Sacre Coeur

by Mamaorion

Summary

“Please, John. Please come back.”

“M’right here, Sherlock,” he mutters frowning, confused.

Slipping into darkness, John is vaguely aware that Sherlock’s lightly rocking him back and forth.

“Fight it, John.” His whisper is fierce and choked. “Come back to me.”

In this s4 fixit, John must piece together the gaps in his altered memory if he and Sherlock are to face the terror that has plagued Sherlock since childhood. As they untangle the web, seven years of hidden love ignite.

((Complete))
Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
John startles awake with a gasp. He peers into the dark.

*Wet and cold. In... water?*

His hands slide across algae-slick stone – an instinctive revulsion surges him upward, only to stumble and pitch forward into the shallow pool. Something is tugging at his leg, holding him back. For a brief moment, every horror movie fear skitters through his mind.

Spluttering, John twists around and gropes through the dark water. A tight metal cuff is sealed around his ankle with a heavy padlock, connected to an arm's length of rusty chain bolted to the floor.

Standing more carefully this time, John rubs his hands onto his sodden jacket, eyes adjusting to the gloom. Rough fieldstone walls curve around him, mossy and slick with moisture. His eyes follow the walls up, up into darkness.


“Christ,” he whispers. “It's a damn well.” As John takes a step toward the wall, the water sloshes around his calves. It’s gotten deeper since he woke.

“Sherlock? Sherlock!”

His shouts bounce around the stone walls. He pauses. How loud does his voice need to be to carry? Craning to hear an answer from above, John's hands fly to his coat pocket for his mobile. He thumbs at the screen - perhaps there’s a shred of reception. Nothing happens. He groans. The phone's been submerged for as long as he's been out cold. Shoving the lifeless device back into his pocket, a sudden bone-deep shiver passes through him.

“Buried alive, eh?” He turns the fear into more yelling.

Several minutes later, he stills. The echoes reverberate into silence. The water has risen almost to his knees.

“Who are you!” he screams toward the opening. “Get me out of here you sick, sodding bastard!” His thoughts race, but it’s all coming back in disconnected shards of memory that make no sense. Sherlock holding a baby… Mrs. Hudson in a… sports car? A mad genius sister running them through horrific trials…

So that’s it. He’s been drugged, on one of the... mad sister’s whims. Eris...Eros? What was her name and why is it slipping away from him? Might be the drug. He scrubs his face wishing he could sort fact from dream. Someone’s clearly dumped him here to terrify Sherlock into a frenzy of deduction. And he can’t do a thing to help him.
Tight-lipped, he channels his frustration toward the chain, kicking his leg hard, testing the strength of the rusty metal. He bites back a grunt as the length painfully chokes his kick mid-swing. He kicks again, then again, splashing water violently, hoping to loosen the bolts.

“Going to have a beauty of a bruise tomorrow,” he growls.

Panting, he kneels and orders himself to breathe slowly, sliding his fingers blindly along the links, cuff and bolts, feeling for any weakness. The metal is solid. He huffs, standing, pushing his freezing hands into his armpits and shaking his head.

“Honestly, Sherlock, who puts a bloody chain at the bottom of a well?” His hoarse voice echoes unnervingly. “Rusty enough to have been here awhile. This your sister’s idea of being welcomed into the family?” He’s dimly aware that he’s speaking to Sherlock. It steadies him.

“Guess we won’t invite her round for Christmas.” The well bounces his dry, mirthless laugh back to him. It’s a little like laughing with someone else.

As if Sherlock has just mentioned it, an idea occurs to him.

“Good thinking, that.” He plunges his stiff hands to the well floor, the slime of algae making him shudder. In this position, the water reaches his throat. He strains to keep his face above it.

The pads of John’s fingers grope in slow, concentric circles for anything he could use to loosen the bolts. The water is over his chin when a surprised little “Oh” bursts from him with a bubble of hope as his hand bumps into something on its slow path across the ground.

“Well then, what’s this—” The bubble pops as he closes his fingers, thick and clumsy, around his find. It’s thin, and even with the coating of algae, sickeningly familiar.

Pulling it close to his face to inspect it in the gloom, his eyes confirm what his hands knew – a bone, a femur, small enough to be a child’s, and it’s been here for ages. His hands dive back into the murky water searching along the floor until he comes across three more bones, then five, ribs and legs, a clavicle, and then the smooth dome of a small cranium. Pulling it from the water, he stares at the slick little skull in his shaking hands, then lunges to his feet, staggering in the rising water.

“Sherlock! Get me out of here!” His voice pitches high, cracks as the skull drops from his fingers into the water which is now just below his waist, the cold of it biting into his legs and wracking his body with shivers. He wraps his arms around himself and paces in the small circle the chain allows. This lunatic may have more than short-term suffering in mind for him.

“Think, damn you, just sod it and think. The water is rising, so it must be coming from somewhere in the floor I can't reach.” He sighs wearily. “Unless I dunk.” The thought is troubling. He’s already chilled. Completely submerging will drop his body temperature further. He steels himself.

“If I don’t do it now, it’ll soon be over my head anyway.” He pulls in a sharp breath, squeezes his eyes shut, and plunges under the surface.

Even with his heavy, sodden clothes, he’s too buoyant. It’s hard to keep himself parallel to the floor. With some twisting and bobbing, John makes a circuitous search of the wall in total blackness, the dull thud of water in his ears, his heartbeat drumming in his throat. His burning lungs send him up for a breath. Down again.

Bubbles gush from his mouth as his fingers suddenly bump into a short pipe that’s indeed set into the wall just above the floor. He can feel the force of the water surging out of it. Pushing back to the
surface, he feels a small triumph: it’s narrow enough to block. When he stands, the water is up to his ribs.

Reluctantly, he peels off his jacket, jumper and shirt, cold fingers fumbling at the buttons, then struggles back into the sodden jumper. The cold, wet wool makes his skin crawl, but his mum’s voice comes to him across the years from some Lake District camping trip. *Wet wool keeps in warmth, but wet cotton will kill you.* Wet cotton is really the least of his worries at the moment, but if he can delay hypothermia a few minutes with wool against his skin, he’ll take it. Sherlock would know, he’s probably written a thesis on the insulating properties of over 200 forms of plant and animal fibers. The thought squeezes his heart. He glances up at the opening of the well, but finds it unchanged.

He dives back under the water. After some frantic groping, he finds the pipe again. With only his sense of touch, he jams the balled-up shirt into the opening with stiff fingers, staunching it briefly. The force of the flow pushes it back into his hands. With a silent curse, he surfaces for breath.

The water has crept up to his chest. A horrible thought occurs to him: the water would have been over the child’s head by now. He swallows very hard, suddenly overwhelmed with grief for this small person who endured such torment. At the same time, Sherlock’s grim, detached voice in his mind directs him to the obvious solution. John’s heart sinks. He needs to take several ragged breaths before he can submerge again.

On his next dive, he finds the femur, the thin ulna, a rib. He uses the bones to wedge the shirt deeper into the pipe, then his jacket. Surfacing for a fast breath, he returns to the pipe, relief surging through him to find the dam still wedged into place, the flow nearly stopped. He pops to the surface like a cork and gives a weak whoop of triumph.

The water is nearly at his shoulders. To get the blood moving in his cold limbs, he treads as much as the chain will allow. After a few minutes, he feels certain that the water level has not perceptibly changed.

Half treading, half bouncing, he yell himself hoarse calling to Sherlock, Mycroft, Lestrade, Harry, Moriarty, anyone. He’s met with the echoes of his voice ricocheting around the walls of the well. John cranes his neck up, trying to see into the darkness. He gasps as he sees a light – he yells out thinking it’s a flashlight – but the light is fixed, the thin point of a crescent moon rising high enough in the night sky to be glimpsed from down in the well. He slaps the surface of the water with frustration.

As the minutes grow long, he begins to feel panicky with nothing concrete to do, and dives down to check his dam. The force of the water has dislodged it and he keeps himself occupied trying to reinforce it with his grisly materials in the freezing darkness. But even with his treading, the cold of the water has sunk into his muscles and moving is becoming difficult, exhaustion pulling at him.

“Bloody hell,” his whispers. “Sherlock, where are you?”

…

The dam holds, but enough seeps through that by the time the moon is beginning to disappear behind the opposite edge of the well, the water is at his chin when he treads, over his head when he stands. The heavy chain tugs him down and his limbs feel leaden. *Rest,* says the practical voice in his head,
which sounds like Sherlock but uses his own medical knowledge. Get your breath back. John obeys, let’s himself sink, pushes at the floor, breaks the surface, sucks in air, submerges.

Inner Sherlock lists out the symptoms of hypothermia he should be watching for. He’s still shivering violently, which is good, but the exhaustion and clumsiness are bad. He doesn’t have Sherlock’s powers of deduction to know the temperature of the water, or gauge how long he’s been in it by how quickly it’s risen or how much the moon has moved. Realizing his thoughts are getting fuzzy, he doubles up his treading efforts, thinking forcibly of people he should be trying to stay alive for.

Mary, certainly. But he frowns. He’s pictured her in her wedding dress, but the image blurs and she’s decked out in tight black leather like a villain from a Bond movie brandishing a gun. With the strange image comes a surge of fierce anger he cannot identify. He shakes his head, bewildered. Thinking of Mary makes him realize—

The baby. That tiny bundle of cells nestled in its mother’s womb, a ribbon of existence unspooling from its incredible potential, yet so small, utterly out of his reach. He craves that potential desperately. Sherlock’s practical voice in his head is incredulous at how much he can grieve the idea of a child, telling him bluntly it’s his human defect, and again he feels a wave of rage. John roars as his head breaks the surface, kicking vainly against the chain.

Sherlock. The memory of him flies up unbidden: pale, unconscious and intubated in the hospital, bandages on his chest. John afraid to touch him, talking to him, head bowed, confessing everything when he knew Sherlock couldn’t even hear him.

The wave of sorrow that hits John threatens to suck all the breath from his lungs. Coward. A yell bubbles out of him as he submerges again, sputters to the surface. The ache inside him is raw and horrible as John imagines leaving him behind, leaving him just a grave to talk to. Idiots. They shouldn’t have to learn this again. It burns in his chest. They’ve lost years.

No, he thinks, as he submerges, bobs, treads, gasps, submerges. It’s better this way, better to die his friend than to leave him with the burden of his love. You’re still an idiot, Sherlock’s voice tells him reasonably. I’ll be shattered either way. The definition of the relationship makes no difference. John’s rage simmers into a dull misery as he reflexively bobs, treads, gasps, submerges, bobs. He’s right, of course.

Minutes pass. The shivering is beginning to subside. Bit not good, says his inner Sherlock. John’s face is tipped up to gasp at his last inch of air, his ears full of the dark rubbery sounds of water, but as he slides below again he thinks he sees movement in the gloom above. He struggles to kick back up when something heavy splashes next to him.

Hands grip him, lifting his head above the surface. Warm arms wrap around his back, squeezing him fiercely. John sucks in breath raggedly, blinking water out of his eyes. But even if he were blind he’d know. Though drenched in the foul water, the scent of Sherlock is strong as John lets his head drop onto his friend’s shoulder. He lets out a huff that’s almost a laugh and mostly a sob. Sherlock, whose feet can touch the bottom, is panting as if he’d run a long distance to the well before clambering down. The rumble of his deep voice is muffled, vibrating against John’s chest.

John realizes Sherlock is shaking him gently, calling his name firmly.

“–got to stay with me, John. John? Tell me you can hear me—”

It grips his heart how calmly Sherlock is trying to speak, the quiver in it betraying him.

“Hear you,” John mumbles weakly against his shoulder, and rallies his hands to briefly squeeze
Sherlock’s back.

“Good. Excellent, John, now listen. There’s a rope, we can climb out.”

John groans against Sherlock’s collarbone.

“Sorry, so sorry, can’t, stuck. Tried to get free.”

Sherlock snaps to attention. Gripping John tightly to his chest, he pulls up, hitting the resistance of the chain. Deductions race across his eyes.

“There is something holding you down—”

“Chain, on my right foot,” he mumbles apologetically. “Padlock. Little kid’s bones.” He wants to be helpful, to speed up his escape, but he can tell the last detail startles Sherlock.

“John, the rope isn’t long enough for you to reach from your position. Take a deep breath. I have to let go of you while I dive down. Good, there, take another, and one more. I’ll be right back to hold you up. Okay, ready, here we go.”

Sherlock lets go of him and John slips below the water, arms flailing out to bob himself higher, but the weight of the chain pulls him below the surface. He feels Sherlock perform a tidy surface dive, feels hands at his ankles, tugging the chain, assessing in the darkness. He tries to be patient, but soon John’s lungs are burning and the panic gives him a burst of adrenaline. His hands grope through the water for Sherlock, find a leg, and tug.

With a swirl of wake Sherlock is back, pulling John above the surface, chin on his shoulder. He lets him float and breathe, giving him warmth. Despite his dire circumstances, John is vividly aware of how tightly they are twined together, though surely it’s just to keep him warm.

“John, I don’t want to alarm you, but I believe the water level has risen since I arrived in the well.” John practically barks out a laugh into his shoulder.

“Nice of you to notice. Been some trouble, that. I blocked the pipe. Slowed it down.”

“You did? How?”

John mutters his solution and is surprised when Sherlock gives him a quick, fierce squeeze.

“Brilliant, John.” Despite the freezing water, he feels warmth spread through his chest at the unexpected praise. “But you’re not shivering enough for this temperature. You’ve been exposed too long and are likely going into shock judging by your exhaustion and mumbled speech. We need to get you out and warm as quickly as possible. We must unlock this chain now.”

“No key, looked,” John murmurs against his shoulder. Now that he has something to rest on, the weariness has flooded him and he lets his eyes slide closed. “Don’t s’pose you brought your lock pick.” He is surprised to feel Sherlock’s chuckle deep in his chest, rumbling against his own.

“Of course I did.” Relief washes over John at this incredible information, stirring his mind into wakefulness. “But it’s been a while since I’ve picked a lock in the dark, underwater, upside down.”

John reluctantly pushes away from his warmth.

“Go fast, I’m okay for a bit, I think.”
Sherlock locks eyes with him and nods. They both pull in huge lung-fulls of air, and at Sherlock’s nod they drop beneath the water.

Knowing he needs to stay still for Sherlock to pick the lock, John makes himself drift limply. He pushes back the doubts creeping in, mentally urging Sherlock on as if the thoughts could travel to him through the water. *You found me in time. You’re brilliant. Get us out of here. I want to go home.*

Suspended in the darkness, John can feel Sherlock’s hands and limbs brushing around him like a murky sea creature, the minute tugs and pulls at the lock. In his delirious state he imagines being rescued not from above by rope, but from below, Sherlock swimming up to him like some beautiful, landlocked selky.

John hears a *clik* through the water and knows he’s done it. The strain on his leg evaporates and he suddenly buoys up higher in the water. As his head breaks the surface, he greedily sucks in air, weakly treading water with two free legs, but not for long. Sherlock splashes to the surface next to him, gasping, and pulls John against him with surprising fierceness. They breathe together like this for several heartbeats. Sherlock’s dark curls are limp and dripping over John’s face. Even on tiptoe, Sherlock’s chin is now just above the water.

“Thank you,” John pants quietly against his shoulder. Then, because he might explode from the fierce emotion, “What took you so bloody long to get here?”

“Couldn’t find you,” Sherlock rumbles against his ear. John can feel his big hands clench on his back. His voice is muffled and strained, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry it took me so long, John. Please forgive me.” Sherlock sucks in a few long, shuddering breaths, but then a wave of shivering hits them both. “Let’s get out of here.”

John gives a small groan of exhaustion as, relief waning, he skeptically eyes the slender rope Sherlock used to descend into the well.

“Not sure I can climb.” He can hardly curl his stiff hands into fists and his legs feel like field stones. “We could unjam the pipe and float til the water level lifts us higher, but we’d die of hypothermia before then. Be a real waste of a lovely bit of underwater lock-picking.” He huffs humorlessly. “Your nutter of a sister must be having a grand time watching you dance.”

Sherlock eyes him oddly, mouth tight with concern as he side-swims John over to the wall and puts the rope in his hands.

John realizes that not even Sherlock can easily touch the bottom now. The reality of his timing with the lock makes John shudder. His teeth begin to chatter again and he’s shaking. Sherlock pulls away from him and reaches up for the rope. John immediately misses his warmth.

“I’m going to climb out and make something to carry you out with. I won’t be long.”

Even though he sees the logic, the very idea of being left in the well alone again horrifies him. He bites his lip and nods, aware that Sherlock is only inches away watching him very closely. He guides John’s stiff hand to the rope, squeezing it closed.

“Just hang onto the rope, John. Keep breathing.” Sherlock stops abruptly, eyeing him critically, and seems to come to a quick conclusion. Holding onto the rope, he uses his free hand to rapidly unbutton his own sodden shirt. John squints at him with confusion, feeling his face warm.

“What are you—” but Sherlock’s already pulled off and threaded his shirt under John’s arms and around his back, knotting the sleeves tightly to the rope. John feels tenderly bemused as
understanding dawns on him. Should he lose consciousness, his head won’t slip underwater. Sherlock tugs on the knots.

“John, should I be delayed and the water rise, you can push these knots up the rope. Show me your hands aren’t too cold for this.” Though his hands are clumsy, John obediently nudges the knots upward. Sherlock nods approval. He then gently pulls Johns hands from the rope to cross his arms over his chest. “Let my shirt hold your weight. Keep your arms tight to your body, it will prevent loss of heat.” He looks right into John’s face, his words like steel. “I’m coming back for you.”

John can’t trust his voice so he just nods curtly. Sherlock flashes him a sudden, unexpected smile and pulls himself up the rope in a strong, lithe movement, water sluicing off of him. Like a selky, John thinks, then frowns. One who suddenly knows first-responder hypothermia measures. Was the knowledge squirreled away in some closet of his mind palace all this time?

Water drips off of Sherlock as he climbs, pattering onto John below. He watches him scale the distance with surprising steadiness and speed, oddly touched at the sight of his long bare feet gripping the rope. He can picture him haring across the moor toward the well, fresh on a lead from some damned riddle that showed him the way. He imagines him finding it, throwing off his Belstaff and suit coat, kicking off his shoes, throwing down the rope...

John’s brow knits as his foggy mind tells him that Sherlock has been in no condition to run across moors or scale ropes. But he can’t for the life of him remember why.

High above, Sherlock briefly blocks out the crescent moon as he pulls himself over the edge and disappears from view.
Rescued

The wait is hell.

John’s tightly-contained panic could propel him out of the well if his numb hands could only grip the rope. Shaking like a poplar leaf, the cold in his body is a dull throb.

“S’good to shiver,” he reasons. “Shivering is heat. Not shivering’s dead.”

Dangling in the water from the shirt-sling, arms tightly hugging his chest in a poor facsimile of Sherlock, John tries to distract himself. What is he doing out there? He imagines Sherlock running barefoot and shirtless across the moor under a crescent moon, wet curls flying. *Never could resist a touch of the dramatic.* He can picture him mentally constructing a hundred potential rescue operations in an instant, irritably brushing his hand aside to scatter them, letting only the most plausible one remain.

“Alright, be brilliant, Sherlock. But hurry it up.”

The well feels like it’s shrinking in around him, the sensation of being buried alive making his breath rapid and shallow. He tries not to think of how much deeper the water might be if the child’s bones had not helped him hold back the flow. *They couldn’t save you, but you saved me.*

Twice he’s nudged the knots of his shirt-sling up the rope. Sherlock’s been gone much too long and his imagination is frantic, delerious: he’s been captured and needs John to rescue him; he’s secretly joined forces with Moriarty and they’re watching his demise on camera; The Woman has him at gunpoint. John shakes himself, muttering, “Stop it, *stop it now.*”

“John! John, I’m here!” Sherlock suddenly leans over the side of the well, his voice bouncing around the walls as he lowers a bulky bundle from another rope.

*He came back.*

Tears spring to John’s eyes and his throat constricts so tightly he can barely call back. *Come on, keep it together.*

“I’ve made a makeshift sling,” he calls down. “Can you get in? Can you hold on?”

The heavy jumble of rope unspools down the well shaft and hits the water with a slap. Though he tries to unravel it, John’s hands are too stiff, his limbs too sluggish to make sense of it. Sherlock sees and quickly shimmies back down the rope, splashing into the water next to him. He utters a small gasp as the cold hits him anew.

John clings to his shirt-sling and watches with quiet admiration as Sherlock loosens a slip knot and unfurls the ropes, knotted and crossed to create a kind of harness. He deftly guides John into it, treading and dunking to get the right ropes under and around his legs, chest and arms.

Awkwardly floating in his bulky harness, John wonders if the rope is really going to hold his weight. Sherlock gives a final decisive tug on a knot. He speaks slowly, deliberately, as if John’s already-inferior mind cannot comprehend speech in his frozen, half-drowned state.

“I’m going to climb out now and pull you up. I’ll just be right outside the well.”

John wonders if Sherlock can deduce how frightened he’s been. He worries how his friend
could possibly lug him all the way up single-handedly. Sherlock grips his shoulder reassuringly.

“There’s a young beech tree nearby I can use for leverage."

John nods weakly while Sherlock climbs up and away.

*Bloody mind reader.*

Before the panic can seize him again, John feels a tug. The ropes tighten and he marvels as they snug against his back, around his legs and shoulders, dispersing his weight evenly, if uncomfortably. It’s brilliant. Three tugs and he’s cleared the water, dripping and bumping lightly against the rough stones.

He wishes he could help, but all he can do is cling to the rope and watch as the opening of the well creeps closer. Glancing below, the dark water slips away from him.

*Free, nearly free.*

He wonders with a little jolt what could be waiting for them outside the well. His eyelids feel leaden, his thoughts sluggish.

*Must stay awake long enough to ask Sherlock what he knows.*

The air is getting fresher and it rouses him a little. He can hear Sherlock’s voice reassuring him from above.

“John, remember when we used to play Rock, Paper, Scissor?"

“We always tied,” John snorts. “You said the variables were too… predictable… or something. Added bloody *dynamite* and *earthquake.*” John knows what he’s doing – trying to keep him talking. He appreciates it.

