said.

John grinned at Mels. "Let me," he said, picking up her phone from where he'd sat it alongside the now-empty takeaway bag. He beeped in her passcode, fiddled with the menu for a moment, and asked, "'Zero-zero-seven confirmed allocation' the one?" At Mel's nod, he tossed the phone to Sherlock, who caught it one handed, his eyes narrowing at John again. "Oh, don't give me that look – Mels didn't tell me the code. After speaking with her, it wound up being rather obvious," John couldn't help but needle his friend a bit.

"It's a bit small on that screen," Mels interrupted as John got up and began collecting the empty food cartons and wrappers. "Can you read it?" she leaned across the distance between the two armchairs. Sherlock moved his attention to the phone. "Yes," he said. John looked over his shoulder and saw the contents of the email for himself.

007 Confirmed allocation
4C12C45F13E13G60A60B61F34G34J60D12H33K34K

John grabbed the last of the trash and deposited it in the kitchen bin while Mels slid off his chair and moved to stand next to Sherlock's. "It's obviously some sort of code," she said, leaning down to look at the screen. "What can you do with it?" she asked, hovering just above his left shoulder. "Go on," she leaned a little closer, "impress a girl." She landed a light kiss against his cheek.

She'd barely managed to pull away before Sherlock's 'deducing' mode of speech started up. "There is a margin for error, but I'm reasonably certain there's a Flyaway Airlines seven-forty-seven bound either to or from Heathrow with its other terminus being somewhere along the eastern coast of the US – probably New York or Washington, but Boston is also a strong possibility. Apparently it's going to save the world. I'm not sure how that can be true, but give me a moment – I've only been on the case for eight seconds." At the total silence which greeted his announcements, Sherlock looked up at Mels. "Oh, come on. It's not code. These are seat allocations on a passenger jet."

He gestured with the phone. "Look: there's no letter 'I' because it can be mistaken for a one, no letters past 'K' – the width of the plane is the limit. The numbers appear randomly and not in sequence, but the letters have little runs of sequence all over the place; families and couples sitting together. Only a jumbo is wide enough to need the letter 'K' or rows past fifty-five. There's a row thirteen, which eliminates the more superstitious airlines, and the style of the flight number – zero, zero, seven – which eliminates a few more. With the governmental agencies after you, this eliminates the remainder to solely those flights with termini in both the US and here. Currently, the only airline with nonstop flights in either direction is Flyaway; at least until American Airlines manages to clear up
their budgetary issues." He stood and adjusted his jacket. Mels couldn't tear her eyes away from him. "Please don't feel obliged to tell me that was remarkable or amazing. John's expressed the same thought in every possible variant available to the English language."

Irene licked her lips. "I would have you right here on the rug until you begged for mercy twice."

"I've never begged for mercy in my life," Sherlock said.

"Twice," Irene stressed.


The confusion lingered on Sherlock's face while Mels grew quietly thoughtful while she resumed her seat in John's armchair, much to the disturbance of John's peace of mind. "Would you check the flight schedules, see if I'm right?" Sherlock said, ignoring, as he always did, the emotional side of events.

John decided not to comment and turned to his computer. It's like he got stuck at fourteen or so. I'm pretty sure he's not sociopathic in any way – he's too protective of Mrs. Hudson... Mycroft, too, for that matter. But the way he reacts to Molly and now Mels? If it weren't for the fact that I'm not entirely sure he can blush, that'd be all he'd need to be a copy of some of the guys I knew back in secondary school. The computer finally finished waking up and a moment later he had the upcoming flight schedules for Flyaway Airlines pulled up in his browser. "Uh, you're right – well, mostly. Flight double-oh-seven, scheduled to leave Heathrow at six-thirty in the evening on March eleventh, bound for Baltimore."

Sherlock paused in his slow pacing of the room and asked, "What did you say?"

"Heathrow to Baltimore," John repeated, thinking he wanted the bit he'd gotten wrong.

"No, before that."

"Uh, six-thirty on March eleventh?"

"Before that."

"Flight double-oh-seven?"

Sherlock repeated the flight number and resumed his pacing, muttering the number over and over to himself. "Double-oh-seven, double-oh-seven, what? Something connected...."

"This might take a while," John said, looking to Mels.

"I don't mind," she said, her eyes tracking Sherlock's bum across the room.

"You need a napkin?" John asked.

"What for?" she retorted, her eyes still tracking Sherlock.

"You're drooling."

"Am not!" she protested, throwing the Union Jack pillow so that it flopped into John's face.

"Are so," John laughed, tossing the pillow back at her.
Mels caught it before it could smack her like it had John. She toyed with it. "Now that we know what was in the email…" she looked at John. "You said knowing would make it easier to plan."

John gave a half-shrug. "We know what it is, but still don't know the significance."

"Does it matter?"

"It could," John said, closing the lid of his laptop. "If I hadn't decided to listen to you today, what would you have done once you found out what the email contained?"

"Forwarded it on to Himself. I don't know what he would have done with it."

John let out a 'hmm' noise and stood. He ducked around Sherlock and walked over to the map still pinned to the wall above the sofa. Moriarty's green dot was centered in Hyde Park. Moran's red one was off to the edges of the map. "What are you thinking?" Mels asked from next to him.

"Not sure yet, but it's shaped like a trap," he said, shifting his gaze from the map to Mel's face.

Mels started to smile, but when John didn't share the expression, her eyes widened. "No."

"I'm not asking for anything I wouldn't be willing to do myself," John said. "Unfortunately, I doubt he'd answer a text from me."

"I don't want to be bait."

"Wanting is beside the point. Will you?"

Before Mels could reply, Sherlock stopped in his tracks and exclaimed, "Coventry!"

Mels turned. "I've never been," she said. "Is it nice?"

John asked, "What's Coventry got to do with anything?"

To Mels, Sherlock explained his outburst with, "It's a story, probably not true. In the second World War, the Allies knew that Coventry was going to get bombed because they'd broken the German code, but they didn't want the Germans to know that they'd broken the code, so they let it happen anyway." He then turned to John, "There's going to be a bomb on that Flyaway Airlines flight. The British and American governments know about it, but rather than expose the source of that information, they're going to let it happen. The plane will blow up. Coventry all over again."

Sherlock turned and stalked back to his chair. "The wheel turns – nothing is ever new."

"Typical," John scoffed. At Mel's expression, he explained, "Hundreds of people are going to die, and he's," he gestured to Sherlock, "bitching that it isn't a new idea!"

"Don't be dense, John," Sherlock interrupted John before he could really get rolling. "I seriously doubt that anyone will actually die from the bomb."

"It's fully booked!" John protested, flinging a hand towards his laptop on the desk.

"Think, John – do you really expect the government to simply sit back and do nothing? It's fully booked, because the government wants it that way. It will be one of those flights where someone might be wait-listed for a cancellation, only there will be no cancellations." He sighed. "Besides, this isn't the first time they've used this particular misdirection."

John sat down on the sofa. "So, what? They're going to fly it empty?"
Mels perched on the arm of the couch and shook her head. "Those aren't the only options, John," she said.

John suddenly remembered the strange case from the end of July – the man in the car boot who should've died in a plane crash hundreds of miles away. A couple of other memories surfaced alongside the recollection – a man who'd been insistent that his aunt's ashes had been replaced and a pair of little girls who had wanted to know why they'd not been allowed to see their grandfather during the funeral.

"Oh," John said, finally understanding the situation. He fell quiet for a bit, then chuckled. "Okay, I think I've got it. I just need to get a hold of a couple of people."


John grinned, then explained what he had in mind.

July 8, 1990

By the time he returned to himself, the skies over London had dimmed to their standard half-lit version of full night. Checking his watch, John found that he'd been 'gone' for the better part of an hour; it was rapidly approaching ten p.m. It took him three tries to stand – his entire body tingled with pins'n'needles. Thankfully, the feeling didn't last long, only a minute or two, before it finally faded and he was back to 'normal operation'.

What the leyline had shown him defied translation to words – John was positive there were no such colors in the English language, and not even the odd verb tenses present in Latin could really do justice to the whole experience – but what it had done didn't really need translated. John followed the subtle pull of magic, letting it tug him towards the eastern side of the park. He had to wait for a couple of cars to clear the way before jogging across to follow Bernard Street. John wasn't on Bernard Street for very long before the tiny bit of himself tied in to the local leyline system tugged him slightly north.

A couple of minutes later, he found himself inside Brunswick Square Gardens, with the 'line tugging him east again. A sense of hurry, hurry flooded him, coming from outside rather than from within himself. It was a decidedly odd sensation, but he ignored the weirdness and followed the 'line, all but sprinting across a deserted football field. At Mecklenburgh Square, he was faced with a small dilemma – the leyline kept insistently pulling him east, but a long row of buildings barred the way. John growled under his breath. "Look, milady – I may be a mage, and you might be magic itself, but if there's a way to make me walk through solid walls, I've not found it yet. I need around the buildings. North or south?"

The 'line pulled him south to Guilford Street, then east again to Grays Inn Road, then pulled him sharply north. Another eastern tug landed him at the edge of St. Andrew's Gardens. John paused to catch his breath. "What is this, a walking tour of London's parks?" The connection to the local leylines vibrated with something that John was pretty sure was laughter. Unbidden, a mental image of London, looking somewhat like a map lacking in significant detail – though the places John knew were labeled – appeared in his mind, overlaid with the weblike construction of leylines running throughout the city. It was only mentally visible for a short moment, but it was long enough for John to realize that most of the parks in the city had been built atop the leyline system. "That your doing or an accident?" John mused, but was answered instead with an insistent tug and that sense of hurry, hurry.
John shrugged and took off jogging again. He followed the pull along Wren, Calthorpe, and Margery Streets, before taking a sharp right onto Yardley. The tug pulled him through Wilmington Square to Tysoe Street, and then to Spa Fields Park.

He nearly tripped over his feet when a sharp, stabbing pain lanced through his chest. He skidded to a halt under a large oak tree, taking a moment to see if he could figure out what was wrong with him, when he realized he could 'hear' the strange crying he'd been hearing the past week starting up again. Only now that he was connected to the 'line, it was about a thousand times louder, bordering on something felt rather than heard. Connected as he was, John also felt like something was draining out of him, like he imagined a tire with a slow leak might feel. It was altogether the most unpleasant sensation he'd ever experienced; even waiting in the muck with a broken arm and an unconscious Mary two summers prior hadn't been this horrible.

Without warning, the feeling of being drained and the sound of crying faded. It was still there, but muted in a way that John had difficulty sensing past. The urgency of the 'line returned, tugging him along to Skinner Street. A left onto St. John Street, followed by a right onto Wyclif landed him in Northampton Square Garden, but John almost didn't register sprinting through it. He followed Sebastian Street to Goswell Road, where he very nearly managed to get himself run over by a night bus, and was hurling the fence into Kings Square Garden before he realized the bus hadn't even honked its horn because he was invisible. He resolved to thwack himself for forgetting that at a later time and poured a little more speed into his legs.

Angling south along Central Street, he veered off across a set of football fields, leapt the wrought iron fence surrounding St. Luke's Garden, wound up on St. Luke's Close, and then ran flat-out alongside Old Street to Bunhill Row, where the 'line's tug intensified. The sense of hurry, hurry magnified and blended with you're nearly there.

Ignoring the sweat dripping into his eyes, he forced his legs to move even faster, enough so that he very nearly missed his 'stop'. He paused, and with his legs and lungs burning, he looked around. "Oh, you have to be kidding me! Bunhill Fields? Seriously? Whoever this Moran is, he's got one hell of a sense of humor!" Among the many other notables buried at Bunhill Fields was Ajay's personal hero – William Blake – who, aside from being an artist and poet, was also one of London's historical mages. Ajay even owned one of the man's personal magic-notebooks.

The gate was already locked for the night, but John wasn't about to let that stop him. Somewhere within the cemetery, a man by the name of Moran was doing unspeakable things to John's Lady Magic. And that just wasn't on.

Not even a little bit.

January 7, 2012

John lay on his stomach, peering down at the square through a pair of field-glasses. "You alright, Mels?" he asked through the radio.

"Yes, I'm fine. I don't see him, though – do you?"

"Relax, we've still got ten minutes," John replied. "But no, I haven't spotted him yet. How about you, Bill?"

"North side's clear still," he let out a small chuckle. "Just like old times, huh?"
"You're not kidding – I keep expecting to hear Major Franklin yell at us to 'stop wastin' val'able bat'ry'," the quote was done in a truly horrid Scottish accent, the rest in John's normal tone of voice. "How about you, Sherlock?" John moved the glasses so that he could spot his flatmate at the edge of the open area. Sherlock was posing as homeless.

"No," came the terse reply. "And what did Murray mean, 'old times'? You were a doctor."

"Yeah, well like I told Mels last week – even black-ops teams need a medic," John replied. "You wanna know something funny? I don't think even Mycroft's got a high-enough clearance to know some of the missions me an' Bill have been on."

Though he didn't transmit it, John could see Sherlock laugh through the lenses of his binoculars. "That must frustrate him," Sherlock said.

"Hate to break up the witticisms, guys," Bill's voice broke into the tail end of Sherlock's transmission. "But I think I spotted him. Twelve o'clock, next to the coffee cart."

John moved his glasses again. "Yes, that's him. Mels – you're on. Sherlock, Bill – get ready."

John watched, nervously chewing the inside of his lip as Irene walked up to Moriarty and began speaking to him. She wasn't transmitting, but her subtle shepherding of dear Jim towards Sherlock's position indicated she was sticking to the script. "Moving over," Bill's voice said.


"Of course," he said, his voice indicating that he felt John was needlessly worrying.

John saw Bill enter the frame of his lenses, dressed like a typical tourist, with a heavy coat, jeans, and a backpack slung over one shoulder. In a motion that he would have missed had he not A.) known exactly how fast his nurse could give an injection and B.) been watching very closely, a syringe was deftly removed from Bill's pocket, used, and returned to the same pocket. The entire action happened in the amount of time it took Bill to 'stumble' against Moriarty, say, "Scuse me, mate," and continue on his way.

John saw Moriarty shoot a dirty look at Bill's back and smiled to himself. "Looks good, Bill – see you haven't lost your touch."

Bill chuckled. "Ah, yes – the fine art of unnoticed injections. That's the only reason you ever asked for me, tell the truth."

"Well, no, you always had the surgical trays set just the way I liked, too," John returned Bill's teasing tone with interest.

"How long's this going to take," Sherlock whispered across the radio.

"It's not television," John replied, "be patient."

"About four minutes or so. Lorazepam's only ever instantaneous in movies," Bill explained while John put the binoculars into his satchel and started downstairs.

"I'll be there in about a minute," he said, waiting for the lift to arrive. "Sherlock – how's he doing?"

"Same as ever, save that he's repeated himself twice now in short succession."

"Good, means it's taking effect." The lift arrived and took him down to ground-level. He exited the
parking garage and found a decent vantage point. He covered his loitering by using a park bench to re-tie his shoe.

"He's having trouble speaking," Sherlock said.

John looked over and saw Moriarty slowly sink to the pavement. "Looks like this worked. Bill – see you at the pub later, yeah?"

"Don't forget the radios – I need to have them back before they do a count."

"Don't worry," John replied, walking in Mels' direction. "Sherlock – you call Mycroft?"

"Yes," Sherlock said, somewhat exasperatedly, "I'm waiting for Anthea to connect us now."

As the other pedestrians in the square began to take notice of the downed man, John pulled the radio earpiece off and tucked it into a pocket. "Lemme through, I'm a doctor!"

It took all of twenty minutes for Mycroft's people – dressed as a private ambulance service – to show up. Mycroft himself was there only a minute or two later. He ignored the tittering crowd and strode over to where John, Sherlock, and Mels were huddled in a small group. "I trust you will explain yourselves," he said, looking to Sherlock.

Mels' expression grew a little worried, but John stepped forward. "Does the how of it really matter?" Captain Watson asked. "He's neutralized. That's all that really matters." Mycroft made a small gesture, acknowledging John's point. "You could call your American friends, though," Captain Watson continued. "Have them call their dogs off of Irene."

Mycroft focused on Irene. "Miss Adler. Tell me why I shouldn't just have you arrested for assault now."

"Because," Sherlock drawled, "you'd have a hard time proving it," he laid either hand on John's and Mels' shoulders, "wouldn't he?"

John and Mels both nodded. "Seems you're outnumbered, Mr. Holmes," Mels said. "However, I did agree to give you this," she retrieved her old phone from her purse. She'd gone through the contents and kept the photos she still had a use for, while leaving in place the ones Moriarty had ordered her to take. "A consolation prize, of sorts." She handed the phone to him. "The passcode has been changed to all ones."

Mycroft took the phone, then looked at the united front of Dr. John Watson, Sherlock Holmes, and Irene Adler. He harrumphed, then turned on his heel and strode away.

They watched him go and managed to last all of half a minute before dissolving into stress-relieving laughter. "Who wants Indian?" Mels chirped, "My treat."

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July 8, 1990

It didn't take John long to locate the man he was looking for. Moran was standing in nearly the exact center of the cemetery, holding something in his right hand. In the dark, it was a little hard to tell, but John could see that he was about three inches taller than himself and rather powerfully-built. He wore a plain, dark-colored t-shirt, with a pair of jeans, and even in the shadows of the cemetery's trees, John knew the man's short hair was either very dark brown or black.
John amped up his othersight and was nearly blinded by a blue-white glow, shading to violent greens and reds, from whatever it was that Moran held. *The power-sink*, John thought, automatically dialing down his othersense until he could 'see' clearly. The blue-white of leyline magic, sparking with black glitter at the edges, pulled up and away from the leyline running through the cemetery and into Moran, where the man's own violently red-streaked-through-with-black aura overwhelmed it, mutating it into the dull red of rust and dried blood. Suffused with an overpowering sense of *wrongness*, that rust-red tendril traced its way down Moran's arm and into a glowing green knot in the palm of his hand.

*Is he using an emerald?* John wondered at that. *Doesn't he know that crystals don't work well for magical storage? All the facets – it just traps the energy, makes it impossible for anyone to use.*

Shaking his head, John reached into a pocket and withdrew a cherry bomb. He lit the fuse, then threw it in Moran's general direction, hoping the loud bang would be enough to startle him out of what he was doing.

The firecracker exploded right on cue, but Moran simply turned towards the noise. "Who's there?" he called out, his voice reverberating through John like a bass drum.

Okay, that didn't work, John thought, crouching behind a tree – invisibility or no. *Time for plan 'B'.* He got his penknife out and gritted his teeth. *Come on, John – now's no time to back out on a promise, let alone a promise to Lady Magic.* Before he could talk himself out of it, he used the blade to cut a small nick at the point where his wrist became his thumb. He quickly returned the knife to his pocket, then moved to catch the drops of blood with his left hand.

"Well, well, well, what have we here?" Moran's rumbling voice startled John. He twisted to see Moran, still channeling the leyline, standing nearly at his side. "A mageling child." He tutted. "Don't you know anything, boy? A notice-me-not doesn't work on mages." Moran flicked his left hand and a rusty black levinbolt materialized within it. "Best run on home, little one," Moran mocked, "it's past your bedtime."

John straightened from his crouch. "I'm not a little kid," he objected, then flung his palmful of collected blood into Moran's face. "I bind thee," John incanted, "from misuse of magic, from the leylines below our feet –"

Before John could go any further with the incantation, Moran licked a drop of John's blood from his lips. "Mmm, salty," he said, negligently tossing the levinbolt through John's chest. It felt like he'd been speared with a gigantic icicle made of electricity. It froze his breath and halted his words in their tracks. "Shush now, and let the grown-ups finish their work, boy."

The levinbolt's dark glow began to thrum in time with John's heartbeat. "I – I bind thee," he tried to finish the incantation, but couldn't. The unpleasant *draining* sensation he'd felt echoing through his connection to the 'line had multiplied – he was no longer feeling it secondhand, but directly. "I bind thee," he gasped, reaching for his inner magic, only to be batted away from grasping it by the presence of the levinbolt. The thrumming from it began to slow and John could feel it draining, not just his magic, but his *life*.

Desperately, John reached further, searching below his feet as Moran walked away from him. He felt the leyline and grabbed it with all his fading will. *Milady, help me. I can't do this on my own.*

The 'line reacted immediately. Power swept through John, overwhelming both him and the levinbolt. John felt a brief flash of envy for the bolt – it couldn't feel – before the sensation of burning from the inside out swept away every last thought in his head.
When the 'line snapped his levinbolt, Moran turned back around. John could see him walking back. Though it had felt like forever that he'd been burning, it hadn't been more than a half-second or so. "Not so weak as I thought, are you, boy?" Moran said, readying another levinbolt.

Only partially in control of his own actions, John pushed himself off of the tree to which the bolt had pinned him. "No," his voice reverberated oddly throughout the cemetery. Is this me speaking, or Milady? There was no answer.

Moran threw his bolt. John reached out and batted it away. "No," he repeated. "You don't get to do this." He walked directly up to Moran and smeared his still-bloody palm across the man's face. With the power of the 'line surging through him like a chained hurricane, John could also still feel the drain of Moran's power-sink, and the thread wrapped around the man, holding him in place. With each breath, John felt more and more like an observer in his own body. On a level deep within his subconscious, he understood that he didn't have much longer. He wasn't meant to channel this much power – he wasn't built for it – and it would kill him just as surely as Moran's levinbolt would have. "I bind thee, Sebastian Leigh Moran, son of Tabitha, son of Andrew. I bind thee from misusing your gifts, from abusing Magic. Thus I decree and let neither god nor man break this binding!"

John felt Moran's connection to the leyline snap. Moran's eyes rolled back in his head, and John felt Magic release the hold she had on the man. He slumped to the ground. John's hand reached down and picked up the large glowing emerald. It happened without John's input, and he realized that his Lady was using him like an ill-fitting suit of clothes. A lance of energy spiked across the surface of the emerald before locating a weak point and shattering it, freeing the not-insubstantial amount of magic it held prisoner.

John's conscious was rapidly fading, but his Lady wasn't quite done with him yet. She walked him to the far side of the cemetery, following the 'line below, and had him climb the fence. When he was safely on the other side, she finally began to slowly withdraw from him. Just before he passed out, he could hear/feel her sorry, sorry, but I had no choice.

March 12, 2012

John stretched and gratefully sank into his armchair. It'd been a busy day at Sarah's clinic – two of her regular doctors had come down with conjunctivitis and pneumonia, so John had wound up working a double-shift. A small boom sounded from the kitchen.

"Don't worry! We're fine!" Mels called out.

John smirked to himself. It's nice to see my advice being taken. It had taken Mels a solid three weeks to fully understand that John hadn't just been talking about himself when he'd told her that she'd get further as 'Mels' than she ever would as 'Irene', but it had eventually dawned on her. Since then, she and Sherlock had been… Well, it's not dating, not exactly. But they're spending rather a lot of time playing with explosives and poisons and such. It's good to see all the kids getting along.

He chuckled softly and turned on the TV. "…late last night over the Atlantic," the newscaster said. "Once again, Flyaway Airlines flight 007 went down over the Atlantic late last night. Preliminary investigations indicate that the number four engine suffered a catastrophic failure, but an official cause will not be released until the investigation has concluded. As of now, there are no reports of any survivors."

John shook his head at the news report, then changed the channel.
July 13, 1990

After nearly four full days of hospital food and inconclusive tests, John was elated to finally – finally! – be released. It wasn’t until he got home and saw himself in the mirror that he realized the small scar on his wrist wasn’t the only lasting damage he’d sustained. His hair now sported several streaks of iron-grey, particularly in his fringe and along his temples.

"Quit scowling," Mary interrupted him. "I like it."

John turned from the mirror above the living room fireplace and sighed. "I don't. Is it too girly to buy hair-dye?"

She nodded. "Still can't remember anything?"

"No," John said. "Last thing I recall was getting ready for bed Saturday night. I don't know how or why I wound up out by Bunhill Fields. Just lucky Ajay found me."

"You got that right," Mary agreed. "You were wearing a notice-me-not charm. Only other mages see you when you're wearing one."

"Explains why I still have my wallet after taking a nap on London's pavement," John quipped.

"It’s not a joke, Johnny! Ajay said there were some weird traces all over you, most of which he couldn't figure out, but one of which was a levinbolt. You could have died!"

"But I didn't," John replied, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "I'm fine, and aside from some memory loss and the grey, there's no lasting damage. If you don't believe me, I can show you the doctor's notes."

Mary shook her head. "No, no need. I just wish you'd brought me along with you."

"I don't know why I didn't. According to you and Mum, I'd gone to the cinema. I have no clue why I wound up where I was found." He let go of her and flopped on his dad's armchair. "The doctors said that, with time, I'll probably regain at least some of my memories. If I do, and they tell me what happened, I'll let you know."

"Promise?" Mary demanded.

"I promise," John replied. It was a promise he kept, though it took nearly ten years to fulfill.

Chapter End Notes

Twenty points to anyone who caught the Dr. Who reference in this chapter.

In the segment with the bus, I used a handful of 'odd facts about London' that I found online. If any of these details are wrong, let me know (I won't fix the story – consider it artistic license if you must, but I would like to know if the interwebz was lying to me).

Also, I've been under the impression that the only reason that Neilson and his CIA
cohorts showed up in Irene's house to begin with was because they had her place bugged and they heard her mention that she'd given Sherlock the keycode to her safe. Just in case y'all were, you know, wondering and all about why they didn't show up this time. If this were being written in the third person unlimited omnipotent style (where POV shifts from paragraph to paragraph and includes thoughts of just about everyone), you would've gotten a short scene from their POV which would have detailed confusion on hearing Watson in the house, but not Sherlock, and Neilson figuring that John had Sherlock on his cell phone. However, since this story is mainly from John's POV (with small bits of others only when absolutely necessary), there simply wasn't space for it.

I also know nothing about Blackberry phones (if that's even what it is – but I've seen that used in a lot of fics, so I'm running with it), but my own phone (a Samsung) lets me answer calls and read/reply to texts when locked; I just can't activate the phone's other features, access saved data, or initiate texts or calls. If this isn't how Adler's phone would work, please consider it artistic license on my part. Thanks.

Heinlein fans may notice that I borrowed a gun manufacturer from The Cat Who Walks Through Walls. Do I really need to mention I've nothing to do with any of his works (other than being a rather rabid fan, of course)? Thought not.

And Tremors was released in the UK on June 29, 1990. I don't think it's out of the question for it to still have been shown nine days later. If this is incorrect, kindly ignore it as artistic license – it took me nearly three hours to find movie titles for that segment (requirements being something Mary wouldn't've wanted to see, and still being shown in theaters that day as well as something they both would've wanted to see – which had to be switched around some – and a flick Mary wanted to see that John wouldn't've wanted to waste time on).

The problem Sarah has texting is pulled directly from my own RL experience – I got my first text-enabled cell back in '03, and the first dozen or so of my sent messages were laughably horrible, especially if I was trying to text and do anything else at the same time (like watch TV or listen to someone speak).

And am I the only one who can't keep associating Nickleback's Shakin' Hands with Irene? Sure, the song's about a US girl, but if you switch a few details, it may as well be Ms. Adler they're singing about. Speaking of her – I've been operating under the assumption that Moriarty was using her, which is why this chapter turned out like it did.

One last bit: Did y'all know that airlines post their flight schedules an average of 330 days in advance? I didn't. But then again, I've never flown anywhere (the curse of having family that's both afraid of heights and claustrophobic, coupled with being perpetually broke and having a control issue when it comes to travel).

All Pashto phrases are taken from nawcom.com/swearing/pashto.htm. Any other language's phrases are courtesy Google Translate (or other aspects of Google).

1.) ὕπνος – 'sleep' in Greek, translation via Latin's dormite (plural command-form, or so my Latin dictionary professes. If you know better than I, lemme know, 'kay?).

2.) Tai-ten tem – 'shut your mouth' in ancient Egyptian (as close as I could come, at any rate).

3.) Kheyli khoshtgel shodi – 'you look beautiful' in Dari.
Please support your local purveyor of fanfic and review - it's the only payment we receive, after all.

Until next time folks!

12/9/18: Killed a typo.
Chapter Notes

Welcome to Chapter Six! Today’s chapter is brought to you by the vocab word of the week, *pareidolia*. Pareidolia is typically defined as the psychological phenomena of seeing meaning or patterns in random or vague stimuli, such as making shapes in clouds or seeing ‘the man in the moon’. Good word, and it’s fun to say!

For this chapter I'm operating under the assumption that therapists (the kind who are licensed to prescribe medications and such for mental issues) in the UK need to, as in the US, attend medical school. If this is incorrect, let me know – I won’t change this story, but I'll keep it in mind for future reference.

I know little of military procedure in the US, to say nothing of the total lack of information I have regarding UK military procedure. Google proved once again that it hates me, and I didn’t get any replies to my Yahoo Answers questions, so I went ahead and made things up as I saw fit. If you know better than I, please tell me what I've gotten wrong – I may not correct it in the story, but I'll definitely keep the information on hand for future writing. And do I really need to mention that any/all phone numbers contained herein are figments of my imagination? Thought not. Also – see ‘warnings’ below.

**Warnings:** All warnings from chapter one still apply. Also, for the majority of this chapter, John’s going to seem rather OOC – this is intentional. I've known many medical professionals (doctors, nurses, EMTs, pharmacists, and so on) over the years, and only one or two of them ever conceded the fact that they themselves were not the best source when treating *themselves* (that old saw about ‘doctors are the worst patients’ has – in my experience – been true). Now, I know that the argument might be made that John wouldn’t behave this way, but I beg to differ – he’s stubborn, he’s smart, and he’s in no way shy of admitting his medical prowess (‘any good?’ ‘very good’ ring any bells?) – this tends to be the ‘magic formula’ for stupidity among medicos treating themselves (from what I’ve seen, of course). Just what have I been hinting at? Well… For the majority of this chapter, we get to see stoned!John. I hope I did him (and the episode as a whole) justice.

One last thing before I quit nattering and turn y’all loose on the story itself – what I did with the dog was one of the very first things my imagination gave me when I conceived of this AU. It’s been a long time coming, and I'm inordinately proud and happy that I finally managed to get to it. I expect the feeling will intensify when I finally get to the few ideas which I thought of prior to this – but those won’t happen until the next chapter.

Again, many, many thanks to Ariane DeVere for posting usable transcripts of the show.
on her livejournal!

Nov. 11, '13 ETA: I finally found a fic utilizing the hover-to-translate option and pulled up the source code on the sucker. Now, I also have that nifty addition to my fic! I still left the footnote translations, just in case my novice HTML skills fail me (and for those of you who, for whatever reason, can't 'hover' a cursor).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Six: Barking

When a doctor does go wrong, he is the first of criminals. He has the nerve and he has the knowledge. – Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

John straightened his brown cardigan and made sure that his buttons were all lined up properly, then whistled his way down to the kitchen. Sarah was coming over and then they were going out for breakfast; Sherlock – thankfully – was off… Skewering a pig, I think. Though I don't know why. He'd missed the bit of Sherlock's never-ending monologue that linked 'skewering a pig' back to the small matter of a missing engagement ring. He looked at the kettle, but decided not to get himself a cuppa with a glance at his watch. Any minute now –

The thought was cut off by the sound of the doorbell.

Grinning, John hurried downstairs and opened the door. "Sarah!" he greeted her, but paused when she didn't return his smile. His own shattered on the pavement. "What's wrong?" he stepped back to let her in, but she made no move to enter 221B.

Instead, she held up her phone. John leaned forward to see what she was showing him. On it was a photograph, taken the night before, that showed John and Mels over at Angelo's, having dinner. It'd been taken as the pair shared a commiserative laugh over Sherlock's Sherlockness. Slightly puzzled, John looked up at Sarah's face. "What about it?"