“Variations increase random outcomes, which is the point of the game.” John can hear the laughter in Sherlock’s voice. He’s also panting with the exertion. “My eldest brother used to play it with me when I was small, let me make up all kinds of variables. He was a chemist, too. Added ‘Catalyst’ that combined elements – using two hands. Fire and Scissor made molten metal, which of course beat Rock."

“I get to add Well,” John calls up. “Beaten by Rope or Bone or…Detective. Not sure how you’d signal that one.” Fog swirls in his mind, he frowns. “Wait, did you just say *eldest* brother?”

Sherlock doesn’t answer. John’s so close to the opening that he could reach out and touch the topmost edge. His whole body aches for it. The bumps stop and the rope shakes a bit. Likely being tied off. Dangling and shivering, he’s suddenly very aware of the open air beneath him, the long fall into the freezing water below should he bungle getting out of the harness.

Sherlock’s face appears at the edge, pale and breathless, and reaches down to him. With a grip like iron, he pulls John out over the well’s mossy lip onto the grass. Taking his weight, Sherlock half-drags him away from the edge. John’s legs have no strength and buckle beneath him. He collapses against Sherlock in a pile of sodden rope.

*“Jesus bloody Christ,”* John gasps as relief floods through him.

Sherlock drops beside him panting, but only rests a moment, springing up to untangle the rope from John’s limbs.
It’s dark, but the rustling shapes around them tell John forest. He stares up at the starry sky with reverence, feeling as if he’s just been exhumed. After several moments of fussing over him, Sherlock’s voice breaks through the fog settling heavily in John’s mind.

“—proper response to hypothermia is to remove all of your wet clothing before wrapping you warmly. It’s dark, but I hope you won’t feel it an invasion of privacy if I—”

“S’fine, Sherlock.” He can’t help but chuckle. “I don’t mind.”

*This is all clinical, survival,* John tells himself firmly as Sherlock’s hands fly over his skin, deftly removing his ruined shoes and socks, peeling off his sodden jumper, jeans and pants. The air is cold on his skin and he shivers violently, but he’s quickly wrapped in something heavy and warm. It’s surprisingly silky against his skin.

“Where’d you find blankets?” he asks thickly, incredulous. Sherlock is wrapping his dry suit jacket around John’s feet.

“John, your currently compromised state is the only excuse for your lack of observation. This is not a blanket.”


Sherlock gives him a lopsided grin, then, seemingly satisfied with his makeshift cocoon, sits closely behind him, wrapping his long limbs around John for maximum contact. Sherlock drops his chin to John’s shoulder wearily, his voice rumbling in his ear.

“Just rest now, I’ll do what I can to keep you warm.” Sherlock sounds exhausted as the adrenaline of his rescue ebbs away.

Though he is aching with cold, the sheer ridiculousness of the moment hits him: sitting in Sherlock’s arms, naked in his precious Belstaff, alive. A wave of giddiness washes over him. He giggles, then clears his throat, trying to sound serious.

“Sherlock, if I’m dying of hypothermia, aren’t you s’posed to be starkers in the coat with me?” Sherlock’s arms twitch. John wonders if it’s possible to feel someone blush.

“Don’t be dramatic, John. While your condition is clearly serious, you are still able to follow basic instructions and respond to conversation. You are not in fact dying, though it would be unwise for you to move very much lest the cold blood in your extremities flow too quickly through your heart or other organs. Cardiac arrest is a possibility. The well water was roughly 45 degrees, making it less likely.”

John grins sleepily at his logistical ramble, obviously a cover for a strong emotion.

“Additionally John, your first responder information is sorely outdated. Studies have found that skin-to-skin contact is not as effective in increasing body temperature during hypothermic shock as when the victim is encouraged to shiver to a normal internal temperature in warm, dry conditions. I’m a poor replacement for a hot water bottle, but I’ll do my best.”

“Mm, no, feels nice.” John chuckles wearily. “Thanks. For, y’know. Everything. It was brilliant, your rescue.” He heaves a weary sigh and sinks into him, shivering, reveling in the warmth of the cocoon. Now that he’s on solid ground, he can actually say the words. “You got there just in time. Few minutes more and the water would’ve been over my head.”
Sherlock ducks his head against the upturned collar of the coat and doesn’t respond, just tightens his grip on him, as if he could squeeze away the cold that’s sunk deep into John’s bones. Minutes slide by in silence and as weariness slips over him, John marvels at the simplest things: fresh wind pushing at his face; the sound of trees rustling all around them; the sensation of Sherlock’s breath against his neck. He shivers and shivers.

They sit in silence and John begins to nod off when he feels damp warmth on his neck. He thinks about this for a long, fuzzy moment then realizes with a sharp breath that Sherlock is crying, snuffling into his hair. John’s stomach twists painfully. What is he whispering? The words are just at the edge of his comprehension as he slides into sleep.

“Please, John. Please come back.”

“M’right here, Sherlock,” he mutters frowning, confused.

Slipping into darkness, John is vaguely aware that Sherlock’s lightly rocking him back and forth.

“Fight it, John.” His whisper is fierce and choked. “Come back to me.”
John slowly drifts up from the blackness of deep, leaden sleep. He can still feel Sherlock’s arms around him, the warmth of his chest pressing against his back, can still feel his breath and tears on his neck. How long was I asleep? Couldn’t have been but a few minutes. But John feels… warm.

Warm. Soft bed. Smells like… home.

With a lurch of vertigo, John peels open eyes that are sticky and resistant, then squeezes them shut against blinding brightness. Though his body feels as heavy as granite, his heart is racing. Where is the forest? The mad sister? What the bloody hell is going on?

“Rrm.”

He feels Sherlock’s full-body twitch against his back as he suddenly wakes.

“…John?” he whispers hoarsely, then cries, “John!” his deep voice cracking. Sherlock lurches up from behind him. Long hands on his shoulder, feather-soft on his face, his hair. “Can you hear me? John, please, please be awake.”

“Mmph.”

“John!” The joy in Sherlock’s voice squeezes something inside his chest. It’s the delight he only ever hears when Sherlock’s solved a really tricky 9, or discovered a string of serial suicides have turned serial killer, or when…

…when he’s just saved John from a dangerous spot and he’s gotten him back, alive.

Feeling like he’s just swum the English Channel, John squints into the brightness and turns his head toward his friend. The tiny motion sends a terrific drumbeat of pain across his temple. From close by, Sherlock’s voice is sympathetic, though he’s grinning so hard his glittering eyes are almost lost in the folds.

“Ah, headache, yes, that should last about twenty minutes. And you’ll be feeling intensely—”

“Wh…. water.”

“—thirsty. Here, let’s sit you up.”

John feels like he’s woken from a fevered sleep with the flu. Sherlock scoops him up from under his arms and props him against the pillows—pillows?—presses a straw to his lips. John gulps the water—can’t drink it fast enough to slake the thirst that’s clawing at his parched mouth. He tries to take the cup, but finds he still can’t make his fingers do as he asks and gratefully lets Sherlock hold the cup until he’s drained it. High-functioning sociopath, indeed.

“Better?”

“Mm. Ta,” he croaks. “Where…” He squints into the brightness and sucks in his breath.
He’s in Sherlock’s *bedroom*.

In Sherlock’s *bed*.

But it’s all been transformed—tables cluttered with lab equipment, an IV standing nearby. His eyes goggle.

“What…”

Sherlock watches him closely, gently placing his hands on John’s shoulders.

“It’s okay, John, you’re safe.” His voice is slow and patient, like when they were in the well. “We’re at 221B. In my room.” His brow briefly furrows. “I’m sorry we couldn’t get you into your old room. There wasn’t a lot of time. It was better for the equipment to be near the kitchen, anyhow, for the water source.”

Sherlock’s talking nonsense. But his face, hovering before him, makes John catch his breath. It’s grayish and lined, hollows under his eyes, tear-stained, a solid grizzle of beard darkening his usually sharp, smooth jaw. He looks utterly wrecked. Except that he’s positively glowing with relief. John blinks and blinks.

“How’d you get us away… from the well?” John’s voice is rough, unused. Talking makes his head pound harder, but he pushes past it. Sherlock’s eyebrows furrow again and he bites his lip. He takes a small hiss of air, searching his eyes.

“How were you, just now?”

John’s solar plexus prickles with panic. *How could he not know?*

“Sherlock, we were just in a well. I was chained and the water was rising and…” Fumbling, John pulls aside the blanket to inspect his right leg, which should, by his account, be purpling with bruises where he kicked against the cuff. But his skin is plain, unmarred. He huffs, shaking his head with disbelief.

“John. Slow down. You’ve just woken. My god, John,” his voice cracks. “You’ve actually woken…” and to his utter surprise Sherlock’s face crumples as he folds him into a fierce embrace. Despite the vertigo and confusion, John closes his eyes and leans into him, his racing heartbeat easing. I *don’t know what’s happening, but he’s still here. And this…* He breathes him in. *This is good.*

There’s a deep sniff and Sherlock pulls away, suddenly looking self-conscious and avoiding John’s eyes. He busies himself by pouring another cup of water and offering it to John. His hands have woken up enough to support it if he uses both of them. Dazed from the hug, he drinks for a while, watching Sherlock fidget with the equipment by his bedside.

Finally, the thirst eases and John carefully places the cup on the bedside table. It feels like a notable achievement. His mind is clearer, though the headache pounds on. John tries to catch his eyes.

“Just tell me what happened, how you got us back here.”

Sherlock fidgets with the edge of the blanket. Sucking in a gulp of air as if he’s about to dive deep under water, Sherlock finally meets his eyes.

“John, there was no well.”

“We were attacked. Here. But for a brief and pointless foray to Bart’s, we have not left the flat. You have been in a drugged sleep for several days, enduring, if my own experience is any reference, highly disturbing and lucid nightmares.”

John startles, blinking hard.

“Drugged. Seriously?”

“Both of us,” Sherlock sighs, shifting on the edge of the bed. “But it affected me differently, only lasting a few hours. The effects were unpleasant, though I do not think our attacker intended to kill. We were both rendered unconscious. I had a short period of vivid nightmares, also waking with headache and thirst.”

“They were all... nightmares?” John squirms at the feverish ache in all of his limbs, head spinning.

“I woke first and found you in your chair, still unconscious. I made you comfortable. I thought you’d come round any moment while I dashed around calling my network, calling Mycroft to begin pursuit...”

“Pursuit of who?”

“Wait,” Sherlock grimaces. “I’ll get to that.” His face falls, radiating guilt. “I wish you’d woken first, with your medical instincts. I should have noticed right away you were in distress. We rushed you to Bart’s–”

“The ambulance–” John blurts out. “I remember you in the ambulance. So that part wasn’t a dream. You were...” John’s voice trails off because he remembers Sherlock had been holding his hand tightly while the paramedics worked on him. He’d looked over briefly to see his stricken face. And then more darkness, more... nightmares.

“But it was all so bloody real... so horrible.”

Sherlock’s expression is pained.

“–so sorry,” he breaths, the words barely a whisper. John isn’t even sure he’s heard right.

“Sorry?”

Sherlock gives his head a little shake as if to clear it.

“Your body wouldn’t wake.” He turns away, hands balling into fists. “We tried so many things, ran rounds of toxicology screenings. We knew after 24 hours that there wasn’t any residue of the drug left in your system. Our bloodwork matched. But I couldn’t find the pattern.” There is self-loathing in his tone. “You stabilized. But you wouldn’t wake. It’s as though you were... trapped.”

John nods slowly.

“I was.”

Sherlock studies him quietly.

“I feared you would remain that way.” He looks away, suddenly shy. “We switched to alternative methods of waking you. It was Molly’s idea, actually. I made an arrangement with
Mycroft. He wasn’t in favor of our plan at all, but I was… convincing.”

John blinks, taking in the cluttered lab spread out in the room, suddenly comprehending.

“You… brought me home.”

“Yes.”

John’s chest squeezes very tightly, lips pulling into a thin line.

“While I continued looking for a cure, we hoped that my… presence, coupled with the familiar setting, stimulating sound, would reassure the part of your mind that had barricaded you in, theoretically, to keep you safe from further harm.”

“Stimulating sound? Oh…” John blinks, making the connections.

“You played your violin.”

“When we lived together, I would often play outside your door when you had nightmares.” Sherlock smiles sheepishly. “It seemed to soothe you.”

“I remember,” John chuckles. “It always helped. And yes. I... I heard music, where I was. You and your crazy sister were playing duets while she plotted to destroy us.”

Sherlock shakes his head wonderingly.

“Where have you been, Dr. Watson?”

John scrubs his face with his hands, tapping is forehead with a grimace.

“Yea, I’ll be needing some help to sort out all the nonsense in here.”

“And not all of it nonsense, I’m afraid,” Sherlock mutters.

John looks up, suddenly remembering.

“You were asking me to wake up, you know. After you’d wrapped me up in your coat.” He feels a blush creeping up his neck and decides not to divulge that bit. “Didn’t make any sense in the… the dream.”

_The well wasn’t real_. It hurts to admit it, he realizes. The relief collides with a curious grief that none of Sherlock’s heroic actions in the well had actually happened.

He takes in Sherlock’s wrecked state, the makeshift lab, the room incongruously well-equipped with nursing supplies.

_Well, maybe not exactly._

Sherlock blinks rapidly, digesting this.

“You heard me?” He grins. “Fascinating. I talked to you every day, read to you, told you all sorts of things. Probably drove you mad—would have been fine if it drove you to wake up, tell me to _shut it._” He swallows hard, sobering. “It was very important that you regain consciousness today. So yes. I was… _imploring_ you to wake up.”

“Why today?”
“I made an agreement with Mycroft that if I couldn’t rouse you in three days, I’d allow you to be moved to a secure facility. It felt wrong to send you there. I had to wake you.”

“So you found the antidote in the nick of time, then?”

Sherlock doesn’t answer right away. When he speaks, his voice is tense with baffled frustration.

“I didn’t, John. You just. Woke up.”

They are silent for several heartbeats.

“You were... holding me. In my dream. And when I woke.”

It’s Sherlock’s turn to redden and turn away.

“Yes. Human contact was part of our… hypothesis.”

“Your hypothesis?” He can’t help but smirk at Sherlock’s discomfort. “So, did Molly hold me, too?”

“Certainly not.” Sherlock looks aghast.

They are quiet for a long time as John absorbs Sherlock’s words.

“It worked, you know.”

“Hm?” It’s been so many minutes that Sherlock seems to have drifted off, lost the thread. John feels a twinge when he sees how exhausted he is. I’ve been his latest case. Bet he hasn’t had a night’s sleep or a proper meal for days.

“Your… techniques. They worked. You pulled me out. Literally. From a well.” The halting words tumble out. “I was so alone. Doesn’t take a great leap to see I was stuck in my head, chained, drowning, calling to you. But you found me, just before… before I went under. You held me up, helped me breathe, made me a harness to pull me out, kept me warm. And then I fell asleep, and woke up… here. With you.” John’s nostrils flare and he sets his jaw. “You rescued me. Brilliantly, Sherlock. There, and here.” He takes a long shuddering breath. “If I’d died in that dream, I’m fairly certain it would have been permanent.”

The strangeness is too much. John folds his knees into his chest and buries his head, raking at his hair. Sherlock blinks rapidly as he absorbed this information.

“I rescued you. In your dream. Oh.”

Sherlock reaches out and tentatively presses a hand on John’s foot through the blanket. When John doesn’t twitch away, he experiments with keeping it there. John lifts his head and appraises Sherlock, thunder in his eyes.

“So go on, then. Tell me. Who did this to us?”

Sherlock is suddenly filled with an agitated energy and pushes off the bed, pacing the room.

“Please, this is complicated. Are you thirsty? Do you need–”

“Sherlock, you’re stalling. Out with it.”
Sherlock scrubs his face while he paces.

“It’s… You’ve only just woken. And even though I’ve been going over and over it in my mind, I’m still not sure how best to tell you without—” His voice catches and he stops, drops his gaze to his feet. John can see the strain and exhaustion etched into his face.


…

“John. You have been removed from certain truths for… for such a long time. It was horrible, keeping them from you. But the alternative was unbearable. Unacceptable.” He turns away, hands balling into fists. “All I have done, John, I have done to keep you safe. But it is quite possible and even justifiable that when I have told you everything, and I intend to tell you everything, you will want nothing to do with me. Not ever again.”

He stops, hunching his shoulders protectively. Closing his eyes, he steeles himself for the wave of John’s anger. He knows how much John hates being lied to, hates being left out. But the silence stretches on and still it doesn’t come.

Instead a hesitant hand, trembling with the simple effort of moving across the sheet, rests on top of his. He twitches slightly at the touch, his fist uncurling, then looks back at John, confused. John’s eyes glitter and his expression is baffling. His voice is unexpectedly soft.

“Sherlock, a short time ago I was drowning. Utterly real. And while I was in that freezing water, I went through every person I should be struggling to stay alive for.” He gives Sherlock’s hand a small squeeze. “Maybe I was in this bed the whole time, warm and safe. But to you, Sherlock, it was reality. And so was every thought I had.”

He ducks his chin to catch his eyes. Sherlock sucks in his breath and makes himself brave them, because John woke up when I pulled him from a well. The blue of his irises is a color he was not sure he’d get to see again. He feels a throb in his chest.

“So whatever you’re about to tell me, Sherlock, I’d like you to tell me here.” John pulls very lightly at Sherlock’s hand. “No truth you tell me is going to frighten me away. Not anymore.”

Wondering if perhaps he’s now the one dreaming, Sherlock shifts back onto the mattress slowly, gingerly settling next to John, shoulder and arm and thigh touching. Invited. It’s different than when John was asleep.

I’m shaking.

John folds Sherlock’s hand into his and holds it like iron, then leans closer, settling against Sherlock’s shoulder. With a shiver and a spasm of breath, Sherlock drops his chin to rest on John’s soft hair, breathes in the scent of him. Moth wings unfold in his chest.

This is a catalyst.

John brushes his thumb over the soft skin of Sherlock’s palm, sending a shiver from toe to scalp.
We can’t go back.

What new chain reaction are they tumbling through? What comes after this?

They sit very quietly. Where a moment ago Sherlock was ready to explain himself out of John’s life, now his mind is curiously blank while it catalogs the warmth and pressure of each place John has willingly pressed his body against his own.

…

“Thank you.” John hums a sigh. Sherlock gradually relaxes against him, his breath slowing. Look at us. John sleepily watches their fingers braided together, very slowly exploring knuckle, fingertip, palm.

Something changed in the well.

It’s as if some vital part inside of him, something that was loose and rattling, has settled into its place. It’s the most peaceful he’s felt in, well, in years. His eyelids droop closed, craving a simpler, natural sleep. His mind drifts.

In the bright afternoon light of Sherlock’s room, leaning into the man who has saved him, memories begin bobbing to the surface of John’s mind. He scrutinizes them, begins to feel the difference between the true memories and the dreams.

The nightmares lack dimension. Upon closer inspection, they crackle apart into irrational logic. Like that wild one where Mrs. Hudson careened to his therapists’ in a sports car, Sherlock drugged in the boot, helicopters trailing. Or that awful one where he was hurting Sherlock, god, hurting him so badly in a morgue with a serial killer. Bloody hell.

He leans against Sherlock and feels him lean back, which sends an effervescent ripple through his stomach. It steadies him. He is safe.

Quietly, a brittle dam bursts. A dark wave of memory floods John’s mind. Real memories.

Christ. He stares up at the ceiling, jaw working, seething.

I knew. Knew all along.

John breathes in sharply, coming back to himself, and finds Sherlock watching him carefully.

He’s worried.

John gives Sherlock’s hand another reassuring squeeze and swallows hard.

“It’s okay,” he says very quietly, the anger an electric current just below the surface of his words. “I remember now. It was Mary. She did this to us.”
Chapter End Notes

Lots more to come, dear readers, though the timing of the next chapter depends on how well middle-of-the-night writing works out this week. This one begged to happen today. Thank you so much for your comments and kudos. You keep me right.
At John’s words, Sherlock jolts out of his sleepy, syrupy reverie and twists around to face him, eyes flashing, coiled to spring.

“Good, John. It’s coming back to you.”

John holds his stare, clenching his jaw. His eyes drift down to Sherlock’s chest where the ancient, droopy pajama shirt gives a glimpse of the raw, pink, newly-healed scar tissue by his breastbone.

John sucks in his breath as if he’s seeing it for the first time. He reaches out to lightly touch the scar, then flinches away, a fast storm boiling across his face. Sherlock gently takes his hand from where it hovers between them and holds it firmly, looking him in the eye.

“Tell me what you remember.”

John’s voice is choked, his eyes pulled back to the healing wound.

“You got shot.”

“Yes, obviously. Who shot me, John?”

John pulls his eyes away, stares out the window, covers his mouth with the back of his fist, eyes filling.

“I had it all wrong.”

Relief flickers briefly across Sherlock’s face.

“Yes, but it’s not your fault.”

John squeezes his eyes shut and nods.

“I remember now. But it’s…it’s hard to say it. To relive it.”

Sherlock relents, his brow dipping sympathetically.

“It’s okay. Take it slowly. You had very little time to process the memories last time before, well, before Mary drugged us.”

“Drugged me. Again.”

“Yes.”

John closes his eyes and scowls at what he’s watching in his mind’s eye, tightens his lips for several long moments while Sherlock perches like a cat next to him on the bed, watching with barely contained impatience.

Suddenly John’s eyes open. His words tumble out.

“Did you know? That I followed you that night?” he pulls his eyes back to Sherlock. “Or did I surprise you, too, when I showed up at Magnusson’s? Janine, she thought I was with you, she just let me in. I couldn’t believe it.”
“Yes. I had… hoped that you would follow me.”

John purses his lips and nods, grinning humorlessly.

“Course you planned that.”

“John. Focus. What else do you remember?”

Sucking in a deep breath, John pulls his knees up to his chin again and rubs his temples, gives Sherlock a worried glance.

“You’ll tell me if I mix any of this up with the nightmares, right?”

“Of course, yes.”

They both startle as a sing-song voice comes from the sitting room. Sherlock growls, though John looks slightly relieved.

“Don’t chase her away, Sherlock. She must’ve been worried sick.”

Sherlock huffs.