"Who is she?"

"Friend of mine," John replied, still confused. "How'd you get the photo?" he asked, knowing there was only a slight chance that her tech-illiteracy would lend itself to running the camera feature of her phone. "I mean – I didn't see you there. Otherwise, we would've invited you to join us."

"Linette," Sarah said, and John realized she was on the verge of either shouting at him or crying. Possibly both, he thought, but replied, "Oh."

Before he could say anything else, however, Sarah barreled on. "Your sister two weeks ago, fine – I'll give you that one. But that blonde? Now this woman?" she jiggled the phone to punctuate her comment. John could sort of understand – Mels had come over straight from a client, and was dressed in a low-cut red cocktail dress, only to find Sherlock up to his eyebrows in that engagement ring case.

John held his hands up in front of himself. "Hey – Mels is just a friend! And I told you before – Mary and me might've well've been siblings!"

Sarah glared at him. "You seem to have an awful lot of friends, John!" She took a quick, deep
breath. "Ones who just so happen to be beautiful women!"

"Oh, for crying out loud!" John reached up and tugged slightly on the white patch in his fringe. "Is that what this is about? Would you feel better about it if they were hideously disfigured?" Sarah didn't reply, but John could see it in her eyes that, yes, she would feel better were Mels not beautiful. "Yeah, I've got a lot of friends who happen to be female. I've got a lot of friends who're blokes, too, you know – I've got a lot of friends, full-stop!"

"Then why haven't I met any of them?" Sarah's voice was starting to get rather loud. John's, too, for that matter.

"You wanna meet Mels, fine!" John all but shouted, digging his phone out of his jeans pocket. "I'll invite her over!"

"That isn't the point!" This time, she did shout. A couple of pedestrians and customers at Speedy's outdoor tables looked curiously at the quarreling couple until John's best glare sent them on their way or back to their breakfasts.

"No," John agreed, the word back to a reasonable volume. "The point is that you're being unreasonably possessive!"

Sarah's eyes flashed. "Unreasonable," she hissed. "Unreasonable? How is it unreasonable to expect fidelity from my boyfriend?"

"You think I'm cheating on you?" John couldn't help it, he started laughing. "Oh, that's rich. That's just too rich! Mels is gonna rupture something when I tell her!" Running a hand through his hair, he looked up at Sarah. It was her turn to wear a puzzled expression. "For fuck's sake, Sarah – Mels is trying to get into Sherlock's pants, not mine!"

She blinked at him, then looked at the photo on her phone. "But…"

"Look," John said, stepping close enough to her to cup her cheek. "Mels had come over from a… client's." At her continued expression of befuddlement, John glanced around, then leaned down to whisper in her ear, his hand on her shoulder to keep himself from overbalancing and tumbling down the short series of steps between the hallway and the pavement. "She's a high-class call girl, Sarah." He leaned back and saw some of the confusion fade from her eyes. "Sherlock's been busy with a case the last, oh," he checked his watch, "twenty hours or so. Didn't have time to waste on her last night, so we went out for supper. She wanted… Well, I guess you might call it 'insider info' on how Sherlock felt about her. Unfortunately, I wasn't much help – he never really talks about that side of himself."

She closed her eyes and let out a breath. "I feel like an idiot," she said.

"Warranted, I think," John replied, "in this instance." He dropped his hand and Sarah opened her eyes. "I'll give you a pass on it – this time," he said, only a little sternly. "But one thing, Sarah: I am nobody's possession. Not even yours." He waited for her to nod, then his demeanor shifted, his smile returning. "Okay, now that's done with – breakfast?"

She shook her head. "I'm… I'm not particularly hungry, John. Mind if I just…" she made a small 'head on out' motion with her hands.

His smile softened a little around the edges. "No, I don't mind."

Sarah took a step backwards, then changed her mind and grabbed John into a hug. "Sorry," she said.
Automatically returning her embrace and kissing her cheek – to scattered applause and a couple of whistles from Speedy's customers – he chuckled a little. "Nothing to forgive – just keep what I said in mind, okay?"

She loosened her hold on him and leaned back. "I will."

"Call me later?"

She nodded and gave him a small kiss before releasing him.

As John watched her walk away, Mr. Chatterjee stepped out of his shop, broom in hand. "Pretty," he said, gesturing with the broom handle in Sarah's direction. "Not as pretty as the brunette, mind, but still worth it." He grinned conspiratorially at John.

"I'm not… I mean," he gestured in the direction Sarah had walked. "She's my girlfriend. My only girlfriend." Mr. Chatterjee let out a skeptical 'uh-huh' and set to sweeping the pavement around his outdoor tables. John replied with a frustrated sigh, scrubbed a palm across his face, then turned on his heel and retreated back to his flat.

Mrs. Hudson met him at the foot of the stairs. "Everything all right?"

John nodded, "Yeah. Sorry if we disturbed you."

"No," she said, straightening the sleeves of her floral-print dress. "I was just about to pop out myself. I didn't want to interrupt…" her apology for eavesdropping was implied.

John shook his head. "Don't worry about it, Mrs. H." He headed up the stairs, pausing just long enough to look over his shoulder as Mrs. Hudson checked her reflection in the small hall mirror, fluffed her hair, then headed for the door.

On returning to the flat, John entered the kitchen via the living room – Sherlock's mini-fridge was still blocking the other door – and made himself breakfast with the last of the milk. He added it to the list held to the fridge door by a magnet scavenged out of a shower curtain, then ambled into the living room. He stared at the chalkboard that had shown up around the end of February, hanging next to the map of London, and counted the tally marks. He added a note to it, then settled at the desk with his cereal and tea. Not quite the morning I had in mind, he thought as he finished. But a little peace and quiet never hurt anybody. He read through the papers while he ate.
To bolster our claims about the experience or mind of a dog, we will learn how to ask the dog if we're right. The trouble, of course, with asking a dog if he is happy or depressed is not that the question makes no sense. It's that we are very poor at understanding his response...

The sound of the front door slamming pulled him from the book with a small jolt. He looked towards the stairs. A moment later, Sherlock strode in, covered in bloody spatters, and slammed the end of a long harpoon against the floor. "Well, that was tedious," he complained, with precisely the same phrasing he always used, of London's subway system.

"You went on the tube like that?" John asked, only a little taken aback at his flatmate's appearance.

"None of the cabs would take me," Sherlock growled, then strode towards his bedroom.

John snickered softly over the sound of the bedroom door slamming shut. "Wonder why?" he sarcastically mused, then returned to his reading.

About half an hour later, Sherlock reappeared, wearing his blue dressing gown overtop a white button-down, black slacks, and socks, with his hair curling in damp ringlets. He paced frenetically from the kitchen door to the windows and back several times, toting his harpoon like a small child clinging to a security blanket. The really sad thing was – harpoon aside – this was not new behavior, and so John ignored him.

"Was there nothing in the papers?" Sherlock eventually spat the question in John's direction.

John bookmarked his place and sat it on top of Miller's Anatomy of the Dog (4th ed.) on the side table. "Um… There was a military coup in Uganda and there's been a cabinet reshuffle…" he thought back to the morning's headlines. "Oh, and another photo of you and 'that hat'."

"Nothing of importance?" Sherlock queried, then wilted slightly on seeing John's negative head-shake. "God!" he slammed the butt of the harpoon against the floor. He fidgeted in his dressing gown pocket, then whirled to face John. "I need some," he said, "get me some."

"No," John replied, narrowing his eyes at Sherlock. "Looks like it was a little more than just one or two out on the fire escape. "Cold turkey, we agreed. No matter what." Sherlock frowned, and leaned his harpoon against the desk. "If I could deal with it, then so can you, and it's not like oxycodone is in the same league as nicotine – besides, you've paid everyone off, remember? Nobody within two miles will sell you any."

"Stupid idea – whose idea was that?" Sherlock asked. John cleared his throat and sent a meaningful look at his friend. Sherlock didn't notice, or if he did, he didn't comment on it. "Mrs. Hudson!" he shouted instead, and then began digging among the stacks of paper on the desk, flinging pages about with abandon.

"Look," John said, trying to catch his friend's attention, "Sherlock – you're doing really well. Don't give up now!"

Sherlock abandoned the desk in favor of plunging his hand into the crevasse between the sofa's seat and back cushions. "Of course you did it well! You had your leyline to help!" Not finding anything of note within the sofa cushions, he whirled around and straightened. John had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing at Sherlock's somewhat pitiful pleading expression. "Tell me where they are. Please." John half-expected crocodile tears to follow. "Tell me."

"Can't help. Sorry."

"I'll let you know next week's lottery numbers."
John let out some of his amusement at that. "Divination doesn't work that way, even if you are a mage."

"It was worth a try," Sherlock muttered, then dove towards the stack of books and papers that stood between his chair and the fireplace.

"Ooo-hoo!" Mrs. Hudson called out as she entered the living room, even as John's brain backpedaled and had him ask, "What do you mean, I had the leyline's help?"

Sherlock ignored him in favor of all but turning a slipper inside out. "What have you done with my secret supply?" his tone clearly addressing Mrs. Hudson. When she failed to immediately answer him, Sherlock tossed the slipper over his shoulder and looked up at her. "Cigarettes! What have you done with them? Where are they?" He spoke so quickly, John was honestly surprised he didn't manage to trip over the words.

"You know you never let me touch your things," she protested. "Chance would be a fine thing," she gestured around at the mess.

"I thought you weren't my housekeeper," Sherlock said as he climbed to his feet and snapped up the harpoon once more.

"I'm not," was her unamused reply as she crossed her arms over her chest. "How about a nice cuppa – and maybe put away your harpoon?"

"I need something stronger than tea!" Sherlock looked down at the mess for half a heartbeat, "Seven percent stronger," he muttered and then aimed his harpoon at Mrs. Hudson. "You've been to see Mr. Chatterjee again," he deduced.

"Pardon?" Mrs. Hudson replied.

"Sandwich shop. That's a new dress, but there's flour on the sleeve. You wouldn't dress like that for baking," he indicated the flour, then her hand, using the harpoon like the world's weirdest pointer. "Thumbnail – tiny traces of foil. Been at the scratch cards again. We all know where that leads, don't we?" He flipped the harpoon and inhaled deeply through his nose. "Mmm – Kasbah Nights. Pretty racy for first thing on a Monday morning, wouldn't you agree?"

"It's Tuesday," John corrected.

Sherlock ignored him and continued, "I've written a little blog on the identification of perfumes. It's on the website – you should look it up." He leaned the harpoon against the left-hand window.

"Please," Mrs. Hudson said, trying – in vain – to stop Sherlock.

"I wouldn't pin your hopes on that cruise with Mr. Chatterjee – he's got a wife in Doncaster that nobody knows about," Sherlock did a little finger-wiggle in the vicinity of his hair. "Well, nobody except me."

"I don't know what you're talking about, I really don't!" Mrs. Hudson leveled a glare at Sherlock, then stormed out of the flat, slamming the door behind her as she went.

Sherlock leapt over the back of his chair. Perching in it, he wrapped his arms around his knees and commenced rocking in agitation. John sighed. "What the bloody hell was that all about? You ought to go after her and apologize."

"Apologize?" Sherlock blinked like the word had come out in Sanskrit.
"Yes," John said. "Apologize. Much like 'sentiment', it actually isn't a dirty word. You were an ass."

Sherlock sighed and flopped into a more traditional posture on his chair. "Oh, John – I envy you so much."

"What?"

"Your leyline drains the pain from your knee while you're in London, likely any residual ache from your shoulder, too. Hardly a difficult deduction that its interest in your well-being would have extended to mitigating the effects of opiate withdrawal. That aside, I also envy your mind – it's so placid, straightforward, barely used. Mine's like an engine racing out of control; a rocket tearing itself to pieces trapped on the launch pad." He reached up and tugged his own hair. "I need a case!" he shouted.

John replied with, "You've just solved one!" and from there, the conversation devolved into bickering and sniping – mostly from Sherlock mocking the latest bunny-napping guest entry on his blog – until the door buzzer sounded. "Single ring," John said.

"Maximum pressure just under half a second," Sherlock agreed.

Simultaneously, they both said, "Client."

Roughly fifteen minutes later, Sherlock grabbed the TV remote and hit the power button. "What did you see?" he asked, rather bored with the new case already.

Henry Knight gestured to the now-dark screen. "I was about to say," he said.

"Yes," Sherlock retorted. "In a TV interview. I prefer to do my own editing."

"Yes?" Henry looked a little taken aback at Sherlock's blunt reply. "Sorry, yes, of course." He paused for a moment and pulled a paper napkin out of his pocket. "Scuse me," he said, blowing his nose.

"In your own time," John said.

"But quite quickly." Sherlock either didn't notice or ignored the slight glare from John.

Henry lowered the napkin and thought for a moment before asking, "Do you know Dartmoor, Mr. Holmes?"

"No," Sherlock replied.

"It's an amazing place. It's like nowhere else. It's sort of…" he cast about for the right words before deciding on, "bleak, but beautiful."

"Mmm," Sherlock said. "Not interested – moving on."

"We used to go for walks, after my mum died. My dad and me – every evening we'd go out onto the moor."

"Yes, good," Sherlock impatiently said. "Skipping to the night that your dad was violently killed. Where did that happen?"

One of these days, he's gonna wind up getting himself punched in the face. John didn't vocalize his thought. Instead he simply continued taking notes.
"There's a place, it's..." Henry said, "it's sort of a local landmark called Dewer's Hollow."

Sherlock leveled a 'so what?' look at their prospective client that was strong enough John was surprised that Mrs. Hudson didn't come up the stairs to complain about it.

"That's an ancient name for the devil," Henry explained.

John noted it down, but didn't believe the man. Thought the Celtic for 'devil' was diabhal or deamhan? Do I know it in Welsh? Yeah – Grandmum'd be proud. It's diafol. So, where'd he get the idea 'dewer' was another name for devil? Somebody must not've liked a Dewar somewhere along the way is my best guess.

Sherlock simply quirked an eyebrow at Mr. Knight. "So?"

Henry stared at them until John decided to move things along by asking the expected question – Something I do so often for Sherlock that it's getting to the point where I don't even need a meaningful pause to cue me. "Did you see the devil that night?"

Henry looked at John and slowly nodded his head. "Yes," he whispered. "It was huge. Coal-black fur with red eyes. It got him, tore at him. Tore him apart. I can't remember anything else. They found me the next morning, just wandering on the moor. My dad's body was never found."

John looked at Sherlock, who'd been peering intently at Knight. "Red eyes, black fur, enormous – dog? Wolf?"

"Or a genetic experiment," Sherlock tossed the idea out like a poker chip at a penny-ante game, a genuine amused expression tugging at his face.

"Are you laughing at me, Mr. Holmes?" Henry asked, sounding like he was well on his way to being offended.

Sherlock managed to clear his expression as he asked, "Why, are you joking?"

"My dad was always going on about the things they were doing at Baskerville, about the type of monsters they were breeding there. People used to laugh at him. At least the TV people took me seriously."

"And, I assume, did wonders for Devon tourism," Sherlock snarked.

I should start charging him for this, John thought, leaning over to Henry. "Henry, whatever did happen to your father, it was twenty years ago. Why come to us now?"

Henry ignored John in favor of glaring at Sherlock. "I'm not sure you can help me, Mr. Holmes," he said, his voice strained with something that sounded very close to anger, "since you find it all so funny." He stood, clearly intending to leave.

Sherlock's voice halted him in his tracks. "Because of what happened last night," Sherlock spoke to John even though his attention was still focused on Henry.

And we have a winner! The thought flashed through John's mind in an irritatingly cheerful game-show-announcer's voice as Henry slowly turned around to stare at Sherlock. And another of those opportunities for asking the obvious question. "Why? What happened last night?"

"How," Henry asked, "how do you know?"
"I didn't know; I noticed," Sherlock replied, then spewed forth a rapid-fire narration of how Henry had spent his morning, ending with, "Sit down, Mr. Knight, and do please smoke – I'd be delighted."

Henry blinked at Sherlock, then glanced at John. John gave the man a small 'what can you do' grin coupled with a slight shrug. Henry slowly meandered back to John's armchair and sank into it. "How on Earth did you notice all that?" he asked, sounding a bit like someone who'd just been informed that yes, aliens are real, and yes, they do quite enjoy anal play.

Sherlock glanced at John out of the corner of his eye. John gave a little sideways tilt to his head, which Sherlock correctly interpreted as 'go for it'. A nearly feral-looking gleam began glowing behind Sherlock's eyes, and he resumed his faster-than-a-caffeinated-fourteen-year-old-girl-on-the-phone speech, detailing the minutia of Henry's appearance which had informed the world's only consulting detective about Henry's morning and what that morning had to say about the night before. This time, the faster-than-light speech ended with, "Am I wrong?"

Henry drew in an overawed, shaky breath. "No," he said. "You're right. You're completely, exactly right. Bloody hell, I heard you were quick."

"It's my job," Sherlock smugly replied. "Now shut up and smoke."

John mentally sighed as he looked at the notes he'd taken thus far. "You parents died when you were just a kid," he said to their visitor. Henry was busy rolling a cigarette, but glanced up and nodded at John. "What makes you think that, well…" Henry lit the smoke and breathed in. After holding it a moment, he then exhaled, only to have Sherlock spring forward and suck the secondhand out of the air. Why? John valiantly resisted both the urge to plant an impressive facepalm and to swat Sherlock like a disobeying toddler. He cleared his throat with a significant glare at his flatmate. Sherlock shrugged, letting out the secondhand with a blissful little noise that John was convinced he'd last heard in the psychiatric research department back in med school. Only then, that noise came from the mice with the pleasure buttons implanted. Not my thirty-something flatmate. Wonder if I could get a recording next time? I think Greg'd crack a few ribs if he ever heard that. He returned his attention to Henry. "Losing your parents so young, that must have been quite a trauma. Haven't you considered that perhaps you invented this story," John paused as Henry took another drag off his cigarette and Sherlock immediately absconded with the secondhand, "to account for it?" On finally finishing his sentence, he twitched a disapproving eyebrow at his flatmate. "And you – quit shotgunning." John looked back at Henry with a small smile. "Sorry. We're still working on the concepts of personal space and appropriate behavior."

Henry did as he'd done all throughout his interview and simply blinked at the inexplicable. "Um… That's what Dr. Mortimer says," he replied to the question John had asked.

"Who?" John asked.

Simultaneously, Sherlock and Knight both replied with, "My therapist," and "His therapist." The only differences were in the possessive pronoun, and Sherlock ended with a small roll of his eyes and an 'obviously'. Henry continued with, "Louise Mortimer. She's the reason I came back to Dartmoor. She thinks I have to face my demons."

Sherlock gave a small nod as though he'd expected that precise reply. "And what happened when you went back to Dewer's Hollow last night? You went there on the advice of your therapist and now you're consulting a detective. What did you see that changed everything?"

"It's a strange place, the Hollow," Henry said, his voice indicating that he was mentally very far away. "Makes you feel so cold inside, so afraid —"
"Yes," Sherlock interrupted. "If I wanted poetry, I'd read John's emails to his girlfriends – much funnier." John let out a sigh. One of these days, I'm either gonna get used to having absolutely no privacy, or I'm gonna kill him. At least if I do wind up suffocating him in his sleep, I'm pretty sure Greg'd be on my side and help me to cover it up. Surely he knows of a good place to dump a body… Unaware of John's inner thoughts, Sherlock repeated, "What did you see?" at their guest.

"Footprints," Henry replied. "On the exact spot where I saw my father torn apart."

John poised his pen on his notepad and asked, "Man's or a woman's?"

"Neither," Henry said with a shake of his head. "They were –"

"Is that it?" Sherlock interrupted again. "Nothing else? Footprints. Is that all?"

"Yes," Henry looked back at the detective. "But they were –"

"No, sorry," Sherlock said. "What was it?"

Frowning, Mr. Knight. He shot a tight smile at the man. "Thank you for smoking."

"Oh, they're probably paw prints. Could be anything, therefore nothing." He leaned forwards in his chair and made a little shooing motion at Henry. "Off to Devon with you. Have a cream tea on me." Sherlock stood and buttoned his jacket with a practiced flick of his wrist before striding into the kitchen.

Henry twisted around in his seat to follow him. "Mr. Holmes! They were the footprints of a gigantic hound!"

Sherlock stopped so suddenly, John wondered if someone had accidentally hit 'pause' on the universe's remote control. Then his flatmate slowly turned around and walked back to the doorway to stare down at Henry. "Say that again," Sherlock said.

"I found the footprints," Henry replied. "They were –"

"No, no, no," Sherlock corrected. "Your exact words. Repeat your exact words from a moment ago, exactly as you said them."

Henry thought for a moment, then haltingly repeated, "Mr. Holmes, they were the footprints of a… gigantic… hound?"

Sherlock straightened a bit and the last lingering traces of mockery fell from his expression. "I'll take the case," he said.


Steepling his fingers, Sherlock slowly padded back into the living room. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention. It's very promising."

"No, sorry – what? A minute ago, footprints were boring, now they're 'very promising'?!" John – even as accustomed to Sherlockian logic as he was – was having difficulty following his friend's train of thought.

Sherlock paused near the sofa. "It's nothing to do with footprints," he said. "As ever, John, you
weren't listening. Baskerville – ever heard of it?"

"I assume you mean prior to today," John said. At Sherlock's 'of course' eyebrow twitch, he nodded. "Yes. Why?"

"Sounds like a good place to start," Sherlock replied with a negligent prod in John's direction.

"Ah! You'll come down, then?" Henry said, sounding relieved.

"No," Sherlock said. "I can't leave London at the moment – far too busy. Don't worry," he stepped over to John. "I'm putting my best man onto it," he patted John's arm. "I can always rely on John to send me the relevant data, as he rarely understands a word of it himself."

"What are you talking about, you're busy?" John clenched his pen in order to keep from strangling Sherlock. "You don't have a case! Besides – this has gotta be at least a nine."

"Don't be absurd, John," Sherlock argued. "The vanishing body adds a point, as does the time since the disappearance-cum-death, but both those factors are negated by the fact that the location is so close to a secret military base. It barely ranks a six."

"Fine, the arbitrary allotment of points aside for the moment, you were complaining just an hour ago about –"

"Bluebell, John!" Sherlock interrupted. "I've got Bluebell! The case of the vanishing, glow-in-the-dark rabbit!" He looked around the room, his gaze landing on Henry with a faint shadow of surprise that the man was still there. "NATO's in an uproar."

Henry shook his head with a slow blink. "Sorry, no, so you're not coming, then?"

Donning a mock-regretful expression, Sherlock shook his head. John sighed. *One of these days, I'm going to write up a Sherlock-to-English dictionary and charge our clients fifty quid a pop for a copy. I'll be able to retire in six months. "Sherlock!"

A broad grin surfaced on the detective's face. "You go on ahead, Henry. We'll follow later."

The subtle nuances of Sherlock's sense of humor were, as always, lost on the uninitiated. "Um," Henry looked confusedly from Sherlock to John and back. "Sorry, so you *are* coming?"

"A twenty year old disappearance? A monstrous hound? I wouldn't miss this for the world!"

Roughly five minutes later, after Henry Knight had – rather bewilderedly – left, presumably heading back to the train station, John let out a small sigh. Thinking of his aborted attempt to visit Dublin back in September, he meandered through the kitchen and knocked on Sherlock's open bedroom door. Sherlock was busily throwing things into a sturdily-built black garment bag that zipped shut around the edges into a standard suitcase. "Yes?" he asked, not bothering to look up from clipping two suit-hangers – the kind with the metal clips for trousers – into the case atop a small stack of folded shirts.

"Dunno if I'm going to be much help on this, to be honest," John said, leaning against the doorframe, marveling as he always did that Sherlock's bedroom was so neatly tidy when the rest of the flat was ever in a perpetual state of chaos.

Sherlock paused and looked up. "What makes you say that?"

"Just… I've noticed any time I leave London, I wind up back in last January."
It took a moment for Sherlock to actually understand what John was saying. "Oh – I thought your magic had solved your mobility problems?"

"Seems to be only when I'm actually in London." He let out another small sigh. "Makes sense, in a magic-twisted way, I suppose." Sherlock leveled his 'explain now' eyebrow in John's direction. "Well, nerve damage either heals on its own or not at all. Medicine can't do anything about it. Healing spells don't either, so I don't see why magic herself would be able to. Magic or no, I learnt a long time ago that some things are just plain impossible."

"Yet the impossible regularly happens around you," Sherlock commented, turning to his sock index. "It isn't out of the question that the damage might have healed itself during the intervening months."

John shook his head. "No," he said. "No, I don't think so. Back in September it was as bad as ever. Maybe even a bit worse, though that could simply be due to having had so long without needing to deal with it."

Sherlock added five pairs of socks to the suitcase, then zipped the garment portion shut. "When were you… Oh, of course. The boomeranged hiker." He sent an accusatory glare at John. "You might've mentioned something at the time."

John shrugged. "'Scuse me for thinking the cane gave it away."

"I had assumed it to be weather-related. I've noticed you tend not to walk far when the weather's like it was then – consistently dreary for more than a week at a stretch."

"Nah. That's more to do with the fact that I don't much like walking in the rain. People start to notice there's something off about me if I'm completely dry in the middle of a rainstorm." He made a vague sort of gesture. "And I don't much like umbrellas. Especially now I've met your brother."

Sherlock let out an undignified little snort at that, then sobered. "Still," he said, rummaging through his bedside table. "You survived quite well for, what was it? Four months? Prior to moving here."

"'Bout that, yeah," John agreed. "However, for half that time, I was doped to the gills in hospital, and for the remainder of that time, I was living on – what is it the papers call it? 'Hillbilly heroin'?"

With a small roll of his eyes, Sherlock tossed a couple of pens into his suitcase's side-pocket. "Most of the dealers I knew simply called it 'ox'." He added a notebook not unlike the one in which Greg took down case notes. "Much less of a mouthful." He looked up at John again. "I presume you still have some. Shelf life of three years, so it should still be usable."

"Yeah, I still have a bit left, but…" John trailed off, realizing that he wasn't going to get out of this trip. "How long are we going to be gone?" he asked, resigned to the inevitable.

"No more than four days, I would imagine, and that is entirely unlikely. I would say overnight at the most, but one can never be certain how smoothly a twenty year old disappearance is going to go."

Sherlock finished speaking and packing at roughly the same moment, the sound of the zipper closing his suitcase underscored his last few words.

Another twenty minutes later, and John had a couple days' worth of clothes packed into a small suitcase he'd forgotten he'd owned until spotting it underneath his duffle; all while he'd been packing, the London avatar had stood in the corner of his room, emitting a complicated cloud of emotions, including disapproval and a general air of surrender to the inevitable. He hauled both his suitcase and Sherlock's – along with his satchel and that damnable cane – down the stairs and out to where Sherlock had hailed them a cab.
In the time he'd spent indoors, the majority of Speedy's breakfast run had moved on, but John could hear a very irate Mrs. Hudson – only slightly muted through the glass door and windows – shouting at Mr. Chatterjee. "...cruise together! You had no intention of taking me on it..." One of Mr. Chatterjee's crusty rolls, the kind he used for soup bread-bowls, ricocheted off the door with a dull thudding noise.

"Looks like Mrs. Hudson finally go to the wife in Doncaster," John commented to Sherlock.

"Mmm," Sherlock agreed. "Wait until she finds out about the one in Islamabad."

*That explains a bit about my morning*, John thought, snickering softly as he climbed into the cab.

"Paddington Station, please," Sherlock directed the driver, then settled into his own seat.

An hour later, their train pulled out of the greater London area. Almost immediately, John's knee began to ache with a steady thrum that John knew from experience was only going to get worse. *It's come on faster this time*, he thought retrieving the bottle of oxycodone from his jacket pocket. He tossed a tablet into his mouth and dry-swallowed it. *I'm really not looking forward to this...* "That settles it," he said, managing to drag Sherlock's attention away from his phone.

"What settles what, exactly?"

"Either you're gonna start taking cases *solely* within London, or you're gonna need to do it without me. I am *never* leaving London again."

The journey to Dartmoor took rather longer than expected, thanks to a lengthy unexplained delay at one of the smaller stations along the train's route. Despite this, or possibly in part because of the trip's length, John spent the majority of it snoozing. Not *sleeping*, not really, but dozing in and out of consciousness, often to the sound of Sherlock's rumbling 'thinking out loud'.

When the train finally reached their destination, John was pulled from his latest catnap by truly horrible burnt-smelling coffee and an insistent hand on his shoulder. Yawning, John let out a series of vowels. Amusement crinkled the corners of Sherlock's eyes. "Yes," the consulting detective said, "we're here." The train began to slow. "Here," he pushed a styrofoam cup with plastic sip-it lid into John's hands. "Drink this and be quick about it."

John scrubbed the back of his right hand across his eyes while Sherlock retrieved their bags from the overhead compartment. Even though the scent warned him it was likely the third-worst coffee he'd ever been subjected to – first prize on that score went to Major Franklin's 'A-for-effort-but-not-much-else' back during that three-day catastrophe of a mission during his second tour in Afghanistan – the sandpaper coating his mouth and throat welcomed its presence. *He must've got this a while ago. It's nearly cold*. John ignored the tepid temperature and chugged it down anyway. *I'll need the caffeine.*

Eventually, he and Sherlock made it off of the train. John parked himself on a bench, their suitcases at his feet, while Sherlock ran off to get them a car. He returned roughly half an hour later with a large black Land Rover. John levered himself to his feet and paused – a light rush of dizziness told him that he was well and truly under the effects of his prescribed medication. With their suitcases tucked into the back seat, John settled himself in the passenger seat and began fiddling with the radio.

Before they could even pull out of the parking lot for the train station, Sherlock smacked John's hand away from the buttons with an irritated, "Quit that."

John rolled his eyes and let out a huff as he flopped back against his seat. "Didn't know you could drive," he commented, his eyes tracking the scenery outside the windshield.
"No point in owning a car in London," Sherlock confirmed, skipping ahead in the conversation.

"You really need to stop doing that," John replied.

"Stop doing what, exactly?"

"Jumping over large parts of the conversation just 'cause you think they're boring."

Sherlock sighed. 'Fine. 'Yes, John – I know how to drive',' he quoted from the conversation-never-was, then mimicked John's own voice, "'Then why take taxis everywhere? Wouldn't it be cheaper in the long run to own your own car?'" He switched back to his own voice, "'It would, yes, but there is the matter of parking.'" He maneuvered the Jeep around a man on a tractor, continuing in his own voice, "'And that's where things begin to get expensive. The nearest secure place to park a car is several blocks from the flat, so we would wind up taking just as many taxis to get to and from the parking garage as we currently do in getting to and from our actual destinations – ergo, there is no point to it.'" He glanced at John. "Happy?"

"Thrilled," John's reply was drier than the Registan. He reached out to start toying with the radio again, only to have Sherlock lightly smack his hand once more. John sighed for what was probably the millionth time since meeting Sherlock, then settled back to watching the scenery in silence.

"There's a map in the glove compartment," Sherlock broke the quiet about half an hour later, navigating the Land Rover into a roadside park populated by gigantic stone outcroppings. He parked the car and hopped out before John could reply.


An undocumented side-effect of oxycodone, at least as far as John was concerned, was a lack of his typical level of control over his othersight abilities. So, in addition to the nearly high-definition visual imagery of postcard-worthy countryside completely lacking in London smog, John also was treated to the unfiltered bucolic tranquility of magical ebb and flow outside of a metropolitan area. The local leyline system had yet to 'notice' John, but John could see it without effort – it was, when compared to his London Lady, greener than her blue-white glow, tasted of chlorophyll and moss and dirt with an undertone of burning leaves, but put him in mind of the way pond scum smelt, and felt like a hike through a blackberry briar; prickly, in other words, very much unlike the smooth and comforting cloud-like presence of London. All-in-all, where London's leylines were very much on John's side, he had the distinct impression that Dartmoor's leyline system would prefer it if he were to go away.