“Yes, yes, alright.” He launches off the bed and calls through the closed door. “Mrs. Hudson, the passcode if you please.”

John can hear her muted complaints.

“Sherlock, the front door’s been bolted and no one but me’s come in or out for days!”

“Mrs. Hudson, it is entirely possible you have been compromised. The passcode.”

“Oh fine, norbury.”

Sherlock flings open the door and rushes into the hall to greet her. While he vaguely listens to Sherlock’s dressing-down about not returning her dishes, John sits very still in the rumpled bed and makes himself take long, steady breaths.

So we do hand-holding now… And what’s with a passcode in the bloody flat? Christ, out of the well and into the frying pan.

Suddenly Mrs. Hudson cries out and rushes into the room carrying a tray and scolding Sherlock behind her.

“—should have phoned me the moment he woke, you ridiculous man. Lucky thing for you I was already planning on bringing you a bite.” She doesn’t lose a beat as her scowl drops, beaming at John while she sets the tray onto a cluttered lab table. “Oh John.” He grins wearily at her while she crowds him on the bed, wrapping him up in a long, tight hug. “It’s a wonder! How are you feeling, dear?”

From the confines of her hug, John smiles and manages to mumble,

“Um, I’m okay, really, a bit done in, quite scrambled, but I’m sure it’ll pass.”

She releases him and sits back on the edge of the bed.

“We’ve been terribly worried about you. Can’t say I approved at first of Sherlock pulling you out of hospital to hide you away up here, but I suppose he must have been on to something.” She
rests a warm hand on his cheek and appraises him critically. “Just look at you, half-starved I’ll wager.”

“There was no danger of starvation, Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock interjects a little defensively from where he’s leaning on the doorway, watching the scene unfold with amusement. “I fed him adequately for his condition.”

John blinks, turning sharply toward Sherlock and scowling.

“You... fed me?”

Sherlock’s smile falls. He avoids John’s eyes.

“No proper food,” Mrs. Hudson clucks. “Broth, and that horrible green mixture you concocted.”

He looks wonderingly at Sherlock.

“You... who forgets to eat for days on end. How?”

Sherlock shifts uncomfortably as John goggles at him.

“Couldn’t give you a feeding tube, obviously. I did my research on how to care for the unconscious. Remarkable, really, how long one could be sustained in the 1400s without any mechanical assistance. I did resort to the IV to prevent dehydration, but you took very unkindly to that.” John notices he rubs absently at his jaw as he says it. “You became... agitated. I didn’t want to sedate you further. Fortunately, I deduced you would allow it if I... with human contact.” He blushes vividly and turns away to fuss with the microscope.

“Will you look at the state of this room,” Mrs. Hudson breathes with horror, suddenly taking in the disheveled tables of apparatus. “What on earth have you been doing to him?”

“Looking for a cure,” Sherlock says irritably over his shoulder. “But it was for naught. John woke of his own volition not an hour ago.”

“And not a moment too soon,” Mrs. Hudson says patting his hand. “Would have been dreadful if you had to be carted off somewhere far from home to keep you safe. Sherlock, that bit still isn’t clear to me. Why did you only have the three days? Where was he to be taken?”

Sherlock frowns and narrows his eyes at John, assessing him.

“John, I don’t want to tell you too much before you’ve shared your memories. I could corrupt them with external input. It’s imperative for me to know what you recall from the night I was shot and the afternoon we were drugged.”

But John just continues to marvel at him, incredulous.

“You fed me?”

Sherlock watches him steadily.

“Mrs. Hudson, perhaps you will excuse myself and John. There are some rather urgent matters we must discuss that require a degree of privacy.”

With a knowing nod, she squeezes John’s hand, gathers up the empty dishes scattered on the workbench and bustles out, but not without a healthy wink at John.
The front door bangs shut. Sherlock turns and fixes John with a sheepish look, hands jammed deep into the pockets of his dressing gown.

“I promised you I’d tell you everything, if you woke. *When* you woke. I’d best begin to live up to my oath.”

“But… you said you wanted to me to tell you first, what I remembered.”

“Your turn next, never fear. You were quite unconscious for the entirety of what I’m about to disclose.” Sherlock begins to pace, but remembering how that had unnerved John, he settles onto the bed again, looking to John for permission. At his nod, Sherlock again scoots over until he’s pressed lightly against his side. The touch sends another bolt of electricity up his skin and it takes a moment for him to focus. He still can’t quite believe they’re here, sitting in his bed, that John is awake to hear this.

With a deep breath, he begins.

…

**Bart’s Hospital, 4 days earlier**

Sherlock has pulled a plastic chair close to John’s hospital bed. Leaning in, he steeps his fingers at his lips. It’s calm in his room. The security detail at the door makes him feel safer, but only marginally. John’s unconscious face is relaxed, pale, a sheen of sweat on his brow as his fever rises and falls.

Sherlock has stared at him like this so many times in the past, when John would fall asleep reading on the couch at 221B, or doze on the train on the way to an investigation, his features youthful, shedding a layer of tension. At those times, he’d always been afraid John would wake up too soon and find him staring. Now, he can’t wake up soon enough.

“I heard you, you know,” Sherlock rumbles.

Monitors beep, machines hum quietly. It’s been 48 hours and they still can’t wake him. The mania of activity has fizzled into a gray, ragged exhaustion, the frenzy in the lab with Molly analyzing toxicology reports, comparing, cross-comparing, consulting physicians, demanding new physicians. Tense phone calls with Mycroft as they tracked Mary into Belgium, lost her in Germany, found her again in Japan. She’s evaded Mycroft’s teams twice.

Molly’s finally gone off somewhere to sleep, demanding Sherlock do the same. He promised he would, just to make her go. Now, though, he sits by John and lists all of his missteps that brought them here, each painful choice he’s made the last three years to keep John safe. And here they are, finally together. He laughs bitterly.

Sherlock studies John’s right hand resting on the sheet, the one with no IV or wires. And no ring. He scowls. Did the hospital staff remove it? No… he thinks back to the confrontation with Mary at the flat two days ago, plays the memory in his mind. *He wasn’t wearing his ring when he arrived. Which means… perhaps he’d already begun to remember.*

His hand looks so small on the hospital sheet. With a guilty look at his unconscious face, he folds John’s hand in his two large ones and very, very lightly holds it to his cheek.

“I heard you, when you were sitting where I am now, and I was the one hooked up to the
machines. You didn’t know if I’d live through the night. You sat right here, so close to me, and I could see and hear everything and do nothing. It was like being trapped in a glass box. I wanted to sit up and tell you to stop being ridiculous, everything would be fine. I had it all under control. But I didn’t. And it wasn’t.”

Sherlock’s face crumples and he presses John’s hand to his forehead, breathing raggedly. “I heard you. But when I woke, when it looked like I’d pull through, you had forgotten everything that happened the night I was shot. Forgot who did it, forgot your bedside confession. And it was entirely my fault. Again.”

Sherlock is silent for a long time. “Are you in there, John? Watching me fall apart? Should I confess to you, too?” He considers his sleeping face, then shakes his head lightly and tightens his lips, gently places John’s hand back onto the sheet. “No, John, I’m not going to do it like this. I would like to see your eyes properly when I tell you. So. You have to wake up. And then I’ll tell you. Everything.” He presses his palm to John’s chest. “I promise you I’ll bring you back.” He stands abruptly, pushing the chair back with a squeak. “Let’s get you out of here.”

Sherlock saves himself several fruitless hours of arguing with the doctors by texting the summary of his plan to Mycroft. His response is an immediate No.

Expected. Sherlock follows it with, I know you don’t like this. Security breach etc etc etc. But do try to remember that WE did this to him, you and I. Let’s try to make it right, hm? It’s become our mutual pastime.

Several minutes pass, Sherlock holding the phone to his lips and tapping a sonata at 7 times its speed on the plastic casing. When Mycroft finally responds, he smiles, grimly triumphant.

Three days only. Transfer at 10am. Sleep, little brother. You should be rested if you are to start playing doctor tomorrow.

Sherlock huffs a sigh. He should sleep, but now there’s so much to do. He paces John’s room, his mind spinning out his plan, itemizing and organizing.

The nurse comes in to change John’s IV. Sherlock deduced her yesterday and found her trustworthy. He’s oddly comforted by her quiet black eyes, her arms strong from a decade of healthcare work and raising five children on two continents. He also finds it endearing that she enjoys needlepoint and horsemanship, the clues evident on her fingertips and eyelids and in the musculature of her shoulders and legs. Giving him a little nod, the nurse goes about her work. Sherlock studies her intently, carefully recording everything she does. When he speaks in her native Farsi, she jumps.

Sherlock: We’ll be leaving tomorrow. I wonder if you would show me a few things that could help me take care of him.

Nurse: (startled, but smiling) Look at you, that’s a proper accent you’ve got there. Well, what is it you need to know?

Sherlock: Just the basics.

The nurse considers him carefully, then nods.

…
Baker Street, the next morning

A fine drizzle slicks the road. A figure in an immaculate suit stands under an umbrella by a sleek black car and watches the windows of 221B. A cab pulls up and Sherlock jumps out carrying a large duffle bag, running to duck under the umbrella.

“Well?”

“We are completing a thorough scan of the flat. Nothing untoward has been discovered thus far.”

“Not that I don’t appreciate it, Mycroft, but if your spooks place any bugs in my flat I’ll find them within five minutes and point them all to Mrs. Hudson’s daytime telly.”

“Nothing of the sort.” Mycroft smiles grimly. “While we know that our target did not return to 221B and no one but your landlady and Ms. Hooper have since gone through this door, we are taking every precaution.”

The door opens and Molly steps out into the rain, a vividly striped scarf wrapped around her neck against the chill. She stops abruptly as she notices the two men.

“Oh! Sherlock! Didn’t expect you back so soon from John’s.” She nods uncertainly at Mycroft, quickly turning her focus back to Sherlock. “I brought everything over, everything on your list.” Sherlock sweeps up to her and takes her hand suddenly, kissing it. Molly eyes him quizzically.

“You’re welcome, but best save your gallantry for him.” She points down the street with her chin. An ambulance is approaching, eerily quiet with sirens and lights turned off, flanked by two unmarked cars. Sherlock knows there is a highly-trained guard riding in the back with John, holding a very large gun, should anything happen en route.

“Sherlock,” she interrupts, “I want you to start comparing the t-cell count of fresh blood samples again. We may have overlooked something.”

He nods absently, drifting to the curb, eyes on the ambulance. Behind him a very fit man and woman in dark clothes exit the flat, nod to Mycroft, and disappear into the black car. Mycroft passes his umbrella to Molly, then stands shoulder to shoulder with Sherlock in the drizzle watching the approaching ambulance.

“Three days, Sherlock. No more. The trace you so cleverly applied is already degrading. I do not expect it to be reliable beyond our agreed-upon date. We do not want to lose track of her and risk a repeat encounter.”

“No pressure,” Sherlock snaps back, not meeting his eyes.

“We are in position in Bangkok. There is a high probability of interception tonight. It may give you more time.”

“Mm. Text me,” he replies flatly. “I’ll order in pad kee mow to celebrate.” They are silent for several moments.

“It was our fault,” Mycroft says, his voice so suddenly quiet and uncertain that Sherlock snaps to face him, frowning. Mycroft gives him a pained look from under his eyebrows, rain on his face. “Save him, Sherlock.”
Sherlock nods, grave, and watches him slip into the dark car and speed away.

“Oh, his umbrella,” Molly bursts out. The ambulance and its escort have parked.

“It’s alright, Molly, he meant for you to keep it,” Sherlock says absently. “He knew you had no other, had not driven yourself here, and would be drenched by the time you reached the tube.” His eyes follow the car as it rounds the corner. “Even the worst of us are sometimes stricken with moments of chivalry.”
The flat is quiet. The paramedics have gone, the armed guards have become invisible somewhere on Baker Street. Mrs. Hudson has finally stopped fussing and retreated to her flat. Sherlock smells cinnamon and knows she is relieving anxiety with her customary ritualistic baking. Molly fusses with the makeshift lab in the kitchen.

“You sure you don’t want me to stay? I could assist, let you focus on John, be on hand.”

“Thank you, Molly, no, I’ve already monopolized too much of your time. I’m sure the stiffs are backing up in the morgue.”

“Well, alright. But you text me if anything changes.”

While Sherlock stares out the window, she sterilizes one more set of glassware, wraps back up in her coat and scarf, and gives his shoulder a squeeze as she passes. He catches her hand.

“Molly, truly, thank you. Without your help and clarity these last few days, I think I would have lost my mind.”

Molly grimaces a smile.

“Take care of yourself, too. At least, try to.” She pads away quietly across the carpet, picks up Mycroft’s umbrella, and hurries down the stairs.

Sherlock stands in the sudden silence. He wrinkles his nose – the usual smells of the flat are swirled with the slightly medical pong of hospital antiseptic.

He peeks in again on John, stationed in his room, looking more comfortable in the old pajamas Sherlock took from his house that morning. Detached from all the wires and monitors, he looks as if he’s just nodded off in Sherlock’s bed.

Molly thought the sensation of it would be helpful, make him feel at home, no matter how many times Sherlock insisted nothing ever happened and what’s more, 221B hasn’t been home to John Watson for almost three years.

“Won’t matter,” she’d said with a wise smirk. “It’ll still feel like home to him.”

Sherlock snaps up his bow and rosins it while he paces the bedroom.

“Well then, welcome home, John.”

He pockets the rosin and picks up the violin, settles his chin, and begins to play.

…

Late afternoon light is pooling in the room when Sherlock finally puts the violin down on the bedside table. He stares at his immobile friend for a while, watches the steady rise and fall of his chest, his relaxed face, then sighs.
“Take a rest, John, I’ll just be in the kitchen.”

He’s halfway through the first experiment Molly had dictated when he gets up to check on John. Nothing has changed. He returns to the kitchen, moves a few petri dishes around. Checks on John again. After twenty minutes of this, he roughly pushes the kitchen table down the hall and through the bedroom door, clinking and rattling with the apparatus, and slides it under the window.

“All right, I’m not all that busy.”

An hour later he’s got John propped up on pillows, a towel draped over his chest, experimenting with the best ways to spoon in bone broth so it doesn’t dribble down John’s chin. The first time he reflexively swallows, Sherlock feels triumphant. But when John erupts into a fit of coughing, he nearly falls over with the shock, thinking he’s killed him for sure. It passes. Sherlock’s shaking.

“We haven’t had time to do any experiments today.”

After clearing away “lunch,” he pulls a worn paperback from the duffel he’d brought from John’s house. Perching gingerly at the foot of the bed, he begins to read aloud the first chapter of *The Two Towers*. It had been on John’s night table. After a few paragraphs, Molly’s voice rings in his head.

*Patients in coma have, on occasion, responded positively to familiar stimuli, reassuring touch and voice. Human contact, Sherlock. His brain patterns indicate he is mentally active. He’s reachable. Help him know he’s not alone in there.*

Sherlock looks up from the book, taps his lip as he considers, then slides to sit next to John in the bed. Leaving a few inches between them, he continues to read.

Two chapters in, the words begin to blur and he recalls that he never did sleep last night. He lets the book drop to the blanket, head falling back against the propped-up pillows with an extravagant sigh. He watches John for a long while. He should go back to the experiment, he thinks. He should text Molly to bring over spirulina powder. Maybe he should play again, Bach this time.

Instead, he lifts a tentative hand and, heart racing, places it lightly on John’s shoulder. He almost expects John to flinch at the touch, but he sleeps on. Would John mind?

Sherlock slips into his mind palace and heads directly to John’s wing. He opens the sturdy steamer trunk storing all of the confusing deductions he’s made of John over the years, the collection growing larger of late: certain looks, sentiments expressed, an unexpected touch. It had all been so mixed up with John’s justified anger at the false suicide, the ridiculous wedding planning, and the constant threat of Mary that Sherlock silently struggled to disarm, always playing John’s amiable best man. To be anything other than that would have meant immediate threat to John’s life. Mrs. Watson was very clear about that.

In the perfect, quiet safety of his mind palace, Sherlock briefly rests his forehead against the edge of the chest, letting a bitter relief flood through him. He’s been holding it back for days. It wasn’t right to feel it when he should have been using is brain to save John.

He can feel it now, for a moment. Yes, things are still dire, it’s been fucking terrifying for months – years, really – he was so rarely in control. But now, at least, Mary is no longer the cuckoo in the nest with her fingers around John’s throat, playing Sherlock like a puppet. The cuckoo flown is something to chase, to trap. And he will find her. He has absolutely no doubt.
Rubbing his hands roughly over his face to focus his attention, he pulls out weathered maps and navigation charts from the chest, each one a key to some moment he saw something in John’s behavior and wondered, Does he? He studies the touches John had offered, freely, though always with qualifiers. In particular, the dancing lessons at the flat (educational purposes); the hand on his knee during stag night (inebriated), the hug during his best man’s speech (high emotion). None had made John perceptibly uncomfortable. He decides it’s at least appropriate for him to proceed with light touch.

But there is the… other evidence. Sherlock pauses, then reaches to the bottom of the steamer trunk, unlocks a hidden compartment in the false wooden floor, and takes out a small round object swaddled in soft velvet that’s the precise blue of John’s irises. Protected inside the folds is a smooth glass egg, shot through with wisps of silver-gold, the color of John’s hair in afternoon light. If he didn’t have the artifact, he wouldn’t believe it had happened at all.

Snapping open the egg on a hidden hinge, he unlocks the memory of John at his bedside when it was he lying in hospital, unreachable.

…

The memory of the shooting was fresh, hours old. Had John’s memory begun to degrade by then? It had been too difficult to observe, thanks to the anesthesia... And John had been in a state he’d not witnessed before that made it… difficult to read him.

John had been shattered that night. Sherlock had expected the grief. He had anticipated anger, it was an unavoidable necessity. But the sudden horror of the lie he’d been living coupled with the imminent death of his best friend… who had kept it all from him... Well, it was almost a relief when John had forgotten it all in the morning.

Sherlock had known it was going to be a bad night. That was rather the point. But he wasn’t supposed to get shot. He was supposed to be helping John through the pain, explaining everything, doing better this time, including him so they could finally face it together. He’d wanted to reach out so badly, hold his hand, hold him.

But Sherlock could not even push his eyes open. By some trick of his astounding, ridiculous brain, he could hear everything, watching as the scene was painstakingly recreated in his mind’s eye: John sitting by his head leaning close to him – his voice near, the scent of him strong, still in the same plaid shirt, rumpled now, sweaty, the jumper removed – he vaguely recalled John had used it to stauch his bleeding.

He deduced John’s face to be slick with tears – frequent sniffling and choked breathing – and often buried in his hands, his halting voice muffled. He would have looked exhausted and worn, the anger and worry creasing his face into an older version of himself.

As if afraid to touch him, John had only once lightly brushed his fingertips down the side of Sherlock’s arm where it had rested on the sheet. It had tickled, but he couldn’t even flinch. And his words... Despite the absolute shit-show the night had become, he is grateful to have been left with the artifact of his words. He will cherish them in the years of solitude that undoubtedly lie ahead.

“You should know, Sherlock. When I met you, I was given something amazing. Something precious. Saved my life. But I fled from it. I wanted it so badly, but I was terrified. Jesus, what did it say about me?

And you, one moment you were a heartless sociopathic prick and the next some brilliant,
benevolent creature who could read my mind with a look. I knew I had been given something… but I had no idea what to do with it. I figured I could live that way, long as you were nearby, didn’t matter what it was.

“And then I lost you. I knew then that I’d wasted it. Utterly. I was broken. Worse than before I met you, because then I knew what I was missing. Tried moving on. God, what a bloody mess… couldn’t even do that properly. I thought she was (his voice cracks and the words are choked, almost silent)… thought she was safe.

“And when you returned, Sherlock, what that did to me… You watch what you wish for, you just might get it. So yea, I got you back. But too late. All wrong. I should never have gone on with the wedding, but I was angry, so terribly angry… How could I ever forgive you for putting me through those two years? I made myself believe it was better this way.

“It wasn’t. Even if this whole nightmare was what I’d actually thought it was. Marrying a nice woman, starting a family. I’d botched it. Knew it on my wedding day, bloody hell the things you said, your face…

“When you were away… I should have been helping you, should have been with you, Sherlock. (A long pause. He wipes his face, takes deep breaths as he’s been taught in therapy, and when he speaks again there is iron in his voice.)

“Because it’s not the damn danger, Sherlock. It’s not, though we both know we love it. We’re more than that, always have been. We’re like some equation that doesn’t make any sense in its parts, then you put it together and it’s… it’s right. (Deep intake of breath) I realized, of course, much too late. It’s always been you, Sherlock. I... I love you.”

There had been noticeable changes on the monitors, but John had been too focused on his thoughts, too exhausted, too certain of Sherlock’s unconsciousness to notice.

“There. Said it. Case you hadn’t deduced it already. So. Please, will you do this for me? Another miracle. Wake up. Be okay. For me. So I can try to get the courage to say this to your face one day. I can’t make this mistake again, Sherlock. Christ, if you’ll even have me…”

Lestrade had come round the next morning for John’s statement and found him asleep in a chair by Sherlock’s bedside. John had woken confused, the details of the shooting blurring, jumbled, no memory of how he’d gotten to the hospital or what had occurred after. The nurse attending to Sherlock took pity on him and filled him in on Sherlock’s condition. Lestrade attributed it to shock. Sherlock knew better.

John had called Mary from Sherlock’s room, bewildered, apologizing profusely for not coming home — god, she must have been so worried — gushing his relief to her that Sherlock had lived through the night, had become stable. When he rang off, he’d said, ‘Love you, too.’

…

Sherlock snaps the egg closed, carefully rewrapping the velvet and sealing it deep inside the chest. Then he slams the lid down hard.

Slipping out of his mind palace, he very carefully shifts across the bed, closing the gap between them, and eases himself against John’s side. He stays like that a moment, stiff and terrified. Gradually, the sound of John’s steady breathing lulls him, the warmth of him soothing. He drops his head to John’s chest and listens to his heartbeat. He is asleep in moments.
Sherlock wakes with a jolt. The room is dark. Sitting up carefully, he realizes he’s been asleep with his head on John for hours, drooled on his shirtfront a bit. He can tell from the pitch and frequency of the traffic on Baker Street that it’s about 2am.

“John,” his voice is gravelly from sleep, “I’ll trust you didn’t mind too much that I kipped on you instead of a pillow.” He scrubs the cobwebs from his eyes, pushes up from the bed and shuffles to the door. While he has woken marginally refreshed, the human contact does not appear to have changed John in the slightest.

Outside the bedroom door, he finds a tray on the floor holding a cold pot of tea and a covered dish that smells of curried chicken. He gives it a small smile. Though his stomach growls traitorously, he steps past it, returning minutes later from the bathroom with a basin of soapy warm water, a soft sponge, a clean towel, and a change of absorbent pants for John. He settles his nursing gear by the bed and considers John for several moments, fingers nervously tapping his thighs.

This is clinical.

“As I’ve had to use the loo, I’ll trust you’re in need of some… refreshment.” He pulls on fresh latex gloves and sighs. “I’m sorry, John, but you will need to suffer more of my trainee fumbling.”

221B, 3 days later

Sherlock is hunched over his microscope in the bedroom. He’s surrounded by petri dishes and slides, beakers of solutions, scraps of paper covered in his spidery writing and formulae, Mrs. Hudson’s empty dishes. He’s wearing his blue dressing gown tied over his oldest, softest pajamas, hair sticking out at odd angles from frequent tugging.

Suddenly he pushes back from the microscope and slams his fists on the table, the glass apparatus clinking in protest. Dressing gown swirling, he spins out of the chair, knocking it over with a clatter, and strides to the door. Just as he’s about to storm out, he notices John from the corner of his eye, lying ever-motionless in his bed. He freezes, hands pulling at his hair, and stares at him, trying to bring his breathing under control.

His mobile pings a pre-set alarm, jolting him out of his thoughts. Running his hands over his face, he scrubs at his eyes and sniffs loudly.

It’s time to take care of John.

“Sorry, that one didn’t work, either. Time for a break, hm? I’ll get your lunch.” He ducks into a small, portable refrigerator that’s been moved next to his dresser, reaches past a rack with several stoppered vials of blood, and removes two jars. One is a container of the bone broth Mrs. Hudson simmered up for him, and another holds a thin, chlorophyll-green slurry he’d made of spirulina and pureed vegetables.

With the deft actions of an experienced care provider, he plucks up a short pipette from the lab table (the spoon was inefficient), balances all of his containers in the crook of his left arm, and scoops up the fallen chair as he walks past, settling it with a bang (no response).
Sherlock deposits his jars on the bedside table, which also hold his violin and bow, and *The Return of the King*, which he began reading aloud that morning. Bending over, he gently slides his arm under John’s back and shifts him up onto several pillows, then scoots next to him on the bed, sitting close so he can support John’s head. After several small feedings each day, he’s gotten quite good at this.

Though he has taken immaculate care of John, Sherlock hasn’t changed his own clothing, hasn’t slept since the first nap, hasn’t shaved, has hardly left this room and not once left the flat. He’s been subsisting on the baked goods and pots of tea Mrs. Hudson leaves outside his bedroom door. Despite his original plan to only eat what John is eating to better monitor his needs, he had noted the increasing protests of his transport, his caloric need obviously more demanding than one who is sleeping soundly all day. He takes a blueberry muffin from his dressing gown pocket and eats it in three bites.

Propping the broth between his knees, Sherlock leans toward John.

“All right John,” he says firmly. “It’s time to eat.” Delicately, he pipettes cool broth through John’s lips, waiting for the reflexive swallow before adding more. When he’s painstakingly fed him a half-pint of the broth, he moves to his green drink. John grimaces in his sleep at the taste, which Sherlock finds incredibly endearing. “There now, see it as motivation. Wake up from this and I’ll order you tamarind duck as a reward.” He absently wipes John’s chin.

He wonders, for perhaps the thousandth time, at this utterly vulnerable version of John before him who would loathe to be the subject of such care, could barely stand it when Sherlock brought him mint tea for his colds. John would just as soon solve this problem with a hare-brained sprint across London, gun tucked out of sight.

While Sherlock misses that, *pines* for that, the deep aches in his own recovering chest tell him how unlikely that’s going to be for the foreseeable future. If John wakes—*when he wakes*—will he ever forgive Sherlock for seeing him so weak? For becoming so weak himself? Will he drift away if their days of danger together are subdued to accommodate an invalid detective?

Doesn’t much matter. Once he understands everything, he won’t be staying.

He pushes the thoughts into a shadowy corner of his mind palace, stashes the jars back in the tiny fridge and pulls out a black vinyl case holding rudimentary physician’s tools.

He takes John’s temperature, checks his blood pressure and pulse, studies his fluttering eyelids—*evidence of REM sleep, interesting*—taps reflexes, and notes everything in a small blue book. Then he rolls John onto his side to take the pressure off of his back and surreptitiously reaches for the IV. He hasn’t attempted it since the first day. Once John is settled, he tests the sensitivity of the bruise on his chin where he had lashed out. But signs of dehydration are becoming evident, even with the liquidy feedings. He has to risk another try.

“John, you’re a doctor, you know how important it is that I keep you hydrated. So just put up with this for a bag’s worth and I’ll take it away. Can you do that for me? Please?”

Snapping on pale blue latex gloves and dabbing at John’s wrist with an alcohol swab, he deftly inserts the IV and efficiently tapes it onto John’s skin. John frowns in his sleep and begins to roll roughly. Sherlock tenses.

“All right, let’s not have a repeat of last time, John, I don’t need you to wake up to me with a broken nose.”

John continues to struggle, as if wrestling something in a nightmare. Sherlock watches him,
biting his lip, deliberating. With a quick nod, he quickly tosses the gloves onto the floor and slides onto the bed behind John, wrapping his arms around his chest and holding him tightly, speaking soothingly into his ear. John fights for only a moment more. As soon as Sherlock has pressed close to him, John gives a deep shudder and calms.

Heart racing, Sherlock marvels at this immediate change, marvels that he is holding John. Though he was motivated by purely medical need, the warm contact sends bolts of electricity through his chest and his breath comes fast and shallow. Would he object? Be angry?

*Show him he's not alone.*

It’s always been you, Sherlock.

He thinks of the lazy afternoons when they’d loll around the flat, reading through the papers over a long breakfast and mugs of tea, just saying whatever came to mind or nothing at all. He misses those days with a painful longing. He thinks John does, too.

As the bag of saline empties into John’s body, Sherlock starts to talk. He tells him about old cases, about the 200 different kinds of ash and ways to discern them from one another, just to annoy him. He rambles about his childhood, his time at the university, a trip he took to Morocco, a dog he once loved.

The IV bag is empty. He hesitantly gets up and considers taking the opportunity to get another. John stirs and frowns in his sleep and Sherlock absently squeezes his shoulder as he stands.

“It’s okay, John. I’m coming back.” He replaces the bag quickly – John is already starting to stir again – and curls back up with him on the warm spot on the blankets, this time less anxiously. Sherlock settles his chin above John’s head and, while rummaging in his mind palace through his old brain chemistry experiments, immediately dozes off.

He wakes with a startle to find the second IV bag empty and John still perfectly calm. Lifting himself heavily out of the bed, he pulls on new gloves and removes the IV, rubs the skin with an alcohol swab, and covers the wound with a small plaster. John does not stir.

*Well, we cracked that one just in the nick of time.*

Pushing the IV stand off to the side, Sherlock’s mobile pings an alarm again. He sighs.

“John, as ever, I humbly ask your forgiveness for this encroachment of your personal space, but needs must.”

Peeling back the covers, Sherlock finds the absorbent pants need changing and handles the cleaning and new application with minimal fumbling and only a few muttered curses directed at the adhesive tape. The first time, in his terror and haste, he’d put it on backwards and gotten a sodden mess of sheets for his trouble. He thinks gratefully of John’s Iranian nurse who did this so effortlessly. *Perhaps the children were good training.* Sherlock’s hands freeze as a memory bursts through his thoughts.

*The baby.*

What will become of it? Will Mary terminate the pregnancy? There’s still time. Or will she keep it as the spoils of her conquest? Retain it for future blackmail? He fumbles with the tapes, frowning. He can postulate all he likes about the child’s position in his game of chess with Mary, but the simple realization sits firmly in his mind, shocking him. *I must find that child. For it’s sake. For*
When everything seems to be correctly attached, he gently tugs a fresh pair of his own ancient pajamas onto John. They’re too big for him. This clinical familiarity with John’s skin feels natural now, though certain thoughts betray his professional demeanor. John’s skin is softer than it has any right to be.

He should run another test on the blood samples, but exhaustion is prickling at the edges of his eyes and dulling his thoughts. It’s the middle of the afternoon on the third day. If John doesn’t wake, they’ll relocate him at midnight to the secure facility Mycroft has selected. At his own insistence, Sherlock will not be permitted to know its whereabouts until they apprehend Mary and determine the extent of her network, in case John is found and used again as a pressure point. He has no idea how long that could take and it galls him, how she can push them apart even after she’s fled.

He turns away from John, arms crossed tightly, hands white-knuckled. Failure. Idiot. You couldn’t do it. Couldn’t find the pattern. What an absolute fool he’d been to believe that some pretty violin music and unrequested snuggling would bring him back. They’re smarter than you. Just accept that you’ve been well and truly beaten this time.

“I’m so sorry, John. I tried to keep you safe.” He can’t keep it at bay anymore. “I failed you.” The grief washes into his mind palace in a flood of thick, black water.

Sherlock lets the tears fall, lets his chest shake with sobs. Serves me right, my turn to know what it’s like being left behind.

Gradually, the wave of crying subsides. He rubs his face on the sleeve of his dressing gown, and even though there is no IV-related distress to justify it, he slides next to John on the bed again. Might be the last time. It still worries his heart to be holding John without his permission, but he can’t stop himself. The smell of him, the firm curves of his chest and arms, the scratch of his cheek stubble against his own. He is home.

If this is wrong of me, John, I’m so terribly sorry. But if I must send you off, let me do it this way.

John, as ever, has no reaction, though Sherlock imagines that if he were to try anything like this with a lucid John Watson, he’d likely flinch away and reaffirm his not-gayness while magnetically pulling toward him with his eyes.

“Oh John, why don’t you just wake up so we can be idiots together and flounder through this mess.” Burrowing his head next to John’s on the pillow, he holds him tightly. Though he’s bone-weary, sleep won’t come.

“John, do you remember when we used to play Rock Paper Scissor? We would always tie, the variables were too simple for me not to anticipate. So I added ridiculous items like dynamite and earthquake. To make you laugh. I miss your laugh. My eldest brother… he was a chemist, too, I’ve never told you. Saw the aptitude in me before the others… he added Catalysts to the game, two-handed combinations…” he rambles on.

“Please,” he whispers into John’s ear. “Fight this. Wake up. Come back to me.” His tears fall onto John’s skin as he plummets headlong into dark, overpowering sleep.

…
221B, the present

Sherlock finally stops talking. He’s been far away, living the memory again as he’s shared it with John, every bit of it, and comes back to himself now with a startle and a sharp breath. He ducks his head, afraid of what he will see when he deduces John’s expression.

But before he can even turn, John’s fingertips are at his stubbled chin, gently pivoting Sherlock’s face toward his own. Confused, Sherlock lets him, locking onto his eyes, ocean-blue irises eclipsed by wide pupils.

John has a pained expression, his eyes darting back and forth between Sherlock’s, reading… what? Is he about to tell him how Sherlock selfishly jeopardized his well-being? That he overstepped every boundary? That he has no memory of his confession? Sherlock can feel his heart beating in his throat, sees John’s pulse in his neck. Is this a new side-effect of the drug? Should he take his blood pressure?

Leaning toward him, cupping his jaw, John says very quietly,

“I remember everything.”

Sherlock freezes. All mental functions come to a crashing halt. He can feel a strong exhale across his cheek just before the stubble of their thin beards rasp together. And then John’s lips are on his own. Moth-wing soft.

Vesuvius erupts in Sherlock’s mind, sending molten lava cascading through his chest and into his limbs.

...Oh.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone for your kudos and comments!
At John’s kiss, the steamer trunk in Sherlock’s mind palace bursts open.

The papers fly out, igniting, scraps of burning map floating recklessly through the air. A gale is blowing through the corridors, urging the fire to burn brighter.

John eases away and places a hand onto Sherlock’s chest, over his healing scar. He can feel Sherlock’s heartbeat drumming against his palm, eyes shining, burning into him. John’s voice is rough, quiet, the breath of his words soft on Sherlock’s face.

“You kept me alive – you cared for me.” John ducks his head. “Because. What I said. It’s the same. For you.”

Sherlock slides his hand over John’s on his chest, squeezing it hard, his voice barely more than a breath.

“Obviously.”

John’s eyes fly up to meet his again, blinking rapidly.

The steamer trunk is consumed in flame. Sherlock swiftly closes the distance between their faces and John gives a surprised little gasp against his mouth. Sherlock folds his arms around him, slides his hands up John’s back, over the nape of his neck. He cups the curve of his skull and pulls him closer. John runs his hands into Sherlock’s tangled, unkempt curls and melts into him.

Vines are growing through the mind palace windows. Red-petaled hibiscus sprawl open, crowding out Sherlock’s thoughts, silencing his deductions, giving him only the raw information of his senses: the precise slick, soft texture of their lips together; the fast rhythm of John’s heartbeat against his as their chests press; the sharp enamel click of tooth-on-tooth as they each surge ahead in the same instant, the resulting wince and chuckle into one another’s mouths. Sherlock is vaguely aware as damp cheeks press together that at least one of them is crying.

There are so many kisses woven into this first tangle of lips and breath. The kiss they should have shared in the entryway of 221B the night Sherlock cured John’s limp. It would have tasted of laughter. Kisses in the backs of cabs. Kisses after adrenaline-fueled chases. Kisses to quiet nightmares; after brilliant deductions; after a life saved; after a subway bomb was disarmed and a bitter lie forgiven. Kisses to smooth harsh words; kisses when John left for the surgery, and more when he returned home.

The steamer trunk is gone, reduced to glowing coals and ash. Only the glass egg rests in the embers, sooty, a web of fine cracks obscuring its surface.

He remembers.

A cold shiver runs through him, throwing cloud shadows across the library windows in his mind. His lips slow. John pulls back to read his eyes, brow furrowing with concern.

“Okay?”
Sherlock’s hands slide from John’s back to hold either side of his face, precious. His eyes try to swallow John, the way he is now, sleep-rumpled, creased with weariness and worry, the grief of the last few months –years– in every shadow and hollow, but bright-eyed, glowing, all John. Sherlock’s chest aches with a painful joy.

*This.* It sits raw and new and fragile in their trembling hands. He can’t shake the feeling he would get as a child when he’d catch some small, brilliant wild thing and know he had to let go for its own good.

“John—” he burrows his face into his shoulder, clings to him. John nuzzles his neck and rubs his back, combs his fingers through his hair while their hearts thunder together between them.

“Sherlock…” John gently pulls Sherlock off of his shoulder, presses their foreheads together. “I know my mind’s been toyed with a lot. I’ve been half-mad trying to make sense of things lately. But you need to know what I have never lost. What has never once faded from my mind.”

He slides his hands up to hold Sherlock’s face firmly, tenderly, his thumbs lightly stroking the damp skin below his eyes.

“Sherlock. I love you. I have always loved you.”

Sherlock inhales hard, a sob catching in his throat. The egg shatters.


John squeezes his eyes shut tight and smiles broadly, tears making tracks down his cheeks. He sniffs, his voice rough.

“I’m sorry… I’m so sorry it took me so long. To tell you.”

Sherlock surges in to kiss him, to stop John’s words. He can’t hear them, John cannot ever be the one apologizing. He presses kisses down John’s neck to the soft skin above his collar bone and then simply holds him, fiercely, their heartbeats slowly calming.

In the cooling embers of what was once the steamer chest, thin green sprouts begin to push up from the glass shards between the coals, oblivious to their heat. They twine together, becoming thicker and interwoven, growing rapidly until they form the trunk of a tree in the center of the library, branches spiraling outward, brushing against the ceiling. Folded into the living wood are small artifacts, among them shards of a silver-spun glass egg; small blue stones that hold the exact texture of John’s kisses; acorns that carry the precise rhythm of his heart; the leaves patter together, whispering the words John has just spoken. Within the very whorl of the wood is the singed encryption of seven years’ buried love suddenly, fiercely ignited.

Wrapped tightly in Sherlock’s arms, head tucked into his collarbone, John begins to giggle.

“I um, hope it won’t spoil the moment, but I have a tremendous need for the loo and... I’m not sure I can stand up just yet. I’d rather not have to use this oversized nappy I just realized I’m wearing.” Sherlock cracks an unexpected bark of laughter, his thundercloud of melancholy receding.

Chuckling, Sherlock kisses his forehead and eases him off the pillows. John laboriously pulls his legs out from under the blankets, leaning into Sherlock’s support. He smoothly threads his arm around John’s back and helps him stand, taking his weight.

“I’ve got you.”
“I know you do.” John leans into him heavily, his smile tired, grateful. “Christ, I’m a wreck, sore all over.”

“Just take it slow, you haven’t walked for several days and the drug has done its damage. Your strength will return.”

It takes a long, shuffling few minutes to traverse across the bedroom and down the hall. When they arrive at the bathroom, a monumental feat in itself, Sherlock tenses and turns away as John unties the pajamas and thumps heavily onto the toilet seat.

“Not gonna bother with standing,” he mutters, breathing heavily. Sherlock edges away. Though he has seen literally every inch of John’s skin over the last three days, has been invited to hold him, just tasted him, leaped headlong into something with him, he bolts for the hall.

“I’ll let you be, then, just call me when—”

“Please, stay, if you don’t mind. I could actually faint.” John glances up and grins warmly at Sherlock’s nervousness. “It’s fine, Sherlock, I don’t care. Nothing about me needs to be hidden from you.” He holds out his hand and Sherlock takes it, lets John pull him back to perch tensely on the edge of the bathtub across from him, their knees a few inches apart. John leans almost double, rubbing his temples with a tired sigh.

“I thought you said this bastard headache would go away after twenty minutes.”

Sherlock wrinkles his nose sympathetically.

“Perhaps I underestimated. Your overall experience has been, on the whole, more severe than my own.” He hesitates a moment, then places his hands onto John’s bowed head and begins to massage the scalp, fingertips making firm, circular strokes down his neck and across his shoulders. John groans and leans into his hands. After several minutes, he wobbles reflexively and Sherlock flinches to catch him, realizing he’s just drifted off. John pops up, soft-eyed and bleary.

“Soh–sorry. Did I fall ‘sleep?” He scowls, yawning so widely his jaw cracks. “Again?”

“Let’s get you up, John, and back to bed.”

“No, no more bed. Couch?”

Sherlock nods, smiling at his soft, innocent request, like a child home sick from school. He helps him stand and hovers nearby, holding a shoulder firmly. He watches him go through the mundane absolutes of washing his hands, brushing his teeth, smiling fondly when he splashes water on his head, scrubbing at his face and making his hair stick up at uneven angles. These simple acts, but they are different now, precious. How could it be that only this morning, John was unconscious in his bed, lost to him? And now he is, somehow impossibly, his?

_Because you pulled him from the well. Long ago._

Sherlock clears his throat, rubbing at his eyes again.

“When you have a bit more strength I imagine a bath would be refreshing, but rest assured you’re quite… um. Clean.”

John just chuckles and shakes his head.

“Thank you, my dear nurse.” He leans into Sherlock as he half-guides-half-carries him down
the hall, the pajamas baggy around his ankles, heading to the sitting room. Sherlock’s spent so much
time in the bedroom these last days that it’s relatively orderly. He shoves the box of medical supplies
off the couch to make room for John, who eases down with a weary groan and plops back against
the cushions.

“Slept for nearly a week and can’t keep my eyes open. Famished, though. Should eat
something first.”

Sherlock suddenly recalls the covered dish Mrs. Hudson brought, and quickly retrieves it from
his makeshift bedroom lab. Though it’s gone cold, he uncovers it to find shepherd’s pie. Both of their
stomachs growl. Sherlock plucks two clean forks from the chaos in the kitchen and joins John on the
couch.

Sherlock tries sitting with their thighs brushing, which earns him a warm smile from John who
leans in to press a soft kiss to his lips. Moths, their antennae furry, rush from his belly into his throat,
pushing a lopsided grin onto his face. He can’t stop looking at John, so familiar and rumpled, but
shining. He passes him a fork, balances the dish on their legs, and they dig in. After a few bites, John
squeezes his eyes shut.

“Mrs. Hudson is an absolute saint. This is the best thing I’ve ever eaten in my entire life. To
think I could have never woken up and missed eating this on our first proper date.”

Sherlock’s breath hitches. He ducks his eyes, staring intently at the pie, his smile growing to
ridiculous proportions.

Chapter End Notes

Enormous thanks to those of you reading along, leaving kudos and taking a moment to
comment. It is so exciting to share this with you. I have literally fallen back in love with
writing through this project. Your support means worlds.

Special thanks to PatPrecieux for your incredibly kind feedback as each chapter is
posted! The phoenix egg is all thanks to your clever observations of what I didn’t even
realize was being written.

And yea, Sherlock just grew a Totoro tree for John in his mind palace.

These husbands...
Lost in the Fog

John drops his fork into the dish and flops back onto the couch with a contented sigh.

“I’m stuffed, you finish that.” He rubs his stomach absently, grimacing. “I should start slow with this rich food after living off of your concoctions.”

Sherlock moves the half-eaten pie to the coffee table.

“Tea?”

John balks at him, grinning.

“You sure that drug didn’t rewire your brain?”

Sherlock returns the grin and rolls his eyes.

“I… like taking care of you, John.”

John watches him quietly for a moment.

“Tea would be. Good. Ta.” He hugs the union jack pillow to his chest, watching with a sleepy, fond grin as Sherlock putters around the kitchen, uncovering the kettle from a disorderly pile of lab equipment on the counter. The trip to and from the bathroom has drained him. As he listens vaguely to the sounds of Sherlock filling the kettle, the traffic on Baker Street, and Mrs. Hudson’s hoovering below, his eyelids droop.

…

“John?”