"What's that?" Sherlock asked, interrupting John's magical assessment.

"What's what?" John replied, digging in his jacket for his field-glasses.

"That, there," Sherlock clarified, pointing to the no-man's land surrounding the Baskerville facility.

"Minefield," John replied, looking through his binoculars. "Baskerville's a level-five clearance army
"base," he said, "so I assume they've always been keen to keep people out."

John didn’t notice, but Sherlock blinked thoughtfully in his direction. "Clearly," he said, then climbed down from his perch atop the outcrop. Ten minutes later, and Sherlock was pulling to a halt in the car park for the only accommodations in the area – the Cross Keys Inn, by name. "Get us a room, John," Sherlock said, then melted into a crowd of people listening to a lanky kid in his early twenties who had a sandwich board standing next to him that, in a rather melodramatic fashion, read **Beware the Hound!!**, complete with a shadow-outline of a snarling wolf with blood dripping from its mouth.

Ignoring the equally-melodramatic patter of the kid trying to cash in on things, John made his way into the Cross Keys. Part of him noticed the 'vegetarian cuisine' sign and was both disappointed and enthused – his inner doctor knew the benefits of a vegetarian diet, but he was far too enraptured of bacon to ever accept it for himself. "Afternoon," he said, greeting the bartender with a polite smile. "You who I talk to about a room?"


"John Watson," John replied. "Need a double room for at least tonight, likely two or three."

Gary frowned, "Sorry, just gave away the last double. Only got a single left."

"That'll have to do," John sighed. *Really, is anything going to go as planned?* Almost as though the thought summoned it, the local leyline system seemed to take that moment to realize John's presence. Whereas London had – at first – manifested as a tentacle-like tendril of magical energy, Dartmoor put John in the mind of a vertical potato that had begun sprouting. It reached out and touched his aura, then violently pulled away. The overriding sense coming off of it was best summed up as 'go back where you belong'. Would if I could, John thought at it while Gary filled out the paperwork for the room.

The Dartmoor avatar slid back from John, avoiding even an accidental touch of his aura, only to be temporarily dispersed by Sherlock ducking in through the door. John's attention was pulled away from both the manifestation of the local leylines and his flatmate by Gary's voice, "Sorry we couldn't do a double room for you boys." He handed John a room key on a brass keychain.

"That's fine," John said, taking the key. He glanced at the 'don't worry, we get *all kinds*' smirk on Gary's face. He handed the man enough cash to cover the room. "We're really *not*," he said.

"I'll just get your change," Gary replied, but John could hear the 'so you say' undertone. While Gary's back was turned, John spotted a receipt spike snugged up next to the beer taps. He likely would have ignored it, save for the fact that he was still lamenting the probable lack of bacon come morning and the fact that one of the receipts was labeled with a handwritten **Undershaw Meat Supplies.** He quickly snatched the receipt off the spike and pocketed it just in time for Gary to turn around with his change. "There you go," Gary said, handing over a couple of coins.

John accepted his change. "I couldn't help noticing on the map of the moor – a skull and crossbones…?"

"Oh, that," Gary said as a customer came up to the bar with an empty larger glass. "Aye." He quickly refilled the customer's glass.

"Pirates?" John asked, not entirely capable of keeping the snark from surfacing. *Though I doubt he noticed.*
"Oh, no, no," Gary replied, handing the customer his refilled glass. "The Great Grimpen Minefield, they call it. Been going for eighty-odd years – it's the Baskerville testing site. I'm not sure anyone really knows what's there any more."

"Explosives?" John asked, watching as Sherlock wandered around the bar area.

"Oh, not just explosives. Break into that place and, if you're lucky, you just get blowed up, so they say… In case you're planning on a nice wee stroll."

John glanced down at his cane and let out an undignified snort. "Not likely."

"No," Gary agreed, seemingly just noticing his newest customer's mobility problem, "I don't suppose that'll be something you're interested in. The minefield buggers up tourism a bit, so thank god for the demon hound." He punctuated his last comment with a wide grin and a small chuckle. "Did you see that show? The documentary?"

John nodded, "Quite recently."

"God bless Henry Knight and his monster from hell," Gary proclaimed, his hands making an expressive 'there you have it' type of gesture.

"Ever seen it?" John asked. "The hound?"

There was no mistaking the tone of Gary's reply – it was identical to what John would have used had someone asked him if he'd ever seen a yeti. "Me? No. They say it's gigantic, though. Size of a small horse."

John quirked a disbelieving eyebrow at the innkeeper. "That's three times," he said. "Just who is this 'they' you keep mentioning?"

Gary looked a little taken aback at the question, but quickly shrugged it off. "Well, Fletcher, for one. He runs the walks – the Monster Walks for the tourists, you know? He says he's seen it. And that crazy bugger Knight."

"Anyone else?" John asked. "Any of the tourists, for example?"

Gary shrugged, and stepped out of the way of a small man – and John felt fully justified in using the description, as the man in cook's whites was fully three inches shorter than himself. "We're out of WKD," the newcomer said to Gary. Gary turned to scribble something down on a pad of paper along the barback with a muttered 'all right' while the cook took to chatting at John. "Lots of monster-hunters lately. Doesn't take much these days. One mention on Twitter and oomph," he paused for a moment, then said, "What with the monster and that ruddy prison, I don't know how we sleep nights. Do you, Gary?"

"Like a baby, Billy," Gary replied with an affectionate pat to the cook's shoulder. "Like a baby."

And that gets filed under 'things I never wanted to know'. Out loud, John couldn't help but correct the cook. "It's a military base, not a prison."

Billy gave a sideways shrug. "What's the difference?" he asked, rhetorically.

"For one, I don't imagine a prison would have a minefield," John replied. Oh, fan-bloody-tastic. The dissolving effect on my brain-to-mouth filter of the oxycodone has engaged. Marvelous – and it takes a solid couple of days to get it back, or did last time. This time, though… Who knows? "Though, if they did have, I would imagine escape attempts would probably take place far less often than they
do. And successful ones would likely only wind up freeing bedspace, but not in the way intended…"
He only just managed not to cover his own mouth with a hand to keep the words from spilling out.
Billy blinked at him with a look John had last seen aimed at Sherlock mid-deductive-rant. "Nice
chatting with you," John said, then fled the bar.

He took a moment to spot where Sherlock had wandered off to, then headed over to where the
consulting detective was sitting on a picnic bench, talking to the kid – Fletcher – who had been
spieling to the tourists when they'd arrived. "Bet's off, John," Sherlock said as John sank onto the
other side of the bench. "Sorry."

Fletcher, who'd been about to leave, seized on the one word and asked, "Bet?"

Sherlock pretended not to hear him as he checked the time on his phone. "My plan needs darkness,"
he said, peering up at the sky. "Reckon we've got another half an hour of light –"

"Wait, wait, wait," Fletcher interrupted. "What bet?"

"Oh," Sherlock replied. "I bet John here fifty quid that you couldn't prove you'd seen the hound."

"Yeah," John agreed. Anything to get him to fork over his half of the grocery bill works for me.

"The guys in the pub said you could."

Fletcher grinned. "Well, you're gonna lose your money, mate."

"Yeah?" Sherlock challenged.

"Yeah," Fletcher nodded, the motion making his oily aura swim dizzyingly around him for a
moment. 'I've seen it. Only about a month ago, up at the Hollow. It was foggy, mind – couldn't
make much out."

"I see," Sherlock said, his voice practically dripping skepticism. "No witnesses, I suppose."

Fletcher puffed up a little at that. "No, but –"

"Never are," Sherlock commented, then looked over at John.

"Wait," Fletcher said, digging out his mobile. He toyed with it for a moment, then held it out to
Sherlock. "There."

"Is that it?" Sherlock said, a disbelieving little chuckle dusting the words. "It's not exactly proof, is it?"

Fletcher shifted and showed the photo to John. John let out a snort. "I've seen better photos by an
alcoholic on a six-day binge," he said, referring to his sister's favored hobby. "Is that a bear? Dog?
Photoshopped squirrel?"

Sherlock shook his head. "Sorry, John – I win, I'm sure you agree."

"Wait, wait," Fletcher said. John was beginning to think it was the budding con-man's favorite word.
"That's not all. People don't like going up there, you know – to the Hollow. Gives them a bad sort of
feeling."

"Ooh, is it haunted?" Sherlock didn't damper his sarcasm one iota.

John chuckled, "Nah – if it were, I'd know about it."
Sherlock ignored the aside, "Is that supposed to convince me?"

"No," Fletcher replied. "Nothing like that," his own disbelief in ghosts bled through his words. "But I reckon there is something out there – something escaped from Baskerville."

Sherlock laughed. "What is it then – a clone? A super-dog?"

Fletcher gave a combined nod-and-shrug. "Maybe," he said. "God knows what they've been spraying on us all these years – or puttin' in the water. I wouldn't trust 'em far as I could spit."

It was John's turn to let out a doubtful laugh. "Oh, come on! D'you have any idea the level of bureaucracy involved in something that's used on people? Even for something as benign as a sonic – read: nonlethal – weapon? The regs listing on it's as thick as a combined phone directory for the entirety of London! And it just gets more and more involved if there's anything chemical involved, particularly if there's any chance whatsoever of accidental spillage into a civilian area. And genetic manipulation –"

Sherlock derailed John's combined medical/military rant with a nod at Fletcher's phone. "Is that the best you've got?"

Fletcher looked from Sherlock to John and back again. "Had me a mate once, he worked for the M. O. D. One weekend we were meant to go fishin' but he never showed up – not 'til late. When he did, he was white as a sheet. I can see him now. 'I've seen things today, Fletch,' he said, 'that I never wanna see again. Terrible things.' He'd been sent to some secret army place – Porton Down, maybe. Maybe Baskerville or somewhere else." He leaned down as though to ensure privacy. "In the labs there – the really secret labs, he said he'd seen terrible things. Rats as big as dogs, he said, and dogs,"

he paused, both for dramatic effect and to pull a casting from his bag, "dogs the size of horses."

The cast was of a large paw-print, roughly twenty centimeters from back-to-front. Sherlock stared at it in thinly-veiled surprise, but John just rolled his eyes. "Not convincing me there, 'Fletch,'" he said, using finger-quotes around the kid's name. "That could be from a mastiff, maybe a St. Bernard or a Great Dane. Hell, could be any one of a dozen or more of the largest dog breeds. If it really was the size of a horse, the paw-print itself would need to be at least three times bigger than that. When I was a kid, our neighbor raised sheep – had a pair of Anatolian Shepherds. Their prints were half again that size."

Sherlock shot him a look that clearly said 'shut up now', but John just didn't care. He continued speaking to the 'tour guide'. "Now you, on the other hand – I appreciate a well-run con as much as the next guy, but you ought to polish yours up a bit. Get the right peppermint edge to it and you'll have a late-night infomercial before you know it. But this," he made a gesture that indicated the whole of the 'Monster Walk' experience, "has been done to death. Too many people out there with too much intel at the tips of their fingers – keep on with it, an' you're just gonna wind up a laughingstock."

Fletcher scowled at John as he returned the cast to his bag, then strode away. Sherlock finally managed to capture John's gaze. "So, you're not interested in money – contrary to all prior expectations."

John shrugged, "Sure. Wouldn't mind it if you actually paid your part of all the tea'n'milk we go through, but that kid?" He made a vague gesture with his hand. "Anyway – you were saying about a plan for tonight?"

Sherlock peered at him as though he'd suddenly grown a third nostril.
"What? Do I have something in my teeth?"

Sherlock shook his head. "No. Fatigue, bradycardia, miosis, an irritating tendency to babble – are there any other side-effects of you on ox I ought to know?"

"Hypotension, dizziness, dry mouth," John listed the other side-effects he suffered from with a cheerful 'fuck off' tone. "And it's only gonna get worse before it gets better because someone wouldn't let me sit this one out."

"Oh, don't be petulant, John," Sherlock said, climbing to his feet. "It doesn't suit you."

"That's rich, coming from you, Mr. There-Hasn't-Been-A-Case-Since-This-Morning-So-I'l l-Tear-Apart-The-Flat-And-Make-Mrs. H-Cry."

"Precisely," Sherlock nodded. "I've the practice for it, you don't. Now get up – we've a testing facility to break into."

As the sun sank towards nightfall, Sherlock pulled the Land Rover up to the main gate for Baskerville. A security guard met them, his hand never straying far from his standard-issue rifle. John's inner soldier approved even as the rest of him was thrumming with nervous tension, while John's inner mage scanned the area and found that the local leyline system – either by accident or design – completely avoided crossing the Baskerville grounds. "Pass, please," the guard said. Sherlock handed over a small card from his coat pocket. "Thank you," the guard said, then strode into the guard shack while another guard, holding the lead to a brown-and-black German Shepherd, stepped forward to inspect their car.

"You've got ID for Baskerville?" the whispered question hurled itself like a kamikaze pilot from his mouth before he could stop it. "How?" John shook his head. "No – Mycroft. Question really should be: Does he know you've got it?"

Sherlock sent him a sideways little smirk. "I acquired it ages ago, just in case. It's non-specific to location."

"Brilliant," John said, succumbing to the urge to roll his eyes. "Fan-fucking-tastic. We're gonna get caught."

"No," Sherlock argued. "Not just yet."

"Caught in five minutes," John stressed. "'round your top-secret weapons base,'" he did a fair impression of imitating himself when he wasn't standing on the cusp of panic, then switched to a slightly deeper voice for, "Really? Great! Come in – kettle's just boiled." In his normal voice, he concluded with, "And that's if we don't get shot! What was it Jason used to say… 'Been there, done that, bought the t-shirt'. I definitely do not want to get shot again."

The guard with the dog interrupted John's hissing stream-of-panic with a not-quite-shouted, "Clear."

The original guard emerged from the shack and handed Sherlock the card. "Thank you very much, sir."

"Thank you," Sherlock said, apparently by reflex. The gate slid open and he put the car in gear.

"Straight through," the guard said.
John managed to stem the flow of words from his mouth long enough for them to move beyond the guards, then let out a small, high-pitched sigh through his nose. It wanted, very much so, to become hysterical laughter, but he managed to reign it in. "Mycroft's name literally opens doors."

"I told you," Sherlock rebutted, "he practically is the British government. I estimate we've about twenty minutes before they realize something's wrong."

"Oh, great. Fantastic. Wonderful. And if we're stuck down in the labs when that happens? Sure – you'll only need to spend however long it takes Mycroft to get off his arse to come and fetch you, but me? I'll wind up rotting down there while some new-age Dr. Frankenstein pokes me and dissects me to see if they can find out why I'm a mage and they aren't –"

"John!" Sherlock shouted. John got the feeling it wasn't the first time, either.

"What?" he shouted right back.

"Quit panicking! Nothing of the sort will happen, particularly not since they've no reason to suspect magic is anything other than the stuff of fairytales!"

John took a deep breath, held it for a moment, then let it slowly out through his nose. He opened his eyes as the car came to a halt, unsure as to when he'd closed them. Sherlock was already out of the car and striding through another manned checkpoint. John pried himself out of his seat and scrambled to catch up, valiantly ignoring the drug-induced dizziness he had on standing. On the upside, that minor freak-out's done more for my blood pressure than that coffee I had earlier. He managed to fall into step with his flatmate just as a military jeep pulled up and disgorged an overenthusiastic young corporal. "What is it?" the corporal said, "Are we in trouble?"

Sherlock leveled his best 'I am a Holmes' glare at the poor kid. "Are we in trouble, sir," he corrected.

"Yes, sir," the corporal replied, stepping up to block their way. "Sorry, sir."

"You were expecting us?" Sherlock asked.

"Your ID showed up straight away, Mr. Holmes," the corporal said, unintimidated by Sherlock's air of entitlement. "Corporal Lyons, security. Is there something wrong, sir?"

"Well, I hope not, corporal," Sherlock replied, subtly dialing back on his demeanor. "I hope not."

"It's just we don't get inspected here, you see, sir. It just doesn't happen," Lyons said, a slight pleading note underscoring the explanation.

"Who said anything about an inspection?" John asked, drawing Lyons' attention from Sherlock. He quickly displayed his ID. "Captain John Watson, Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers." While speaking, the corporal came to attention and saluted. It was instinct – born of years of practice – that had John returning the salute. I will not babble incoherently. I will not babble incoherently.

"Sir," Lyons said. "Major Barrymore won't be pleased, sir. He'll want to see you both."

"I'm afraid we don't have time for that," John argued. He hoped 'don't interrupt me, Sherlock, I've actually got sort of a plan here' could be read by his flatmate. "Mr. Holmes needs a full tour – I'll deal with this Major Merrybore."

"Major Barrymore, sir," Lyons corrected, then winced a little. "I'll escort you myself, sir," he glanced at his watch. "Private Pipping ought to be just inside – she can escort Mr. Holmes to wherever he
needs to be."

John gestured towards the door. "After you, corporal." *I will not babble incoherently.*

"Yes, sir," Lyons said, turning smartly around and striding towards the door.

Sherlock and John followed, the former shooting the latter a multi-layered look that John had no trouble decoding. He gave a little shrug in reply. Sherlock shook his head in the smallest of movements, then swiped Mycroft's ID card through the door reader. It let out a chirrupy double-beep, then displayed 'access granted' in white text across a green background. A moment later, Lyons disengaged the door locks and made a small 'after you' gesture. On entering the facility, Lyons removed his hat, shut the door behind them and said, "One moment, sirs," then hurried up to a redhead woman. "Private Pipping," he greeted her. "Please serve as Mr. Holmes' escort." He pointed to Sherlock, then turned his attention to John. "And if you would follow me?"

![Access Granted](image)

John sent a quick 'be careful' glance at his insane flatmate before the somewhat homely private ushered him towards the elevator at the end of the hall. John was pretty sure that it wasn't his imagination that had him seeing a similar look aimed in his direction from the mad genius. John nodded, mostly to himself, then set to following Lyons deeper into the ground-level labyrinth. *It's the same setup as that training facility in Nevada. I wonder – do they all use the same set of blueprints, or is this just a coincidence?* "How far down does the lift go?" he asked. *I will not babble incoherently.*

"Quite a way, sir," Lyons replied, nodding in passing to another of the security team.

"And I imagine the secondary lift goes even farther," John commented, knowing that these sorts of places *never* had just one. "Generally, what's down there?"

"Well," Lyons said, glancing at John, "we have to keep the bins somewhere, sir."

John could appreciate the understated snark in the sentence – it told him far more clearly than the earlier 'it's just we don't get inspected here' just precisely what sort of base Baskerville was. *I will not babble incoherently.* "What goes on down there?" John asked.

"I thought you'd know, sir," Lyons replied.

Either you've been posted here too long, kid, or you're exactly the sort who'll do well at these types of postings. "I know – in broad strokes – the mission-purpose of bases like this. I was just curious as to specifically which branch of research Baskerville was currently dedicated to following."

"Mostly biological research of one breed or another," Lyons replied, finally seeming to recognize the
experience John had at talking around a topic. "Everything from stem-cell research to trying to cure the common cold, sir."

"But mostly weaponry," John commented to himself. I will not babble incoherently.

"Of one sort or another," Lyons agreed. "Yes, sir."

"Biological, from what you've mentioned, rather than chemical. Boys at Porton Down were working the strictly-chemical side, last I heard," John said. And that wasn't even all that long ago, either.

"One war ends, another begins, sir. New enemies to fight. We have to be prepared," Lyons said, coming to a halt outside a pair of steel doors with a scan-to-access keypad much like the one on the door through which they had entered the building. Lyons slid his card through the reader and pushed his way into the security mains of the complex.

John glanced at his watch, recalling that Sherlock – who was usually pretty spot-on about these sorts of things – indicated they'd have twenty minutes. John figured that meant twenty minutes counting from when Mycroft's ID had been initially scanned out by the gate. About eight minutes left. I hope Sherlock is getting whatever it was he was after. Lyons led John past the soldiers sitting at the banks of security feeds over to an office in the corner of the room. It had a half-glass wall that looked over the main room.

"Major Barrymore, sir," Lyons said, knocking politely on the open door.

"Corporal Lyons," a tall man, roughly the same age as John, looked up from the paperwork he was reading. "What do we have?"

Lyons introduced John. "Captain Watson to see you, sir," he said, then stepped away. He walked over to one of the seated security team and began chatting quietly with him.

John stepped into the office and gave a small salute to the major. I will not babble incoherently. "Major Barrymore, sir."

"Captain Watson." Barrymore motioned to the chair that faced his desk. "Have a seat."

John closed the office door behind him and took the offered seat with a barely-concealed sigh of relief. "Thanks," he said. "Bloody knee hasn't been the same since Kandahar."

A measure of respect leaked into the major's posture as he sat himself down on his own chair. "What brings you to Baskerville, Captain Watson? My men have been tittering some nonsense about an inspection."

John let out a small chuckle. I will not babble incoherently. "No, not an inspection, major – and call me John, please. Just a small matter that falls under the jurisdiction of Article Forty-Eight."

Barrymore frowned. "If this is about the rash of aggression we've been experiencing the last couple of months –"

John shook his head. "No. At least, that isn't what brought us here," he reassured the major.

Barrymore let out a small sigh and relaxed a bit into his chair. "It's nothing untoward, I trust?"

"Not at all," John agreed. "Honestly, I personally don't see why we were sent, but the higher-ups must have their reasons."
Barrymore nodded, idly scratching his chin through his graying beard. "And they rarely see fit to inform the rest of us," he agreed. "Going to be here long?"

John shook his head. "I don't think so. The civvy they've got me partnered to thinks it won't take more than a day or two. This is just a small warning-visit. I'm hopeful that what we're looking for won't actually be found – not here, at any rate." John rubbed his palm over his aching knee. Even with the opiate at its peak efficacy, it still throbbed like an abscessed tooth. "Still, we have to be certain," he met Barrymore's gaze. "We should be out of your hair with a minimum of fuss." I will not babble incoherently.

"I'm going to hold you to that, Captain Watson," Barrymore said, pointing at John while speaking.

John gave his best smile. "I'm a five-November-foxtrot," he said. "My word's good as gold." Or, in this case, those foil-wrapped chocolate coins I remember from childhood.

Barrymore unbent enough to echo a faint copy of John's smile back at him. "Dealt with you boys before. Eases my mind a bit."

John glanced at his watch again. Six minutes and counting. "Would you excuse me for a moment, please," John said, retrieving his phone. He sent a text to Sherlock. Need to hurry up. I really really don't want to get caught here when Mycroft catches up to you. A moment later, his phone chimed a reply.

On my way up now. SH

"The government kid's on his way back," John said, returning his phone to his pocket. I will not babble incoherently. "Can I have your number, in case we need to return?"

Barrymore nodded and scribbled something down on a bright yellow post-it note. He handed it over with a more genuine smile than he'd worn earlier. "Let me know either way – just so I won't keep waiting for you to show up again."

"Will do," John promised, taking the note. He pushed himself to his feet. "Pleasure, Major Barrymore," he said, then opened the door. Lyons noticed him and motioned for him to wait a moment. John did so, rapidly sending Sherlock another text. If you can, stall Mycroft from sending out an alert on his ID use, will you? I think I managed to cover our presence here.
Lyons finished his conversation with the other security man and strode over. "Sir?"

"Think I'm done here, corporal," John said, readjusting his satchel's strap. He kept his phone out, though. "If you would…?" he made a motion towards the door. *I will not babble incoherently.*

"Sir," Lyons agreed, then set about leading John back through the maze of offices towards the main door.

They met up with Private Pipping and Sherlock just as they exited the lift. An older man wearing a white lab coat was with them. Lyons dismissed the redhead with a curt, "Thank you, private. Back to your duties."

"Yes, sir," she said, then headed down the hallway in the direction John and Lyons had come.

"If you don't mind, corporal," the white-haired man in the lab coat said, "I'll show them out."

"As you wish, sir," Lyons said, then waited until the man had led John and Sherlock into the rapidly-gathering twilight outside.

"This is about Henry Knight, isn't it?" the newcomer eagerly asked, easily keeping pace with Sherlock's giraffe-legs and John's own dogged desire to be well and truly away from the base. When neither of them replied, the man grinned. "I thought so! I knew he wanted help, but I didn't realize he was going to contact Sherlock Holmes!" Sherlock grimaced at the sheer fanboy enthusiasm flowing off of the lab-rat. John couldn't blame him. *I've no need to babble with him around – he's doing enough for the both of us!*

"I'm never off your website," the man continued. "Thought you'd be wearing the hat, though."

"That wasn't my hat," Sherlock bit out.

The man looked to John, ignoring Sherlock's comment entirely. "I hardly recognize him without the hat!"

As generally irritating as the man was being, John couldn't help but smile a bit at Sherlock's continued displeasure over 'that hat'. "It wasn't my hat," Sherlock repeated, over-enunciating in the way he did when he was especially annoyed.

"I love the blog, too, Dr. Watson!" the man continued, as before, ignoring Sherlock's increasing frustration with his presence.

"Oh, ta for that," John said. "I didn't catch your name…"

"Robert Frankland," the man said, offering his hand. "Call me Bob, though." John shook the offered hand out of reflex while the man gushed on about his blog.

Sherlock managed to derail the praise by stopping in his tracks and turning to face Frankland once they were only a few meters from the Land Rover. "You know Henry Knight?" he asked.

Frankland also stopped walking and stood a comfortable conversation-distance away from John and Sherlock. "Well," he said, scratching the back of his neck, "I knew his dad better. He had all sorts of mad theories about this place." He dropped his hand and glanced at the ground. "Still, he was a good friend." He glanced over his shoulder. "Listen, I can't really talk now," he said, dipping a hand into one of his lab coat pockets. "Here's my cell number. If I could help with Henry, give me a call." He handed a standard business card to Sherlock.

Sherlock took it, and looked at it while saying, "I never did ask, Dr. Frankland – What exactly is it
that you do here?"

"Oh, Mr. Holmes, I would love to tell you – but then, of course, I'd have to kill you!" he managed most of it with a straight face, but broke into chuckles on the last few words.

Sherlock brushed aside the poorly-told and vastly overused – in John's opinion – joke with a completely serous, "That would be tremendously ambitious of you." He then changed the subject. "Tell me about Dr. Stapleton."

Frankland shook his head and tucked his hands into his pockets. "Never speak ill of a colleague."

"Yet you'd speak well of one, which you're clearly omitting to do," Sherlock said.

"I do seem to be, don't I?" Frankland agreed.

Sherlock raised the business card and 'tapped' it on the air in Frankland's direction. "I'll be in touch," he said, then turned to complete the short walk to the car.

"Any time," Frankland replied.

John waited until the sound of Frankland's footsteps indicated he was heading back to the building, then asked, "What was all that about?"

"Not yet," Sherlock replied, pulling his Belstaff a little tighter and flipping the collar up.

John rolled his eyes. "Can you not do that? Just for one day?"

Sherlock paused next to the driver's door. "Do what?" he asked, seemingly honestly puzzled.

"You being all…" he gestured at his friend, almost literally groping for the right words, "mysterious with your cheekbones and popping your collar so you look cool."

Sherlock blinked slowly at John. "I don't do that."

"Yeah," John argued, opening the passenger door. "You do." He slid into his seat before Sherlock could reply.

While Sherlock navigated back to the gate, his phone chimed twice in quick succession. Using one hand to retrieve it from his pocket, he tossed it at John. "Take care of that, would you?"

John tapped into Sherlock's inbox and saw four unread messages from Mycroft.

What are you doing? M

What's going on, Sherlock? M

I'm tempted to ensure you stay there overnight. M

Don't think I won't, Sherlock. Answer me. M

John winced a bit. "What should I say?" he asked.

"I honestly don't care."

John chewed on his lip for a moment, then typed a reply. Sherlock's busy at the moment. Once he's free, I'll pass along your concern. He then hit 'send'. Without meaning to, John held his breath, tension
increasing exponentially as they reached the gate, then passed through it. He didn't breathe again until it had locked behind them and they were on their way away from the base. The pressure seemed to evaporate as soon as they pulled onto the main road from the paved access to the base. "So..." he prompted. "What did you find out?"

"They apparently keep 'lots' of animals, but no one is admitting to any ever escaping. I'm also certain that Dr. Stapleton knows more than she let on about Bluebell."

John blinked at Sherlock. "Bluebell...?" he shook his head as though to dislodge water from his ears. "The kid who emailed you, the rabbit? Please tell me we didn't just break into a secure base on behalf of a missing rabbit!"

"The missing luminous rabbit, John, the luminous rabbit owned by a child whose mother just so happens to specialize in genetic manipulation."

"She made her daughter's rabbit glow in the dark?" John wondered why.

Sherlock nodded. "Probably a fluorescent gene removed and spliced into the specimen. Simple enough these days." Sherlock glanced at John. "We know that Dr. Stapleton performs genetic experiments on animals – the question at this juncture is: Has she been working on anything deadlier than a rabbit?"

"To be fair, that's quite a wide field," John said, then asked, "How many levels did the lift reach?"

"How is that relevant?"

John shrugged, then began kneading his injured thigh. "Just gives me an idea what they might be playing with, is all."


"'Ah'?" Sherlock looked over at him. "'Ah'?"

"For cryin' out loud, watch the bloody road!" John scolded. He flexed his injured knee. A sharp stab of 'surely, you don't expect more of me today' issued from it with a loud cracking noise. John hissed, then checked his watch. Took the first one nearly nine hours ago. We get back to the inn, I'm hijacking the nearest tub for at least an hour. And if Sherlock wakes me up before eight tomorrow, I'm going to cast Sleep of the Dead on him and shave his head – eyebrows included. He pulled out his pill bottle and dry-swallowed another oxycodone tablet.

"'Ah'?" Sherlock repeated yet again.

"Yes, yes – biosafety levels one through three would be what that lift can access. One of the levels it reaches would be reserved for the base rec-room and canteen, possibly a few sleeper rooms, too. If it follows the standard format, the access to BSL four would be a separate lift in the marked basement, with the majority of any other space on that level reserved for storage and the computer servers."

Sherlock swept John with a quick, yet piercing look that John wasn't able to interpret. John ignored it. "Standard layout, from what I could see. How many levels down did you go? I'm guessing just to the first – most genetic manipulations are a BSL-one or BSL-two at the worst, and twos are only if they're working on something particularly tricky or tinkering with the genetics of basic bacteria. Of course, if they're toying with anything deadlier than say botulism or tetanus, they'd do so in the corresponding BSL lab for the parent disease, plus-one. Standard practice."
"You seem to know an awful lot more than I would have expected about places like Baskerville," Sherlock commented, not bothering to look in John's direction.

"Army doctor with a pretty impressive security clearance, Sherlock," John explained. "My first two years in the service were at places very much like Baskerville, though not actually at Baskerville."

"Hmm… This would indicate that your preexisting security clearance is what caused you to be selected for those black-ops teams you mentioned."

John nodded. "Yeah – well, that and the fact that I can hit what I aim at if you put a gun in my hand. Not many doctors out there that manage to score higher than the basic minimum in their firearms proficiency."

John could practically see Sherlock etching the new information into his brain. "If that is the case, then why were you so concerned about our visiting the base?"

John winced a little, recalling the slight panic-attack he'd endured on reaching the base. "It's not without precedent," he said. "A covert research facility 'detaining' a mage, I mean. I haven't any clue whether or not we've done it, but the Yanks have. Last time I was in the States..." he scrubbed a hand over his face. "It was... Well, there's this training facility in Nevada. I spent three weeks a year there, renewing certain certifications to maintain my security clearance. All was pretty normal until the '09 renewal..." he trailed off, lost in memory for a moment.

He abruptly switched topics. "I've told you that most mages are only really good at one or two areas of magic, right?" At Sherlock's nod, he continued, "Well, there's one area of magic that is extremely rare, only about one in a thousand mages wind up with it. It's called 'dreamwalking'. It's also one of those magical gifts that invariably ends up paired with nonmagical talents – things like precognition or empathy."

"You mean psychic talents," Sherlock clarified.

John nodded. "Yeah. I'm a little surprised – you don't seem all that skeptical about psychics...?"

Sherlock shrugged. "Though the vast majority of so-called 'psychics' are nothing more than attention-seeking idiots out to cash in by playing with people even more moronic than themselves, science has unearthed a few rare instances wherein certain individuals demonstrated unexplainable abilities. I had assumed, once I'd learnt of your own uniqueness, that those individuals were actually mages of one form or another."

"Not exactly. There are a handful of talents that have nothing to do with magic. Pre- and post-cognition, telekinesis, empathy, and thought-sensing are all in that category. A person needn't be a mage to have any of them, but in the rare case that they are magical, then those gifts are able to draw on the mage's magic for an added 'power boost'. Now, dreamwalking is a magical talent, but it is almost always paired up with one of the clairvoyant gifts – usually precognition."

"Yes, you said that already."

John's knee was finally starting to fade a bit in its insistence that it never wanted to move again. He manhandled his foot so that the ankle of his injured leg was resting on his uninjured knee, then set to massaging his calf muscle. "Sorry – I know you hate repetition. Anyway, back to '09 in Nevada... It was day four of my three-week rotation. It had been a particularly grueling day – the details aren't that important, but it was extraordinarily physically demanding. I was completely knackered by the time they released us – so much so, I bypassed both supper and a shower in favor of more sleep. That night, I was... Well, 'contacted' is the best way to describe it. It had felt more like his brain had
"If 'dreamwalking' is as intuitive in meaning as the name suggests, I believe I can imagine how. Who was it?"

John moved his foot back to the floorboards of the Jeep with a small sigh. "A kid. Was about fifteen or so. Panicked out of his mind and instinctively lashing out for someone – anyone – to hear him. I was the closest mage, so I was the first mind he latched onto. It took some doing," he said, thinking, *Not to mention a dreamscape projection of the safest place I could think of at the time – Dad's old workshop.* "Eventually, I was able to calm the kid down. Come to find out that he'd been orphaned three years earlier. He didn't have any other family, and so got shunted off into foster care. His foster-family freaked out after one too many inexplicable happenings, and – I don't know how on this part – but the government got wind of it. Some bureaucrat had the kid transferred to that Nevada base with orders that the scientists there 'find out what makes him tick.'" John paused for a moment, lost in memory.

"Now, I don't have a problem with scientists researching psychic abilities. I wouldn't even have a problem with science looking into magic. However, I do have issues with performing what amounts to torture on anyone, particularly a kid, who hasn't consented to it."

"Torture?" Sherlock asked with a sidelong glance and a raised eyebrow.

"Sleep-deprivation, electro-shock, various and sundry drugs. The night Eddie contacted me was the first time in nearly ninety hours they'd let the kid sleep. I wouldn't have been able to do anything – not directly – but, fortunately, Eddie's a powerful dreamwalker. One of the best things about dreamwalking is that subjective time is up to the mage who initiated the 'walk, and he wasn't about to short himself on what he'd seen as his only possible escape. We used the time wisely. I taught him how to gate. Of course, he was on his own in finding chalk, but I taught him how to draw the door, how to pull his magic up and push it into the gate architecture, and I taught him the anchor key for Penny Kapstan's gate – she's an Arizona mage that worked with Mary on a dig in Choco Canyon."

"I presume Eddie was able to escape."

John closed his eyes and shook his head. "No. He didn't get the chance." He shivered with the memory of how it had felt. "They misjudged a dose of… I'm pretty sure it was an amphetamine. He was linked up to me at the time. I assume they were trying to wake him. They killed him instead."

John swallowed hard, then cleared his throat. "So… If I'm a little paranoid about it, I've got good reason."

Sherlock didn't comment, but pulled the Land Rover to a stop. They were parked in front of a truly massive house – John could count four stories – that had probably been built at least two centuries before. The sound of the driver's door slamming shut jolted John out of his memories of what it had been like to be psychically and magically linked to another person as that person died. He unbuckled his seatbelt and followed Sherlock up the flagstone path, through a somewhat neglected conservatory, and up to the main door. John arrived just as Sherlock released the door buzzer. Moments later, Henry Knight opened the door.

A couple of minutes later, Sherlock, John, and Henry were settled in Henry's kitchen. Henry bustled about making coffee. Sherlock added sugar to his own mug. John could see a midsized leyline that streamed through Henry's back garden. *It's only a matter of time before it senses that I'm here.* Overtop the faint clinking sound of Sherlock's spoon tapping against the side of his mug, Henry said, "It's a couple of words, what I keep seeing." John glanced out the window as he reached for his notebook. "'Liberty'," Henry said.
"Liberty?" John queried, clicking his pen.

Henry nodded. "'Liberty','" he repeated, "'and 'in'. Just that." He picked up the bottle of milk that had been sitting in front of John's place at the counter-island. "Are you finished?"

John nodded. "Yeah. 'Inn' or 'in'?"

"Pardon?" Henry paused as he returned the milk to the fridge.

"One 'n' or two? 'Inn' as in a hotel or 'in' as in 'in a box'?' John clarified his question.

"The second," Henry answered.

John marked it down in his notebook, then glanced at Sherlock. "Mean anything to you?"

"'Liberty in death' – isn't that the expression? The only true freedom," Sherlock said, sipping at his coffee.

John nodded, then glanced out the window again. The leyline had finally noticed him and sent out its avatar. The spiky, green tuberous magical growth seemed to be glaring at him. *It's worse than when Mum caught me and Harry roughhousing in the living room that time we broke Grandmum's piano.*

"What now, then?" Henry's voice cut through John's thoughts.

"Sherlock's got a plan," John replied, tearing his eyes away from the presence outside to Henry. They both looked at Sherlock, who had a faint smirk on his mouth. "Yes," he agreed.

"Right," Henry said.

"We take you back out onto the moor –"

"Okay," Henry's voice carried a touch of nervousness.

"– and see if anything attacks you," Sherlock concluded. "That should bring things to a head."

"At night?" Henry asked. "You want me to go out there at night?"

Sherlock nodded, taking a sip of his coffee. "That's your plan?" John asked. He let out an amused snort. "Brilliant," the word practically dripped with sarcasm.

"Got any better ideas?" Sherlock asked.

"That's not a plan. That's the sort of last-ditch idea that denotes a marked lack of a plan. I mean, I've not really noticed anything all that out of the ordinary – other than the fact that Grimpen actually seems to actively dislike me." He wrinkled his forehead in thought. "And what's that about, really? I've never known a particular web to actively dislike me before. It's not like having a strong opinion about someone who's abused the system, after all – crap like that leaves a lasting mark, one that even you could read. But it does and it's taken to watching me, so I suppose that's rather extraordinary, but I doubt it's anything to do with what happened to Henry's father or the footprints he found yesterday…” John trailed off when he realized that both Sherlock and Henry were staring at him as intently as the leyline was, though in Henry's case, it was with a combined sense of both fascination and confusion, and Sherlock was obviously amused.

"Listen," Sherlock said, visibly attempting to not laugh at John's latest babble, "if there is a monster out there, John, there's only one thing to do – find out where it lives." He shifted his gaze to Henry
and smiled at him before taking another drink of coffee. Henry looked like John imagined a worm would look after being informed of its imminent upcoming role as 'fishing lure'. Or would, if a worm had, you know, a face, or any sort of understanding of communication. Fantastic. I'm coming up with weird metaphors now. What's next? Blending languages? Probably. John repressed the urge to grin. That could be fun. *Salaam, ismee John. Nemidanam if usted tiene cualquiera, but amem some lionn.* I wonder if anyone would understand it? Might be worth keeping in reserve, though, for the next time Sherlock hacks into my laptop or decides that the food-fridge is where he needs to keep orange slimes that seem to share my taste in yogurts. (1)

Henry looked outside for a moment, then back at Sherlock. "You… You're actually serious."

Sherlock nodded. "Have you any torches?"

Knight slumped a little, nonverbally conceding defeat. "I'll go get them," he said, then exited the kitchen.

John looked at Sherlock. "This is not your best idea."

"Well," he glanced at his watch. "I estimate you've about two minutes to come up with a better one."

Sherlock drained his coffee and sat the empty mug on the counter. "And what did you mean – Grimpen hates you? How can a village hate anybody? I thought I told you once to quit anthropomorphizing."

John shook his head. "Not anthropomorphizing, Sherlock. Just like London's got a leyline system, so, too, does the countryside. I'm just calling this one Grimpen because I don't know how far the local 'lines stretch. It's the 'lines out here that don't seem to like me any, and no – I've no idea why. Remember the last time you used othersight?" John was referring to a few weeks earlier when Sherlock had decided to alleviate his boredom by dipping into the emerald-colored eye drops that John had concocted for him. He'd managed to do so at a time when the London avatar was 'visiting' with John and subsequently spent the next three hours alternatively in contemplative silence and aggressively – not to mention loudly – musing on why John wasted time with dating when he already had 'the perfect girlfriend'.

Sherlock nodded, but didn't say anything.

"Well, it's like that, only the leyline here seems to have taken an instant and intense dislike to me."

John realized something and let out a little chuckle. "It's actually a bit like how you instantaneously prickle whenever Mycroft shows up."

"I do not 'prickle'."

John snorted. "Tell that to your aura."

Footsteps in the hall interrupted any further magical discussion as Henry reappeared carrying three torches. "Will these be okay?" he asked, looking up from testing the smallest's beam against his palm.

"Those will do," Sherlock said, holding out his hand.

Henry handed the detective a flashlight and then offered one to John. John shook his head. "Ta, but no – I've got kinda scary-good night vision. Torch'll just mess it up."

Henry shrugged and sat the odd torch out on the counter, then grabbed his jacket from the back of a chair at the breakfast table. "You sure about this?" he asked Sherlock.
"Absolutely," Sherlock replied with his very best fake smile.

Reluctantly, Henry gathered his coat and led them out into the night, choosing a path that paralleled the flow of the leyline that ran through his yard.

John allowed them to get several yards ahead of himself to enforce the small lie he'd told Henry — flashlight beams had no actual effect on his othersight, but with the painkillers screwing with his control over said sense, he simply didn't need an additional light source; the various levels of magical output of the surrounding area was more than enough for him to navigate safely. He split his attention between following Sherlock and Henry into the forest surrounding the Hollow and attempting to figure out why the local leyline system didn't like him. He stretched out a small thread of his own magic and tentatively connected with the 'line; not its avatar, which was following him with the same 'get out now' presence with which it had been 'staring' at him, but the 'line itself.

The instant he touched the line, a jolt of magical energy flooded back through the connection, making him feel like he'd suddenly been dipped in rancid pond water whilst being electrocuted. John stopped in his tracks and waited for an intense neon green flare to fade from his eyes — it was very much like waiting for a camera flash afterimage to go away — and for the high-pitched tinnitus-esque white noise to wash out of his ears. Sadly, he could do little about the feeling of phantom ants creeping across his skin, nor about the flavor/stench lingering at the back of his throat. "Why?" he muttered to the local magic. "Why do you want me to leave? You've no other mages in the immediate vicinity — I can tell. So why do you not want me here?"

His only reply was an intense emotional burst from the magic of concentrated distaste before the leyline writhed out of his grasp.

John let go of the wrong-feeling leyline, manipulated his own aura to 'scour' around himself, and then took a long breath and let it out slowly. "Yeah, that wasn't particularly helpful." He sighed, then looked in the direction Sherlock and Henry had been headed, only to find that they had already disappeared into the forest's underbrush. "Damn it. How is it that the guy who can tell that I had an egg sandwich for breakfast by the way I buttoned my cuffs can't notice when I'm no longer shadowing him?"

He shook his head and attempted to filter out the 'magical noise', hoping to pick up on the trail his friend's aura would have left. It didn't work. "So much for that idea," he grumbled, then simply began walking in the direction he'd seen them go. He took three steps, then halted again as a physical light caught his attention. It was flashing intermittently off in the distance. John watched it for a moment. "Is that Morse?"

He retrieved his notepad and pen without looking away from the flashing light and scribbled down the letters it was spelling out. A moment later, the flashing stopped. He looked down and read, "U, M, Q, R, A." He squinted at the letters on his notepad. "Umpra? No, that's not a word. Doesn't even sound like it could be a word." Mentally, he tried rearranging the letters, much like he did any time he utilized his Scramble tiles to answer a question. "Only way those make any sense at all is 'rum QA', which actually doesn't make any sense whatsoever. And why would whoever it is be sending an anagram, Watson? On what planet does that make sense? Okay, not an anagram." He tucked the notebook back into his pocket. "Think about it later. For now there's really only one relevant question: Where the hell did Sherlock disappear to?"

He resumed walking in the direction Henry had been leading Sherlock. He'd managed half a dozen steps before a gravelly howl split the night, overpowering the fox-screams, night-birds, and cricket symphony for a solid five seconds or so. John halted again and closed his eyes. The magical resonance which typically manifested itself within John as visual glowing shifted slightly, colors
becoming more pure and the entirety taking on a variety of barely-audible noise ranging from the
faint bass hum of the grass beneath his feet to a high-pitched oscillating warble of the moss on the
trees, overlaid with a thousand microscopic variations in temperature and humidity and pressure, and
intertwined with a million new scents which didn't normally reside within the Devon countryside,
including the clear tones of vanilla wafting from the oak trees and the more intense, sharp scent of
mentholatum drifting off the wings of moths. Even though he now had to deal with more sensory
input than was usual, closing his eyes also managed to focus his ears to the point wherein he actually
had a slim chance of triangulating the direction from which the howl had originated.

Or that was the theory.

Instead, the sheer amount of magical interference attempting to manifest through means other than his
visual processing centers managed to drown out where, precisely, the howl had come from.

"So much for that idea," John reiterated, then opened his eyes. Immediately, the additional sounds
and scents and flavors and so forth shifted back to being primarily visual. He steadied his grip on his
cane and once more stepped forwards. "Sherlock!" he called out, hoping that the others hadn't
managed to get too far ahead of him.

Almost as though it were answering him, a second howl split the air. Instead of attempting to locate
its source, John quickly checked in with his knee. It informed him that if he wanted to run, that was
fine, but he'd definitely pay for it later. John nodded to himself and broke into a sprint.

With every jarring step, it felt as though his knee was going to explode. It sent stabbing throbs of
lightning down to his big toe and up to his hip, where it then lanced across his back to ignite a
steady, burning throb in his scarred shoulder – but he pressed onwards. After about ten yards, the
leyline veered sharply off to the right, leaving the disapproving Grimpen avatar behind. "Sherlock!"
John shouted.

A heartbeat later, the dancing beams from a pair of torches began to flicker in and among the trees.
John slowed, much to his knee's relief, and altered his course slightly to intercept his friend and their
client. "Did you hear that?" he asked, a little out of breath.

Sherlock barely even glanced at John before pushing past him, intent on exiting the forest. Henry
sounded both terrified and vindicated as he said, "We saw it. We saw it."

"No," Sherlock argued, "I didn't see anything."

"What?" Henry asked, confused. "What are you talking about?"

"I. Didn't. See. Anything," Sherlock repeated, over-enunciating, then picked up his pace in order to
leave the forest that much quicker.

John held his tongue. He could tell that something had managed to spook Sherlock – the man's aura,
normally a coruscating cloud of golden, teal, and green specks that drifted out to approximately eight
or ten inches from his body, had gone into protective, self-defense mode. The green portion had
constricted to hover just above his skin, with the teal congregating in centimeter-thick 'shields' over
his eyes, pulse-points, and throat, with the golden part forming defensive spikes at semi-regular
intervals that reached out nearly a full meter from his body. That, John thought, is way beyond
'prickly'. He looks like a cartoon porcupine that's gotten electrocuted. What the devil did he see?
By the time they exited the forest, Sherlock's mile-long legs and ground-eating pace had gotten him far enough ahead of John and Henry that John had lost track of his friend. Henry kept muttering about how Sherlock had to have seen the hound, since he'd seen it himself. John paid him little mind, instead focusing on ensuring that he wouldn't lose his footing. As they arrived back at Henry's house, John noticed that the Land Rover had disappeared. "I'm gonna bloody kill him," John grumbled to himself as he followed Henry up the path to his house.

"Look," Henry was saying, not noticing the flash of anger from John, "he must have seen it! I saw it; he must have. He *must* have. I can't…" Henry unlocked his front door and finally landed his gaze on John. "Why?" he asked. "Why? Why would he say that?"

John nudged Henry to get him inside. "It– It– *It was* there," Henry stumbled over the words. "It was."


"No, you're not," John argued. "You've had a pretty bad scare. And *that* is why Sherlock said he hadn't seen anything. It's nothing personal, mind – he just doesn't do all that well with things he can't weigh and measure, and emotions top the list. Particularly emotions that surface when he's managed to prove himself wrong. He'd convinced himself that this hound of yours couldn't *possibly* exist, so of course he's gonna be a little freaked out that it isn't just the manifestation of a delusional mind." John rummaged in his jacket pockets for a moment. He managed to come up with a small travel-sized bottle of ibuprofen and his healing charm. *That'll do.*

Henry smiled. "This is good news, John," he said, unwinding his scarf from around his neck. "It's– It's good. I'm not crazy. There *is* a hound. There– There *is*. And Sherlock… he saw it, too. No matter what he said, he *saw* it."

"Of course he did," John assured him. "Listen, I'm gonna give you something to help you sleep, all right?"

Henry nodded. "That's fine."

John surreptitiously slid his mistletoe ring into place on his hand and then gave Henry two ibuprofen and the bottle of water that had been sitting on a side table. "There you go," he said. Henry downed the pills without even looking at them. "Now, let's get your coat off. Those should kick in pretty quickly."

John helped Henry off with his jacket, zapping the man with mild taps of his healing magic while he did so. Henry was slumped and snoring on the sofa by the time his coat was fully off. John lingered long enough to remove Henry's shoes and prop him more fully on the couch before leaving.
He pulled the front door latched behind him, then stared out at the night. Even with his ability of being able to see/sense all the life present, the night felt both serene and vaguely sinister – though that last bit might have had more to do with the local leylines' avid dislike of him than anything else. John looked up at the sky for a moment. "Gonna hafta walk," he grumbled to his knee. It ached in reply, the sharp, stabbing pain it usually screamed out nicely dulled by a haze of synthetic opiates. His right shoulder was also murmuring in complaint – it had grown unused to the additional strain of cane-duty – as was his bullet-scarred left, but John barely noticed either voice, drowned as they were by the louder grievances from his knee. He let out a long sigh, then set off across the landscape, heading towards the small cluster of sodium-vapor streetlights of Grimpen.

By the time he arrived at the Cross Keys Inn, he was more than ready to call it a night. Unfortunately, he knew he wouldn't be best pleased with himself if he didn't at least try to ensure Sherlock was alright. John clumped his way into the inn, steadfastly attempting to ignore the presence of the Grimpen avatar that was still following him and staring at him with an extremely strong 'get out of my territory' glare. Pausing in the pub, he closed his eyes and reached out with his othersight. Sherlock's presence was – thankfully – on the ground floor, in the restaurant, though his aura was still locked into defense-mode.

John made his way to where his friend sat in a brown leather wingback chair, facing the stone fireplace in the restaurant. He eased himself down onto the matching chair next to Sherlock, then took a good long look at his friend and flatmate. Beneath the spikes of his aura, Sherlock was staring into the flames of the fire, his eyes flat and glassy, his skin slightly more pale than normal. He had his hands steepled in front of his mouth in his typical 'thinking' pose, but John'd lay even money that he wasn't doing much actual thinking. "Well," John said to break the silence. "Henry's in a pretty bad way. He's manic, totally convinced there's some mutant super-dog roaming the moors." Sherlock's eyes flicked over to him, then returned to the fire. "There isn't, though. Ignoring the whole fact that if there'd been something weird out there, I'd have noticed it – if people knew how to make a mutant super-dog, we'd bloody well know about it. It'd be for sale. I mean, that's how it works." Sherlock clasped his fingers together and took a couple of deep, measured breaths. "Well," John amended, "maybe not for sale, but we'd definitely know. After all, they couldn't wait to brag about it back when they cloned that sheep. It was in all the journals immediately. Hell, it even made the evening news! So if someone bred some specialized breed of dog through genetic manipulation, it'd be known. Just like any time a zoo winds up with a liger or zonkey. Or that sea life attraction in Hawaii that has a wolphin. Weird stuff like that's always news."

Sherlock took another measured breath, letting it out through his nose. John abruptly changed the topic – he was getting absolutely nowhere in calming Sherlock down with reason, so he figured a distraction might prove useful. "Listen, when we were out on the moor, I saw someone signaling. Morse. At least, I think it's Morse, though it doesn't make much sense." He dug out his notebook. "U. M. Q. R. A. That mean anything to you?"

Sherlock blinked rapidly, then took another deep breath through his nose. He was still staring at the fire as though it contained the secrets to the universe and his aura was still wildly spiked in all directions. John returned his notebook to its place and spun a tendril of his own aura out to attempt to soothe his friend's frazzled nerves. "So, okay. What have we got? We know there's footprints, 'cause Henry found them, so did the tour guide bloke – but I still maintain they could've been from any of the larger dog breeds out there. We all heard something. Henry's adamant that he saw something. John's adamant that he saw something. I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary, though – no traces whatsoever of anything I've never sensed before, at least, so I highly doubt that whatever this is is at all related to my sideline." John let out a small sigh. "Maybe we ought to look for whoever's got a big dog, because I can't for the life of me imagine it could be anything but a big dog. Perhaps one gone feral, but still just a dog." He blinked and added, "Maybe a wolf-dog at a stretch," as an afterthought.
"Henry's right," Sherlock finally said something. John checked Sherlock's aura to see that the golden spikes had shortened to about half the length they'd been.

"What?" John prompted, hoping that additional conversation might actually get his friend calmed down.

"I saw it, too," Sherlock admitted, a faint tremor shaking his words.

John directed his aura to continue smoothing Sherlock's and repeated, "What?"

"I saw it, too, John," Sherlock said again, this time it came out a little steadier than before.

"Just a minute – you saw what, exactly?" he leaned forwards, his hands folded over the handle of his cane.

Sherlock finally looked away from the fire and at John. His expression was one John had never before seen on his face – fear and anger and something that lingered rather close to the self-loathing end of the emotional spectrum. "A hound, out there in the Hollow," he said through gritted teeth. "A gigantic hound." He snapped his eyes back to the fire burning cheerily in the grate.

One of John's eyebrows crept a little closer to his hair line. "Look, Sherlock – we've got to be rational about this, okay? Let's just stick to what we know. Stick to the facts."

"Once you've ruled out the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be true," Sherlock muttered, his words falling from his mouth alarmingly fast, yet still crystal-clear. Though he wasn't quite as wound-up as he'd been before John had arrived, his aura was still locked in self-defense mode. Were it not for the dozen or so other people present in the restaurant, John would have utilized his mistletoe ring to a similar effect on Sherlock as he'd used on Henry. Unfortunately, that simply wasn't an option at the moment; having Sherlock suddenly pass out would undoubtedly wind up causing alarm among the other customers and someone would insist on calling for an ambulance. Sherlock reached out for a tumbler of liquid the distinct golden color of really good whiskey. He stared at the trembling glass for a moment, then said, "Look at me. I'm afraid, John. Afraid," the word was said with the same level of distaste that most people reserved for descriptions of maggoty road-kill. "Always been able to keep myself distant," he said, taking a drink from the glass. "Divorce myself from feelings," he took another drink, and again, the word was said with a level of disgust that bordered on the absurd. "But look," he held up the glass, showing how it was still shaking, amplifying the tremors coursing through his hands, "body's betraying me. Interesting, yes?" He slammed the glass back on the side table while spitting, "Emotions," like an epithet. "The grit on the lens. The fly in the ointment."

"Yeah, all right, Spock, just take it easy," John said. "You've been pretty wired lately – you know you have. I think you've just gone out there and got yourself a bit worked up."

"'Worked up'?" Sherlock mocked.

"Worked up?" Sherlock mocked.

John ignored it. "It was dark. You had Henry's descriptions of what he'd seen running through your head, coupled with that rather melodramatic tale from that tour guide kid… It's only natural that you managed to freak yourself out a bit," he let out a small, self-deprecating grin. "Just like my first tour in Afghanistan. Heard all these stories, most of which had been exaggerated all out of proportion, about camel spiders, so by the time I saw one in the flesh, I'd been half-expecting to see something out of a B-level horror flick. Damn thing had gotten into the canteen. When I heard about it, I just had to go see. Just about laughed my damn arse off when I got there. This wicked-looking tarantula was sitting in the middle of the floor, looking a little confused and forlorn and frightened, while eight career soldiers had retreated to sitting on the tables – one was even crying rather hysterically at the
time. Sure, it was big for a spider, but it wasn't *that* big! Only about sixteen or seventeen centimeters across, not even half the size of the giant bird-eating spider I saw as a kid at the London Zoo. But it had all these urban legends surrounding it that made everyone scared of it." He chuckled. "Managed one helluva reputation-boost when I picked it up and took it outside. They can, and do, bite, but I had my additional abilities to pull on and it's not at all hard to soothe something so simple-minded." *Quite unlike a certain consulting detective I know.*

"As fascinating as your little anecdote is," Sherlock sarcastically spat, "it holds no bearing on the situation. There is nothing wrong with me."

"I never said there was," John said, still directing his aura to attempt to smooth out Sherlock's.

The other man's aura surged, then 'exploded' back to an approximation of its regular self, the individual particles of green, teal, and gold whipping about him in a whirlwind of anger. "THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH ME!" the detective shouted, glaring at John. "DO YOU UNDERSTAND?" Sherlock glanced around the room, seeing that everyone had paused and was staring at him. He took a quick breath. "You want me to prove it, yes?" he continued in a more location-friendly tone of voice, though it was still clearly angry in tone. "We're looking for a dog, yes? A great big dog – that's your brilliant theory? Cherchez le chien. Good. Excellent. Yes, where shall we start?" John was grateful that Sherlock had managed to push himself past his fear, but was disappointed that he'd strolled directly into angry scorn. "How about them?" Sherlock flung a pointed finger in the direction of an elderly woman seated across a table from a middle-aged man in a jumper even John wouldn't have worn in public. "The sentimental widow and her son, the unemployed fisherman. The answer's yes. She's got a West Highland terrier called Whiskey. Not exactly what we're looking for."

"Oh, for god's sake, Sherlock –"

"Look at the jumper he's wearing – hardly worn," Sherlock cut off John's concern before it could really get going. "He's clearly uncomfortable in it. Maybe it's because of the material, more likely the hideous pattern, suggesting it's a present, probably Christmas. So, he wants into his mother's good books. Why? Almost certainly money. He's treating her to a meal, but his own portion is small. That means he wants to impress her, but he's trying to economize on his own food."

"I don't doubt it," John said, infusing his aura with a light dusting of magic. Now that he'd managed to get Sherlock out of self-defense mode, he needed to shift that giant brain around to its typical level of analytical reasoning. "But dissecting the personal lives of random strangers isn't likely to solve this case, now is it?"

Sherlock continued as though John hadn't said a word. "Small plate, starter. He's practically licked it clean and she's nearly finished her pavlova. If she'd treated him, he'd have had as much as he wanted. He's hungry all right, and not well off – you can tell that by the state of his cuffs and shoes." Sherlock shifted slightly and then mimicked John's voice, "'How d'you know she's his mother?'" He returned to his regular voice and rapid-fire deductions, "Who else would give him a Christmas present like that? Well, it could be an aunt or elder sister, but mother's more likely. Now, he was a fisherman. Scarring pattern on his hands is very distinctive – fish hooks. They're all quite old now, which suggests he's been unemployed for some time. Not much industry in this part of the world, so he's turned to his widowed mother for help. 'Widowed?' he again mimicked John, then continued normally. "Yes, obviously. She's got a man's wedding ring on a chain around her neck – clearly her late husband's and too big for her finger. She's well-dressed, but her jewelry's cheap. She could afford better, but she's kept it – it's sentimental. Now, the dog: tiny little hairs all over the leg from where it gets a little bit too friendly, but no hairs above the knees, suggesting it's a small dog, probably a terrier. In fact it *is* – a West Highland terrier called Whiskey. 'How the hell do you know
that, Sherlock?,” he mimicked John for the third time. "'Cause she was on the same train as us and I heard her calling its name and that's not cheating, that's listening. I use my senses, John, unlike some people, so you see – I am fine. In fact I've never been better so just leave. Me. Alone."

"Yeah," John said, skepticism blatant in his voice. "You're just peachy, aren't you? Panic must be a normal mode of operation for you, because otherwise you're lying through your teeth – and speaking of, you must've eaten an Altoid before I got here, so that'd explain the peppermint pouring off of you. Either that or you're lying. And you've no cause to be lying, not to me, and particularly not to yourself." Sherlock just glared at him. "Fine. Why listen to me? I'm just your friend."

"I don't have friends," Sherlock spat.

John jerked his aura back from Sherlock's at that. "Nah," he said, more than just a little hurt at the proclamation. "I wonder why?" He pushed himself to his feet and left Sherlock to calm down on his own. "Bloody prat, so caught up in the fact that the almighty Sherlock freakin' Holmes actually managed to get scared that he couldn't reason his way out of a wet paper bag right now," he muttered to himself, not seeing the sidelong glances from a couple of people he passed on his way out the inn's back door.

The ever-present Grimpen avatar followed him outside and stood there, 'glaring' at him. John leaned against the stone of the building and scowled right back at it. "Wish you'd bloody tell me what your problem is. This watching me is getting on my nerves right proper."

The avatar's prickly presence rippled and an intense wave of hatred washed over John, coupled with a powerful sense of 'go away'. "Be happy to," he growled at it, "but we gotta finish this case first. Which we'd do a mite faster if you'd quit bloody staring at me."

The avatar quivered, then doubled in size. John could tell it was working it's way up to an attack – something he'd only ever heard about, and only that in the oldest of Ajay's collection of journals. Acting on instinct, John flung out a bolt of his own magic. It was similar to a levinbolt, only it wouldn't affect anything living. The avatar battered it out of the air like a pesky mosquito, then lashed out with one of its tentacle-like tendrils. It snapped across the back of John's right hand, raising a combined welt and burn in its wake. John hissed and dropped his cane.

"Oh, you fucking shite," he said, then physically reached out with both hands and his magic. He wrapped his magic around two of the larger tentacles on either side of the avatar and pulled. Sweat popped out on his forehead as he wrestled with the wild magic. After what felt like ages, but in reality was only a couple of seconds, the avatar split down the middle with a spectral ripping noise that sounded similar to the noise made when a cook pulled the skin off of a raw chicken. He then 'spun' the two halves into rope-like patterns and tied them into a complicated knot.