Startling awake, John finds Sherlock sitting close, a hand on his shoulder. The kettle is hissing on the burner. An array of basic medical equipment is spread out on the table, Sherlock smiling apologetically.

“John, before you sleep, I’d like to have a new data set to compare to your resting state. If you’ll just allow me, it won’t take but a few minutes.”

John nods, bemused. Sherlock shines a light in his eyes to check his dilation, then pulls out a stethoscope. John chuckles.

“So, I take a nap for a week and you suddenly earn your medical degree?”

“Really, John it’s just basic procedures,” he says, half-distracted by his checkup. “I observed your doctors. And I’ve watched you for years. I did my research, I know what I’m looking for.”

“Clearly.” He watches with a small, surprised smile as Sherlock checks his reflexes and takes his blood pressure. Popping in the earpieces, he presses the stethoscope to John’s chest.

“Wait.” John says quietly, “like this.” He gently shifts Sherlock’s hand holding the stethoscope to rest slightly higher. “So you can hear the superior vena cava.” He lets his hand stay on Sherlock’s a moment and their eyes catch, sparkling. They hold each other’s gaze for a long moment. A bright, snapping heat smolders in John’s chest, his accelerated heartbeat pounding through the stethoscope.
Sherlock sucks in a breath, eyes averting and brow furrowing as he tries to focus. After listening to heart and chest and taking John’s temperature, Sherlock sweeps the equipment into a vinyl bag and becomes absorbed making notations in a little blue book, comparing and cross-comparing rows of data.

“Well, doctor,” John says into the silence, still a little wobbly from the wave of volcanic activity in his chest. “Your diagnosis?”

Sherlock responds in the distracted way John knows indicates he is deeply in thought.

“The persistence of the headache is an anomaly I need to track. We’ll monitor it hourly with a basic pain scale. Your blood pressure is still too low, pupil dilation normal. Pulse a bit erratic, though that may be expected given our… circumstances.” He twitches his eyes up to John’s and gives him a small smile before returning to his book. “Appetite and excretions normal. I trust that in another 24 to 36 hours your strength will begin to return.”

“Ah, good, so I’ll live?”

Sherlock focuses on his notebook, eyebrows scrunched in thought, but smiles.

“Yes, to a ripe old age if I have anything to do with it.”

John hugs the pillow again, smiling sleepily, watching him work. His eyes slide to Sherlock’s jaw and the smile drops. Sitting up quickly, he gently tilts Sherlock’s face toward the light.

“John? What– don’t–”

“Hush. Sherlock, how did you get that bruise on your chin? I can see it under your beard.”

Sherlock tucks his chin, pulling away.

“It’s nothing.”

John lets him retreat into his notes, considering him.

Oh. Oh, no.

“When you tried to administer the IV. You said… Oh god, Sherlock– I’m so sorry–”

“You were deeply asleep, John, no need to apologize. You weren’t aware of your actions.”

Wasn’t I? Dream shadows crowd his mind, chest clenching with a deep ache. John watches Sherlock hunched over the notebook. He’s pulled away from him.

“Maybe not here. But. In a nightmare. I hit you. Many times.” They had been in a morgue. Sherlock was high, brandishing a scalpel for some reason. John had been so angry, couldn’t stop hitting and hitting him. He can remember Sherlock’s battered face, the bewildered, broken trust in his eyes. John shakes his head to free himself of the awful vision.

“As I keep saying, John, not your fault. I’ll be fine. I’m sure I had it coming.”

“Don’t,” John says, with heat. “You didn’t. Sherlock.” He pulls the book from Sherlock’s hands and sets it firmly on the table, swivels to face him. Sherlock’s eyes dart to his, wary. He forces his voice to be calm. “Look. Things have been… more than confusing. And. We’re in a new place, you and I. So let me be perfectly clear. This,” he gently touches Sherlock’s chin, “is not okay.” John bites his lip. “It’s not like it’s the first time. When you came back...”
“You were angry. I gave you a terrible shock. You felt I had... abandoned you.”

“Jesus, Sherlock,” John snaps. “That doesn’t justify beating you. Yes, we’ve been through hell. But I never get a pass for hurting you. Let me save that for any bastard foolish enough to threaten you.” He presses his lips together tightly. “I have… too much anger. I’ve been working on it. In my therapy. But it’s one thing to grapple with it when I’m awake.” He sucks in his breath, looking up at the ceiling, a blush rising up his neck. “I mean… what if I have a nightmare while I’m in bed next to you. I could hurt you in my sleep. Again.”

Sherlock’s cheeks redden, his scowl falling away. He blinks rapidly.

“You. Really want to sleep. With me?”

John’s stomach flips.

“Course I do,” he says softly. “Honestly, starting today I don’t ever want to sleep without you.”

Sherlock sways as if by the force of John’s words.

“If—” John falters, “you want that, too, I mean.”

Sherlock stares at him for a very long moment, his face a perplexed mask. John feels like he’s crumbling inside. *Idiot. Too much. Too fast.* But suddenly Sherlock startles, expelling a huff of breath he’s been holding.

“Sherlock, look, I’m sor—”

“–I do.”

“Oh. Um. Right. Good.” Relief floods through him.

“John, if my limited experiments indicate anything, it is that your close proximity to me was very effective in reducing your agitation during REM sleep. I should like to test this hypothesis further.”

“That, Sherlock, was almost romantic.” He shakes his head, chuckling. “I suppose we’ll need to keep a chart by the bed to track how often your spooning soothes me.”

“I’m a bit out of practice.” Sherlock’s hands fidget.

“You mean… sleeping next to someone? Or, other bedroom… activities?”

“Yes.”


Sherlock gives him an incredulous stare. “John, you’ve been married for two months, a baby on the way. Had a string of relationships. I don’t think our levels of expertise can be fairly compared.”

“Well, that was with women, wasn’t it?”

They startle as the kettle begins to whistle in earnest.

“I’ll just. Um. Tea.” Sherlock darts to the kitchen, casting a look back at John as he goes,
tripping on the carpet. He fumbles through the dishes in the sink, extracting two mugs, and busies himself washing them.

So much for taking it slow, John marvels. This side of Sherlock, it’s still so mysterious to him. What is he comfortable with, what questions should he be asking? But something keeps pulling his thoughts away, nagging at him like a burr.

Sherlock making tea… When did he last see him making tea? His head pulses with a fierce ache. He winces, frowning, and rubs at his temples. Sherlock has frozen at the kitchen counter, watching John intently. His hands hover over the steaming teapot, dangling the teabags.

“You’re remembering.” Sherlock’s voice is a quiet rumble. John nods, looking pale and stricken. Sherlock steeps the teabags, adds milk, and brings their mugs to the couch. John takes his gratefully, cradling the hot mug as if it could keep him afloat. Sherlock sits close, watchful, taking careful sips.

…

Long moments pass. Steam wafts up from their mugs. John stares into the milky swirl slowly spinning on the surface of his tea. He huffs a sigh.

“Things keep coming back. I want to tell you, but I don’t know where the holes are, what else could be missing.”

“We’ll go through it together, John. Are you rested enough for this? We could wait–”

“No.” John juts his chin. “I want it clear. I’ve been too long in the dark. It was awful, waking up in the hospital like that, no earthly idea how I’d gotten there. My heart nearly stopped when I looked over and saw you in the bed, so pale, all hooked up and dead to the world.”

Sherlock studies John as he speaks, monitoring the direction of his gaze. It indicates the lobe he’s accessing for each memory – imagined or recalled, emotional or visual. He notes the building tension of the muscles around John’s eyes, nostrils flaring, the tendons of his neck straining sharply. The old tremor rattles his hand and nearly spills his tea. Sherlock deftly takes the mug, sets them both on the table, and folds John’s hands into his own. They’re warm from the mug and tremble in his grasp.

“Take a deep breath, John. Twice you’ve been prevented from facing these memories. We do this together now, as we should have from the start.”

John nods tensely. He sucks in a deep breath, visibly relaxing his shoulders. When he can speak again, his voice is calmer.

“A nurse was checking on you, when Lestrade woke me. She came and held my hand, said you’d pulled through, long road ahead and all that, and I was…” he laughs bitterly. “I was a lucky man to have my partner still alive. Said I should take you on a proper holiday. She thought…”

“Yes, I’m sure she did.”

“Course she did. Everyone does.” John glowers.

Sherlock peers his eyebrows at John, whose scowl warms into a sheepish smile.
“I got there, eventually.”

“You always do.” Sherlock takes John’s hand, trembling less now, and brings it to his lips to brush with a kiss.

“Unfortunately, I didn’t take too well to hearing it, then. I started to yell a bit. Wasn’t good for me to wake up, finding you like that, without any idea of how it had happened....”

“Tell me what you remember.”

...

Bart’s, 1 month ago

“John, look at me, John.” Greg is peering into his face, hand on his shoulder. John’s chest is heaving. The bed sheets are clenched in his fists. He’s vaguely aware the nurse has fled. “Right, now just calm down, John, you’re at Bart’s, Sherlock’s been shot, touch and go for a bit, but he’s okay. You can see, right there, he’s breathing.”

“Shot? Jesus, Greg, who?” John shakily releases the bedclothes and folds his arms tightly to control the tremor in his hand. Lestrade considers him, confused.

“See, John, I was rather hoping you’d be able to tell me, seeing as you were there.”

“What? Christ Greg I…” John looks from Sherlock to Lestrade, bewildered, and thumps back into the chair wearily. “I remember going to Magnusson’s, trailing Sherlock there. Something he was doing for a case, said I mustn’t come, so I…”

“Went anyway. Right, ‘course. Not like Sherlock to leave you behind.” Greg leans against the wall, arms crossed, eyebrows knit. “Can you remember anything from when you were at Magnusson’s?”

John stares into empty space, eyes darting rapidly as he searches desperately for something in his memory, but a dense fog has filled his mind obscuring every landmark. He squeezes his eyes shut and bends almost double in the chair, fingers raking his hair as if he could pry the thoughts out of his skull. He groans, long and pained. Lestrade watches, eyes wrinkling with concern.

“John, mate, what is it, what do you remember–”

John pushes himself up with a sharp intake of breath. His eyes settle on Sherlock. When he finally finds his voice, it’s barely a whisper.

“That’s just it. There’s nothing. I... it’s just. Gone.”

“What’s gone?”

“The whole bloody night.” John flops back in the chair, shaking his head slowly. “It’s there, and then, it just stops. Like an eraser worked on my mind. I walk up to the security monitor at Magnusson’s private office. Janine rings me up, I go up the elevator. She gives me a peck on the cheek and tells me they’re upstairs, go on up, thinks I’m part of it, heads back to her desk. I walk
through a big sitting room. There’s this awful red rug on the floor. Then… I wake up here. But, jesus, Greg…” He squeezes his eyes shut, and when he opens them they’re wet. “Something horrible happened. I can feel it in my gut.” He struggles to hold back his tears as he watches Sherlock, unconscious. “What in god’s name happened to him, Greg? Why can’t I remember?”

Lestrade puts a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. John doesn’t shrug it off.

“Likely the shock’s blocking it, seen it before.”

John’s face twists into a defensive scowl.

“Greg, when I was in Afghanistan I saw some truly grisly things happen to people I cared about. I never had shock amnesia. I’ve seen Sherlock plummet off this bloody rooftop and I remember every damned detail. Much as I’d like to erase them.”

“All of it, ‘cept for the bit when you say you got knocked out.”

John’s eyes snap to him suspiciously,

“Are you implying you think this has happened before? I got knocked down and bloody hit my head, just blacked out for a minute. The rest of it’s all still there, Greg. Horribly so.”

“Alright, alright, I’m just trying to find a pattern, that is my job, you know.” Greg holds up his hands in surrender. “See, the paramedics say when they got there, Magnusson was out cold on the floor, holding a gun, same one that shot Sherlock.”

John blinks rapidly as he digests this information.

“You were with him,” he points at Sherlock with his chin. “Doing your best to keep him alive. Came with him in the ambulance.” He gives John a quizzical smile. “You really don’t remember?”

“I… I don’t. What about Janine?”

“Doesn’t know a thing. Said she let you in, went back to her desk, played a few rounds of Bubble Quest – timestamps on the door’s security camera and her mobile record confirm it – then next thing she knows, you’re yelling for her, call 999 and all that. I tell you, John, it looks to me like Magnusson had a row with Sherlock that ended rather badly.”

“Greg, hang on,” John wrinkles his brow. “If Magnusson was unconscious, how could he have shot Sherlock?”

“Judging by his bruising, I’d say he was hit in the head with the butt of a gun. Your weapon was found nearby, but not fired. I’m going to guess that since you weren’t exactly invited, you may not have been directly involved. Maybe you were out of sight, heard things get rough, maybe even heard Sherlock get shot, then jumped in. I imagine you came up behind Magnusson, gave him a good whack, and went to see to Sherlock.” Lestrade shakes his head ruefully. “Pity he’s the victim. He’d have loved sorting this one out.”

Lestrade shuffles his feet, looking awkward.

“Look, John, there would usually be more… questions round something like this, but what with you and Sherlock being so tight, well, I’m just saying. If it weren’t me on the case, if it were some wet behind the ears detective, they’d probably be digging into your amnesia with more… suspicion.”
“Jesus, Greg, you don’t think I—”

“Course not. But it’s a bit dodgy, you must admit.” He gives John a critical once-over. “Look, you’ve just woken. Terrible shock. Take a bit of time, things might start to get clearer.”

“Believe me, Greg, if anything comes back, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Might want to get a doc to have a look at you while you’re here.” Lestrade grips his shoulder. “Don’t expect you’ll be going home anytime soon.”

John nods, then jolts as a realization hits him.

“Christ, Mary.” He gropes frantically in his pocket for his mobile. He finds that she’d texted around 1 in the morning, after he’d fallen asleep at Sherlock’s bedside. He thumbs through them, the texts progressively evolving from worried to furious. “Jesus, I’ll catch hell,” he whispers, getting a sympathetic look from Greg. “We’d had a row, yesterday. She thinks I was out getting drunk.”

“We can vouch for you, mate,” he stage whispers as John thumbs her speed contact, then walks to a far corner of the small hospital room, fumbling through a lame apology.

“Mary, I can explain, well, no, actually I can’t. Something… something terrible happened. To Sherlock. I’m at Bart’s. He’s been shot.”

There is a quiet space as Mary reacts with shock and horror at this news. Sherlock’s monitors quietly beep and hum.

“I know, it’s awful. But, he’s okay, they say he’ll pull through…. Yea, if you want to come, that’d be… good. I need to stay here a while, you understand… yea… Yea. Love you, too.”

He pockets his mobile with a huff.

“Well that coulda’ gone worse,” Greg grimaces a smile and claps him on the shoulder. “You look twice done in, mate, let me bring you a coffee, maybe it’ll help things clear up.” John nods absently, arms folded across his chest, staring hard at Sherlock as Lestrade goes in search of caffeine. John’s left hand clenches against his chest.

“Bit not good, Sherlock.”

…

221B, the present

“Remind me to commend Lestrade on his unusually perceptive observations,” Sherlock huffs. “But as usual, he failed to notice the greatest feature of interest. Shock amnesia in a danger-addicted war veteran, really.”

John smiles a little abashedly.

“I didn’t want to admit it, but it seemed like the only plausible explanation.”
“He should have at least entertained the possibility that another had been there, seen the traces of multiple footprints in the carpet. But of course, he doesn’t notice those things. He did the best he could with the available facts, for an average detective.”

“That almost sounded like a compliment."

“Honestly, John, I was glad of the conclusions he reached, or rather didn’t reach. I didn’t want Scotland Yard knowing anything about my…intentions for visiting Magnusson that night, not while you were under Mary’s watch.”

“Jesus, Sherlock, to think I invited her to the hospital, after what she’d done… that she came.”

“It wasn’t her plan that I should live, John.” Sherlock’s voice is a growl. “She had to make certain her investments were… secure.”

John’s eyes snap up to meet Sherlock’s, stricken, pieces clicking into place.

“I left you alone with her. When I was speaking with your doctor. Jesus, she could have finished you off.”

Sherlock squeezes John’s hands.

“Could have, but didn’t. Might have attracted suspicion if I suddenly died after my promising recovery. I’m still not completely certain she didn’t try – I am known to be indestructible.” John huffs without humor. “It was confusing, then. The morphine made it harder to think. But I could hear her, leaning over me, telling me very clearly that I mustn’t breathe a word of anything to you, to the police. The usual threats. She only turned my morphine pump down a few points just to make herself clear.”

“Christ.”

Sherlock locks eyes with him, grips his hands for emphasis.

“John, it is imperative that I understand how your memories began to come back to you.”

John returns Sherlock’s squeeze, then reclaims his hands, reaching for his tea and sipping it for a while, eyes unfocused, gathering his thoughts.

“It was that feeling in my gut. That something truly horrible had happened. I couldn’t shake that feeling. It got worse around Mary. Much worse. I mean… things with us had been tense. We’d had a terrific row the day I went to your flat, when you were preparing to go to Magnusson’s. You deduced it the moment I walked through the door.”

“John, the signs were rather obvious. Even Mrs. Hudson would have noticed.”

“Yea well, I’d had, um, something on my mind. To say to you that day. Begged off work. Rode the tube round for ages just trying to get up the nerve.”

“But then you got here, and I was rather an arse.”

“I lost all my nerve,” John grimaces. “It had been weeks since I’d been by, and you were well, it seemed like you were unhappy I’d come. You were so distant, so cold. I… just questioned everything. Again. Didn’t think you could possibly want what I wanted. So I didn’t say it, pushed it all down.
“Then when you said I couldn’t come along on the case that night, I just saw… rejection. You’d moved on. Nothing was supposed to change, but it had, and I didn’t know how to get it back. So.” John shrugs, a smug smile blooming. “I followed you.” He sips his tea, the smile dropping. “In hindsight, not the most brilliant of ideas.”

“John, it was,” Sherlock says quickly. “When you came here that day, I admit, I wanted to drive you away. For your safety.” John frowns at him. “But then I saw the opportunity. I took a chance. I hoped you would follow and witness the exchange, but not by my invitation. If Mary found out…”

“Yes, yes, I know that,” John says testily. “Now.” He sighs heavily, taking a long drink of the cooling tea.

“You were describing the return of your memories. A feeling of unease, discord with Mary.”

“It drove me up a bloody wall. Couldn’t maintain a civil conversation with her. Couldn’t sleep in the same bed. I felt a revulsion for my life in that house. I just wanted you to recover. It helped, having your care to focus on. When you invited me to stay here after you left hospital, taking leave from work, well, that was. Good. Very good.” Sherlock nods.

“It was risky, but as long as your amnesia held and I was weak, I felt she would allow it. You were infinitely safer out from under her roof. And I wanted your presence and your skill as a doctor while I recovered.”

“Right, so it was during one of those days I was here, hooking you up for your IV antibiotics, bullying you to eat. We’d been rubbing each other up the wrong way all morning, so I retreated to the kitchen for a bit, waiting for the kettle, reading the papers. I saw the story about Magnusson on trial for your shooting. I was thinking about that slimy git, how much he’d hurt you, how much I hated him…”

“And then it just slammed into me, this flash of Mary all decked out in black James Bond gear, aiming a gun, a strange looking thing, right at me. I felt utterly panicked. Betrayed. Just that flash, nothing else. It shook me, terribly.”

Sherlock watches him very carefully.

“Was it just the image? Did you also remember voices? Smells? Sensations?”

John quirks an eyebrow at him, considering this.

“Funny question. But now that you mention it, yea, I remembered her voice, too. Things she said. Horrible things… and I could smell her perfume.”

Sherlock nods, as if recording this information on a chart in his mind palace lab.

“Every few days, another one would hit me. I’d be standing on the corner waiting to cross with a bag of shopping. And bang, you’re falling to the floor at Magnusson’s, hit with a bullet. I’d be in the shower, bam I’m in the ambulance with you and you’re not going to make it. I’m just drifting off to sleep, wham I’m running behind as they wheel you off for surgery, left to pace the corridor. Each one came with a vicious headache. Bit like this one.”

“But you didn’t tell anyone.”

“No… I couldn’t make any sense of all the little parts. Sounded crazy, worse than amnesia.”
“I observed you were becoming increasingly troubled. I anticipated the amnesia would deteriorate, but I had no idea how long it would take, or in what manner.”

John studies him.

“You have more to tell me about that. Much more.”

“In time, John. I will not hold anything back. But first, your memories.”

“Right… so it was… what day is it? Last Thursday, maybe? Your last IV antibiotics session. Mary was due to pick me up afterwards for an obstetrician appointment. I was nervous as hell. The longer I stayed here, the more my convictions returned, but when I thought about the baby, I’d get so confused.

“We were just finishing up lunch. We’d ordered in Thai to celebrate the end of your treatments. I was going back home for the weekend and wanted to see you well fed before I left. I remember you were... making tea. Which was bloody strange. Mary walked in, and it was like a gale blew the fog away from my mind.”

…

221B, 6 days ago

Mary gives John a quick peck on the cheek as he tidies up the last of the home-rental medical equipment. She watches him for a moment, then drifts into the kitchen to greet Sherlock. John can hear them chatting amiably, Mary asking after his treatments, how he’s feeling, is the pain very bad these days?

He watches Sherlock pass her a mug of tea. She takes it, laughing.

“You? Make tea? Well, you must be on the mend. This is an honor.” And though he’s given Sherlock hell before about the damn tea, he can’t stand that she’s mocking him. He bristles, but catches himself. God, he’s been so tightly wound lately. He watches her sipping the tea, his wife, this woman who had once seemed so charming, so intelligent, so funny, had looked at him and seen a person worth healing...

She... she’s a liar.

John sinks heavily to the couch as the vision of his wife disintegrates. The memories rush into his mind so violently that he cries out, catching Mary and Sherlock’s attention. His head thrums with pain.

In the span of the mere moments it takes them to find him crumpled on the sofa, John remembers.
Baker Street, 1 month ago:

John storms out of the flat. He lets his feet take him, paying little attention to the turns and crossings as he talks himself through an anger-reframing exercise that’s failing miserably. *Just going to have to weather this one out.* He lets the hurt gather in his limbs and pounds it into the sidewalk through the soles of his feet, squeezes his fists as they swing by his sides, fingernails biting palms. Sherlock’s sharp, dismissive words cycle around and around his mind.

“*Why have you come, John?*”

“What do you mean, why? Why wouldn’t I?”

*Sherlock hadn’t even looked up from his microscope.*

“You haven’t been by in a month. You’re not at work. Your gun is in your waistband. So. Bored of your new life so soon, popping by for a quick fix? I’m busy, John. Do leave me alone.”

He is well into Regents Park when he finally stops, sinking onto a bench, breathing hard. It’s gray and chill. There’s hardly anyone about on the walking paths and wide, trim lawns. He bends almost double, holding his head. The anger has mostly drained, leaving a cold, empty space behind.

The day is a royal wash. First the row with Mary. God, pregnancy hormones are a bloody nightmare. He’d stormed out of that one, too. Should have gone back right away, apologized, made her that thing with the mushrooms that settles her stomach, given her a damn foot rub in front of the telly. But the very thought had repelled him like the push of reversed magnets. This had troubled him so deeply that he’d just kept walking.

He’d found his way to the Underground. No place in mind, he just needed to go. Anywhere. He’d done that a lot as a student at Bart’s when he was new to London with little money. The rocking of the cars and anonymity of the crowd had eased the strain of uni. He found he studied better on the trains, though the graphic medical texts did raise eyebrows. It had also been a safe way to look at other young men he wasn’t likely to stumble into again at Bart’s – he’d met more than a few that way.

He’d ridden for hours, turning things over in his mind. Watching people. The jostle and rhythm of the car had soothed him into a blankness he’d sorely craved. He might have ridden through the night, or just gone home with takeout and a lame apology, if not for the older couple working a Sudoku diagonal from him.

They were silver-haired, both handsome in their 60s. He’d felt a little like Sherlock as he’d watched them surreptitiously, reading into the tilt of their bodies (close), proximity of their limbs (thighs touching), their clear history (matching rings, overheard conversation about a nephew’s recent wedding and a much-chuckled-over anecdote about his bed-wetting years). He felt a fierce pang of jealousy for these husbands, for their easy bickering over the Sudoku book, for their gentle and obvious affection for one another.

They had gotten off at Charing Cross. John had missed them immediately. The pieces rattling
in his mind had settled.

*Obvious, really.*

He’d wound up at 221B, intoxicated by his convictions. Yes, it meant he’d made a horrible mistake with Mary. No, he had no idea what the next steps were. Except this one. If Sherlock would have him, at least that piece of it would make sense.

And if he couldn’t get the words out, at least he’d bring him along on a case. John had been rather self-consciously aware of the gun tucked out of sight. He’d taken to carrying it out with him, just in case… in case Sherlock texted, needed him to come urgently. *Might be dangerous.*

Course, Sherlock had noticed. Hadn’t gone well.

Christ, what had he expected? Sherlock to look up from his microscope with surprise, pleasure? More of that smoldering intensity he’d glimpsed the last few months? Or at the very least cranky Sherlock, certainly distracted Sherlock, caught up in his train of thought, pulling John in as if he belonged there, as if he had only been gone an hour, never mind a month.

Staring out across the broad lawn, a drizzle begins to pelt him. He knows he should go home, stop this nonsense, accept the nest he’s built and bury all of this. Deep. He should apologize to Mary. Read up on what size berry the embryo can be compared to this week. Maybe it’s up to ‘kumquat’.

But as he walks back to the main road, the rain soaking into his Haversack, he doesn’t go down to the tube. That magnetic repulsion keeps his feet moving. He walks back to Baker Street. And then, using his key, slips into the entryway of 221B. He pauses, noticing his wet footprints on the hall floor. With a quick look up the stairwell and toward Mrs. Hudson’s door, he quickly crouches and rubs them out with his coat sleeve, then ducks into 221C to wait.

The damp, dim little basement flat is gloomy, but he hardly notices as he fills up with the thrill of a chase, all those hours they’d spent lurking behind bins in an alley or bantering in disguise in plain sight, Sherlock playing up his role just to see if he could make John break character, their eyes catching and flashing. This stakeout is foolish, he knows that. Sherlock will likely be livid. But right now, he doesn’t care. He’s feeling reckless and damn but it feels brilliant.

Sherlock thunders down the stairs. The front door opens and slams. John breathlessly counts to 15, then silently emerges, a little thrill burning bright in his chest as he follows his quarry down the street, keeping a fair distance between them. Sherlock strides along, looking out for cabs. He never once looks back. If he did, well, John is feeling more capable of confronting *that* right now than the angry, pregnant wife he isn’t sure how to love anymore.

Sherlock finally gets a cab’s attention. John does the same. He leans toward the cabbie, pointing ahead. “*Follow that cab.*” Just like in the movies. The cabbie revs away and keeps a professional distance between them, apparently eager for a little adventure in her night. It is ridiculously easy.

They almost lose them at a light, but the cabbie outdoes herself, using the company’s GPS to locate them. *Doubt that’s legal.* The track them all the way into the City. Sherlock strides from his cab into an ostentatious high-rise, more glass than steel.

He recognizes the logo, carved in black marble in the midst of a lit fountain. It’s for that media mogul, what was his name? Magnusson? Sherlock had despised him, going on at length about his web of corruption, avoiding his papers, even referring to him as the *Napoleon of Blackmail.* He feels an uneasy twinge—what has Sherlock gotten himself into?
John tips the cabbie well for her skullduggery, then follows the swirling, black Belstaff through the wide lobby and up several escalators. The tricky bit is staying out of sight as Sherlock speaks into a security kiosk in a quiet hall.

John hasn’t anticipated this bit, had hoped there would just be some room he could lurk outside of, maybe a window he could climb through. Obviously, the country’s most powerful media mogul would have a security check. With a small crestfallen sigh, he decides his chase is up.

“Yes, hello Janine. He is expecting me.”


John bounces on the balls of his feet before the kiosk, the thrill crackling through his veins. He loves this part, when the variables could go either way on a hairpin moment. He pushes the call button. Janine’s familiar face appears in black and white on a small screen. He smiles at her in a way he hopes says, ‘Of course I’m supposed to be here.’ She scrunches her eyes as she works out who he is, then grins warmly.

“Oh John! Just a sec, love, Sherlock’s just gone up. Didn’t know you’d both be coming tonight.”

“Course we would, I was just a bit behind, had to wrap up something with Mary.”

The elevator doors hiss open. John feels giddy. But there is a worm of worry that adds another unique thrill. Almost too easy.

John steps out of the elevator into a spacious multi-level suite that is both spartan and pompous, all ebony angles and stainless steel. Janine bounds over and squeezes him into a hug he half-heartedly returns.

“Oh, good to see you, John! How’s Mary and the baby? Oo, you must just be delighted. Or terrified, am I right?” She elbows him playfully in the ribs, all waggling eyebrows.

“It’s, yea, um, it’s magical. Mary, she’s fine, fine. Throwing up. Constantly.”

“Oh, poor love.” Janine wrinkles her nose.

“Yea, beastly. So. Um, where’s Sherlock?”

“Oh, course – just through there and up the stairs. They’re in his office.”

“Ta, um, I’ll just…”

Janine waggles her fingers at him and turns to her desk, scooping up her mobile which shows dozens of vivid bubbles paused in play. She settles into her chair, taps the screen and immediately forgets him.

John counts it as a stroke of considerable luck that he can continue his approach unseen. After his dismissal at Baker Street, he can imagine Sherlock’s anger if he were to waltz in. But he can also imagine the flash of pride in his eyes as his blogger stubbornly asserts his place by his side. Best to listen a bit first and get the hang of the situation. John walks cautiously through a cold sitting room with a wall of dark glass overlooking the pinpoint lights of the city. The only colorful element in the room is a horrid red leather rug that looks as if someone has bled out on it.
Stomach thrilling with the risk of it, John pads cautiously up the curving steel stairwell to the mezzanine outside Magnusson’s enclosed office. As he edges closer to the doorway, he can hear muffled voices through the thick, opaque glass. Magnusson, Sherlock and… surely not. 

Mary?

He stops just outside the doorway and listens tensely, all spark and daring extinguished.

“–had not expected you to grace us with your presence, Rosamund.”

Rosamund? What in the hell? Does she have a twin?

Sherlock’s voice immediately mentally scolds him. John, it’s never twins.

“Yes, well,” the Mary-not-Mary voice responds. “I thought it best to receive the final delivery in person. It was most peculiar that John did not come home tonight.”

A wave of cold washes through him.

It’s her.

“Rosamund, if you are implying that I am trying to double-cross you by involving John, you would be most mistaken. Why would I threaten his safety so close to your assurance of his freedom? It would be counter to my goals. He stopped by the flat earlier. We quarreled. As did you, I believe. I don’t know where he is now.”

Sherlock’s bored rumble betrays, to John’s ears, a tense edge. Something has happened Sherlock didn’t anticipate. John prickles with nerves.

“Oh, poor love, struck down two for two,” Mary simpers sarcastically. “Out getting pissed, I’m sure. Do forgive my assumptions, Sherlock. I know how you feel about my little plan. Wouldn’t put it past you for one last daring act of gallantry. Of course, how silly of me, thinking you’d put the safety of thousands of innocents before our sweet John.”

John finds himself pressing his back hard against the frosted glass wall, hands clenching, biting his lips to remain silent while his heartbeat pounds in his skull. It’s Mary’s voice. But there is steel and venom in it, a voice he has never heard from her. It sends claws of confusion down his spine.

“Really, Rosamund,” John hears Magnusson’s unctuous voice. “If you bait him like this, you’ll only risk drawing attention to yourself. You shouldn’t be seen here. If my PA finds out, it could be bad for you. She was your bridesmaid, was she not?”

“Never fear, Charles,” she responds peevishly, “I’ll be leaving very shortly, quiet as a mouse. Now, Sherlock, the serum if you please.”

A pause, a rustle of coat, clicks of plastic.

“Ah, excellent. How satisfying to have the matching set! You see, Sherlock, no matter what they all say, I find you enormously easy to work with. The others simply don’t understand that you just need to be properly motivated. Now. Tell me about the method of delivery.”

“Airborne skin application, penetration up to twenty feet. Any part will do, though it works more quickly the closer it is applied to the skull. No discernible marks at entry. It can also be diffused as a single concentrated burst in a crowd as an inhaled vapor. The effects are reduced at the edge of its range. A single dosage will render the recipient quite forgetful of the occurrences taking place.”
“For what span, and how long?”

“From my limited testing, it obscures a span approximately 10 minutes before the exposure and continues blocking all memory of the next 5 hours. This is essential for blocking any memory of having received the serum. It comes into full effect five hours after exposure. The exact longevity of the block is not known.”

“How stable is it? We don’t want another Redbeard, Sherlock.”

“Tested in laboratory scenarios. And on a range of willing subjects.” John thinks he can detect more tension in Sherlock’s voice. What the bloody hell is Redbeard? “The homeless will do a great deal for compensation. Besides, Rosamund, the risks to my interests would be far too great were I to attempt any kind of subterfuge.”

“Excellent. Then it’s quite safe to perform my own little test.”

There is a soft click, then a man’s gasp.

“Rosamund! For god’s sake,” Magnusson cries angrily, “what did you go and do that for?”

“Charles, you are tiresome tonight.”

John hears a meaty thud, a groan, and the telltale sound of a body collapsing onto the floor.

“Rosamund, this is unexpected,” Sherlock says lightly. “I’d rather thought you and Charles to be a matched set.”

“Hardly. Worm. He serves his purposes.”

“Well, at the very least we won’t have a witness to our exchange,” Sherlock says almost cheerily. When he continues, there is steel in his tone. “Rosamund. Our agreement. I have your word that John is safe now.”

…Safe?

“Yes, Sherlock,” she replies impatiently. “I will uphold my portion of our deal. I will make the necessary adjustments to my situation with John. This morning’s little domestic can be easily escalated. Anger issues in a father-to-be, well… it is a mother’s prerogative to put the needs of her child first. I imagine that, legal proceedings aside, he would be returned to you and relatively unscathed by the experience within a month. That would give me ample time to initiate the next phase with John under my watch as collateral, should the serum not perform as expected.”

“And the child?”

“Will be my concern. It was never part of our agreement.”

“The child is as much John’s as it is yours.”

“How can you even be sure it is John’s? Oh, this is tiresome. As always, Sherlock, one word, one breath of this to John, and it will be worse than death for him. You as ever have my word on that.”

“Not a word, Rosamund. Not a breath.”

The acidic horror of the situation sinks into John, burning away all he’d held to be true: safe Mary, sweet Mary. Cold, sociopathic Sherlock pushing him away. Nothing was as it seemed.
For her to have lied to him is one poison, but her abuse of Sherlock is another entirely and it sends lances of rage up his limbs. What has she been forcing him to do? Make some kind of a drug? To use on the public? Has she just killed Magnusson? John pushes against the cloudy glass wall to steady himself.

“Mmm. Although,” Rosamund continues in a slight sing-song, “you have certainly caused me enough grief in this lifetime to take great pleasure in my revenge. I almost wish you’d push me to it. But then, I never liked playing by the rules. Neither do you, as my father could attest.”

“If you are alluding to the tiger, Rosamund, I was as appalled as you. Your father did not deserve such a horrific end, but big game hunters take a risk. Are you implying I had something to do with the attack?”

“You are the Moriarty. Of course you had something to do with it,” she seethes, her sweetness lancing daggers. “A fraud, in my rightful place. It’s mine. I believe abdication by death is still recognized by The Elders.”

“They would never let you.”

“Wouldn’t they? Your delightful new board is so benevolent. I am sure they would look very kindly on my information. Clever Rosamund, stopping you from committing one of the greatest acts of terror our century has known. Magnusson and I have gobs and gobs of proof. They will embrace me with open arms.”

John here’s the familiar click of a gun cocking. Sherlock’s voice is tight, too fast.

“Rosamund, think this through. I can still be very useful to you.”

There is a roar in John’s ears as he steps around the corner and aims his gun at Mary. He doesn’t remember pulling it out of his waistband, but there it is in his hand, pointed at her heart, no sign of a tremor. The sight of her makes him gasp – head to foot in black: bullet-proof vest, gloves, knit cap pulled over her hair, gun trained steadily at Sherlock.

Magnusson lies in a crumpled heap on the floor, a bloody cut on his forehead. Sherlock, his hands raised, glances at John. He does not look the least bit surprised to see him, only sad. Terribly sad. In two steps John has placed himself in front of Sherlock, blocking him from Mary-no-Rosamund. She raises her eyebrows with an expression that is more resigned than surprised.

“Ah, there you are, husband. Back like a beaten dog.”

John sputters, his face turbulent with anguish and fury.

“You’re a monster.”

“Tut, John, while I’m sure you are quite peeved at the moment, we know how your anger clouds your judgement. Do consider our child.”

“Ah, our child is it now, funny how that changes moment to moment. You… you horrible– I loved you.”

Mary eyes him, bored. “You didn’t.”

“John…” he feels Sherlock’s hand on his shoulder, gentle. His voice is very quiet. “Lower your gun. This has all gone wrong. Let me talk to her.” He squeezes John’s shoulder. “Rosamund,” Sherlock’s voice shakes. “Whatever you’re doing, we can help you–”
Mary furrows her brow with irritation, then, her gun still aimed at them, she pulls a strange weapon from her belt. It looks less like a gun and more like something children would use to squirt water at each other over long distances. In the brief moment of John’s confusion, there is a flash, something sharp against his skin. He turns ever so slightly to clasp his neck where the skin stings. It’s all she needs.

The sound of the gunshot takes heartbeats to reach his brain, the whole room slowing down as he turns and finds Sherlock stumbling backward, the bloom of red at his shirtfront so small, barely larger than the red buttonhole of his coat, and though some part of him demands he keep his weapon trained on Mary, most of his mind is screaming god she shot him, she bloody murdered him–

The scene speeds back up: Mary is suddenly very close, pinching a spot on his neck, and with a flash of pain, John stumbles to the floor, his limbs prickling and numb. Kicking his gun aside, she stands over them. John tries to lash out to knock her off balance, but none of his limbs respond. He spits his rage.

“John, this is most unfortunate, I have become somewhat fond of you. You’re very useful for hiding in plain sight, sweet normal doctor’s wife and all that. That’s why I’m only erasing tonight. Back to marital bliss come morning. Tsk tsk, it will be devastating for you to wake to the knowledge that Magnusson has murdered your dear Sherlock, but I shall comfort you in your grief. It’s quite my specialty. See you at home, husband.”

And then Mary… no… Rosamund… presses her gun into Magnusson’s hand and simply walks out through a door behind the desk without another glance at him.

The numbness is receding and he’s twisting around frantically, crawling over to where Sherlock has sprawled on the slick white marble floor. He’s calling to Janine, frantic, yelling at her to call an ambulance, finds himself in his shirtsleeves with his jumper bundled against Sherlock’s chest, soaking up red, holding pressure to the wound.

“Sherlock, can you hear me? Stay with me. For the love of fucking god you are going to stay with me, you owe me one hell of an explanation.” He realizes Sherlock is muttering through gritted teeth and leans in close, his breath fluttering on John’s cheek.

“So… so sorry… only way I knew… Didn’t think she’d shoot me… sorry…”

“Sherlock, christ, just keep calm, you’re going to be okay. Janine!”

“John…” He gasps in pain, eyes squeezed shut. “Don’t tell.”

“Don’t tell what?”

“Say it was Magnusson. Write it down. You’ll forget.”

“What? Sherlock, I don’t understand. Just, it’s okay, bloody hell… You’re going to be okay.”

“John…” He’s fading, his voice barely a mutter. “Glad you came.”

“Sherlock!”
John lands heavily on the couch as the memories hit him with the force of a tsunami. His head throbs. Rosamund is holding her tea, looking at him sharply, wary, calculating.

“You shot him.” John spits bitterly. He pushes back to his feet, voice pitching high, hands balled into fists. “You lied to me, every last thing.” He shakes his head slowly. “Who does this? Marries a man for ransom...for what?”

Sherlock stands a few paces behind her, out of her line of sight, silently pulling something from behind a book on the crowded shelves. His hand slips into his dressing gown pocket. Was that a syringe? From behind Rosamund, he gives John a miniscule nod.

“Oh John, your confusion is always so adorable” Rosamund responds mock-soothingly. “I must admit it all went rather pear-shaped. Sherlock was never even supposed to survive.”

“You weren’t supposed to be there that night,” Sherlock interjects with false levity.

“Neither was he.” She barks a laugh and winks at John. It makes his skin crawl. “That’s what I love, Sherlock, the chaos. Set up any plan, beautiful in its complexity. Chaos will always have its way. That was Jim’s downfall, of course. He always thought he could out-think chaos. He was brilliant, but weak. And you,” her face suddenly hardens as she turns to him, “despite what he believed, have nothing of his genius. It’s faulty then, your magnificent serum.”

All of her softness drops like a curtain. John is horrified to see that she is almost unrecognizable without the kindly guise. She is Rosamund. His stomach curdles with revulsion and he takes an involuntary step back.

“It would seem the current formula degrades within a month of being administered.” Sherlock is talking fast, which is either a good sign, or a very bad one. “I had anticipated some instability, did say as much. Under your very aggressive timeline, there was no evidence of recall. With some adjustment, it could be avoided. However, I rather think you’re out of coin to make such a request. Especially as you have rather spectacularly betrayed me. Tell me, were you even going to go through with the attack, or was it simply a ruse, beautiful in its complexity, to damn me in the eyes of The Elders? Oo, and how’s that going by the way?”

She considers Sherlock over her tea, surprisingly calm. Jesus, is he taunting her?

“Really, Sherlock, this isn’t a movie. Just because you’ve caught me by surprise doesn’t mean I’m going to unveil all of my plans to you.” She rolls her eyes, sips her tea.

“We should expect Magnusson to be crafting some interesting headlines about you in coming days.”

“Yes,” she sighs. “Your little error is becoming increasingly tedious. Should have just shot him, too. But worms can be so useful. And pets.” She steps close to John to run her hand down his cheek. He flinches away from her touch.

“You…” John growls, “you wanted Sherlock dead. All along. Were you coming here tonight to finish your botched job? Make me your senseless pet again?”
Rosamund huffs. “Really, John, don’t be so dramatic. When Sherlock lived I simply adjusted my plans. Unlike some, I survive because I dance with chaos. So one road ends.” She shrugs. “New variables have already presented themselves. I honestly never anticipated your memory recall today, or any day. Too much faith in my chemist.” She glares at Sherlock. “Truly, John, today I was just picking you up for our appointment. To hear our baby’s heartbeat.”

“Don’t,” John hisses. “It’s not mine.” His voice cracks as he says it, tears pricking. He tries to focus on his rage.

“So sure, are you?”

“John… steady.” He feels ready to lunge, to strike, but Sherlock is at his side. When did he get there? Mary watches them, sipping her tea, bemused. His hand on John’s elbow is very firm as he speaks in a low tone. “I realize this is a horror for you.” He mumbles very quietly, “We do this together, now.”

John turns slightly to Sherlock, his voice a pained whisper.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I would have killed you, John. Or him.” Rosamund grins. “Depending on the day.”

John’s fury and disgust are twisting into a very real fear. This isn’t some mad version of his wife taunting them, toying with them, but a brutal, viciously trained assassin. And they’ve cornered her without any preparation, no backup. It could go very badly.

John feels more than sees that Sherlock’s hand has drifted away from his elbow and, from the cover of John’s back, slipped into his dressing gown pocket. A nod, hardly a tremor. It’s enough. John coils himself to spring.

Together, then.

It happens in a blink of an eye. She lightly touches her wedding ring. It clicks strangely, John hears it as he jumps to knock her down. She twists away from him as smoothly as if they had choreographed it, slashing her hand through the air in front of them. John feels a soft spray of droplets across his face and blinks, landing awkwardly where she had just stood.

“–the hell?”

He is immediately overwhelmed by a nauseating wave of vertigo, blackness pooling into his vision. His legs buckle beneath him. He’s tumbling heavily to the floor, half-collapsing onto Sherlock.

The nightmares begin.

…

221B, the present

On the sofa, they sit very quietly. John stares at his hands, exhausted from the telling.
“That’s... all of it. All I can remember.”

Sherlock nods.

“Thank you, John. I know that was... difficult to relive.”