Once finished, he let go of the leyline and left it twitching in the grass of the inn's garden. He failed to notice the severe burns on the palms of either hand until he stooped to pick up his cane. His hands were bright red, easily seen even in the limited light available, with large blisters popping up on the pads of his fingertips and the fleshy bits of his palms. They looked like they should be excruciating, but all he could feel was the residual tingly thrum of unfamiliar magic. He rummaged in his satchel for a moment before coming up with some gauze from the medical bits he carried about, then carefully wrapped his right hand. It actually hurt, from the fire-brand lash the avatar had managed, but the rest of it was as numb as his left. Wonder if that's a good thing or a bad thing? He taped off the loose end of the gauze, then checked the contents of his bag again. Last of the gauze. Gonna need to restock. Once he'd finished clumsily wrapping the worst of the blisters on his left hand, he picked up his cane. Glaring at the still-twitching ruined avatar, he pushed off the inn's wall and began walking across the garden.
Halfway to a small park bench nestled among some sort of flowery shrubs, he noticed the blinking light from earlier was back. He altered his course and walked towards it. The adrenaline from his anger and the short battle with the leyline, coupled with the remaining oxycodone in his system kept most of the pain from his knee from registering.

Roughly five minutes later, he crested the hillside to find several parked cars, most with steamed-over windows. The flashing lights were coming from a red Peugeot that was rocking slightly on its springs while a couple spoke quietly within. As John realized what he was seeing, he sighed, then turned around and began the trek back to the inn. "Fan-bloody-tastic," he muttered. "So, weird message? Not so much."

His phone chimed a text-alert. He thought briefly of ignoring it, then decided not to – it might be his sister or Mary or Sarah or Mels. He was disappointed.

Henry’s therapist currently in Cross Keys pub. S

"So what?" John said, then typed it as his reply. A heartbeat later, his phone chimed again.

Interview her? S

He got halfway through his reply of Interview her yourself, when he managed to accidentally place the tip of his cane in a small hole in the ground. The sudden change in his stability caused him to trip, which made him lose his grip on his phone and the instinctual reach to break his fall caused several of the blisters on both of his hands to rupture painfully. To top it all off, he landed awkwardly on his injured knee, which let out a shriek of agony that shattered through the oxycodone he’d taken.

Cold sweat broke out all over his body, and for a moment, John thought he’d be sick. He closed his eyes and waited for the queasiness to pass, then rolled over and sprawled on his side, clutching both hands to his chest and his injured knee pulled up into a semi-fetal position. He forced himself to take several deep, even breaths. Eventually, the pain receded to something a bit more bearable, though still agonizing. He rolled himself into an upright position and spotted his mobile. The pain in his left hand sharpened intensely as he picked it up and returned it to his pocket, not bothering to finish the text to Sherlock.

Shaking, he simply sat in the grass for a bit and waited for the world to quit its nauseating rocking around him. Once it was back on a somewhat even keel, he braced himself and grabbed his cane. He managed to get partially upright before his right leg gave out entirely. "Daga me ra wazbaisha," he mumbled through clenched teeth. "Fuckin' dislocated it again." He placed his hands on either side of his misaligned knee, but the slightest pressure on the blisters had him letting out a high-pitched whine more appropriate to a whistling kettle than a human throat. (2)

"Fuck!" He nearly shouted it. "No way in hell am I gonna reduce it on my own."

John looked at the lights of the inn that stood roughly a kilometer away and weighed his options. They were horribly few. "Can either wait here 'til someone notices, try to get a hold of Sherlock, or call 999 on my own. I really don't wanna wait out here all night. Calling emergency services just 'cause I can't get up would simply be mortifying. And I'm far too angry at Himself right now to want to see him, let alone need his help – and that's assuming I could even get him to answer his bloody mobile!" He took a deep breath and held it for several long seconds. As soon as he felt himself become lightheaded, he released it. "Nothing for it, then. Gonna hafta do this one myself."

He grit his teeth and retrieved the bottle of oxycodone from his pocket. It took him three tries to get the cap off, by the end of which he was panting harshly through his nose. He tipped the bottle onto his bandaged palm with a shaking hand. There were three tablets left. Closing his eyes, John
mentally calculated the dose of one versus the half-life remaining of the last one he'd taken, then held
the resulting number up against the burning agony of his hands and stabbing throb in his misaligned
kneecap. He tipped two of the pills back into the bottle, then crunched the last pill between his teeth.
The intensely bitter flavor helped to distract from the pain until it kicked in.

Once the opiate haze managed to dull the complaints of his traitorous flesh, John pulled himself into
a sort of half-standing position. Even with the painkiller flooding his system, he was unable to
straighten his right leg. So, leaning heavily on his cane, he managed one slow, agonizing step after
the other.

His entire world narrowed to the cane in his hands, the ground directly in front of him, and the
barely-muted throbbing that kept pace with his pulse.

By the time he reached the inn's garden, he felt like he'd just run two marathons back-to-back. He
was shaking with exhaustion and the world felt like it was spinning off without him. He nearly didn't
notice the pretty brunette perched on a picnic bench, smoking, until she spotted him and let out a low
whistle. "Jesus, what happened to you?" she said, tossing her still-smoldering butt into the grass.

John closed his eyes and twisted his head in her direction, then opened them again. "D-dis-" his
tongue felt thick and unwieldy. "Dislocated m'right patella. T-tripped. Landed badly."

Before he could catalog what was happening, the brunette had manhandled him over to a bench
situated almost directly under the garden light. She knelt in front of him and gave him a tight smile. "I
haven't done this since med school, but I think I remember how…" without warning, she popped the
kneecap back into its normal position.

John couldn't stop himself – he let out a little shriek. However, painful though it was, most of the
pain faded entirely once the bone was back where it belonged. He closed his eyes and took steady,
measured breaths through his nose.

"You're not going to sick up on me, are you?"

"No. Don't think so, at any rate." He opened his eyes. The woman's smile was a touch more genuine
now. "Thanks," he said. "Dr. John Watson," he offered her his hand.

She started to reach for it, "Dr. Louise Mortimer," only to halt on seeing the stained gauze. Not only
had the blisters broken open, but the ones on his right palm had begun to bleed during his trek back
to the inn, and there was a fine crust of dirt and grass stains overlaying everything else.

John glanced down and let out a mirthless little chuckle. "Yeah – it's been rather a spectacularly bad
day."

"So I see," she said, standing. "I don't have much, but I do keep a first aid kit in my car. I'll be back
in a mo." Before John could reply, she'd already ducked into the inn.

John let his gaze drift over to the still-knotted mass of leyline avatar twitching a few meters away.
Instead of attempting to escape from its current predicament, waves of amusement seemed to be
emanating from it. "Yeah, laugh it up, you da spi zo," he growled at it. (3)

"Pardon?" Dr. Mortimer's voice startled John.

"Nothing," John immediately said, wondering if it was the barely-muted pain from his injuries or the
oxycodone that had skewed his time-sense all out of joint. "Just… Well, 'frustrated' is as good a word
as any right now." He noticed that Dr. Mortimer was carrying a small blue duffle bag, not dissimilar
to the ones he imagined people took with them to the gym, in addition to a standard first aid kit.
"What's all this, then?"

"I ran into Nigel Hobbs – he's a paramedic with the local fire service. He keeps a bit more on hand than I do." She sat the duffle on the bench next to John.

"I'd imagine so, what with you being a therapist and all," John said.

Dr. Mortimer leveled a sharp look at him. "How did you know that?" she asked.

"Henry Knight mentioned you," John said as she took his right hand and unwound the soiled bandage. "He hired this detective I work with to look into his dad's death." He let out a hiss as the bandage pulled away from the abused skin beneath it.

"Sorry," she said, wincing in sympathy.

"Don't worry about it. Was my own damn fault."

"Can I ask…?"

John shrugged. "Just did something stupid, Dr. Mortimer. Don't particularly want to bandy about the details, especially not to a beautiful woman."

She let out a small giggle, then turned her attention to his left hand. "Call me Louise, please."

"John," he replied.

"Well," she said, gently working at the gauze, "you know what I do for a living. How about you? You don't have one of those useless degrees in underwater basket-weaving or some such, do you?"

John grit his teeth as she came to the last layer above the broken skin, but it wasn't as bad as the other one had been – fewer blisters had broken, and none had started bleeding yet. "No, not useless. Was a surgeon in the army up until September of 2010."

"Was?"

"Got shot," he said simply. Louise looked up at him, a little surprised. "Shoulder," he clarified, making a vague gesture to the area with his hand. "Did enough nerve damage to kill my career. Now I do a bit of locum work at a surgery in London, when I'm not chasing after my flatmate and keeping his sorry arse in one piece."

"Sounds like you keep busy," she commented, rummaging in the blue duffle. She came up with a chemical cold pack.

"That I most certainly do," John agreed wholeheartedly.

Louise squeezed the chem-pack to activate it, then took a closer look at John's knee. His jeans had torn when he'd fallen. She ripped the hole a little wider. "Nothing seems too awfully serious," she said, then grabbed an elastic bandage out of the duffle. She wrapped a layer around his knee through the gash in his jeans, then used the rest of it to secure the ice pack in place.

"I'll still need to have my doc take a look when I get back to London. Dislocated it before," John explained. "Combined with a starburst fracture of the patella. Dr. White will wanna MRI it to see if there's been any additional damage."

"I don't envy you if there is. My brother crashed his motorbike a couple of years ago and wound up needing his knee and ankle replaced. I wouldn't wish that on anyone." Louise returned to his hands
and examined them a little more closely with the aid of a penlight.

"Yeah, that's all I'd need – another couple pounds of titanium in my skeleton."

"'Another couple pounds'?" Louise tore open a packet of alcohol swabs. "Sorry, this is gonna sting."

"Go for it," John replied. "Yeah. My left scapula was replaced when I was shot, and there's more than a dozen surgical pins holding adjoining bones together."

"Sheesh. What'd you get shot with, a bazooka?"

"Close," John said, wincing as she swabbed the broken blisters on his left hand. "An anti-tank gun." He could see her next question swimming up within her eyes and answered it before she could give it voice. "Was on my way with a squad to a little village that needed a doctor pretty badly. We got caught in an ambush. Otherwise, yes, the army tends to keep their surgeons well away from active combat. Unfortunately, the bad guys don't always follow the rules."

"I would imagine," she said, trading the swab for a tube of antiseptic cream, "that would be why they're called 'bad guys'."

"Likely so," John agreed.

They fell into a companionable silence for a few minutes; long enough for Louise to finish up rebandaging his hand. As she switched to his right, she glanced up at his face and asked, "So... The painkillers – they for your shoulder?"

John let out a startled chuckle. "You ever get tired of talking to people for a living, we could use you in the clinic."

She shrugged a little, tearing open the packaging for another alcohol swab. "I've treated my fair share of patients with both pain-management and addiction issues – I know the signs. And I don't think I'd do well with clinic-work; I can't stand sick people."

"That's an odd," John hissed as the swab came into contact with the bleeding blisters on his right palm, then continued, "odd opinion for a therapist."

It was Louise's turn to chuckle. "Not so odd. Mental illnesses rarely present with runny noses and projectile vomiting."

"Rarely'? Something tells me I don't particularly want to know."

Louise switched over to the antibacterial cream. "Well, everyone gets the flu every now and then, don't they?"

"Indeed," John agreed.

She finished with the cream and began bandaging John's hand. "So... Henry told you about me?"

"In passing, just mentioned you were his therapist is all."

"And you're looking into his dad's disappearance?"

John nodded. "Yeah, though I was under the impression his dad had died."

"They never found Mr. Knight's body," she said, finishing with the bandage.
"So you don't believe he's dead?"

Louise gathered up the various wrappers and tucked them into a net pocket on the outside of her first aid kit. "Oh, I didn't say that." She resumed her perch on the picnic bench's tabletop.

"Then what do you mean?" John asked, lifting his injured leg up to rest on the bench.

She retrieved a battered pack of menthol lights from the pocket of her floral-print dress and lit one with a new plastic lighter that still had the price-tag on it. After taking a long drag, she answered, "Well, it's not commonly known, but the memories we carry with us out of childhood are nearly always invariably wrong in at least one detail if not conjured completely out of wholecloth. Nobody does it on purpose, it just happens and we don't yet know why. As to Henry in particular, I'm afraid all I could really say on the subject are those parts which are a matter of public record. Something happened the night of October twelfth, back in 1992. His dad was never seen again."

"Didn't Henry report that his dad had been killed to the police?"

Louise nodded and flicked ash from the end of her cigarette. "He did, but their investigation never turned up anything. To be quite honest, I'm not altogether certain they tried all that hard – even now, the Knight family has something of a reputation around here."

"Mr. Knight was some sort of conspiracy nutter, wasn't he?" John was pretty sure there was a better way to phrase that, but it was all he could do to keep some sort of brain-to-mouth filter in place. "Got fixated on Baskerville, what they might be doing there, and what have you."

"So the local story goes," Louise agreed. She glanced at her watch. "Eek. I gotta get this back to Nigel," she tossed her half-smoked cigarette under a nearby bush and grabbed the blue duffle. "You need any help getting inside?"

John shook his head. "Ta, but I'm good. Thanks for your help, by the way." Steeling himself, John rummaged in his satchel for a moment. He came up with his notebook and a pen.

"No problem," she replied with a smile. "If you change your mind…"

John nodded, "I doubt it, but I'll keep it in mind." He scribbled his mobile number on a sheet of paper and handed it to her. "Likewise, if you think of anything else about Henry's problem that you can share, gimme a call."

Louise borrowed his pen just long enough to provide her own number, then disappeared back into the inn, with a friendly 'good night'.

John sighed for what, he was sure, was approximately the billionth time since meeting Sherlock Holmes. He looked up at the sky, so much clearer than it ever was in the heart of London. "Could nearly reach up and pluck a few stars to take home with me," he mused, then shook his head and moved his gaze to the knotted mass of leyline. Waves of animosity drifted from the avatar. "Yeah, yeah, yeah – I know. If you've not sorted yourself out, I promise I'll untie you before I return home. Wish I knew what it was that I did before I tied you up that had you hating me on-sight." A single free tentacle of green energy waggled lethargically in his direction. John got the distinct impression that the avatar was flipping him off.

John ignored it and focused on cleaning off the handle of his cane. When it was a little less blood-crusted, he silently checked in with his hands and knee. They were all pleasantly numb. Not that it's going to last. I'm sure they'll start up screaming again the moment I move... but I can't stay out here all night.
He moved slowly, more like an arthritic old man twice his age than his normal self, and managed to pull himself through a spate of dizziness and into the inn's pub. The man behind the bar was neither the inn's owner nor the tiny cook he'd met on arriving in Grimpen, but a tall kid who was about twenty or so, with shaggy blonde hair that sported violently violet streaks in the fringe. John paused long enough to request a couple of bottles of water that he tucked into his satchel before beginning the long, arduous journey up the stairs to his room.

Both his right palm and his much-abused knee were singing loudly through the opiate haze by the time he arrived at his door, but the oxycodone was doing its job in making him simply not \textit{care}. His pulse thudded along, providing a bass accompaniment to the pain-symphony. John closed the door behind him and slumped against it with naked relief. After taking a moment to simply breathe, he opened his eyes. The only sign of his mad flatmate was the man's suitcase resting on the foot of the bed. John ignored it as he headed to the only good thing about having been given the inn's last available room – the en suite bathroom, complete with an antique cast-iron bathtub coated with worn white enamel.

John sat his satchel in the sink, then turned on the hot water tap to set the tub to filling while he carefully divested himself of his jacket, jumper, and flannel shirt. As the tub filled and the room steamed up, John hobbled back into the main room, flung the jacket across the back of a wooden chair snugged against the room's desk, and then rummaged in his suitcase. With clean boxers, his old blue-and-cream striped t-shirt, and a pair of flannel pajama pants (which had once been black, but had long since been washed to a fuzzy, faded grey) in hand, he returned to the bath. A gurgling, sucking noise told him the water had reached the overflow vent up under the spigot, and so he shut the water off, then stripped out of his vest and boots. The ripped jeans were sighed over, but kept, and his dirty socks and underwear joined the small pile behind the bath door.

Focusing on his satchel, he removed the water bottles he'd purchased from the bar and drained half of one in a single go, then sat the bottle on the back of the toilet, seating himself on its lid. Next, he sorted through the magical contents of his bag, smiling to himself when he located three of the five items he'd hoped he had with him: a ziplock packet of dried arnica, a similar baggie of comfrey root, and a small dropper-bottle of lavender essential oil. John added half of each baggie of herbal components to his bathwater, then carefully unwrapped his knee. The chemical icepack had warmed to merely 'cool' and so he tossed it in the trashcan under the sink. The elastic bandage he re-rolled for later use. Fumbling with the buckle, he then removed his wristwatch and sat it next to the water bottles.

"Wish I had some Epsom salts with me," he muttered, inspecting his black-and-blue knee. Clumsily, he managed to undo the bottle of lavender oil's top, then working drop-by-drop, he slowly worked ten drops of the oil into the bruise that used to be his right knee, using his unbandaged wrists and the insides of his forearms to massage the oil into his skin. He checked the tub as he finished up – it looked like the world's largest cup of weak green tea. Nodding, he returned the dropper to the bottle of oil. "Lucky thing I had you with me," he said to the bottle. "But, then again, hope springs eternal." After replacing the packets of herbals and the vial in his satchel, John levered himself up and slowly eased into the steaming contents of the tub. "Even though I've only seen one woman out here that I'd be even remotely interested in," he concluded the thought with a hiss of air through his teeth as hot water hit bits of him that weren't quite expecting the change of temperature. He spared a slightly guilty moment of thought for his girlfriend back in London, but… \textit{I really don't think that's going anywhere. Hellfire, last time I slept at her place, I slept on her lilo. Not exactly what I'd been aiming for.}

The hot water felt heavenly on his stiff and sore muscles. Bit by bit, he slid down in the tub until the water was lapping at his chin, with his bandaged hands kept dry by hooking his wrists over the rim of the tub. "Only good part about being short," he mumbled, feeling knots he hadn't even known
he'd had loosening. "I can fit in a tub without bits of me sticking out."

Heat, herbs, and the blissful hypnotic haze of his oxycodone soon had him taking longer and longer blinks until finally sleep slipped up on him, though he didn't realize it until he found himself wandering down Baker Street.

It looked much like it had after Moriarty's explosive invitation to Sherlock at the beginning of the five pips 'game' – rubble strewn about, the air thick with smoke and dust. The only real difference was that it was, presumably, daytime, though there were no other people around; diffuse, yet over-bright light illuminated the street, much like sunlight as filtered through thick fog. John leaned against the remains of a ruined taxi and stretched his othersight. It was more than just Baker Street – his dream self couldn't find another single person as far as he could sense. The utter stillness was unnerving.

Despite the fact that some part of him knew this was a dream, he couldn't help himself as panic began creeping up on him. He reached for the leyline only to find that it had vanished. No trace of it remained.

The scream of a falcon split the air. John startled and spun around in time to watch an impeccable example of a peregrine land with precise precision on a large chunk of destroyed brickwork resting atop the ruined taxi's roof. "What's going on?" he asked, more to himself than to the falcon.

The falcon replied in Sherlock's voice, "As ever, John, you see yet fail to observe." It took off in a muffled explosion of feathers before John could reply. Eerie quiet quickly erased any sign that the falcon had ever been there; all John could hear was his own pulse hammering in his ears.

Mrs. Hudson's voice called out from the direction of 221B's battered door. "Would you just look at this mess! I'm not your housekeeper, you know!"

"Mrs. Hudson!" John shouted into the stillness, hurriedly picking his way around the rubble. "Where are you?"

"Oh, don't mind me," came the reply as he arrived at the flat's front door. A peacock butterfly slowly flapped its wings while clinging to the knocker. It sighed. "All the marks on my table – and the noise! Screeching violin at half past one in the morning! Bloody specimens in my fridge! Imagine – keeping bodies where there's food!"

"Mrs. Hudson?" John asked, peering at the butterfly.

"It's okay, John," she said, her voice oddly tinged with sadness, and then flapped off into the bright gloom shrouding the ruins of Baker Street.

"Evening, Mrs. Hudson," Lestrade's voice sounded from John's right as the butterfly faded from sight. John looked, but didn't see anything on first glance. "Leave it, John," he said, and finally John managed to pick out the shape of a small chameleon lounging on the remains of one of Speedy's outdoor tables.

"Leave what?" John asked, confusion overtaking the disturbing reality of a dream wherein magic seemed to have abandoned London.

"Don't try to interfere, or I shall arrest you, too!" the chameleon growled the order, then scuttled off, disappearing under a pile of bricks.

A rattling noise dragged his attention back to the ruined taxi. He half-expected to see the falcon again, but was surprised to find a savannah cat instead. She wore a pastel pink collar. She groomed a bit of fur to the sound of the falcon's scream, but was unperturbed as it landed next to her. "What do
you need?" the cat asked in Molly Hooper's voice.

The falcon cautiously stepped closer to her. "If I wasn't everything that you think I am," Sherlock's voice seemed oddly fitting coming from the bird of prey, "everything that I think I am, would you still want to help me?" The bird ended up standing just in front of the large cat, his head ducked slightly towards his breast in a strangely submissive, pleading posture.

The cat crouched down and looked the falcon directly in the eyes. "What do you need?" Molly's voice repeated, carrying an overtone of stubborn determination.

The falcon jumped up and wrapped his talons around her collar. "You," replied Sherlock.

The cat, with her falcon passenger, sprinted off, leaving John with more questions than he knew how to voice. Even if he knew where to start, he didn't get the chance. "Oh, Johnny," Mary's voice sighed through the sunlit haze of smoke and dust. "You're going to drive yourself mad if you keep on like this, you know. He's gone. You know it – you saw it with your own two eyes!"

A giant schnauzer ambled out of the haze, a rhesus macaque riding on its back. The dog paused next to John long enough to stare dolefully at him while the macaque hastily climbed his legs and settled on his shoulder. The dog then continued on its way. The macaque leaned close to John's ear and whispered in Ajay's voice, "I normally wouldn't deny the evidence, but I think you might be right about this one, kiddo. Things just aren't adding up the way they should. Granted, you've got some of the worst luck I've ever heard of when it comes to necromancy, but to have turned up a giant goose-egg on this? You, of all people? Keep trying, John – and I'll look through my collection, see if I can't find something a bit more reliable than what you've been using." With that, the monkey swung himself off of John and quickly vanished back into the haze.

"Wait! Ajay! What the hell is going on!" John shouted, sprinting after the monkey. He made it to the corner of Marylebone before giving up. He stood there, staring at more destruction, for quite a while – how long, exactly, he wasn't sure – before a strange grinding noise registered on his mind. He strained his ears to pinpoint the direction it was coming from, then cast his eyes about for a decent hiding place.

He settled for hiding behind the crushed remains of a city bus and waited. Somehow, he doubted this was another familiar voice waiting to emanate from an animal source. The grinding noise came closer and closer and held the distinctive tones of machinery. He felt small pebbles rattle down from atop the bus as it approached.

"Get in the car, Dr. Watson," Mycroft's voice was loud and larger than life, filtered through what seemed to be a PA system, though it maintained the man's air of disinterested politeness. The grinding, scraping noise had ceased, but an underlying growl of an engine continued. John looked around and spotted a pristine CCTV camera atop a tall pole that he knew didn't exist in the real world; fastened next to the camera was an antique WWII air raid siren. A small red light glowed in the camera's lower right corner. Slowly, John stepped away from the bus. The camera followed his movement.

One of Mycroft's Non-Descript Vehicles™ had parked itself next to the crushed bus, only this particular example could, in no way, be considered non-descript. It had treads like a tank and sported a pointed dozer-blade in lieu of a front bumper. The grinding noises had been the sounds of the blade pushing debris out of the vehicle's way.

The rear passenger door opened by itself and between one heartbeat and the next, John found himself seated within the saloon-cum-tank. From the inside, it was impossible to notice that there was anything at all odd about this particular automobile. The only real difference between this car and the
ones he'd ridden in before was the addition of a tinted glass partition, much like the ones found in limousines, that kept him from being able to see the driver.

"Where are we going?" John asked, not really expecting an answer.

And he wasn't disappointed. The drive, as impossible to guess at the duration as had been his wait behind the bus, was concluded in silence. As the door opened – again, on its own – Mycroft's voice came through the car's speakers in a rough approximation of a whisper. "I'm sorry," he said. "Tell him, would you?" He sounded honestly apologetic, and there were threads of guilt and sorrow wound around the words. It was more honest emotion than John had ever before heard from Mycroft.

"Tell who?" John asked, but the car dissolved from around him before he could finish the question.

Looking around, he found that the carnage that had been prevalent in his London dreamscape hadn't followed him to… Wherever it is that I am now. It looked vaguely familiar, but it took him longer than he would have liked to recognize it as the Grimpen cemetery. "Although, since I've only really noticed it in passing, I suppose it's not that big a deal," he muttered. He pulled his jacket a little tighter around himself and waited for the next inexplicable voice to appear.

When it didn't, his feet took it on themselves to begin walking.

They followed a small path through the tombstones, winding among the dead with respectful silence. John looked down, watching his feet take one step after another – much like he had during his painful journey back to the inn, only this time marveling at the lack of agony. As his feet halted, John finally pried his gaze from the ground and looked up.

He was standing directly in front of a shiny black headstone. No wear at all obscured the white letters and a lack of weathering had the rest of the stone polished to a mirror-finish.

The name on the stone read *Sherlock Holmes*.

*It's all because of you.*

The words echoed in his head even after he'd startled awake to cold bathwater and the thick, oily taste of chlorophyll and moss and dirt heavy in his mouth. Gooseflesh pricked its way across every spare patch of skin he possessed while his right knee readied itself to begin screaming at him for his clumsiness the moment he made any demands of it at all. The dream itself faded, though the words lingered.

Shivering, both with the chill of the water and with the aching remnants of his dream, John blindly groped with his left foot to unplug the drain. As the water level lowered, John braced himself and then grit his teeth as he pulled himself out of the tub. His knee began its protestations, joining in on the chorus in his hands. It didn't hurt quite as bad as being shot, but it was a close second. *Hard to say which hurts more, the backlash from that first run-in with Moran or this.*

He sat on the toilet lid, feeling like the two-foot distance from the edge of the tub had been part of a triathlon. *Swimming, running, and hurdles.* A grim smile tugged on the edges of his face before being chased away by more pressing concerns. He gave himself a quick rubdown with one of the inn's towels, then reached for his satchel. Luckily, he knew that the items he now wanted were secured within its depths.

John retrieved the fist-sized piece of obsidian from a corner of the bag, then used his cane to hook his jeans so he could 'rescue' his pocket-clutter – including his penknife. The coins and assorted bits of
paper he sat next to the half-empty water bottle behind him. Holding the obsidian loosely in his right hand, he used the handle of his penknife to chip a small flake off the stone. The knife joined his change and such while the obsidian was returned to its place in the satchel. "Normally, I'd do this to one of my fingers, but they hurt too much right now," he said, unaware his thoughts were being vocalized. He took the sharp shard of obsidian, a part of the back of his mind idly grateful for the presence of the bandages around his left hand that protected his fingertips from its edges, then selected a spot on his right arm that would bleed well enough for what he had in mind without cutting into a vein.

The slight sting of parting skin was barely noticeable among the louder protestations from his hands and knee. He waited for several drops of blood to well up from the small cut – it wasn't even an inch long – before collecting them on the point of the obsidian blade. "Too bad I can't heal myself," he mused, reaching for the elastic bandage he'd rolled and sat aside before his bath. "It would make this so much easier…"

He closed his eyes and reached for his magic. "Sun-warmed rock on a summer's day," he said, drawing the bloody point of his obsidian 'pen' along the coiled edge of the bandage, "flickering fire in a winter's grate; a drop of blood the price I pay, to hold a bit of peace and the pain abate." He finished the rhyme as he ran out of both bloody 'ink' and bandage. His magic reached out and twisted, making the obsidian shard dissolve into a faintly grey mist that soaked into the bandage. It immediately began to heat up in his hands.

"Not quite as good as an electric heating pad, but it'll do," he muttered, wrapping the bandage back around his damaged knee. It had warmed up to roughly sixty-five degrees Centigrade or so, and felt better than the hot bath had, if only because the rest of him had managed to become so chilled from staying too long in the tub.

He took a moment to allow the heat to sink into his knee before wriggling his way into a pair of clean boxers. John collected his dirty clothes and his satchel, then hobbled out to the main room. There was no sign that Sherlock had been back at all during the night. "Typical," he muttered, taking a moment to glance out the window. The stark blackness of night had begun to fade. Dawn was likely only an hour or so away. "No sense in trying to get any more sleep at this point."

John laid his satchel on the bed, trading it for his suitcase. He stuck his unused pajamas back in his bag, exchanging them for a clean plaid shirt and jeans. Looking from the buttons on the flannel to his bandaged hands and back, he let out a small groan, then limped over to the desk. John snagged his jacket and returned to the bed, fishing out his precious bottle of synthetic opiate while doing so. He managed to retrieve the pills just as he hit the edge of the bed. It took him three tries to get the cap off the bottle, but eventually he managed to dry-swallow a bit of relief. On an empty stomach, it didn't take long to kick in. "If we're gonna be here much longer, I'm gonna need to see about getting a refill." He had only one tablet remaining. "Had I realized how few I'd had left, I woulda done it before leaving London. Not that I'm ever gonna make that mistake again. I don't care if Himself decrees it to be a solid ten on his silly points scale, I'm never leaving London again."

John wriggled himself into his clean clothing, then picked up his jacket, intending to put it on, but wrinkled his nose at it. "Smells like a gym," he mumbled, recalling the excruciating and exhausting journey back to the inn last night. Instead of wearing it, he quickly emptied out the pockets and stuffed it into a plastic bag he'd brought along to pack away his dirty clothes. He grabbed his backup jacket – the olive green one – and began stashing his various charms and assorted other pocket-clutter in it. "Damn it," he grumbled on reaching the last one.

His abalone shell, etched with a Celtic knot, had partially shattered when he'd tripped the night before. "Suppose it's a miracle I didn't wind up waking the whole ruddy inn. Then again, it's been
almost a full year since the last really bad one…” John collected up all the shell-shards and tipped them into a small rubbish bin resting between a bedside table and the room’s outer wall. "Gonna need to make a new one, though. I'm definitely not a fan of nightmares."

Almost as though the word called it into being, the memory of his strange dream burst through his mind in a flash. A small portion of his mind marveled at the animal associations his subconscious had concocted for the people he knew, but the larger was more than slightly alarmed at the overall feel of the dream – and that same bit of himself was disturbed at the final scene, the tombstone bearing Sherlock's name.

Doesn't happen often – can count the number of times on both hands with fingers left over – but... could it be a warning-dream? Ignoring the crop of gooseflesh that prickled out on his skin, John stuffed his feet into his worn boots, doing up the laces on auto-pilot and not even registering the twinge of pain from his hands spiking through the oxycodone. Sherlock didn't come back to the room last night... Is it his typical disregard for sleep while on a case? Or did something happen? Grabbing his cane and slinging his satchel across his chest, John hurried out of the room as quickly as his injuries would permit and headed for the last place he'd seen Sherlock.

The bar was lit by a few dim lights and the glow of banked coals from the fireplace, but it was more than enough light for even a non-mage to see that the room was empty – save only for the Grimpen avatar, lurking in the shadows near the chairs where John and Sherlock had sat but a few hours earlier. "I see you managed to untie yourself," John whispered to it.

The potatolike representation of the local leyline system nodded at him; the motion seeming to say 'no thanks to you'.

"I told you – I would've released you before I left. I can't concentrate when you're staring at me all the damn time!"

A wriggle of one of its tentacles clearly said, "So go back to where you came from!"

John clenched his jaw. He took a deep breath and said, "I haven't got time for this." He ignored the avatar and set to crossing the room, intent on checking the inn's garden for his missing flatmate. The avatar fell into step right behind him. John managed three steps before noticing his magical tail. Growling under his breath, he spotted a salt-shaker sitting on one of the tables. It wasn't anything special, just the same plain, white plastic favored by restaurants the world over, but it sparked a small memory.