“Still can’t believe, all that time, what she was doing to us... You nearly died.”

His chest feels tight. He can feel Sherlock watching him. Squeezing his eyes shut, John pulls in air sharply, but not enough of it fills his lungs. Get it together. He sits perched on the edge of the sofa, holding his aching head, trembling with the effort. Suddenly, Sherlock gently, firmly pulls him over, wrapping his arms tightly around him. Slowly, the fierce tension in his body begins to melt.

Hidden against his shoulder, John feels the wave of unshed grief pushing through his pores. Sherlock doesn’t say a word, just clings to him, rubs his back in soothing little circles, runs his hand over the nape of his neck and up into his hair.

It’s too much. The dam quietly crumbles and John is crying, soundlessly, shaking with the sobs. It’s as if he has just been pulled from the well, in awe to be above ground, to be saved, but still aches with the horror of the cold, dark earth that nearly swallowed him.

He cries for their younger selves, separated by the height of a building; for Sherlock, alone and dead to the world, out doing god knows what for two years trying to keep him alive. The grief of those years surges into him and he grips Sherlock more tightly.

He cries the unwept tears of unspeakable relief when he had reappeared. How many times has he almost lost him? He shudders at his own innocence when Mary was a warm, funny life raft that he’d clung to, cries out the pain of her deceit. He sobs for his child, lost to him, maybe never his at all.

Sherlock’s shoulder is soaked against his face. John digs his fingers into his back. He’s never cried like this in his life, ripped open and exposed, loud, messy. He doesn’t care. Sherlock’s got him, holds him like iron. Kept me alive, for god’s sake, bartered for my life, fed me with a damn pipette.

He is safe here. He is home. At last.

...

Keeping him wrapped tightly, Sherlock gingerly slides down onto the couch to lie more comfortably. He holds John against his chest, running his hands very slowly over his back, face pressed into his hair.

The storm passes, sobs gentling to hitches of breath, and John lets himself lay utterly spent against him, washed up from a shipwreck. He sucks in a deep, shuddering breath and squeezes Sherlock weakly.

“Sorry,” John croaks quietly, sniffling.

“No, don’t.” Sherlock whispers into his hair. “John, I– I’ve wanted to be here for you, for this, for such a long time.” His voice is tight with emotion. “It’s... thank you. For trusting me.”
“Nothing keeps me from you,” John whispers fiercely. “Not anymore.”

Sherlock responds with a nuzzle, pressing his lips into John’s hair. They don’t speak for a long while, just holding and being held. It is something of a miracle to have even this.

John aches for it to be this simple, the two of them curled on the couch just like he’d imagined every time they’d watched a movie. Thinking about takeout, talking through a new case. He’s exhausted and the crying has left him feeling hollow and fragile. But there is an assassin at large. He sighs wearily.

“Where is she now, Sherlock?” he asks in a hoarse whisper. “Are we in danger?”

“I’m… not certain. It depends how extensive her network is, how much she wants to handle personally. We and anyone who could be used as a pressure point are heavily guarded at the moment. We were last certain of her location in Calcutta. The team sent to liaison with her last night was not successful. She is in the air again, moving east.”

“How on earth are you tracking her?”

“She ingested a serum containing an element that, with a very sensitive satellite filter, can track her location. It is slowly being excreted. We don’t have many days left.”

“How the hell did you manage that?” John raises his head to goggle at him. “She knocked us out before you could even get close with the syringe.” From beneath him, Sherlock stretches out his arm to the nearly empty mugs of cold tea forgotten on the table. He flourishes his hand over them like a magician.

“I formulated it to be tasteless, odorless, trackable for roughly a week before being fully metabolized.”

“Slipped it in her tea?” John huffs a dry laugh. “And there she was, ridiculing you in this very room for making her a cuppa.” He smiles warmly at Sherlock. “Brilliant.”

Sherlock smiles sadly at the praise. I wasn’t brilliant enough. Not nearly enough.

“Wait, Sherlock,” John suddenly scowls up at him. “Much as I would like my estranged, imposter of a wife to be caught by Mycroft’s spies, she is carrying a… child. Is the tracker safe?”

“The pregnancy was considered during formulation, John. It’s quite safe. We all ingested it.”

“Oh.” John raises his eyebrows. “In case…”

“There was always the chance that afternoon… we would have been separated again. Rosamund can be difficult to predict. I knew your memories were resurfacing, that it could be any day they fully returned. I’d rather hoped it would happen when we were alone together, to give you time to sort through it, so we could form a plan. I… had to improvise a bit.”

“So you had no idea that was going to happen that day?”

“No.” Sherlock scowls. “And if I hadn’t been such an idiot, I’d have injected her while her back was turned. Or tried to… I admit I was nervous about that course of action. A cornered, trained assassin versus an invalided detective. I hesitated, fearing what she might do to you if I failed. Not without cause. It’s most unfortunate what has become of the teams sent to intercept her.”

Sherlock suddenly goes rigid beneath John.
“Oh. Oh!”

“What?”

“Of course, of course,” Sherlock gasps, awed and gaping at the ceiling, “I can’t believe I didn’t see it until now – she’s testing it.”


“The trace John, oh, don’t you see?” He’s suddenly flushed with excitement. “She’s like a caged predator testing the bars for weakness. She knows we can follow her moves, so she makes erratic jumps. When we’re there to intercept her, she knows we’re still tracking her. By now she’ll have determined that her trace was ingested, will probably have isolated it to the tea and knows it’s only a matter of time before she makes a move and we can’t follow her.”

“And she’ll know… she’s not traced anymore?”

“Yes, precisely. We have to stop intercepting her. Now.”

“Why?”

“So she’ll come back to finish us off.” He’s pulled his mobile from his dressing gown pocket, texting rapidly above John’s head. John twists out from under his arm and sits up with a huff.

“And that’s a good thing how?”

Sherlock talks rapidly while he texts.

“Need to catch her by surprise, let her think she’s back in control. That tracker can barely last two more days. She must think she’s untraceable as soon as possible. It’s the only way.”

Sherlock finishes his text and puts the mobile on the table with a “check mate” finality.

“Mycroft is livid. But he’ll do what I say. He’s lost too many people already and it’s costing a fortune moving teams around so quickly.”

Sherlock drops his head against the couch cushions with a contented huff. John, unnerved, scowls as he settles back against him.

“Hope you know what you’re doing…”

“It’s the best chance we have.”

“How long?”

“Oh, 48 hours, roughly.”

“Christ.”

He can barely walk and Sherlock is orchestrating a rematch. He tries to make his mind think about a plan, some way they can outwit her, but too many unanswered questions pull at him.

“Sherlock, I have to ask. When you... came back. From your Fall. Did you know she would be here? Did you know what she was then?”

Sherlock squeezes his eyes shut very tightly, his bravado evaporating.
“I knew her. I did not expect her, here. It is the greatest error in judgement I have ever made and one I do not expect you to forgive me for.”

“You knew her? How?”

“As I’ve told you, while I was gone, I had been focused on removing the threat that had been placed upon Mrs. Hudson, Lestrade, and yourself. It is a… complicated story. That I will tell you.”

John nods warily, wincing and rubbing his forehead. The headache won’t budge. Sherlock notices and begins working on his temples again. John hums appreciatively and relaxes against his chest.

“Where does the headache pain now sit on the standard pain scale?”

“Oh, um, dunno, maybe a 6.”

Sherlock nods, filing the data away on a mental chart.

“When I was away, my focus was on a particular threat to you. And I wrongfully assumed that it was the only threat to you. When I completed my… dismantling… I anticipated I would finally be able to come to you without threatening your life. I knew it would be horrible. For you.” His voice becomes very quiet. “It was horrible for me. I had hoped, the day I returned, that we could reach an understanding. Much like you – the afternoon you rode the trains and made up your mind – I had hoped the things I wanted to say to you would… lessen the hurt. Perhaps. But when I arrived, there was a viper in my nest.”

“You were going to come back and tell me… how you felt?”

Sherlock kisses his temple. John squeezes his eyes shut. All this time... Jesus, could I be done with the crying, now?

“So you knew, about her, and if I found out, she’d have killed me.”

“Yes. At least, at first. It later occurred to her that by threatening me with your grief, I was even more... malleable. Of course, we learned that she wanted me out of the picture the entire time. I admit I had doubts that she would remain true to her pledge, but double-crossing her always put you at risk. And the risk was very real, John. When I returned, I didn’t believe her. Ignored her first demands. That’s when she… had you put into the bonfire. I almost didn’t get to you in time – the skip code she sent. It was like a game to her.”

It shouldn’t be a shock, not after all he’s learned about her. But it is.

“My god,” he whispers. “She gave me so much hell about that, she was angry for days. Said I should quit messing around with you and your cases, I’d just end up making a fatherless child...” Course, that was her plan all along, wasn’t it? “I was always just equity to her. To get to you. Why?”

“For starters, she had inherited some unfinished business her father and I had been conducting. Long ago.”

“What, those serums? She wanted a weapon, or something?”

Sherlock nods, simply.

“And she had her own reasons for despising me.”
“She was working for Moriarty, then? Seems just the sick sort of game he’d play.”

“In part, yes. Rosamund Moran, for that is her real name, had been a close ally of Jim’s. Assisted in many of his plans for me. She even developed the code name for my special project. *Sacre Coeur.*” He stretches the French accent with precision.

“Sacre… sacred heart? But that’s… isn’t that a fiery heart?”

“Yes. The symbol, the heart on fire, was always a particular favorite of Jim’s when it came to me. Punishing me. For not belonging to him. Your marriage was the final phase in his plan to *burn the heart out of me.*”

“My marriage? Because… oh.”

Sherlock runs his fingers over the nape of John’s neck and into his hair, making John shiver pleasantly.

“As I said, John, I have… loved you. From the beginning.”

It is the second time Sherlock has said the words aloud. They send a bolt through John.

“It was obvious to many, Jim among them. Our connection infuriated him.” He sighs wearily. “But *he* never wanted me dead. Quite the opposite, it turns out.”

“How in the hell can you know all of this?” John sits up suddenly, his hair mussed from the massage. A horrible thought has just occurred to him. “Wait. Sherlock. What did she call you, at Magnusson’s that night.”

Still relaxed on the couch, Sherlock studies John quietly.

“Good, John, you caught that,” he hums, almost to himself, then sits up to meet his eyes. “For your safety, I have had to hold back a great deal from you. Ever since my return. It has been… horrible, having to keep so much from you. But. It’s finally time for you to know the truth. All of it.”

John’s stomach grips with nerves. This should be a relief, but if he’s even guessed at half of it…

“Is this about your fall, when you were gone?”

“Oh John,” he sighs. “It started so much longer ago than that.

“How long then?”

“When I was fifteen years old.”
Chapter Notes

In any spontaneous process, there is always an increase in entropy of the universe

~The 2nd law of thermodynamics

Note: This chapter touches on addiction.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Holmes manor, 21 years ago

It's so beautiful.

Sherlock watches with delight as the sulfur-yellow molecules catalyze in his mind, the isothermal reaction creating blooms of rose-colored entropy. The variables sprout outward, tendrils of possibility as delicate as spring leaves. Becoming mitochondria-small, he accelerates into a double-helix, closer to the solution, closer…

“Wake up, lazy bones.”

“Mph, wot?” Sherlock frowns deeply, eyes pinched shut. “Leave it, Mycroft,” he mutters. His voice, just on the verge of plummeting into a rumbling base, is a soft alto, thick with sleep and irritation.

“Try again, sleeping beauty.”

Sherlock startles, waking fully. The heavy leather-bound book slides off his chest onto the grass. His eyes snap up to the tall, lean figure standing before him, dappled with willow shadow and sun, smiling warmly.

“Sherrinford! Aw, ace! When did you get here?” Sherlock leaps up and throws his arms around his favorite brother. The elder by ten years, they share the same piercing grey eyes, unruly black curls, and pale skin, though while Sherrinford’s supposed to be finishing a post-doctorate in chemical thermodynamics, Sherlock can tell from his ruddy, freckled skin and the dry mud ground into the leather of his shoes that he’s been doing a lot of what their mother disapprovingly dubs gallavanting.

Sherlock loves that his brother is part mad scientist, part Indiana Jones, somehow always getting tangled up in schemes that land him deep in crypts uncovering Celtic treasure hordes just by the chemical makeup of the soil above, or proving the guilt of smugglers with the salt collected from the hull of their boat. He’s practically a pirate, and despite Sherlock’s worldly 15 years, he has always had a soft spot for pirates.
Sherrinford cuffs him gently and retrieves the book from the lawn, brushing off the cover and rolling his eyes at the title.

"On the Equilibrium of Heterogeneous Substances. Ah, some light reading for your summer holiday. Mum put you up to this?"

“No! Gibbs is much lighter than slogging through Thermodynamik chemischer Vorgänge—"

“Helmholtz is not appropriate summer reading, young man,” Sherrinford mock-scolds. “Brush up on your German when it isn’t a beautiful day outside.”

“I like chemistry.”

“Know you do,” he sighs. “Seems to be our family weakness. But you’re a kid, allowed flights of fancy once in a while. Sit under this willow and read some proper Tolkien, Billy.”

Sherlock warms at the nickname. Of all the people in all the world, only one can ever call William James Sherlock Scott Holmes Billy. Sherrinford gave up tormenting Mycroft with Mikey after he tattled to Mum about a girl Sherrin had been sneaking into the manor several summers ago. But Sherlock loves the nickname from his eldest brother. And while Sherlock protects his own fragile eccentricities from other kids with well-deduced barbs and a general attitude of adolescent disdain, Sherrinford brings out all of Sherlock’s childlike, rascal tendencies. He is happy, relaxed in a way he usually isn’t with other people.

“So how much money do you need this time?”

Sherrinford scoffs.

“Can’t a bloke come ‘round to say hullo to his family without raising suspicions?” He grins through the retort as they amble over the broad, neatly trimmed lawn toward the manor.

Sherlock arches his eyebrow dramatically. He’s only just figured out the trick of it and uses it relentlessly. Sherrinford notices and chuckles.

“To my credit, that is not entirely why I’m here.”

“Mum’s away. Conference in Berlin. Dad went with her.”

“Ah, good for her. No, actually, I’m here for you, Billy.”

A carbonated sensation prickles Sherlock’s solar plexus. He grins at his brother.

“Why?”

“Got a tricky thing I’m working on. Bit dangerous.” He smiles wickedly, but his face promptly falls, his eyes looking suddenly stormy as he gazes out over the wide lawn. “I’m well and truly stuck, is the thing.”

Sherlock catches his breath. Sherrinford’s moods are capricious as a summer thunderstorm, lances of brilliant sunlight immediately shuttered by a thunderhead, a quick downpour, then radiating golden sunlight that sparkles on the startled, saturated grass.

Sherlock worries about him. He’s brilliant, the most of them all, but so mercurial that he’s on to the next puzzle as soon as the current one begins to go stale. He had received student accolades as a daring thinker, challenging established methods. He leapt up the educational ladder with one
reckless, dazzling display after another, but also spectacularly failed at anything he deemed the least bit uninteresting. Their mum frets about it ceaselessly.

Sherlock thinks he understands him. He, too, loathes being bored. He chases the adrenaline surge of a fresh, risky puzzle, but he also relishes the long, meticulous trial and error, the isolating and hypothesizing, so vital to their work. He wishes he could become molecule-small and study Sherrinford’s mind from the inside, observe the hormones and synapses at work to determine how best to rewire him, see some of his brilliant theorems to completion. Sherlock’s been reading about the brain for years. He could probably manage it.

“Truly, Billy, I’m flummoxed. Not all that interested anymore, excepting my patron is rather insistent that I finish the work he paid me for.”

Sherlock groans

“You already spent it all, didn’t you?”

“Well, the first payment was just an advance. And yes. Had a bit too much on hand to resist a good bit of fun, if you know what I mean.” It’s his turn to arch his eyebrow at Sherlock, then frowns. “I’ll need the rest to cover my debts once I’ve cracked it.”

Sherlock whistles. “That much? And what if you don’t? Crack it, that is?”

“Bit of tight spot, that.”

Sherlock nods. Cards are Sherrinford’s weakness. He’s brilliant at the table, can anticipate all of the variables for all of the hands, but he also has a weakness for the drink.

It usually goes like this: he plays a few humdrum hands to avoid suspicion. Starts playing better. Brings up his bets with naive hopefulness. They all think he’s a bloody greenhorn. Then he gets cocky, because he knows he’ll win it. He’ll be winning extravagantly, then lose a bit when the tempers start to fly, and by now he’s well and truly pissed.

Sherrinford can anticipate any variable of cards just by deducing his own hand and the expressions of the other players. Except when he gets drunk, which is almost always. By the end of the game he’ll be down a few hundred quid if he’s lucky. More if he was cocky. Which is also almost always.

Whomever he owes money to will have rather base ways of extracting punishment. He’s seen his brother bruised and bloodied over debts before. Sherlock suspects he actually likes losing. More dangerous that way.

“Can’t you just ask your benefactor for an advance? And then not blow it on cards for once your life?”

Sherrinford shakes his head darkly.

“No, not these blokes, Billy. Rather wish I hadn’t gotten wrapped up with them. Prickly lot, very cagey, lots of dark suits and concealed weapons.”

Sherlock grins.

“It sounds brilliant.”

“Not when it’s you two weeks past deadline, and no sign of a solution.”
“Been out on the moors quite a lot, then?”

Sherrinford scowls at him, eyes flicking to his shoes.

“It helps me think, Billy.”

Sherlock bends down to pluck a blade of grass and chews it thoughtfully

“So, what’s it you need me to solve?”

Sherrinford’s gloom clears immediately into dazzling, beguiling sunlight. He pulls a sheet from his back pocket, messily folded and creased, both sides densely covered in formula, and passes the puzzle over. Sherlock is already completely caught up in his spell.

…

Back in the cool, polished mahogany-quiet of the manor, Sherlock curls up in a wing-back chair, knees folded under his chin, eyes settling into a familiar soft focus as he studies the crumpled formula. Sherrinford pours a whiskey for himself from their father’s liquor cabinet and finds a lemonade in the ice box for Sherlock, lobbing the bottle toward him. Without looking up, Sherlock holds up his hand, catching the bottle with a sharp slap against his palm.

“Oh. Oh!” Sherlock looks up at his brother with wide eyes. “You’re trying to induce unconsciousness.” Sherrinford, sprawled sideways in a matching leather chair, smiles over his drink at him.

“How can you tell?”

“Tidy work with the chloroform molecule, never seen it broken up like that. Must make it potent, but still water-soluble. Right, so the lights go out, but… oh, why the adenosine and melatonin? You must want to prolong the sleep-state.”

“Precisely. Well done.”

Sherlock ducks behind the paper to hide his flushed grin.

“So where are you stuck? Looks like this would work.”

Sherrinford sighs extravagantly, sinking lower in the chair, legs dangling over the arm, drink resting on his chest as he scrubs at his eyes.

“They want induced dreams. I can induce sleep fine and dandy – couple of drops on the skin and my rats go out like a light. They call me the sandman at the lab for all the rat naps I’m responsible for. But the rat always goes straight through the 4 sleep cycles and wakes without any REM state.”

“Why do they need them to dream?”

Sherrinford shrugs, sipping his drink.

“No idea, don’t really care, honestly, not that they’d ever tell me. I’m just the Scientist in the White Coat, dozens of others like me, each with our little puzzles, very limited access to the other
labs. Big men, big guns, like I said. Not surprising that this bunch doesn’t want them to be particularly nice dreams.”

Sherlock goggles at him. How does his brother manage to make chemistry so cool?

“Well, think you can crack it, Billy?”

Sherlock takes his time, sipping his lemonade, enjoying this part. He’s saved Sherrinford a dozen times, though it’s always been for some dull lab practical or a term paper.

The threat to his brother tingles at the edge of his conscience. He should probably tell their parents Sherrin’s gotten himself involved in a job that has armed guards at his lab door, a job that’s asking him to make a nasty nightmare knockout drug. But he’d get mad, and then he wouldn’t want to work with him. Which would doubly put him at risk. Not to mention the debt he owes his card sharks. No, if he’s going to get Sherrin out of this, he’s got to do it himself. No one can know.

Sherlock studies the formula for another long minute, not really thinking of the equations at all. Sherrinford drains his glass and begins to pace around his chair. Sherlock lets him dangle for a few minutes, then sets his face into what he hopes is a bored, confident sneer.

“Course I can. This is stinking with errors, Sherrin. How on earth did you get your doctorate with this sloppy work?”

Sherrinford beams and ruffles his hair.

“All thanks to you, Billy. You know I hate the fine print. Give me leg work. Give me chaos to grapple with!”

Sherlock grins at him, his pirate chemist brother, but there is sadness behind his mask. Bloody hell, Sherrin, what have you gotten yourself tangled up with now?

“Look, you need to overstimulate the anterior pituitary gland, get a flood of corticotropin to overwhelm the adrenals and cortex, then generate a wave of cortisol to illicit a fear response from the amygdala. Add some psilocybin to the mix to enhance the content of the nightmares.”

Sherrinford blinks at him.

“Forget everything I said, Billy. You keep reading whatever you want on your summers.”

Sherlock shrugs, embarrassed. It seems so simple to him, the chemical pathways, the cause-and-effect triggers unfolding in his mind’s eye like a swooping cloud of starlings. He’s a little troubled that Sherrinford didn’t make the connections himself, but then, his eldest brother doesn’t pass the time reading about neuroscience with Sherlock’s particular fervor. If at all.

…

It’s just as well their parents are away. They spend the next three days in the makeshift, but highly serviceable, lab that fills most of Sherlock’s bedroom. While Sherlock works to synthesize the veritable Rube Goldberg of chemical reactions, Sherrinford brings his napping rats and sets up equipment to monitor their sleep cycles and REM states.
Sherlock loves when they work together. Though sloppy in his methods and easily distracted, his eldest brother is encyclopedic in his knowledge of organic chemistry and Sherlock always learns something. The depression fades and Sherrinford’s curiosity rekindles. He’s more willing to dive into the repetitive, but vital, trial runs and makes some astounding leaps in his observations that dazzle even Sherlock.

Mycroft stays locked in his room pouring over law and Greek, preferring to stay clear of their eldest brother’s good-humored tormenting.