"Mostly, what you hear in folktales is nothing more than imagination," Ajay said, setting a stack of books into their place on a shelf. All six books were brand-new copies of To Ride a Silver Broomstick, by Silver RavenWolf, and they were shelved next to three copies of a thirty year old book about traditional folk-remedies out of Scotland; it was these latter books which had triggered the current topic of conversation.

"But what isn't, then?" Mary asked, slicing through the tape holding more new merchandise for Ajay's store.

John, enjoying the last few shining days of his summer hols between his junior and senior years at uni, nodded in agreement. "Yeah – you said 'mostly'. And we know you well enough now, siksaka, to know that you don't say anything you don't really mean." (4)

Ajay grinned at his students. "You're learning," he said, pride in his pupils shining through his expression. "But," he returned to the topic at hand, "you are right. There isn't a whole lot that actually works out of folklore... not that I've seen, at any rate. However, one thing I know for a fact
John's skepticism was blatant in his tone and smirk. "Why not pepper? Or ketchup?" He let out a snicker of amusement at the thought. "How about parsley? Or chocolate syrup? Maybe those little silver sprinkles Mum loves to spray all over fairy cakes?"

Ajay smacked him on the shoulder with a copy of the book on folk-remedies. "Shut it, you! No, one of the exceptions to the whole problem of using crystals in magic is salt. I don't know how or why it works, but salt can – temporarily – dispel any malevolent magics. All you need do is toss a bit on the source."

"Is that why Dad throws a bit over his shoulder when he knocks the salt-shaker over?" Mary wondered.

Ajay shrugged, 'I'd imagine so – but I think I've got a book on superstitions around here somewhere that goes into more detail…'"

John blinked hard, removing himself from his memory and returning to the here-and-now. With a small, bitter grin, he grabbed the salt-shaker off of the table. "Damn it," he growled at the avatar. "I told you to leave me well alone!" He ended by flinging a small spray of salt from the shaker at the avatar's tuberous form.

It disappeared in a whirling puff of green smoke.

With one less irritation to take up valuable mental processes, John gratefully slipped the shaker into his pocket. *I'm pretty sure that won't hold for long.* He limped his way through the door to the inn's back garden.

There was no sign of Sherlock. John frowned, then closed his eyes. Using the fullest extent of his concentration, he filtered through the massive influx of undampened othersense, searching for any trace of his flatmate's distinctive and familiar aura. The chair back in the bar glowed softly with remnants of his friend's energy, but the trail – looking like nothing so much as footprints in glittery dust the same collection of colors as the man's living aura – was rapidly drowned-out by the sheer number of other people's similar trails.

Giving up on tracking him with othersight so close to the inn and its plethora of people, John retreated back inside. He cut through the bar to the inn's front door and checked the parking lot. The black Land Rover was still there.

Nebulous worry initiated by the strange dream coalesced into something far more substantial. John retrieved his mobile and scrolled to Sherlock's number. Where are you? he sent via text, needing to make two attempts at typing it clearly. It took longer than normal for the phone's animation of sending a text to complete, and once it ceased, the normal 'message sent' wasn't anywhere to be seen. Instead, the screen said *message delivery failed*. John double-checked his signal – he had full bars showing. He dismissed the message on the screen and called Sherlock directly. It rang straight through to voicemail.

"Either he's forgotten to charge it," John muttered, putting his mobile away, "or the coverage out here is slightly dodgy." Considering the trouble he'd just had in trying to send a text, he was relatively certain it was the latter. *Besides,* he thought, picking his way across the gravel parking lot, *in the year-plus that I've known him, Sherlock has never forgotten to charge his phone. Left it behind – sure. Had it broken and/or drowned – yeah. More than once on that last. But forgotten to charge it? He'd sooner use the Strad as kindling.*
A thought occurred to him and he changed the direction his feet were taking. "Maybe the dream was a warning, but of where I can find him now, not that he's actually in any sort of danger. I mean, it's not like the dream was particularly frightening – just really, really weird." John had no difficulty locating the Grimpen cemetery; it was just across the street from the inn.

He canvassed the rather small area twice before admitting defeat. Taking a seat on the steps of an elaborate memorial, John shivered a little. He pulled his jacket tighter around himself and looked around. The early-morning fog was beginning to take on the pearly glow that heralded pre-dawn. The avatar was back, too, though it lingered outside the boundary of the cemetery itself. "Wonder what that's about?" John mused, then dismissed it from his thoughts. As long as it's clear over there, I'm not going to worry about it. Where can he be? It's not like Grimpen has much in the way of night-life!

John found himself toying with his phone. Maybe he went over to Henry's? John scrolled through his contacts to see if he had their client's number. He didn't. Just to be sure, he checked the notes he'd taken back at Baker Street. No luck. A quick check with information indicated that there was no listing in Grimpen for anyone by the name of 'Henry Knight' or any variation thereof. Another try to Sherlock's number yielded the same straight-to-voicemail response.

The worry for his flatmate was gaining strength at the back of John's mind, managing to overtake the physical complaints of his burned hands, dislocated knee, and of muscles protesting the awkward position in which he'd slept. He couldn't get the image of that shiny black tombstone out of his head. He scrolled through his contacts once more, stopping on a very familiar number. The clock in the upper corner of his screen told him it was only a quarter past five in the morning. He's answered at odder times before, though… But that was only when he was hip-deep in a case. Was he working anything in particular when we left? I don't recall…

You awake? John sent a text, his much-abused fingers protesting the act. If he doesn't reply inside of twenty minutes or so, I'll assume he isn't.

He needn't have worried – a reply came mere moments later. Yeah. Do I need to post bail again?

John smirked a little at the reply – Greg had been referring to a small series of humorous misunderstandings which had taken place during an uninspiring, teensy case roughly six months earlier; one which had seen both he and Sherlock needing Greg's bail-posting skills an astonishing nine times within a single twenty-four hour block – but didn't send one of his own. Instead, he simply called back, much to the relief of his dominant hand. "Not this time," he said once the ringing on the other end ceased.

"Good," Greg said. "That got old really quick. What's got you calling this blasted late in the day? Or should I say, early in the morning?"

"Has Sherlock contacted you at all in the last twelve hours or so?"

"Just to say that you boys would be down in Dartmoor for a bit. Why?"

"I've lost track of him," John admitted. "And I can't get a hold of him – his phone goes straight to voicemail."

"Thought he preferred to text." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah. Coverage is a bit dodgy here. I'm honestly surprised my text to you went through. Besides, texts are something of an issue for me at the moment."
"Oh?" John could hear the DI's curiosity had engaged full-force with that single syllable. "How so?"

"Burned the hell outta my hands last night. Spee bachee local 'line hates me, but hell if I know why." (5)

"I'm not even gonna pretend I know what that means," Greg replied. The sound of rustling papers echoed through the connecting. "Listen – I just finished up the last of the paperwork on my last case. I can be there in about four hours."

"What about work?"

"Got the rest of the week off, thanks to the case I just finished. Had all hands called in. Some damned group of idiots were growing enough cannabis to supply Amsterdam for a month in a warehouse out by the airport; had the place's fire-sprinklers rigged, those special sunlamp bulbs in all the fixtures, all that. Even with everyone working 'round the clock, it took better than three days just to clear the place out. I'm just grateful I wasn't in charge – it's gonna take the better part of a month just to get all the paperwork done!" Greg chuckled, but there was an undertone to it that told John that he'd managed to actually worry the man by calling him. "As a result, my team's on stand-down until Monday morning. Like I said, I can be there in about four hours."

John was going to insist that wasn't necessary, then changed his mind. He could be useful, particularly since I'm far from being at my best at the moment. I don't much care for leaving Sherlock without someone trustworthy watching his back. "Okay," he replied. "I'll let you know if Sherlock shows up."

John could faintly hear the sound of muted speech in over the line. "Make sure these get filed with the evidence," Greg said, obviously speaking to someone that was in his physical presence. "Hang on a mo, would ya, John?" John waited patiently while there was more muffled speaking, followed by the sound of cloth rustling and keys rattling. A minute or so later, Greg's voice echoed oddly through the connection – it's peculiar timbre was enough to tell John that the DI had made it into the elevator at NSY. "Okay, I'm done here. I'll send a text to the kids; they're old enough to look after themselves for a day or two. Maybe I ought to contact Mrs. Kelsie, too, have her keep a discreet eye on them…" Greg trailed off for a moment; John knew he was double-checking that the idea of having his work-from-home neighbor ensure that neither Jack nor Rosie managed to burn the house down in his absence was a good one. A heartbeat later, John could practically hear the man nod. "Yeah, that'll do. Donna and me had another to-do a few days ago – she's been staying with her mum since – but I'll still let her know where I'm off to, too." The sound of the elevator's ding on reaching the lobby filtered through to John. "Now that's done," Greg indicated the whole being-at-work by a slightly relieved sigh, "you wanna tell me just why Sherlock slipping his leash has you so worked up?"

John's forehead wrinkled a little at the persistent implication that he was far more responsible for his flatmate than he felt he actually was, but he ignored it with the ease of long practice. "Couple of things, really," he said. "First off, Sherlock managed to scare himself witless last night."

"Wait, what?" Incredulous surprise could not have had a better aural definition than the tone with which Greg managed those two words. "Mr. Emotion-is-a-Disadvantage did what now?"

A small smile managed to work its way onto John's face. "I'm glad I called him. "Yeah, I know. But it's true. This case we're working, it's… Well, to put it bluntly, it's downright weird."

Faint noises of early-morning London traffic told John that Greg had exited the building and was on his way to the car park where he left his beloved vehicle during working hours. Much to John's initial surprise, Greg's ride-of-choice wasn't a cheap econobox or a morbidly-expensive 'mid-life
crisis mobile', nor was it even a wife-induced people carrier, but – of all things – an '09 Honda
Insight. Greg had named 'her' Cherry, even though 'she' was a dark silvery-black, and John had
remained utterly confused about the choice until his first visit to the Lestrade home, where he’d found
bio-degradable soaps the rule, strictly-sorted recycling bins, a total lack of anything resembling a
paper towel, and LED bulbs in all the lights. He further understood the choice when Greg had taken
him home that night – the Honda’s control panel put John in mind of that irritatingly addictive video
game, Plants vs. Zombies, which he’d caught Greg playing on his phone more than just a few times
over the past few months. "Weird?" Greg prompted, interrupting John's musing on Greg's darling
Cherry.

"Yeah, weird," John repeated. "Client's name is Henry Knight. He dropped by yesterday morning.
His dad had disappeared about twenty years ago – the guy's convinced some sort of mutant doglike
monster ripped him apart – and wants Sherlock to..." John chewed on his lip a moment, not entirely
sure how to phrase it. "I guess," he eventually said, "he wants us to verify he's not completely
barking. He said his therapist's convinced he invented the memory of seeing his dad torn apart." John
let out a little sigh. "To tell the truth, Greg – I'm not convinced she's wrong. I've been here long
enough now that anything new should have registered."

The tweedle-beep noise of Greg disengaging Cherry's alarm drifted through the connection. "How
d'you mean?" The question was punctuated by the sound of a car door closing.

"I mean that everything – and I do mean every-bloody-thing – has its own presence to othersight.
And nothing out here has come up as anything I've never seen before."

"Oh-kay..." Greg let the word hang for a moment as he searched his memory. "Okay," he repeated.
"Lemme see if I've got the right of this – your own eccentricity," he used his own preferred word for
John's magical abilities, "lets you know when there's something around that you've not seen before?"

"Exactly."

"Nope. Still not getting it, mate. Sorry."

John let out a huff of air. "How about a few examples, huh? Roaches, for instance. Even if I can't
physically see the little blighters, I know if they're around. They leave behind this waxy chocolate
smell, like the cheapest Easter bunnies – you know the ones I mean?"

"Think you're looking for 'carob' there, John," Greg said. An irritating chime temporarily erased all
other noises coming from his end of the line. When Greg's voice resumed speaking, it held the
distinct hollowness that informed John that Greg was now conversing through the Bluetooth adapter
he'd installed in Cherry. "And I happen to like carob, by the way."

"Gross," John commented. "But then again, there's no accounting for taste. Another example – most
butterflies leave this astringent lemony flavor at the back of my throat, a little like if you accidentally
breathe in some mist from a kitchen spritzer. Cats, even if I'm not touching them, feel fuzzy and
warm and kinda vibratey, but all that's threaded around this rusty barbed wire feel. D'ya
understand?"

"Think so," Greg agreed. "So, you've not sensed anything out there you've not come across before.
What's that got to do with your case and Sherlock catching a case of the willies and haring off into
the night?"

"It means – top-secret bio-weapons research lab at Baskerville aside – that there is no way a mutant
creature showed up out here, regardless of what Henry and Sherlock seem to think they saw!"
"Ah!" Greg exclaimed. "Finally, you're getting to the good bits! So, Sherlock saw something he couldn't reason away, huh?"

"Thinks he did, yeah. But, I'm telling you, Greg – there's nothing at all out of the ordinary out here!" John's eyes drifted over to where the Grimpen avatar still stood, watching him from the boundaries of the cemetery. "Well, not nothing, but there aren't any mutant dogs running about. One of the locals is running this Monster Walk for the tourists, has a plaster cast of a paw-print. It's pretty big, but not mutant-big. I've been thinking it's from somebody's lost Great Dane or maybe a Saint Bernard. Big, yeah, but not 'horse-sized' like the kid wanted us to believe."

"Sounds more like a job for animal control than anything else, John," Greg said. "And I think I'm getting the picture here… Sherlock thinks he saw whatever it is that Henry thought he saw, right?"

"Yeah. He had Henry take us out to the place he claims to have seen it – the same spot he supposedly saw his dad die twenty years ago – last night. It was dark, the moor was starting to spit out fog. I got separated from them, but I did hear something howl. Not five minutes later, Henry came tearing outta the woods, panicked. Sherlock trudging right alongside and about as freaked-out as I can imagine him ever being. Just guessing here, but I'm thinking that Henry freaked himself out, thanks to that probably-wrong memory he's got of the place, and Sherlock, caught in the tangled underbrush of a baby forest – something so far from London's back alleys that I can't think of anything more different, outside of a tropical rain forest – and Sherlock wound up with a case of mirror neurons."

Greg let out a rueful chuckle. "Sorry," he said.

"For what?"

"I keep forgetting you're likely just as smart as Sherlock. Since you don't rub it in all the time, it's easy to forget."

Another small smile twitched into place on John's face. "Yeah, well… They don't tend to hand out medical degrees to complete idiots, you know."

"But… I think you're right about the cause. Sherlock isn't as immune to emotion as he likes to claim and his mirror-responses increase if he's feeling wrong-footed. He'll likely make his own way back to wherever you're staying before noon."

Some of the worry-induced tension leaked out of John's spine. "You think so?"

"Yeah," Greg assured him. "He's done this before. Not for a long while – think the last time was about three years ago, and was sparked by a hit of LSD – but he has freaked himself out before. Is it wrong of me to be grateful you're not in town?"

"Depends on why."

"Last time, he broke into the house and just about wound up with the fireplace poker lodged in his skull for his trouble – he considered my sofa the safest place he could think of." Greg let out a fond chuckle. "Scared the bejesus outta Donna. He curled up on our couch for a bit, then disappeared completely for a solid twelve hours or so. When he came back close to lunchtime the next day, it was with a pizza box of Donna's favorite in one hand and a six-pack of my favorite beer in the other."

John chuckled. "That's… Not good, but reassuring nonetheless."

"Listen – I'm about to get on the M4. I'll see you soon, alright?"
"Yeah. See you soon. And Greg?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"No problem," Greg replied, then ended the call.

John returned his mobile to his pocket feeling slightly more at-ease than he had all morning. He glanced through the rapidly-lightening gloom of oncoming morning at the local avatar standing outside the cemetery's fence. The weight of its dislike for John wasn't nearly so heavy – nor so irritating – a force with several dozen meters separating them. A little more tension evaporated out of John's spine. He shifted to a bit more comfortable a position on the memorial's steps.

Time passed more quickly than he'd had any reason to expect. The fog had gained a bright glow, that rapidly faded, as the sun rose. The fog itself also rose, high into the sky, crafting a patchwork layer of intermittent cloud cover that skittered and danced above Grimpen without seeming to actually go anywhere. Crickets changed over to birdsong. Much of the overnight chill managed to dissipate as the morning waxed, though it still lingered in the shadows. All-in-all, John was somewhat grateful he'd switched to his olive-colored canvas jacket – the heavier one with the strategically-placed leather patches would have been much too warm for the day.

The sun, come-and-go though it was, shining through his dark jeans also lent a bit of relief to his abused knee. The warming spell he'd put on the elastic bandage had worn off, but the sun was a good enough substitute that he couldn't be bothered to re-set the spell. And thinking of magic… I ought to contact Ajay, see if he knows why the leyline out here is acting so… Out of the ordinary. John retrieved his notebook and jotted a reminder to himself to do just that, then spent a few minutes looking over the notes he'd acquired on the case.

The sound of approaching footsteps made him pause for a moment, realizing that he actually recognized the specific sound of Sherlock's shoes, but he still doubted his own ears long enough to reach out with othersight and verify that, yes, Sherlock's aura was accompanying the familiar footsteps. John tucked the notebook back into his satchel as Sherlock rounded the corner of the path and came to a halt in front of him.

"Did you, uh," Sherlock shifted his shoulders in a gesture somewhat similar to an awkward shrug, "get anywhere with that Morse code?"

Dr. Watson took a hard look at Sherlock; No injuries. Bracing himself, John managed to lever himself to his feet. "No," he replied, his eyes closed, waiting for a spate of light-headedness to pass. Once he was in no danger of tripping over himself, he stepped down from the memorial and began to limp in the direction of the inn. Now that he knew that Sherlock was fine, the bitter anger he'd felt at his summary dismissal the evening before came roaring back.

He could feel Sherlock's gaze sweep him from the tips of his hair to the soles of his shoes while saying, "U. M. Q. R. A., wasn't it?" Sherlock fell into step a pace or two behind John.

"It was nothing – just my pareidolia acting up," John insisted, wincing as his right hand levied another string of complaints about its treatment.

"You sure?"

"Yeah," John replied. He halted in his steps and leaned against a low brick half-wall that stood directly in front of a family mausoleum. The name 'Knight' was carved into the stone above the
building's archway.

"How about Louise Mortimer?" Sherlock asked, leaning himself against the mausoleum's iron handrail. "Did you get anywhere with her?"

John sat on the low wall, hooking his cane over his left elbow, and shook his head. "No."

"Too bad," Sherlock retorted, a vague level of teasing in his voice. "Did you get any information?"

"You being funny now?" John asked, glancing at his flatmate, while working to unwrap the bandages from his right hand.

"Thought it might break the ice a bit," Sherlock admitted, then leveled his laserlike gaze on John's hands. "You seem to have had something of an eventful few hours…?"

It was telling, that significant question-pause. *He's still not quite back to himself, not yet.* John ignored the implied order to fill his flatmate in on what he was unable to deduce for himself. *I know he wasn't himself, but that doesn't make what he said…* "Damn it," he growled at the stubborn bandage on his hand – the tape wouldn't peel off. "Funny doesn't suit you. I'd stick to ice." He lifted his hand to his mouth, intending to use his teeth to worry the tape loose, when his peripheral vision caught the barest wince from Sherlock before the other man closed the distance between them and took John's hand in his own.

"John…" he said, focusing on undoing the rather too-excellent job that Louise had managed rather than on John himself. He looked to John's eyes more unsure of himself than he had the evening before, than he ever had, and it…

*It's painful, is what it is.* "It's fine," John said, allowing his magic to infuse his voice in a way he didn't typically need to use – it wasn't the *shut up and listen* of Captain Watson, nor was it the *trust me* of Dr. Watson. Instead of compelling in any way, it was more like an auditory version of hot tea and fuzzy jumpers and bright orange blankets lit by flashing lights. It said 'you're forgiven' and 'I suppose I'm a little sorry, too' and 'you scared me, you idiot' and 'don't ever disappear like that again'.

Sherlock finally managed to pick apart the tape and began to unwind the soiled gauze bandage from John's hand. "What happened last night…" He shook his head in the minutest of motions. "Something happened to me – something I've never really experienced before…"

"Yes, you said. Fear," John said, his voice still caught somewhere between 'soothing a friend' and 'I'm still angry about what you said last night'.

"Not just that. It was more, John. It was doubt. I felt doubt," Sherlock hissed a little as he removed the final layer of gauze and finally caught sight of the injuries on John's hand. He finally looked John in the eyes. "I've always been able to trust my senses – the evidence of my own eyes. Even with all the other that you've brought to my awareness, I could believe what my senses were telling me; all I had to keep in mind was that I wasn't seeing everything there was. Until last night."

"You can't actually believe that you saw some kind of monster. Monsters don't exist. Besides, if you'd managed to actually listen to me last night, I told you I haven't sensed anything new out here."

"You've got cotton wool with you, yes?" Sherlock asked in an aside, then said, "No, I can't believe I saw a monster, John, but I *did* see it. So the question is: How?"

John fumbled with his satchel for a moment before coming up with a plastic baggie of cotton balls. He handed it to Sherlock. "Good question. D'you know the answer yet? 'Cause like I said, there's nothing unusual out here. Just the leyline that's taken an extreme dislike to my presence. Otherwise,
it's all the same as everywhere else: Bass humming from grass, this high-pitched warbling noise from moss, vanilla flavor-scent from oak trees, the fuzzy-electric treacle of squirrels, and so on. I can't sense anything at all new."

"Tape," Sherlock demanded as he finished unwinding one of the cotton balls. John ignored the protestations of his left hand as he came up with a roll of tape from the medical portion of his satchel's contents. "Would you register something new, though, if it were comprised of components with which you were already familiar?" Sherlock asked, gently laying the cotton over the worst of the ruptured blisters on the palm of John's hand.

John thought about it for a long moment, during which Sherlock taped the cotton into place, before slowly nodding. "Yeah. I think I would, at any rate. That woman at Baskerville – you said she made her daughter's rabbit glow in the dark, right?" Sherlock nodded, unwinding another cotton ball. "I could sense some weirdness within the complex. I know they've got rats and mice and rabbits and guinea pigs and rhesus monkeys somewhere in there, even though I didn't see them personally. Not even the best filtration system money can buy can remove all traces of what I sense, not when I'm looking through unfiltered othersight. And there were a couple of bits floating in the air that weren't entirely familiar. There isn't anything like that, though, outside the gates to the base."

Sherlock blinked a bit at that. "How is it, I wonder, that you manage to stay sane? I admit I see… Well, everything, but you… What you can sense at times makes me feel truly blind."

"Usually, I can control it," John said. "Usually, I can push all the extra info aside, dial it back, and ignore it."

"But not now," it wasn't exactly a question, which told John that Sherlock was pretty sure that he'd worked out why for himself.

John nodded. "But not now," he agreed while his flatmate secured the cotton ball over another ruptured blister on his right hand. "The painkiller for my knee's screwing up my controls," he explained, noticing the slightest twitch of 'I knew it' that flashed across Sherlock's face. "I don't remember it being this bad before, but maybe it's just because it's been so long since I've needed the oxycodone…"

"Possible," Sherlock allowed, then started working on another of the blisters on John's hand. "How, exactly, did this happen?" he asked, indicating the mess of John's hand, finally just coming right out with his curiosity.

John flinched a little as Sherlock inadvertently pressed just a shade too hard on one of the blisters. "The local 'line and me had something of a disagreement."

"A 'disagreement'?” an incredulous eyebrow twitched towards Sherlock's unruly hair. "Typically, a 'disagreement' does not result in second-degree burns."

"It does when the local leyline's taken an active and intense dislike to you," John replied, then went on to explain how the local system's avatar had been shadowing him and generally being a nuisance. He went on to describe what had happened the night before, including the additional damage he'd managed to do to his knee; he finished his tale with how the avatar seemed reluctant to follow him into the cemetery just as Sherlock finished taping one last cotton ball over the blisters on the back of his hand.

"From what you've said previously, this is atypical behavior for a leyline. Have you any reasons why it's acting oddly?" Sherlock asked, retrieving an expensive linen handkerchief from the inner pocket of his Belstaff.
John shook his head and looked over the job his flatmate had done. "No clue," he said. "But then again, I can't explain why London's system acts the way she does around me, either. Up until that day I bumped into Mike at the park, the leylines I've been around never took much notice of me. I noted where they were, but never really interacted with them myself… except for once, but that was more than twenty years ago. It can't have much bearing on why they've all suddenly gone weird on me now. I mean, I admit that what happened then probably has something to do with London's 'lines acting like they do, but I can't see how it would have had any effect this far from there."

The sound of ripping fabric underscored a somewhat rueful chuckle from Sherlock. "I doubt I can be of much help in puzzling out their motivations," he said, tearing another strip from his handkerchief. "I would think, however, that you might want to discuss this with Ajay when we return home."

John nodded in agreement. "It's already on my to-do list," he said, watching Sherlock rip one last strip from his handkerchief. "Right alongside restocking our med-kit."

Sherlock reached for John's hand once more and began gently wrapping the injured appendage with the strips he'd torn from his handkerchief, using small bits of tape to secure them in place over the layer of cotton. He had nearly finished before he broke the silence by clearing his throat. "Listen," he said, "what I said before, John – I meant it." He used the last bit of tape to make sure the whole makeshift bandage wouldn't fall apart. "I don't have friends." He looked up at John's face. "I've just got the one."

Really, what could John say in reply to that? Instead of commenting, he just held Sherlock's gaze for a moment, hoping that his friend could read from his expression that he wasn't going to hold a grudge, that they were still friends, that it would take more than mere words said in anger to drive John off at this late stage. When the wordless exchange grew to be too much, it was John's turn to break the silence by clearing his throat. "Right," he said, looking away. "Umqra was a complete dead-end, so have you come up with anything?" He pushed himself off of the low wall, and resumed his interrupted journey back to the inn; Sherlock once more falling into step with him, only at his left elbow instead of behind him. The additional padding of the cotton against his blisters quieted most of the complaints from his cane-hand and John couldn't help but be grateful for it.

They'd almost reached the cemetery gate when Sherlock halted completely. "Oh!"

John stopped and looked at Sherlock – his friend's face was a study in sudden understanding; John half-expected to see the word 'eureka' hovering in cartoon letters over his head. "What?"

"You are fantastic!" Sherlock enthused. "Amazing, really, and altogether astonishing!"

The last lingering remnants of the unease which had haunted Sherlock had finally faded from the man's aura. John let out a small sigh. "Come on – you were fine with what you said already. No need to overdo it."

Sherlock ignored him and began walking again, but still keeping pace with John. "You might not be the most luminous of people, John, but as a conductor of light, you are unbeatable!"

"So I'm a bit of fiber-optic cable now, am I?" John almost – but not quite – managed to keep the amusement out of his voice.

Sherlock snatched his own notebook out of his pocket as they exited the cemetery. "Some people who aren't geniuses themselves have a remarkable ability to stimulate it in others –"

"Shut it, Sherlock – you were saying 'sorry' a minute ago, don't spoil it." At the faint irritation that flashed across his flatmate's face at the interruption, John sighed and said, "Go on, then. What have I
done that's so bloody illuminating?" The local avatar slid into place a few paces behind them as the cemetery gate squeaked shut behind them.

Sherlock scribbled something down in his notebook and showed it to John. It simply read HOUND. "So?" John said. "What about it?" He reached into his pocket and wrapped his fingers around his stolen salt-shaker.

"What if it isn't a word, but individual letters?" Sherlock asked, scribbling on the paper once more. When he revealed it to John, it now read H.O.U.N.D.

"An acronym? What for?" John asked, halting halfway across the parking area for the inn and spinning around. "And I told you," he spat at the avatar, "to leave me be!" he punctuated it by spraying it with salt. It disappeared into a cloud of green smoke that quickly faded.

"Do I want to know?" a familiar voice asked from the direction of the parked cars.

Sherlock, momentarily startled by John's actions, switched his attention to the obviously just-arrived Detective Inspector Lestrade. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Greg removed his sunglasses and finished climbing out of his beloved Cherry. "Well, nice to see you, too," he said. "I'm on holiday, would you believe?"

Sherlock strode over to Greg. "No, I wouldn't," he all but growled at the DI.

John sighed to himself and hurried after him as fast as his aching leg would let him, not failing to notice that despite Sherlock's words, tone, and aggressive body language, the younger man still gave off a burst of emotional energy that smelled of cocoa butter to John's othersight.

"I heard you were in the area," Greg said. "What are you up to? After this Hound of Hell, like on the telly?" John managed to reach the other two just as Greg finished his question. "Hullo, John."

"Greg," John gave the man a tight, pained smile of greeting.

"I'm waiting for an explanation, Inspector – why are you here?" Sherlock seemed unaccountably angry at Greg's arrival in Grimpen. John wondered why. *I thought they were... Well, maybe not 'friends', but I wouldn't've thought Sherlock would be this upset to see him here.*

Greg shrugged. "I told you – I'm on holiday."

Sherlock's frustration was easy to read – even if John wasn't watching the man's aura, it was clear
from his expression alone. "You're brown as a nut – you're clearly just back from your 'holidays'!"

Greg glanced at John before looking back to Sherlock. "Yeah, well, maybe I fancied another one."

Sherlock's posture wilted some as his I've figured this out and I hate it' expression shouldered its way onto his face. He straightened. "Oh, this is Mycroft's doing, isn't it?"

"No," Greg said, "look –"

Interrupting, Sherlock continued, "Of course it is! One mention of Baskerville and he sends down my handler to spy on me 'incognito'. Is that why you're calling yourself 'Greg'?"

"That's his name, Sherlock," John said while thinking, They've known each other how long now? And how many warrant cards has Sherlock stolen from Greg and he never bothered to read the name on them?"

Sherlock frowned. "Is it?"

Greg looked as nonplussed as John felt at the look on Sherlock's face that indicated Greg's first name was actually something he'd not bothered to learn before. "Yes," Greg ground out, "if you'd ever bothered to find out." He tucked his sunglasses into his jacket pocket before he could manage to break them. "Look, I'm not your handler, and I don't just do whatever your brother tells me."


Sherlock shifted his eyes from the DI to John. "You? But… Why?"

John rolled his eyes, How is it that he's the smartest person I've ever met, yet regularly manages to sound like a bratty six year old?, and gestured to himself with his cane. "I'm hardly in top form right now. Besides – you'd bugged off and I couldn't get a hold of you this morning. I'm not too proud to admit that I was worried. I'd called Greg," he couldn't help but give Lestrade's name a slight emphasis, "to see if you'd contacted him at all, in hopes of figuring out where you'd gone off to." He didn't mention his dream. I'm pretty sure that, weirdness or no, it wasn't at all prophetic. Just an odd dream. Nothing more. "He offered to come down and lend a hand, since I'm down a pair at the moment." John saw some of the same faint concern resurface on Sherlock's face that had been lurking there all while he'd been rebandaging his hand. "Besides…" John continued in a slightly more thoughtful tone of voice. "He could be just who we need." Sherlock's 'explain' eyebrow twitched into place. "I've not been idle," John said, rummaging in his pockets for what he needed. "Ah, there it is." He pulled out the receipt he'd snagged on checking in the day before. He showed it to Sherlock before handing it to Greg. "That's an awful lot of meat for a vegetarian restaurant, isn't it?" A small, somewhat manic grin broke through Sherlock's expression. "Nice scary inspector from Scotland Yard who can put in a few calls might come in very handy."

The trio had to wait nearly an hour before the last of the morning breakfast crowd cleared out; much to Greg's amusement, much of that hour was spent by having Sherlock repeatedly attempt to get John to partake of something other than coffee in a role-reversal he hadn't ever expected to see. Unfortunately, though John managed to successfully get Sherlock to eat, sometimes even during a case, the reverse was most assuredly not happening. Greg, himself possessing some rather odd side-effects to prescription medications, understood the lack of hunger, though he was a little unclear as to why John had taken anything to begin with, just like he was somewhat confused as to the presence of the cane. It took him nearly the whole of the hour to recall John had shown up at that first crime scene with it before it had disappeared entirely.

Just as the last of the breakfast crowd left the dining area surrounding the bar, Sherlock got up to
refill their coffees from the self-serve pot at the end of the bar. While he was fixing the cups to their various tastes – John preferred black, Sherlock himself took sugar, and Greg couldn't stomach coffee without copious quantities of both milk and sugar – the owner of the Cross Keys finally wandered over. "Sorry that took so long," he said. "Billy'll be out in a moment."

Greg nodded and motioned for the man to take a seat. Not long afterwards, Sherlock returned to the table with their coffee refills, and just as he was sitting down, Billy arrived with a thick stack of papers. Greg donned one of his best 'serious' faces, then got down to business.

After sorting through the general licenses for the inn – just to make sure everything was in order – he asked for their invoices. Roughly twenty minutes later, Gary was futilely attempting to defend their having kept a vicious dog around to scare the tourists. "It was just a joke, you know?"

"Yeah, hilarious!" Greg sarcastically replied, pushing the stack of paperwork at the pair. "You've nearly driven a man out of his mind. Really top-notch humor right there!"

Abashed, Gary and Billy quickly gathered up the papers, and then scurried off to other parts of the inn. Once they were safely out of hearing-range, Greg slumped in his chair and rubbed lightly at his temples. "I'll have a word with the local force about this, but, to be frank, I honestly don't know if anything they did was technically illegal."

"They didn't have the dog put down, though. Couldn't that be something…? I mean," John paused, groping for the right words. "Isn't there something in the laws about keeping dangerous animals?"

Greg bit back a small grin at John finally speaking – all through the interview with the Taylors, he'd literally been chewing on his lips to keep from blurting out whatever'd been on his mind. "Those are only if the animal in question has actually hurt anyone," Greg replied, then downed the last bit of coffee in his cup with a grimace at its lack of a palatable temperature.

Sherlock was frowning to himself, not really listening to John and Greg, but then shook his head and focused on his flatmate. "What makes you so certain the dog is still alive, John? Gary certainly believed he was telling the truth, and Billy's body language was consistent with regret."

John didn't even need to look at Sherlock to know that the man's face was likely sporting an expression caught somewhere between puzzlement and disgust – his typical reaction to anything that could even remotely be labeled as 'sentiment'. "One of these days, Sherlock, you're gonna realize that 'sentiment' isn't actually a dirty word, you know." John gave a small combined shrug-and-sigh and finished off the last of the now-cold sludge in the bottom of his own cup. "Lies taste like peppermint," he explained, glancing from the mug to Lestrade and finally to his flatmate. "They always taste like peppermint – 's why I don't much care for the taste in toothpaste and what have you. I taste it enough as it is, I certainly don't need to deal with it as part of my grooming routine."

Sherlock narrowed his eyes at his flatmate even as Greg's expression shifted to one of complete confusion until he recalled how John had described how he 'saw' the world. "Do you realize you're more observant on opiates than you are sober?" Sherlock asked, either unaware or uncaring of Greg's own inner thoughts.

John shrugged again. "Nah," he countered. "Not really. Like I told you earlier, I just can't turn it off right now. I can't ignore the bits'n'pieces that aren't important – and ninety percent of the time, lies aren't that important. Everyone winds up tasting like peppermint sooner or later. Women in particular, because makeup and hair-dye might not solely be used by prostitutes any longer, but they surely aren't honest." Greg had to chuckle a little at that, but his laughter didn't even register with John. The doctor continued without breaking for breath, "I've been meaning to ask, Sherlock – is this what it's like for you all the time? Only less glowy, of course. Seeing every-bloody-thing, I mean. But less
glowy and without the synesthesia. Pretty sure it's magical synesthesia, at any rate, why I hear and taste and smell and feel what everyone else only sees –"

All the while John had been speaking, Greg's grin kept growing and growing. Having had more than a few work-related injuries over the course of his career, he knew that strong painkillers, if one was seated relatively comfortably and not overtaxing the afflicted body part, had a tendency to loosen one's tongue, but this? This was priceless. Particularly as Sherlock interrupted John's rambling with, "You're babbling again. It's becoming rather annoying," and a hard scowl.

"And you're a poncy git who thinks popping his coat collar makes him look cool," John snapped back.

Sherlock opened his mouth to argue the point, but Greg beat him to it. "Boys! I get enough of the childish name-calling from my kids, I'm not about to put up with it from you two."

John opened his mouth to say 'Fine, let's get back to the task at hand, then, shall we?', but as his eyes landed on the Grimpen avatar, staring at him from a corner near the bar, it switched over to, "Damn it!" He pulled himself to his feet and glared at the avatar. "Do I need to tie you up again? Because I swear, you da spi zo, if you don't bloody well leave me the fuck alone, I don't care if I wind up burning myself down to the bone – I will leave you in so many knots, you'll be a millennia untying yourself!" (6)

The avatar simply stood there. John had the distinct impression it was smirking at him. John stared right back, his posture and expression clearly shouting 'don't fuck with me' in every line.

Greg edged away from John. He looked at Sherlock and saw that the man's forehead was furrowed, but not with worry – he had the look on his face that, rare though it might be, usually indicated he wasn't seeing what he knew he should be. Greg peered in the direction John was glaring, but saw only the corner where the bar's top joined with the outer wall of the building. There wasn't even any dust, let alone something that could be causing the normally level-headed ex-soldier any concern.

John didn't notice Greg's own distress, nor Sherlock's intense scrutiny. His attention was wholly engaged by the avatar; the memory of its attack the night before foremost in his mind. The air around the avatar shimmered to his othersight, much like heat-waves bouncing off of hot pavement. It quivered, a slight shudder that traveled from the outermost tips of its tentacle-like protrusions to the green, tuberous mass of its main 'body'.

Greg could feel… something. Something building, like the pressure-change just before a sudden summer thunderstorm. Something that made every hair on him stand up. Something that left a taste not unlike ozone at the back of his throat. He tore his eyes from John and looked again at Sherlock. The younger man's hands were pressed palm-down against the tabletop, but so hard that his knuckles were white, and was breathing in short little gasps, like he wasn't getting enough air, but he was still staring intently at the corner where John's own gaze was fixed. Greg had the sudden urge to duck under the table, but couldn't bring himself to move more than his eyes.

John's sense of time skewed out of alignment with reality, but it had less to do with his magical nature than the finely-honed instincts he'd acquired whilst living in a war zone. In slow motion, he saw the avatar increase in size, just like it had done the night before.

John dipped his hand into the pocket of his jacket and grabbed his 'borrowed' salt-shaker.

They both attacked simultaneously; the avatar lashing out once more with a whip of its own tentacles, and John with the last of the salt. The salt hit first, however, and so John was spared another burned welt. As time suddenly slotted back into its normal rhythm, John realized that had the
avatar managed to land the blow, he likely would have wound up losing one, if not both, of his eyes.

Greg had absolutely no idea what John just did, but the tension snapped with all the suddenness of a crack of thunder, taking with it his unease. He cleared his throat. John and Sherlock both startled and looked at him. "Um... What the hell just happened?"

John opened his eyes, unsure as to when he'd closed them, and looked at Greg. His pulse had gone from the steady thud, thud, thud of imminent conflict to the hummingbird thrum of 'fucking hell, but that could've been really, really bad'. He let out a small, shaky breath, and sank back onto his chair. "That," he said, "was the local leyline's latest attempt to get me gone from here. He doesn't much like me, and I've no bloody idea why. It's the reason my hands are burned." John indicated the bandages wrapped around the appendages in question with a small nod.

Greg grimaced. John could see several questions floating in his friend's eyes, but Greg didn't bother voicing any of them; it simply wasn't the time. Instead, Greg said, "I'm sure I'll probably want to know more about that, but it can wait for now."

"Indeed," Sherlock said, then changed the subject. "The sooner I can figure out what's going on out here, the sooner we can return to London."

"Yeah," John nodded. "Okay, then. So it's their dog that people keep seeing out on the moor. But if they've only had it for two months, then it can't be what Henry saw twenty years ago."

"Nor was it what I saw last night," Sherlock said, his gaze focusing inwards, on the memory of what he'd experienced with Henry. "That was immense... It had burning, red eyes, and it was glowing. Its whole body was glowing..."

The strong, sharp flavor-scent of peppermint briefly flared into existence around Sherlock, and John peered a little closer at his flatmate. Sherlock might be speaking to him, but his body language clearly indicated that he'd meant the words he'd just said for Lestrade. Instead of asking for clarification on the lie, John decided to let Sherlock run with it. "What's next, then?" he asked.

Sherlock blinked hard, then gave himself a small shake. "I've got a theory, but I need to get back into Baskerville to test it."

John frowned. Is he completely insane? He managed not to smack himself in the forehead. Come on, Watson – of course he's that bloody nuts. "How?" he asked instead. "I doubt you'll be able to use Mycroft's ID again."

Sherlock allowed a slow smirk to surface on his face. "Might not have to," he said, pulling out his mobile. "Excuse me for a moment," he muttered, thumbing through his contacts and getting up from the table. John and Lestrade followed him outside, but at a distance of several dozen paces. "Hello, brother dear. How are you?" they heard Sherlock say insincerely.

John and Greg lingered in the vicinity of the inn's door while Sherlock paced back and forth a few meters away, arguing with his brother. "You know he's actually pleased you're here," John commented, glancing at Greg, before returning his gaze to the bandages wrapping his hands. "Secretly pleased, I mean."

Greg let out a snort of amusement. "Sure he is," the sarcasm wasn't quite as thick as Sherlock could manage, but it was pretty damn close.

John shrugged. "Believe me, don't believe me – it's all the same to me, Greg, but that cocoa butter scent he gave off when you showed up only ever means one thing: relief."
Now Greg knew that the vast majority of what John could do was greatly out of his depth, but he had read more than his fair share of fantasy novels in his time – primarily thanks to Rosie; Greg made a point of reading all the same books that either of his kids read and Rosie's favored genre was sword&sorcerery – and as a result, the more that John talked about his abilities, the better Greg understood them, even when the former soldier wasn't actively explaining things. John saw a small vertical line appear between Greg's eyebrows. It was very similar to the expression he got just before he caught up with Sherlock while on a case, but not quite so intense. "So, you've got that what's-it-called? Empathy? As well as the whole magic-thing?"

John shook his head. "Not exactly. Empathy – the skill, is what you mean, right? Where a person actually feels what others are feeling?" Greg nodded. "Yeah, okay. No, that's a psychic gift like clairvoyance. My othersight's not quite as good, and I don't actually feel the emotions. I can just identify a few of them because of how they register in othersight. Some have specific scents or flavors, but most I have to identify by how they affect your aura."

Greg grimaced. About a year before Rosie had been born, Donna had gotten intensely interested in the alternative scene – crystals, pyramids, 'astral' travel, and so forth. "Aura." Greg said the word with a tone and expression that both would have been more at home on his face had he just bitten into a rancid lime.

John snickered. "Yeah," he said.

"…No! Absolutely not!" Sherlock shouted. "Five cases! It's barely worth three! And none of those 'national security' ones, either! Three interesting cases, Mycroft, or I'll figure out some other way."

John waited for the shouting to die down before turning to face Greg. "Yeah," he repeated. "Auras. Something tells me you've read some of the nonsense out there about them."

Greg shook his head. "Not personally. Donna got really into that crap a while back. Luckily, it only lasted a few months, but if I never have to hear about aligning energies or how something's bad for my karma ever again, it'll be too soon."

John grinned. "I'm not about to argue with you," he said. "I'm probably more frustrated with all the misinformation out there on the topic than you are. It doesn't help that modern thinking's got auras all lumped in with crap like phrenology and palmistry and astrology." The grin disappeared as he noticed the Grimpen's avatar reappear. It lingered in the doorway of the inn, though, keeping a respectful distance from him. As long as you leave me alone, I'll leave you alone, John thought at it.

"Odd lot of superstitious nonsense, if you ask me."

John nodded. "That they are, mate. However, auras exist. Around everything. Anyone with othersense can 'see' them, but it's not at all like in the books. Auras don't change color-distribution with emotion. They're more of a baseline of the personality of their person. Take Sherlock and his brother, for example. Their colors are gold and teal and green. Everything I've seen links green with 'inquisitive', teal with 'intelligent', and gold with…" he trailed off.
"With what?" Greg asked, curious despite himself.

"It's kinda hard to describe, but it boils down to… Well, 'goodness'. Not sweetness-and-light, of course, but the type that… It isn't kindness," John abruptly changed tracks. "At least, not traditional kindness – that's more of a yellowish-green color. It's more like a parent allowing a little kid to burn himself on the stove, knowing that a minor injury will do more to make the kid respect fire than all the words in the world. Or sacrificing a squadron of men in the short term to ensure that thousands of others won't be injured or die. To someone unable to think that far ahead, it often comes across as cruel, but it isn't, not really." He leveled an 'are you following me?' look at Greg.

Greg nodded. "I get what you're saying."

"Good," John replied. "But back to emotions… Like I said, they don't affect the colors present, no more than feeling happy or sad or tense is going to change your basic personality. I see auras as a cloud that suffuses a person, and how that cloud acts is how the emotions typically reveal themselves. If someone's pissed off, the cloud whirls around them, like they're standing inside their very own tornado. If they're feeling threatened, it gets 'prickly', like a cactus or porcupine."

Any further discussion on the topic ground to a halt as Sherlock disconnected his call and let out an explosive sigh. "We've got twenty-four hours," he said, walking back to John and Greg. "Unrestricted access."

"You don't sound particularly happy," Greg said.

Sherlock rolled his eyes, but John just shook his head. "What did you have to promise Mycroft?"

"Four cases, though he did promise they would, at least, be marginally interesting," Sherlock replied. John sighed. "Joy," his sarcasm clearly showed what he thought about that.

Sherlock ignored it and subtly began herding Lestrade and John towards Greg's car. John followed along willingly enough, but took a moment to search his pockets for the post-it note Major Barrymore had given him. He climbed into the passenger seat while retrieving his phone. 01647 523771 is his office number, and it's, he checked the time, closing in on eleven o'clock. He ought to be in. John dialed the number and patiently waited for the call to connect.

The major was, understandably, unenthused about the impending visit, but – when reminded of John's earlier assertion that what he and Sherlock were looking into fell under the jurisdiction of what was in essence an internal criminal investigation (blatant lie though it may have been), he resigned himself to allowing them access. John could tell he didn't much appreciate it, but Mycroft's influence had managed to enforce the false idea. For once, John found himself somewhat grateful for the elder Holmes' rather overbearing, meddling attitude – not to mention his still-unnamed position within the British government.

Half an hour later, John was once more wrestling with keeping his understandable, though still rather inconvenient, paranoia in check while maintaining an air of 'what can you do?' as Sherlock traded sarcasm with Major Barrymore and Greg wandered towards the lab levels. Eventually, Barrymore left. John immediately claimed the most-comfortable looking chair in the security office and shot a questioning look at Sherlock.

"What?" Sherlock snapped, dragging another chair over to the bank of security cameras.

"Just wondering why you sent Greg down to the labs. It's not like he's got a whole lot of experience with them. I'd figured you'd either want to snoop around yourself or send me."
Sherlock made short work of forcing the CCTV system to show him what he was looking for. "Again, you see, yet do not observe," Sherlock replied, typing commands into the keyboard at his fingertips. Keeping one eye on the monitors, he then dug out his phone and began messing about with it.

"What don't I observe this time?" John asked, crossing his forearms to rest over the handle of his cane.

"Simple: I mentioned the main question at this juncture was how was it possible for me to have seen what Mr. Knight claims to have seen on at least three separate dates thus far? Also, what we saw was definitely not a normal dog. What conclusions might be drawn from those two lines of thought?" Sherlock glanced up from his phone.

John met his gaze. "Magic isn't the cause, so it's something normal. So…" he thought hard for a moment before the answer dawned on him. "You think you were drugged?"

"Very good, John," Sherlock returned to toying with his phone for a moment, then returned it to his pocket. "Yes – I believe that both Henry and myself have been drugged. Though my experience with hallucinogens is somewhat limited, it is one of the few theories which fit the data at hand. Since you yourself have not and are not exhibiting any of the symptoms which I and Mr. Knight have endured, whatever chemical cocktail is being used is not something to which you have been exposed. Since we have partaken of the same air, drinks, and so forth, I was forced to evaluate where differences lay."

"And?"

"To my knowledge, the only difference is that you take your coffee black, John. Both Mr. Knight and I take sugar in our coffee. Ergo, this morning I borrowed a sample of the sugar from his kitchen."

John could feel a headache coming on. "And you made coffee for us at the inn… So, you drugged Greg?"

Sherlock peered at the monitor. Lestrade had just exited the elevator and was looking around the BSL-1 lab with a bored sort of curiosity. "Yes," he said, unapologetic. "I did."

"You do realize, don't you, that he's gonna bloody well kill you for this, right?"

Sherlock shrugged. "I fail to see how he would find out."

Eventually, Sherlock looked at John and sighed. "Oh, yes, very well. Tell him if you must. I thought it better than risking a potentially problematical interaction with the oxycodone in your own system – something I am unable to predict without knowing the precise chemical mixture involved."

*Which, in Sherlockian, means that he didn't want me getting hurt from his experiments. Something inside John uncoiled. He absurdly felt like laughing, but kept the urge safely bottled up. If I doubted it at all before, this would have been enough to erase any lingering thoughts that he's actually the sociopath he claims to be. Still, though – I hope Greg goes easy on him when he figures out what Sherlock's gone and done.*

John settled back in his chair and watched Sherlock run his experiment on their friend. At one point, Greg disappeared off the monitor by going through a door into another room. John wondered why Sherlock didn't instruct the security system to 'follow' him, but received his answer without having to
actually voice the question: One of the scientists – John thought he had the peculiar, half-starved look of someone working on their first thesis – hurried into the lab and positioned a large, rolling rack of powerful lights just outside the door through which Greg had gone. He then plugged it into a bright red outlet before leaving the lab.

Sherlock queued up a string of text-based commands in a DOS prompt on the computer screen set in the desktop, then hovered his finger over the 'enter' key on the keyboard. The moment Greg returned, Sherlock hit 'enter' and the rack of lights flashed on. Sherlock then typed in another command and the sound of an alarm buzzed through the CCTV feed.

Without wasting much time – though he did take a moment to curse inventively – Greg all but ran across the darkened lab to the elevator. Sherlock was a step ahead, however, and the security checkpoint buzzed out an 'access denied' message. "Damn it!" echoed clearly from the CCTV speakers.

John saw Greg retrieve his mobile, and moments later, Sherlock's phone rang. Sherlock, of course, ignored it. "Quickly, John – your phone," Sherlock demanded, holding one hand out. Too conditioned to these sorts of requests from his flatmate, John tossed his mobile to Sherlock. It began to ring a moment later. Sherlock denied the call, and began typing into it with one hand, while his other dealt with the computer keyboard. "I would use a digital recorder," Sherlock said, 'thinking out loud'. "However, there is always some loss of sound quality when recording from another recording."

John opened his mouth to ask what Sherlock meant, but clicked it shut. I'll find out soon enough, I suspect. The noise of the alarm cut out, drawing his attention back to the security monitor. Greg had pulled out a small flashlight and was using it to cut back the gloom of the lab. It looked to John as though he were searching for the light switches.

"No, no, no, no, no! The cages, Lestrade – look to the cages!" Sherlock sat with one hand holding his own phone, the other holding John's. After a moment of fruitless searching, Greg did indeed wander to the bank of sheet-draped cages. The first two were empty, but the monkey housed within the third managed to make Greg startle. John might've laughed, but decided it wasn't advisable – he could have very easily wound up in Greg's place had but a few small details changed. As Greg checked the fourth and final cage, Sherlock smiled and tipped back in his chair. He pulled the microphone for the intercom system into his lap, swung his feet up on the desk, and waited. On the screen, Greg suddenly became unaccountably nervous. The torch beam began to waver all over the lab.

"Finally," Sherlock breathed out. He hit a button on John's phone, then held it to the microphone of the intercom, switching it on with the pinky of his other hand.

A fierce growl emanated from the speakers on both the phone and the CCTV monitor.

Is it wrong of me to be really, really glad that Sherlock isn't using me for this experiment? John wondered.

Sherlock's phone began to ring again, and again, the consulting detective ignored it. More growls echoed through the intercom, accompanied by the sound of claws clicking on tile.

John could see that Greg was beginning to panic. The DI tried the card-reader at the nearest door, only to receive 'access denied' again. The recording Sherlock was using let out a vicious snarl and Greg jumped.

As Greg rushed back to the cages, tucking himself into one of the empty ones, Sherlock hit 'send' on
his mobile with his thumb. The faint, tinny sound of Lestrade's ringtone sounded from the monitor. A moment later, Greg's voice came from Sherlock's phone. He was speaking quietly enough that the CCTV mics couldn't pick up on it. "There's something in here," he said.

"Where are you?" Sherlock asked, all business.

"Get me the hell outta here, Sherlock," Greg replied. "You know damn well where I am – first floor down in the main elevator. Exactly where you fucking sent me, you bastard." It was a measure of how unsettled Greg felt, how much his language had degraded. Under the relatively normal stresses of his job, John had noticed that the DI didn't tend to swear much or often. 'Hell' and 'damn' were usually about as salty as he got. "Now get me the fuck outta here." Sherlock hit 'mute' on his phone and held John's next to the intercom mic. Another vicious growl came from John's phone, and immediately thereafter, an odd sort of strangled squeaking noise emanated from Sherlock's. Sherlock smirked and hit a quick succession of buttons on John's mobile while simultaneously unmuting his own.

"Alright," he said. "Keep talking – I'll find you."

"Are you out of your bloody mind? It'll hear me."

Sherlock stood and motioned for John to follow him. "Keep talking," he insisted. "What are you seeing?"

"Seeing?" Greg echoed. "Not seeing a fucking thing, Sherlock. But I can hear it."

The discussion – *if you can really call it that* – continued between Greg and Sherlock as John followed his flatmate to the elevator and down to the BSL-1 lab. Halfway down, Sherlock took his phone off of 'speaker' and held it to his ear. He sent a series of texts from John's phone while encouraging Lestrade to describe what he was seeing. By the time the elevator reached the lab, someone – probably the same poor grad student from earlier – had taken up the task of playing that stupid recording over the intercom.

Sherlock sent one last text as they crossed the lab. They were now close enough to Greg that John could actually hear him. "I can see it," he was whispering fiercely. "It's here."

Sherlock returned John's phone, then tucked his own against his shoulder. He looked up at the CCTV camera, raised his arm, and grabbed the corner of the sheet covering the cage in which Greg was hiding. He gestured to the camera as he flipped the sheet back, and his unnamed accomplice turned on the lab's lights at the same moment. "Still in one piece, I see, Inspector."

Greg glared at Sherlock and tucked his phone back into his pocket. "Gimme one damn good reason why I shouldn't black your eye right this moment," he growled, levering himself out of the cage. "'Oh, I've got to check in with the head of security – I'll catch up in a moment,'" Greg mockingly repeated Sherlock's instructions on reaching Baskerville. "'Nothing to worry about – just check the main lab, we'll all go through the sub-labs together'," he continued, then switched over to his own, very angry, tone. "Damn you, you asshole! 'Nothing to worry about' my aunt's hat! Giant, glowing, man-eating dogs! Where the hell'd it go?" Greg looked around, finally noticing that the lab was mostly empty, save for the angry little rhesus in the third cage.

"Calm down, Lestrade. I need you to focus – what, exactly, did you see?"

"I told you!" Greg yelled, "Giant, glowing, man-eating dog!"

One of Sherlock's eyebrows twitched upwards. A slow smile spread across his face. "I was right."
"Oh, that's just bloody marvelous! You were right! Fantastic. What were you right about this time, you damn nuisance?"

"You have been drugged. You, me, Henry Knight – we have all been drugged," Sherlock explained, though it didn't escape John’s notice that he didn't really explain at all. "Come," the brunette barked. "It's time to lay this ghost." Sherlock's Belstaff flared out behind him as he strode towards the pair of double-doors that led deeper into the BSL-1 laboratory maze.

An hour later and the three of them were settled in Dr. Stapleton's lab. Sherlock was availing himself of the various bits of equipment, specifically the microscopes and spectrometer. Greg and John were seated at a table on the other side of the room, and Dr. Stapleton herself leaned against one of the worktops nearby.

Once Sherlock was obviously entangled with his self-appointed task, and Stapleton had reassured herself that the madman actually knew what he was doing, she turned her attention to the other two men. "Are you alright?" she asked, aiming the question at both of them.


She gestured to his hands. "Might I ask…?"


"Can't be easy," she replied.

John blinked at her. "What can't?"

"The cane," she clarified. "Must hurt."

"Nothing to be done about it. I'm already taking something for my knee. It takes the edge off."

"Does it contain paracetamol?"

"Why?" John asked. Greg stifled a yawn and shifted to a somewhat more comfortable position. *He looks like he's about to pass out, John thought. Of course, if he was still at work this morning when I called, it's likely been at least a full twenty-four since he's last had any sleep.*

"We've got a pretty decent topical medication for burns. It's going to be released to the public this November. Proven to speed healing by close to eighty percent and reduce scarring by ninety percent." Stapleton turned and rummaged in a cabinet for a moment. "But it contains a hefty dose of topical paracetamol. Wouldn't want to use it if you've already taken some – paracetamol can be rather hard on the liver."

"Yes, I know," John said. "I'm a medical doctor. And no, by the way. I'm taking forty-mil oxycodone on a twelve-hour rotation."

Stapleton winced at that. Locating what she was looking for, she closed the cabinet and turned around. In one hand, she held a small white tub with a plain label that simply read *Burn Fix Compound 27-A*, and a plastic first aid kit in the other. "Nasty stuff," she commented, the question she didn't ask lurked in her expression.

"Ongoing pain issue from some nerve damage in my knee," John explained, glancing at Greg. The DI had indeed fallen asleep, his head pillowed on his arms. John didn't envy the crick he was bound to have in his back on awakening, but didn't want to interrupt what was likely the man's first chance at a nap in god-only-knew-how-long. *It's likely a miracle he made it down here in one piece as it is –*
Stapleton’s curiosity faded away as she sat herself down on the remaining empty chair at the table. She opened the first aid kit and efficiently laid out the supplies she wanted: scissors, gauze – both pads and rolled, tape, and a few other items. Without looking, she snagged a pair of exam gloves from a box on the counter behind her, and pulled them on. "Here," she said, motioning for John to give her his hands. Despite her rather brusque way with words, she had a gentle touch. John barely felt the coldness of the steel scissors as she cut away the much-abused bandaging from his left hand and the remains of Sherlock's handkerchief from his right.

"Sorry," she said, keeping her voice low.

"No, don't worry – I've had worse, I assure you."

Once everything was removed, Stapleton gathered the soiled bandages and tape and disposed of them in a bio-waste bin. "You'll want to wash those," she said. "Use that sink," she pointed to the one in the opposite corner to where they were sitting. "And use the pink soap, not the green."

The reasoning behind the soap recommendation was clear by the labels on the bottles – the green one contained pumice. *Definitely not something I'd want to use on blisters.* Once he finished, he limped his way back to Stapleton, using his forearms and the counter in lieu of his cane. His left hand was better off than his right; fewer blisters had broken and, of course, was only burned on the palm. His right, however, would have made him wince even if it wasn't one of his own hands. Parts of it looked like undercooked pork, and the fleshy bit under his thumb resembled nothing so much as a bit of raw mince.

After reseating himself, Dr. Stapleton took his left hand and inspected it. "The salve will work best if we excise the covering of the blisters."

John frowned, but nodded. While Stapleton set to first draining the blisters, then cutting away the excess skin, he asked, "What else is in the salve?"

"Paracetamol, like I said, antimicrobials, vitamins A, D, and E, and extracellular matrix," she replied.

John nodded, suddenly understanding how it could reduce healing time and scarring by so drastic a percentage – extracellular matrix had a tendency to attract a body's own stem cells to the wound where it was applied, discouraging scar tissue from forming. "And you say this will be made public come autumn?"

Stapleton nodded. "Yes. Though how much it will cost remains to be seen. I suspect that prices will be rather low until its worth is proven in the public arena."

"Isn't that always the case?" The question was rhetorical. "Is it going to be prescription?"

Stapleton shook her head. "No need. There aren't many ways it could be abused, after all. Though clinical trials did indicate it needs to include a warning not to use it on fresh body modifications – some of our participants wound up needing to be compensated for tattoos which failed to 'take' due to the salve's interference."

John let out a quiet laugh. "I can see why they'd be upset. Tattoos aren't cheap."
Stapleton finished her minor surgery on his hand and opened the jar of salve. "You sound as though you speak from experience."

"Yeah," he agreed. "Was a present to myself on graduating medical school."

"May I ask what? And where?" The salve was cool, but didn't sting as she gently rubbed it into the tender new skin that had been under the blisters' protection.

"RAMC insignia, on my right bicep," John replied. "Joined the army a week after I was accepted to med school." He twitched as Stapleton accidentally pressed a shade too hard against one of the more sensitive spots along the heel of his hand. "What about you?"

She shook her head. "Just pierced ears. I never really understood why anyone would want to pierce anything else, nor what the appeal of tattooing could possibly be."

"I agree on the piercing thing, and as far as tattoos go, I could give you a list of excuses, but no real reasons."

Stapleton acknowledged his comment with a strange little head-bob that wasn't quite a nod. "Are you right or left handed?"

"Left," John replied.

She frowned. "Then I'll need to wrap both hands. It would be best if you could leave them exposed to the air, however. But if you're left-handed, then you'd simply be risking further injury. Likewise, to your right, because of the crutch." Stapleton unwrapped the paper from a packet of gauze pads and began bandaging the worst of the former blisters.

John nodded in agreement. "I'd planned to let them air out once I got back to London. Hopefully, that'll be in the next day or two." They fell silent for a short while, the only sounds those of Sherlock's science-ing, Greg's soft *whuff* snores, and the rustle of medical supplies. Eventually, John asked, "Do you know what they're going to call it? Come November's release, I mean."

"No idea," Stapleton replied. "I'm sure it will be thoroughly advertised, however."

"Will it contain the paracetamol? Or are they going to release versions both with and without it?"

"The last I heard, the plan was to release it with the painkiller, though in a rather reduced capacity than we use here in the lab." She taped the last trimmed piece of gauze into place and set to wrapping his hand in rolled gauze as an extra preventative measure.

John heard Sherlock let out an irritated huff behind him. Almost as though in reply, Greg let out a mumbled jumble of sounds that sounded suspiciously like 'duck, you daft bugger'. Stapleton finished with his left hand and gestured for his right. It received similar treatment, though fewer of the blisters had managed to survive intact.

Stapleton had just finished taping the last bit of bandage into place when Sherlock let out a furious, "It isn't there!" and threw a glass slide across the room to shatter into pieces against a bit of bare brickwork in the wall. "There's nothing there!" he growled, ignoring John's exclamatory curse and Greg's startling awake with a confused, bleary 'wha?'.

"What were you expecting to find?" Stapleton asked, collecting wrappers and disposing of them in a trashcan.

Sherlock ran his fingers through his hair while pacing in a short arc, the microscope he'd been using
serving as the midpoint. "A drug, of course. There has to be a drug. An hallucinogenic or a deliriant of some kind, but there's no trace of anything in the sugar."

"What?" Greg repeated, this time a bit more intelligibly. "Sugar?"

Sherlock barely glanced at Lestrade, but gave a brief nod nonetheless. "The sugar, yes," he said. "It's a simple process of elimination. I saw the hound – saw it as my imagination expected me to see it, as a genetically engineered monster. But I knew I couldn't believe the evidence of my own eyes. So, there were seven possible reasons for it – the most probable being narcotics. Henry Knight – he saw it, too. However John did not. John and I have partaken of precisely the same things since arriving in town," he paused for breath, and John suddenly realized that, apart from some coffee, tea, and water, he'd not had so much as a breath mint since arriving. Which means that Sherlock's had even less. John repressed the urge to sigh. One of these days, he's going to realize that, transport or not, he can't live on air alone. "The only difference in what he and I have eaten is that I take sugar in my coffee," Sherlock continued, unaware of John's inner thoughts. "I took a sample from Henry's kitchen." Sherlock glared at the microscope as though it had insulted him. "It's perfectly all right." His tone of voice shifted slightly and he ceased his pacing. "It has to be a drug, but how did it get into our systems? How?" he asked no one in particular and perched back on the stool in front of the microscope. "There has to be something," he muttered, closing his eyes. "Something... something buried deep..."

Ten minutes later, Stapleton was showing John and Greg to the main break room on sublevel two, while listening with rapt attention to John's explanation of just what a 'mind palace' entailed. Greg, still exhausted, followed them, grinning to himself at the mental image of an animated, cartoon Sherlock Holmes wandering around a Disney-style fairy princess castle – he blamed his daughter for the plethora of imagery from which he could draw for that type of imagining, but it was his son's fondness for Japanese cartoons that was to blame for the fact that the Sherlock in his imagination only held a passing, caricaturish resemblance to the detective.

The break room was far and above anything even remotely close to the rooms with which Greg had had experience in the past; it contained a ping-pong table, three pinball machines, a bank of vending machines along a wall shared by a fully-functional kitchen with two large refrigerators, several tables with four comfortable-looking chairs at each, and an arc of three overstuffed sofas surrounding an HDTV that sported two separate gaming consoles in addition to a Blu-ray DVD player. Greg flopped onto the nearest sofa with a grateful groan and a creak of the sofa's fake-leather upholstery. He was asleep in minutes.

John wished he could follow suit, but there were other things that needed doing. Not the least of which is actually attempting to eat something, regardless of the fact that food holds all the charm of a week-old corpse right now. God, I want to go home. London. Where I don't have to choke down chemicals in order to walk without feeling like my leg's going to explode...

The break room's coffee pot wound up with plenty of exercise over the next few hours, as Dr. Stapleton came and went. John busied himself with slowly eating a somewhat stale donut from the vending machines, channel-surfing on the TV, reading – and immediately forgetting the contents of – articles in the collection of newspapers scattered around the room, and finally giving up on attempting to be somewhat productive and playing solitaire with a deck of battered playing cards he'd located in one of the cupboards. It took him nearly an hour to realize the deck was missing the six of clubs. Giving up on the cards, he then spent the next hour reading through his spellbook, idly noting those spells he thought he might actually need by the end of the case.

When the oxycodone in his system began to fade, John took himself over to the cluster of couches and stretched out on the one next to where Lestrade softly snored. He watched the minute hand tick
around and around on his watch until it finally read five-thirty. John pulled the bottle of opiate from his pocket and stared at the single pill rattling forlornly within. His hands had started to itch; the deep-seated irritation of mending tissue telling him more than the distinct lack of pain that Dr. Stapleton's salve was working as advertised. He debated not taking that final pill, but the pain from his knee – his overworked, much-abused knee – was steadily getting worse. *I'm probably going to need that one spell before all is said and done here. Good thing I memorized it.*

A loud yawn interrupted him. "D'you think they'd notice if I took this home with me? It's more comfortable than my bed," Greg said, shattering John's blank assessment of his last remaining tablet of relief.

John let out a small chuckle. "Probably, but if you really wanna try…"

Greg echoed the laugh and shook his head. "Nah – won't fit in my car." He yawned again, then pushed himself into a sitting position and stretched, wincing when his shoulders and the top part of his spine crackled noisily. He scrubbed his palms across his face, then took a deep breath. "There still coffee?"

"Should be, yeah," John motioned to the industrial pot next to the sink. As Greg got up and helped himself, John fumbled the lid off the bottle and dry-swallowed the pill. *If we're going to be here much longer, I'm going to need to see if there's a chemist's nearby.* He tucked the empty bottle back into his pocket and hobbled after Greg.

They were just finishing up their coffees when Dr. Stapleton returned once more, Sherlock on her heels. "I've got it!" the consulting detective exclaimed, then proceeded to shepherd Greg, John, and Stapleton back to the elevator and up to the security office without any further explanation.

Once the four of them were settled within the office, Dr. Stapleton at one of the computer consoles, Sherlock paced the length of the room. "Project HOUND. Must have read about it and stored it away. An experiment at a CIA facility in Liberty, Indiana." He paused in his pacing and stood behind Stapleton. "H. O. U. N. D," he spelled out, looking over her shoulder. She typed on the keyboard, but the computer sounded a buzzing noise that was recognizably a 'denied access' alert even without needing to look at the screen.

"That's as far as my access goes, I'm afraid," Dr. Stapleton said, looking at Sherlock.

"There'd be an override," John supplied, stretching his injured leg and wishing that time-release oxycodone kicked in a little faster.

"I'd imagine so, but that'd be Major Barrymore's," Stapleton agreed.

Sherlock spun on his heel, almost bowling over Greg, as he hurried over to Barrymore's office. "Password, password, password," he muttered. Switching on the office lights, Sherlock flopped down on Barrymore's chair and peered around the room, his hands folded in front of his mouth. "He sat here when he thought it up." John didn't bother walking over to watch Sherlock's process – he'd seen it enough in his day to day life that he could have predicted exactly what Sherlock was doing, down to how his hair was arranged. Greg and Stapleton, however, hovered in the doorway.

"Describe him to me," Sherlock demanded of the scientist.

Stapleton shrugged. "You've seen him."

"But *describe* him."

Something in the tone must have clued Stapleton in on the fact that Sherlock was looking for
personality, not physical description with his order. Stapleton thought for a moment, then said, "He's a bloody martinet. A throw-back; the sort of man they'd have sent into Suez."


"Mid-eighties? Probably Falklands veteran," John replied, knowing his role in Sherlock's brainstorming routine with a level of familiarity only performers in long-running plays and musicals could sympathize with.

"Right," Sherlock said. "So Thatcher's looking a more likely bet than Churchill." He brushed past Greg and Stapleton and headed over to the computer Stapleton had abandoned.

"So that's the password?" Greg asked with a tone that revealed a dawning understanding of how it was that Sherlock managed to hack into the Met's files anytime he pleased.

Sherlock began to slowly, deliberately type on the keyboard, then paused and shook his head. "No," he said. "With a man like Major Barrymore, only first name terms would do." He hit backspace a few times and re-typed the password. He hit 'enter', and the computer let out a string of irritatingly cheerful tweets.

Using his cane to push against the floor, John rolled the chair he'd commandeered over next to Sherlock, nudging Greg back a step. An overview of Project H.O.U.N.D. dissolved onto the computer screen. John's eyes managed to latch onto several important phrases in the first few paragraphs: extreme suggestibility, fear and stimulus, conditioned terror, aerosol dispersal. Sherlock quickly scrolled down and a photograph of a group of thirteen scientists, all wearing the same sweatshirt showing a snarling wolf over the legend H.O.U.N.D. Liberty, In, appeared on-screen. The caption below named the five project leaders: Elaine Dyson, Mary Uslowski, Rick Nader, Jack O'Mara, and Leonard Hansen.

John's imagination latched on to the first letter of the last names and printed them on Scrabble tiles. It only took half a second for him to rearrange them into HOUND. He looked over at Stapleton, who was staring in stunned disbelief at the screen. "Hound," she whispered. John glanced over his shoulder and saw that Greg was frowning at the screen. John returned his attention to the computer. Sherlock had scrolled past the photo and now new phrases jumped out at John: paranoia, severe frontal lobe damage, breach of the blood-brain barrier, gross cranial trauma, dangerous acceleration, multiple homicide. Several were accompanied by equally-alarming photographs.

"Jesus," Greg whispered.

Sherlock ignored the sentiment and focused on scanning the file. "Project H.O.U.N.D. – a new deliriant drug which rendered its users incredibly suggestible. They wanted to use it as an antipersonnel weapon to totally disorient the enemy using fear and stimulus; but they shut it down and hid it away in 1986."

"Because of what it did to the subjects they tested it on," Stapleton said, though it was more than half-question.
"And what they did to others," Sherlock agreed, paging back to the horrifying photos. "Prolonged exposure drove them insane – made them almost uncontrollably aggressive."

"So someone's been doing it again – carrying on the experiments?" Greg asked.

Sherlock continued scrolling back through the file until he reached the group-shot of the scientists involved. "Attempting to refine it, perhaps, for the last twenty years."

"Who?" Stapleton asked, focusing on the photo. "Who would possibly want to do something like that?"

Sherlock clicked the photo to bring up a larger copy of it. "Five principal scientists, twenty years ago… Maybe our friend's somewhere in the back of the picture – someone who was old enough to be there at the time of the experiments in 1986, but…" he trailed off. "Maybe somebody who says 'cell phone' because of time spent in America." He looked to John. "You remember?"

John closed his eyes and nodded. "Dr. Frankland," he said. "He gave us his number in case we needed him."

"Bob? Bob Frankland?" Stapleton was obviously having a difficult time believing it. "But Bob doesn't even work on… I mean – he's a virologist. This was chemical warfare," she nodded to the screen.

"It's where he started, though, and he's never lost the certainty – the obsession – that the drug could really work," Sherlock said, retrieving his mobile and the card Frankland had given him the day before. "Let's arrange a little meeting." Sherlock abandoned the computer and focused on his phone.

Before he could connect his call to Frankland, John's own phone began to trill out the ringtone it used for numbers not listed in his contacts. Frowning at it, John hit the button to answer. "Hello?"

All he could hear was the sound of a woman crying. "Who's this?"

"You've got to find Henry," the woman said.

John blinked in recognition at her voice. "It's Louise Mortimer," he said to Sherlock. "Louise, what's wrong?"

"Henry was," she sniffled, "was remembering, then… He tried…” The hitching, crying breath interrupted for a moment before she could continue. "He's got a gun. He went for the gun and tried to…"

Adrenaline seeped into John's blood, pulling him to his feet and forgetting the pain in his knee.

"What, Louise?"

"He's gone," she said. "You've got to stop him. I don't know what he might do."

"Where are you?" John asked.

"His house – I'm okay. I'm okay."

"Right," John replied. "Stay there. We'll get someone to you, okay?"

"Yes," she said, then dissolved into tears again.

John hit 'end', then looked at Stapleton. "You know the Knight house?"

She nodded. "Bloody huge place on the edge of town, right? Just past the turn for the base?"
"Exactly. Get there, and quickly. Henry Knight's therapist is there. No injuries, I don't think, but I'm damn sure she could use a shoulder right about now."

"Henry?" Sherlock asked, causing John to shift his attention.

"He's attacked her and ran."

"There's only one place he'll go to – back to where it all started," Sherlock said, heading for the door. "Did you bring a gun, Lestrade?"

And then there was running, and Greg pushing his precious car hard enough that the display never once shifted out of blue backlighting – it always glowed green whenever John had ridden in it before. Greg parked her with what would have been a screech of tires had they been on pavement and not the graveled track that lead to the borders of the forested area surrounding the Hollow. "Go on, I'll catch up!" John insisted when Greg paused just long enough to look at John climbing out of the car's back seat. Greg nodded and took off at a run, easily catching up with Sherlock.

Working quickly, John used the Insight's bonnet as a makeshift table as he dug into his satchel. He withdrew the chunk of obsidian he carried, and retrieved his penknife from his pocket. With another flake chipped off the stone, he returned it to its place and the knife to his pocket. It was a matter of moments before he'd re-opened the cut on his arm from that morning. He collected the droplets of blood on the obsidian shard's edge, then took a deep breath to center himself. When he'd told Sherlock that a mage was incapable of healing themselves, it hadn't been entirely true – there was one healing-class spell which a mage could use on themselves. It didn't actually heal anything, however. All it did was defer the pain to a later point in time. "And when it comes back, there isn't any chemical compound in any chemist's shop the world over that can touch it," he muttered. "Do I really need to do this?"

Distantly, faintly, he heard Sherlock shout, "No, Henry! No!"

"I'll take that as a yes," he mumbled, then reached for his inner well of magic. He cleared his throat, then recited, "Dolor retrasado es el dolor multiplicado por tres. Admito de buen grado y con agrado el precio. Por mi sangre, que así sea. Por mis palabras, que así sea. Por mi voluntad, que así sea."

With a flash of yellow mage-fire, the blood disappeared from the obsidian. Half a heartbeat later, the pains in his knee and hands and the strain in his back and shoulders evaporated. Tossing the now-useless piece of volcanic glass into the underbrush, he sprinted in the direction Sherlock and Greg had gone.

Skidding to a halt on the rim of the Hollow itself, John grabbed a tree to keep from pitching off the edge. He had arrived in time to hear Sherlock say, "Yes, I'm sure you do, Henry. It's all been explained to you, hasn't it? Explained very carefully." Though the words were said in a very soothing manner John hadn't been aware Sherlock knew how to employ, there was an undertone in his friend's voice that hinted at stress.

Looking down into the Hollow, John had a very clear view of Greg and Sherlock standing a few feet from a distraught Henry. A distraught Henry who was aiming a chromed handgun in their direction. "Shit," John muttered and slipped and slid his way down the steep, muddy cliffside, ignoring his ever-present vertigo of high places as he did so.

Sherlock's words seemed to get through to Henry, for he lowered the gun while John was descending the cliff, and asked, "What?" in a small, confused voice.

"Someone needed to keep you quiet, needed to keep you as a child to reassert the dream you'd both
clung to," Sherlock said, still using that soothing tone. "Because you had started to remember." He
took a couple of steps towards Henry, holding one hand out in a placating gesture. "Remember now,
Henry. You've got to remember what happened here when you were a little boy."

Henry took a shaky breath and raised the gun again, but to John's relief, it was aimed several feet off
to the right, ensuring that if Henry accidentally pulled the trigger, the worst it would do was dig a
hole in the dirt. "I thought," he stumbled over the words. "I thought it had got my dad." A thickness
choked the last word, revealing that Henry was all but a hairsbreadth from crying. "I thought…"
Henry's aura – shades of palest pink and grey – whirled around him, then surged, before contracting
against his skin. "Oh, jeh – Jesus! I don't know! I don't know any more!" he shouted, then curled
himself over his gun, sobbing.

Greg lurched forwards. "No, Henry! Henry, for God's sake!"

Sherlock took another step in Henry's direction, his voice still soothing, but also taking on an edge of
absolute certainty, "Henry, remember. 'Liberty, In'. Two words. Two words a frightened little boy
saw here twenty years ago." The certainty did more for Henry than the soothing tones had done; his
aura began to relax somewhat and the hitches in his breath began to calm. "You'd started to piece
things together, to remember what really happened here that night. It wasn't an animal, was it,
Henry?"

The sound of gunmetal clinking against tooth enamel was disproportionately loud as Henry removed
the muzzle of the gun from his mouth. John saw his aura relax a fraction more as he straightened up
and looked questioningly at Sherlock. Sherlock nodded minutely. "Not a monster," he said. "A
man." Henry's aura flared back to its normal position, accompanied by a surge of the scent of cocoa
butter, then the scent faded from John's awareness as Henry's aura began to twitch. "You couldn't
cope," Sherlock continued. "You were just a child, so you rationalized it into something very
different. But then you started to remember, so you had to be stopped – driven out of your mind so
that no one would believe a word that you said."

Greg slowly stepped close to Henry. "It's okay, mate. Give us the gun." Henry surrendered his
weapon; John was nearly certain that he didn't even realize he'd let go of it.

"But we saw it. The hound. Last night," Henry said, his voice still laced through with confusion.
"We – we – we did. We saw –"

Sherlock nodded. "Yes. But there was a dog, Henry. Leaving footprints, scaring the tourists, but it
was nothing more than an ordinary dog. We both saw it, yes. Saw it as our drugged minds wanted us
to see it. Fear and stimulus – that's how it works." Henry blinked at him. "But there never was any
monster."

An extremely close, loud howl rent the air, as though in direct opposition to Sherlock's reassuring
words. Everyone immediately shot startled and fearful looks in the direction from which it had
emanated. Out of the corner of his eye, John saw Henry's aura flatten back to defeated terror, while
Greg let out a shocked noise and instinctively raised Henry's gun to the rim of the gulley. While
Henry let out a panicked string of denials, John – reacting to the rudimentary emotion flowing from
the dog – launched himself at Greg. "No!" he shouted, grabbing the gun and wrenching it to point
uselessly at the ground.

"Are you out of your bloody mind!" Greg yelled, competing with the dog's growling in order to be
heard.

Henry had collapsed to his knees, still repeating a litany of 'no, no, no' while Sherlock unsuccessfully
attempted to get him to calm down and actually look at the dog.
The snarling canine was picking its way down the same slope John had so recently conquered himself. But though its body language was aggressive, John had no trouble sensing other things swirling in its mind. First and foremost was fear; the thick, cloying taste of ammonia left little room for misinterpretation. Wrapping it was the cold, bitter desolation of being utterly, utterly alone – an emotion John himself recalled in all-too-familiar vividness from those days between settling into his bland little bedsit and meeting Sherlock. And on the surface was one last primary emotion – the sharp, bright knife's edge of hunger.

"Don't shoot the dog," John ordered in his best Captain Watson voice, then let go of Greg's wrist and spun around in time to see the dog – a larger-than-normal Chocolate Lab – quivering in preparation to leap towards Sherlock and Henry. Still using his magic-infused voice, John jumped into the dog's path and shouted, "Down!"

The dog let out a confused whine and nearly concussed itself on a rock to pull its leap short of the target. John sent a tendril of his magic out and sank it into the dog's monochrome aura, smoothing out the spikes of fear and pushing a sense of not alone into its confused mind. Unfortunately, John couldn't do a damn thing about its hunger – Not yet, at any rate. "It's okay," John said, still using Captain Watson. "It's okay." He walked over to the dog and held his hand out. The dog let out another whine and licked his wrist, just above the bandages covering his burns. "See? I'm not a bad guy," he said, then knelt on the damp leaves. In a slightly louder voice, he called over his shoulder to Henry, "It's just a dog, Henry. Just a dog. Come see for yourself."

The Captain Watson order cut through Henry's panic like a hot blade through ice cream. His repetitions of 'no' cut off as though someone had flicked a switch. Hesitantly, Henry got to his feet and stumbled over to where John was stroking the dog behind its ears. Unseen by Henry, John was also suppressing the dog's fight-or-flight response; John's own aura had completely cocooned the less-developed aura of the dog. As a result, the dog itself had calmed significantly, and was even wagging its tail, sweeping leaves and bits of rotting vegetation clear of the stone-choked soil directly behind it.

"Just a… dog," Henry's voice was packed with childlike wonder. "A big, black dog." Carefully, Henry approached the dog and held out his own hand. The dog sniffed it, then licked the side of John's face.

"Alright, you, down," John laughingly said, wrestling the dog off of him.

The pleasant little interlude was then interrupted by Sherlock's voice from the other side of the Hollow. "It's not you – you're not here!"

Alarmed by the horror in his voice, John leapt to his feet, the dog coming to heel just behind him. On the other side of the little ravine, Sherlock had grabbed a hold of a man wearing a gas-mask – one
with red-tinted eye holes – and was wrestling with him. Lestrade moved around the edge of their grapple, looking for a place to jump in and help. Sherlock adjusted his grip and managed to knock the man's mask off, causing him to back away, holding his shirtsleeve over his nose and mouth. It was Bob Frankland.

Sherlock immediately calmed and straightened up. "The fog!" he cried.

"What?" Greg said.


The dog, still wrapped in John's aura, growled threateningly at Frankland; reacting to John's own loathing of the man. Frankland startled and nearly tripped over a fallen log. "For God's sake! Kill the blasted thing!"

Henry looked from the dog – bristling with anger at John's side, but not moving an inch – to the man who had once called his father 'friend'. "No," Henry said, though it was obvious that this time the word wasn't a denial of events, but a direct reply to Frankland's command. "It's just a dog," he growled, stepping closer to Frankland.

John saw Henry's aura finally spin back into its usual cloud, then begin to swirl madly around him. Henry's temper had finally reached its breaking point. "You. Utter. Bastard." The words were ground out through gritted teeth. Henry tensed, then leapt upon Frankland. "Twenty years!" he shouted, pummeling the scientist. "Twenty years of my life making no sense! Why didn't you just kill me and have done with it?!"

Greg quickly moved over and pulled the flailing knees'n'elbows of Henry Knight off of the crouching scientist, but it was Sherlock who answered Henry's question. "Because dead men get listened to, Henry. He needed to do more than kill you – he had to discredit every word you ever said about your father. And he had the means right at his feet. A chemical minefield," he gestured to the ground, shrouded in a thick layer of fog. "Pressure pads in the ground dosing you every time you came back here," he said, then grinned. "Murder weapon and scene of the crime all at once," he let out a delighted little laugh. "Oh, this case, Henry! Thank you! It's been brilliant!"

John sighed. "Sherlock!" he reprimanded. As his friend looked at him in slight befuddlement, he clarified, "Timing."

Sherlock cocked his head slightly. "Not good?"

Henry interrupted the aside, "No. It's fine." He glanced from John to Sherlock. "Because this means," he said, looking to Frankland, "this means that my dad was right." He took two steps towards the scientist, but Greg's hand on his shoulder kept him from getting any closer. "He found something out, didn't he? And that's why you killed him – because he was right and he'd found you in the middle of an experiment," he spat the last word with a level of disgust that John typically reserved for finding electric-orange slime in his yogurt.

"Henry," Greg said. "Come on, mate – calm down. We've got him now. I'll speak with the local force, have them reopen your dad's file." Henry ripped his gaze from Frankland to level a questioning look at Greg. "Oh, sorry – we've not been properly introduced. Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade, Scotland Yard, London." He let go of Henry's shoulder and offered his hand.

A slow smile crossed Henry's face as he shook it. "Pleasure," he said.
"Frankland!" Sherlock shouted, ripping attention back to him and the scientist. The scientist had taken the momentary interruption to make an attempt to escape. Sherlock dashed after him, branches breaking in the undergrowth.

Greg shouted Sherlock's name and took off after them, with Henry on his heels. "No!" Henry yelled. "He can't get away now!"

John just rolled his eyes and slowly began picking his way across the uneven terrain. "Where do they think he's gonna go?" he aimed the question at the dog. "It's not like we can't find him." The dog let out a little yip of agreement and followed John.

A loud explosion had John reflexively ducking for cover a couple of moments later. The dog whined and tried to bury its head in John's jacket. John climbed to his feet, brushed bits of leaves off of himself, and headed towards the flickering glow of fire. He caught up with Henry, Greg, and Sherlock at the barbed wire fence that surrounded the more traditional minefield that encircled Baskerville. Even without having to ask, it was fairly obvious what had happened – Frankland had, either by accident or on purpose, triggered one of the landmines.

John fought his memories back – memories of blood and death and missing limbs – and dug into his pocket for the post-it from Barrymore. He handed it to Sherlock, then spent the next twenty minutes in doctor mode, making sure that everyone was alright, while violently repressing the urge to traipse across the minefield to see if Frankland had managed to survive.

Eventually, Barrymore arrived, along with twenty other soldiers. Most of the soldiers immediately set to work, hooking up floodlights and working with metal detectors to go into the minefield to retrieve Frankland's body. The major himself settled in front of the cluster of John, Greg, Henry, and Sherlock. It took nearly an hour for the four of them to explain what had happened; during which time it came to light that Greg had most likely been exposed to the drug by means of a leaky pipe back in the BSL-1 labs. Barrymore's only response was a brief look of sudden understanding, and a terse, "I will ensure the matter is addressed."

Eventually, the major released them.

Back at the Cross Keys Inn, Sherlock immediately excused himself to the room John had secured for them while Greg went about getting himself accommodations for the night. The spell John had placed earlier in the evening was still going strong, however, and so he decided not to waste his temporary reprieve. He hiked out into the night. Grimpen didn't have much in the way of stores available, but there was a small petrol station still open. He popped in and purchased a one-kilo bag of dog food, then headed for the center of the Grimpen cemetery. Though the avatar hadn't returned to plague him, he didn't want to be easily accessible when it finally decided to return.

The dog – as it had been doing all evening – followed at John's heels, waiting patiently by the door when he'd ducked into the store. Once John was seated on the war memorial's steps, he ripped the bag of kibble open and sat it down. The dog barked happily, then set to inhaling the food at a rate which made John feel guilty for not having been able to feed it earlier.

A quick inspection revealed that the dog – most likely a Labrador/St. Bernard cross – was male, and had, at one time, been someone's pet. He'd already been fixed, and there was a faint thinning of the fur around its neck where a collar had once been worn. "I don't know if I'll be able to keep you," John said, lightly scritching the dog's ears. "I don't know if Mrs. Hudson will let us have any pets."

The dog just grinned at him and thumped his foot with his wagging tail.

"Yeah – I suppose you have a point," John replied. He got out his phone and hit 'send' after scrolling
to the right number. It rang twice before someone answered. "Evening, Mrs. H. How're you doing?"

"Oh, fine as ever," she replied. "Sherlock behaving himself?"

John chuckled. "Much as he ever does. We've wrapped up this case and should be back home sometime tomorrow, probably just before noon."

"That's good to hear. It's too quiet when the both of you are gone."

"Listen, I had a question for you."

"Yes?" Mrs. Hudson was curious.

"How do you feel about pets? Specifically, dogs?"

She let out a delighted laugh. "I love animals, John. But do you think it wise to keep one, what with Sherlock…?"

John had to admit she had a point, but one look at the dog's chocolatey eyes, sparkling happily in the faint light from the streetlamps, had him firming his resolve. "I know, but I don't think Sherlock will be the problem. Only real issue I can foresee at this juncture is the sheer amount of kibble he's gonna go through."

The dog seemed to know that John was talking about him and let out a puppylike bark.

"Oh, is that him, then?" Mrs. Hudson asked, a little bit of enthusiastic happiness coloring her words.


"I'm sure I will," Mrs. Hudson replied. "So, I'll be seeing you tomorrow, then?"

"Pretty sure. I'll call if that changes."

"See that you do – I'll make scones."

A couple of minutes later, they bid each other good night, and John returned the phone to his pocket. He focused his attention on the dog. All of the fear and hunger and loneliness of earlier had bled out of his aura and was now sleepily content. The dog jumped up onto the stair beside John and laid his head in John's lap. A soft wuff had John resuming his interrupted petting. Less than twenty minutes later, the dog's paws began twitching as he chased dreamtime rabbits and squirrels.

Even knowing that, once his spell wore off, he was going to be in agony; even knowing that Frankland would never stand trial for torturing Henry; even knowing that the next day was going to be excruciatingly long; John was content. He was still curious as to why Grimpen's leyline hated him, but since it wasn't actively bugging him at the moment, he pushed aside thoughts on it, promising himself to ask Ajay when they returned to London.

He looked up at the star-spattered sky, idly adjusting where he'd stuck his cane through a beltloop, and let out a long breath. It's beautiful out here. He glanced down at his injured knee. Beautiful, yes, but I don't care if Sherlock manages to score himself a solid ten on his weird-o-meter – I am never leaving London ever again.

Chapter End Notes
Sorry about the lateness of this chapter, but I landed a paid editing gig for a fantasy manuscript, and pay takes precedence over pleasure (as I'm sure y'all are aware).

The book John is reading in the beginning of this chapter is *Inside of a Dog: What Dogs See, Smell, and Know* by Alexandra Horowitz. The excerpt was provided by Amazon’s ‘look inside’ feature.

I also know that the structuring for schooling in the UK is very different to that here in the US, however I meant what I said about the bit where I mention flashback! John was between his junior and senior years – my headcanon has it that he attended to his undergrad studies in the US (and I even know which school he snagged a full ride to, too, but I'm not going to say – I'm still hopeful that bit will find a way to present itself in-story); so, during that teeny flashback, John was enjoying the last of his summer break between his third and fourth years of college. Of course, I'm going to keep him having gone to medical school at St. Bart’s, otherwise I'd need to rewrite rather a lot of what I've already posted, and that's just not something I'm willing to do right now.

And while writing this, I rather had dog-puns on the brain, so I noticed something I'd not really registered before – has anyone else noticed how *punny* it is that Sherlock and John wind up with a Land Rover? Just thought I'd point it out.

The bits that John used in his bath have both magical and medicinal properties. Arnica is commonly used medicinally to treat strained muscles, and magically it’s believed to enhance psychic gifts. Comfrey is one of the best topical remedies I know of for bruises and swellings (and has been used for millennia under the folk-name of ‘boneset’), and it’s magical uses include warding off thieves. Lavender’s relaxation properties are likewise not a matter of superstition, but are scientifically-backed; it’s a potent relaxation aid and a very effective anti-inflammatory. Magically, it’s not as relevant (and why John said what he did about ‘hope springs eternal’) – it’s used quite a bit in aphrodisiacs and love potions. Just so y’all know, of course.

Extracellular matrix is one of natures little miracles. It’s seriously awesome stuff. Go do a little research and see why!

All Pashto phrases are taken from nawcom.com/swearing/pashto.htm. Any other language’s phrases are courtesy Google Translate and any other appropriate aspects of Google.

1.) Salaam – ‘hi’ in Dari. Ismee – ‘my name is’ in Arabic. Nemidanam – ‘I don’t know’ in Farsi. Usted tiene cualquiera – ‘you have any’ in Spanish. Amem – ‘I would love’ in Latin. Lionn – Scottish Gaelic for ‘beer’. (I've actually uttered sentences like this, only using words from Spanish, Russian, Japanese, German, and English – and, depending on how drunk I am at the time, parts have been known to be signed in ASL, too. Drives everyone I know nuts, and me, too, because I rarely notice when I've done it until I get the blank stares and the ‘WTFs’ from whomever I'm around at the time.)
2.) Daga me ra wazbaisha – Pashto for ‘suck my dick’.
3.) Da spi zo – Pashto for ‘son of a bitch’.
4.) Siksaka – Hindi for ‘teacher’.
5.) Spee bachee – Pashto for ‘son of a bitching’.
6.) Da spi zo – Pashto for ‘son of a bitch’.
7.) Dolor retrasado es el dolor multiplicado por tres. Admito de buen grado y con agrad
el precio. Por mi sangre, que así sea. Por mis palabras, que así sea. Por mi voluntad, que así sea. – Spanish for ‘Pain delayed is pain multiplied by three. I willingly accept and welcome the price. By my blood, so be it. By my words, so be it. By my will, so be it.’

(And in something completely unrelated – I spend a lot of free time over at notdoppler.com, playing either Earn to Die or Feed Us (1-5). I've found the perfect example of irony: In Feed Us 3, in order to beat the game, you have to kill the sea monster (which is hard to do, as you might imagine). I figured out the trick to it, but the last time I played, I killed the sea monster, only to almost immediately get eaten by a shark – yet I still ‘won’, because I completed the level’s objective. So far, no irony. I know, I'm getting to that bit. The irony comes in with the splash page that shows on completing that level: Congrats, you are now top of the food chain. Even though I was just eaten by a shark.)

Please remember to let me know your thoughts on this AU. Thanks in advance.

Until next time folks!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!