Delirious from two days without sleep, Sherrinford, bent over his rats twitching with the first successful instance of REM sleep, shouts, “We are the dream team!” Then, dissolving into exhaustion-fueled hysteria, he chokes, “No-no, we’re Team Dream!”

Sherlock, also exhausted, catches his hysteria and they snort and choke until Mycroft bangs on the wall, which only makes them lose it all over again. Once they’ve caught their breath, the formula is dubbed Team Dream, TD for short.

That night, Sherrinford forgets to put his gloves back on after returning from the loo. Sherlock is pulled from his reverie at the microscope as Sherrinford, administering a new round of TD-8 to the rats, falls bonelessly to the bedroom floor. Sherlock jumps up, tossing off his goggles and kneels by him, fascinated.

“Idiot,” he mumbles. “Well, let’s see what you do.” Sherlock quickly attaches the electrodes to Sherrinford’s temples and watches the readout on his computer screen, the dull green line suddenly jumping into life as his REM state begins. Sherrinford whimpers in his sleep. Sherlock puts a soothing hand on his shoulder.

“Sorry, Sherrin…”

12 minutes later, Sherrinford wakes with a gasp. Sherlock, who had drifted into his mind palace as he watched the mesmerizing patterns on the screen, jolts back to himself.

“Sherrin – you okay?”

“Water,” he gasps. Sherlock rushes to bring him a glass from the bathroom and watches as he gulps it down. Sucking in air and wiping his mouth, Sherrinford finally meets his eyes.

“Not scary enough. Needs more psilocybin.”

…

On day three, version 10 of TD successfully induces sleep, then bypasses sleep states 2 through 4, progressing directly to a highly-agitated REM state. The rats’ cortisol levels are alarming, but it takes three full hours for them to finally rouse. The rats then drink furiously and resume normal ratty behavior.

Sherrinford whoops, claps Sherlock on the shoulder, rapping his fist against his thick safety goggles with glee.

“Sherlock, you’ve saved my life.”
Chapter End Notes

I love writing about Sherlock and Sherrinford. I thought this was going to be a one-chapter flashback, but it's stretching out. More from these two in days to come!

I read a lot about the brain and sleep and dreams and thermodynamics this week. There are worse ways to spend one's middle of the nights...

Thanks so much for reading.
“So, I’ve got good news and bad news,” Sherrinford announces as he strides into Sherlock’s bedroom-lab. He’s still wearing his tie, the pressed dress shirt rumpled from the train, messenger bag slung across his chest. Sherrin’s favorite rat, Morpheus, is conked out in a carrier-cage from the morning’s demonstration, twitching with bad dreams.

Sherlock, cross-legged on his bed and surrounded by piles of paper, braces himself.

“Good first.”

“They loved it.” He flashes Sherlock a triumphant smile. “TD-10 is proceeding to human trials.”

Sherlock buries his head in his hands, groaning with relief. He’s been trying to distract himself all afternoon by checking and cross-checking their data, but images of Sherrin being dragged off by armed guards kept interrupting his thoughts. He’d locked himself into a tower of his mind palace to avoid them.

“So… what’s the bad, then?”

“They want another.” Sherrin grimaces and Sherlock’s stomach flips. “It’s a real corker – isolate a newly-formed memory and block it.”

A terrible thrill runs up his spine. Sherlock can already see the pathways, the cascading catalysts flowing through his mind, and tries to make his voice passively curious.

“So, you on to anything yet?”

“Not me, idiot, we.” Sherrinford dumps his bag onto a cluttered table and gently places sleeping Morpheus close to the rat’s water drip. “No way could I solve this one without you. You’re perfect for it.” He crouches down and pulls a handful of sunflower seeds from his pocket, alternately tossing them into his mouth and sprinkling them into the enclosure. The rats scurry over to investigate.

“I thought you were done with these people, if TD-10 worked.”

“Yea…” Sherrin sighs. “Bit more complicated than that, unfortunately.”

He should want his brother to be safe. He should want this all to be over. But the pull of the puzzle, the thrill of this mysterious organization… it’s electrifying.

“So? What do you say? Partners?”

Sherlock gives him a wicked grin.

“Partners.”

“Yes! That’s my boy!” Sherrin hops up and claps him on the shoulder. “So, we’ll start mapping out some theories, take it slow. Don’t get frustrated, this one’s going to be loads harder than TD-10.”
Sherlock feels the thrill percolating in his belly, sees the starling-cluster of compounds ripple and cascade through his mind. He raises one eyebrow.

“Idiot, I’ve already solved it.”

“Like hell you have.”

Sherlock gives him his pirate grin and picks up a pencil.

…

That night, Sherlock and Sherrinford scuff slowly back up the stairs from a break, full of sandwiches and tea, pockets stuffed with stale scones and eating out of the same rumpled bag of crisps.

“Damn! Alright, best twenty-five out of thirty.”

They hammer the air with closed fists, suddenly opening their palms, fingers contorted.

“Yes!” Sherlock crows. “Molten lead beats pathetic strontium!”

“Wait, this isn’t fair, I can’t use two hands holding the damn bag.”

Sherrin crunches it under one arm as they take the last few stairs and, pausing at the landing, face each other with competitive grins.

“Go.” Their fists fly, landing on–

“Yea! Take that! Plutonium beats helium!”

Sherlock grins at his brother’s win, and is about to start the next round when he looks up to see Mycroft watching them from his bedroom door, bored and superior. Sherlock stuffs his ready fists into his pockets and looks away, cheeks burning.

“Didn’t you make up that imbecilic game for Sherlock when he was five?” He sneers. “So Sherrinford, back home hiding from your debt collectors? Or just bringing your homework by for Sherlock to do?”

Sherlock glowers at him. “Shut it, Mycroft.” It rankles him that he’s not far off from the truth.

“And what, pray tell, has had the two of you locked up for 36 consecutive hours?”

“We’d tell you,” Sherrinford says lightly, popping a scone into Mycroft’s shirt pocket as he passes, “but then we’d have to kill you.”

Mycroft rolls his eyes, ignoring the scone.

“Ah, so you’ve felt it appropriate to engage a minor in your illicit activities? How very big brotherly of you, Sherrinford.” He leans against the doorframe of his bedroom, immaculate in white shirt, dress pants and polished shoes. *Even in summer, for god’s sake.*

“He’s fifteen, Mycroft, he can make his own choices,” Sherrin snaps.
“At least tell me the codename for your thrilling project so I may inquire after your activities without threatening my very life,” he sniffs lazily.

Sherlock hates to admit it, but it’s a brilliant idea. He eyes his pirate-chemist brother, fresh from a kitchen raid, already edging away toward his room.

“Redbeard,” he blurs. “Project Redbeard.”

“Redbeard? Ah, Sherrinford’s preferred moniker when he humored you with imaginary games as a boy. The parallel is not lost on me. Well, I’d love nothing better than to continue to be excluded from your childish nostalgia. I was only just popping out to tell you that Mum and Dad will not be coming straight home from Berlin. They’ve gone directly to Sussex to attend to Grandmere. Her health has taken a turn.”

“Grandmere?” Sherlock’s stomach clenches. Wiley, caustic and brilliant, with a tender streak toward him, she has been ancient as long as he can remember. He had vaguely thought of her as immortal. “What’s wrong?”

“Haven’t said, but it’s nothing urgent else they’d have asked us to come.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Mycroft is already turning back into his room.

“Well then, back to your summer extracurriculars. Do warn me if any poisonous gasses are released, hm?”

“Only from your arse!” Sherrinford yells, cackling at Mycroft’s murderous look as he turns abruptly and slams his bedroom door. A moment later it’s flung open again, the scone hurtling through Sherlock’s doorway, before dramatically slamming again.

“Oy, you missed me!” Sherrinford hollers.

Stuffing his worry into a far corner of his mind, Sherlock tugs back the crisp bag back and helps himself to a handful.

“What that bloke needs is a good shag,” Sherrinford mutters as he crumbles up the discarded scone into the rats’ terrarium. Sherlock pinks and chuckles at Mycroft’s expense, hoping very much the topic won’t drift his way.

“And how about you, Billy, got a girl you’ve been driving wild with your curly locks and long lashes?”

Shite. Sherlock’s blush deepens.

“Not really my... area.”

“Oh come off it, Billy, you’re fifteen, you should be raging with hormones by now, can’t possibly be having wet dreams about the Trapezoidal Rule or the goddamn Goldman Equation.”

Sherlock shoves a scone into his mouth, but finds he hardly has the saliva to chew. He ducks his head and pretends to seriously consider Sherrin’s latest draft of the formula he’d been reviewing before they’d knocked off for tea.

“Fine, keep your secrets. But mark my words, Billy,” Sherrinford points at him with a half-
eaten scone as he plops into his seat across from him at the workbench. “Mark them. Don’t be a slave to your brain. Don’t lock up your heart, like poor Mikey down there. He says it’s all weakness, but he’s wrong. You have to include your heart, or your brain will never know what it’s doing it all for. Find some lass who doesn’t give a fig for Goldman, who just loves you for your pretty eyes. Or, hell,” Sherrinford’s eyes glitter at his sudden deduction, “some bloke. Just don’t let your heart go unfed and shrivel up. Yours especially.”

Sherlock has frozen mid-bite, hovering over the charts. Some bloke. So maybe he knows. But he’ll be damned if he’s going to get lured into such risky territory, even with Sherrin.

“Right, got it,” Sherlock waves him off. “Now look at this, Sherrin, you’ve gotten this backwards. You have to isolate the nerve cluster first, block the receptors, then introduce the catalyst that will start the decay of the second compound. Otherwise you’ll have a rodent that never remembers a thing for the rest of its days.”

“Bloody hell, Billy, you’re right. So, blokes then, is it?”

Sherlock’s stomach drops. He breathes an extravagant sigh.

“Do we have to do this?”

Sherrinford smiles at him gently between the messy array of glass apparatus, lighting a Bunsen burner, pipette in hand. Sherlock stares down at their heap of notes, the equations stirring on the page as he imagines their chemical reactions instead of meeting his brother’s eyes.

“Billy, relax. It’s brilliant. Really.”

Sherlock startles minutely, his eyes darting up.

“Sure,” Sherrin continues affably. “Bet you get picked on mercilessly at school, kids are right wankers about that sort of thing. But it’s the ‘90s for chrissakes.” He gesticulates widely with his pipette. “People’ve been gay for as long as there’s been two dicks to rub together. Be proud of it.”

Sherlock sinks into his chair. The approval is unexpectedly gratifying. But also mortifying.

“So, you got a boyfriend? Ever fooled around?”

Sherlock looks daggers at him.

“What?” Sherrin grins at Sherlock’s discomfort. “You need the guidance of an elder.” He snorts. “And it’s not like you’ll get much from Mycroft.”


Sherrinford continues to give him the same maddeningly knowing smile.

“Rupert, Kevin, Omar, George.”

He peers at Sherrin through the glass tubes and beakers, his prickly layer of protective condescension slipping.

“Who are… they?”

“Boyfriends, blokes I’ve shagged,” Sherrinford shrugs. “Not all of them serious, but all of them seriously hot.”
Sherlock feels like he’s missed the last step on a flight of stairs. He goggles at Sherrinford through the experiment running between them.

“You’re gay?”

“Oh, not exclusively, no no.” The beaker suspended over the Bunsen burner begins to boil and Sherrinford deftly adds the solution he’s been preparing, one drop at a time, still wearing that maddeningly knowing grin. The bubbling liquid turns a vivid red.

“Oh, good – it worked–” Sherlock says distractedly, blinking repeatedly as he tries to sort this incredible new information about his brother. “Wait, so you like both?”

“Jesus, Billy, we really need to get you out more. I’m bisexual. Bi, as in the Latin for two?”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, but finds himself smiling cautiously.

“Yea, heard of it, thanks. I just, I dunno, never suspected.”

“I don’t bring my boys round, Dad’s a bit weird about it. If it got serious, I’d broach the topic, but it’s sooo exhausting explaining things to him.” He looks at Sherlock meaningfully over the bubbling red beaker. “You understand, I’m sure.”

“Yea… sure I do.”

“So, if I’ve sufficiently calmed your nerves that you’re not about to get your head flushed for liking your self-same gender, back to my question. You ever fooled around?”

Sherlock bites his lips, taps his fingers on the workbench with agitation tinged with excitement. I could tell him, he wouldn’t laugh. Oh for fuck’s sake…

“Yea. Victor. Earlier this summer.”

Sherrinford’s grin cracks wider. “Victor, really?” He purses his lips, nodding with approval as he considers Sherlock’s old childhood mate, usually off at school in Scotland. “Your first, then?”

Sherlock feels himself blush, but the quills don’t rise to protect. He finds he actually wants Sherrin to know. It would be such a relief, to share what had been possibly the best thing to ever happen to him, him, the freak.

“Yea,” he grins sheepishly. “And second, third, fourth…”

Sherrinford crows, thumping the bench. “Atta boy!” Suddenly his bravado darkens and he gives Sherlock a threatening look. “You used protection, right?”

Sherlock quails and quickly nods. “Course. Victor’s a bit more... experienced. Had some.”

The thunderhead evaporates and Sherrinford smiles again. “Good, that’s a relief. Because no matter what you’re up to, Sherlock, you always–”

“I know, I know!”

“You know better than most about the destruction a pathogen can wage on you. Always, Sherlock.”

He winces a little at the use of his name, nods.
“I will. But there’s hardly any use nagging. Victor’s gone for the summer.” He hopes the
disappointment doesn’t show too much.

His (what, not boyfriend… lover?) had left to holiday with his family in the Alps a week
before. They had been clear, no attachments, no long-distance heartache. He wasn’t exactly in love
with Victor, but he did miss him. Ginger-haired and lanky, equally obsessed with rugby and insects,
he had been a bearable summer distraction during their childhood. Though Victor was rubbish at
playing pirates, they’d found a mutual interest in poisonous substances when they were seven, and
had spent long afternoons out in the woods collecting samples to study.

With Victor, he’d had what he’d imagined most children considered a friend. They picked on
one another relentlessly, shared private jokes, went on aimless adventures, plotted elaborate practical
jokes on Mycroft, and rough-housed like wolf pups.

It was the wrestling that had led to it. The years of school rugby were transforming his weedy
friend into a sturdy bloke who could topple and hold him with ease. The holds did something strange
to him. Sherlock had always thought himself immune to the idiocy of crushes – certainly no girl had
ever made a blip on his radar – but he’d found his thoughts often strayed to Victor that summer. He’d
egged on the rough-housing rather a lot, and Victor seemed unusually eager to teach him new moves
he’d learned during last term’s Greco-Roman wrestling club. It was during a particularly breathless
par terre when the chemistry between them had shifted radically.

Victor was the wiser in this arena, but Sherlock had always been an uncannily quick study.
The manor was expansive, his parents rarely home, and Mycroft as good as absent for all the time he
spent locked in his room. Their trysts came about spontaneously, frequently, and as they were
usually hunting for some rare beetle for Victor’s collection, or a lichen for Sherlock’s, the forest
began to feel downright desultory. There was a certain thick-limbed, low-slung tree they’d liked. He
couldn’t even walk by it now without getting hard. It was spectacularly distracting. His progress in
Gibbs had been considerably hampered.

Sherrinford, seeing the flash of melancholy, softens.

“Just keep some on you, always. You never know when your next prince charming’s going to
waltz into your path and destroy your better judgement. You’re smart, Billy, but we all get stupid in
the heat of the moment.”

“Right.”

They are quiet for several moments, each focused on their portion of the experiment.

“Victor strikes me as more of a top if you ask me.”

Sherlock grins roguishly as he works.

“Not always.”

…

Sherlock tosses his violin onto the bed with a frustrated huff. He’s been stuck on the nerve-
cluster catalyst for two days and it’s driving him mad. To make it worse, Sherrin’s had to put in some
face-time at the lab, so he’s had no one to bounce ideas off of for hours. With a growl, he stalks from
the room and sets off for the forest.

    Halfway across the grounds, the logjam in his mind starts to loosen. The day is overcast and a
moody wind tugs at his clothes and shaggy hair. The wind smells of petrichor and the possibility of
lightning. He pushes on toward the edge of the woods when he hears someone calling his name.
    Turning toward the manor, he sees the shape of Sherrin coming up the walk, his small blue
Fiat parked beneath one of the big elms.

Sherlock’s own personal storm cloud shifts and he grins, changing course to meet him. His smile
slips when his brother’s features become clear. Bloody lip, bruised eye, swelling around the left
cheek, his left arm held close to his torso. His stomach clenches with worry.

    “Did your boss do this to you?” Sherlock blusters, picturing dark suits swarming him in his
lab. Sherrin laughs bitterly.

    “If I piss off my boss he’ll likely do you the kindness of returning me in several small, labeled
packages. No, I had some business to attend to on my way home. Sorry I took so long. You look
stressed. Still stuck?”

    “Yea… was going to take a walk, clear my head.”

    “I’ll join you.”

    “You sure? Looks like it hurts.”

    “Nothing I haven’t dealt with before, no matter.”

They set off toward the forest paths. Sherlock suddenly closes his eyes, realization dawning.

    “You got paid today. And paid off your card sharks.”

    “Yep. There was a bit of interest they felt needed to be worked out in the flesh. But we’re
square. Kept all my digits.”

A ball of tension relaxes in his chest. Sherlock hadn’t even realized he was carrying it.

    “I made one other stop on my way.” Sherrin pulls an envelope out of his back pocket and
holds it out for him to take. “Lest you think I’m taking advantage of your brilliance…” Sherlock
stops and tears it open warily. The texture and scent of the paperstock tell him bank.

Inside, he finds documents stating that a rather large sum of money has been set aside for him
in a trust, to mature on his 18th birthday.

    “Is this… your next advance?” Sherlock asks, dumbfounded.

    “Right again. I’d have given you the whole of it, excepting my outstanding debts.”

Sherlock goggles at him, rooted to the spot. Sherrin kicks at the turf, avoiding his eyes.

    “These formulas are yours, Billy. I want to keep you as far from these people as possible – you
shouldn’t be mixed up with them at all. But since you are, you should absolutely be getting
compensated for your work.”

    “Sherrin, I can’t accept this–” he stammers.

    “Can, will, already have. It’s all settled. Bank of England’s business, now.” Sherrin gently
nudges him and they continue walking. Sherlock carefully folds the letter back into its envelope and tucks it into his back pocket. *Another thing to hide from Mum and Dad.*

“Look, Billy. We all know you’re brilliant. Not even Mikey had the periodic table memorized by the time he was four. I was dead proud when my baby brother practically blew up the garden shed with ingredients he’d nicked from the kitchen. Kid, you can see chemical reactions in your mind like you can read a person’s history at a glance. While other idiots your age while away the time getting stoned, you’re learning more about the brain than most neurosurgeons.

“But it’s easy to disregard all that when you’re growing up in a family of flawed geniuses. You’re unique, and the least damaged of us all. You’ve always jumped to solve every challenge I brought you, yes, because you crave mental exercise. But mostly because you have such a good heart.”

Sherlock watches his brother’s face, all bruises and swelling. He bites his lip and jams his hands deep into his pockets while he walks.

“I haven’t been the best big brother to you these many years. I’ve taken advantage of your boredom to get through the tedium of my collegiate responsibilities. I’ve been absent, caught up in my own games when I should have been a better friend. So. Let this trust give you a little flexibility to follow your bliss when you come of age. In case the more orthodox pathways prove too tedious.” He studies Sherlock with a thunderous intensity. “Do something that matters. Use your heart.”

A large lump in Sherlock’s throat is preventing speech. He stops, Sherrin pausing next to him, and suddenly pulls his brother into a tight hug, hoping the embrace will speak for him.

“You’re welcome, kiddo,” Sherrin says quietly, giving him a squeeze. “And I’m sorry.”

“No?” Sherlock frowns, pulling away to look at him.

“You should be spending your summer reading *Gibbs* and running through the woods with some pretty boyfriend, and here I am taking advantage of your skills again, to bail me out of a tight spot with another shady crew. Teenagers should not be mixing up recipes for spies on their summer holidays.” He smiles ruefully, ruffling Sherlock’s hair. “I know you think it seems cool. But ultimately, you’re doing it because your good heart worries about your idiot big brother. You’re not a greedy sot like me, bored and desperate for a thrill no matter the cost.”

“No, look, Sherrin, you’re not—”

“I know my vices, Billy.” He frowns slightly. “But I’m also getting a sense for yours. So let my missteps please be a formative lesson for you, hm? Chasing danger may not be the best professional compass.”

“Aw, hell,” Sherlock grins shyly. “Where’s the fun in that?”

…

Morpheus is a clever rat and learns his mazes more quickly than the others. After proving to his masters that he can run the latest maze for a hunk of scone in less than fifteen seconds, they administer their latest iteration of TD-12.
Since then, every hour on the hour, Morpheus has zipped through the twists and turns perfectly for his reward. He’s aced it four times. Finally, on the fifth at 3:00 in the morning, Sherlock sets the rat at the start and watches him scamper forward, then stop, turn, backtrack, and lose himself in a confused bumble.

With a shiver, Sherlock scoops up the confused rat and places him at the start of last week’s maze. The sleek, spotted rat sniffs the air, whiskers trembling, and suddenly zips off, taking each turn with sharp precision. Sherlock watches, breathless, as Morpheus completes the old maze as perfectly as he had before the serum.

“Sherrin!”

His cry startles his brother out of his sleep at the workbench, face slack against a pile of notes.

“Wot?” he blurs groggily.

“It’s Morpheus! He’s lost his memory of the new maze!”

Sherrin knocks his chair over as he scrambles to his feet.

“Show me.”

Sherlock gives Morpheus a congratulatory hunk of scone and sets him back at the start.

“And he aced last week’s?”

“Yep.”

Shoulder to shoulder, they watch the rat get hopelessly lost in the new maze, then scamper effortlessly through the old one to eagerly devour another lump of scone.

“This means…”

“We did it!” Sherlock crows, throwing his arms around Sherrin who hoists him up around the middle and spins him around, yelping with victory. Suddenly there’s a pounding on the door.

“It’s three in the bloody morning. Some of us are trying to learn Cszech in our sleep.”

Sherrin hushes them, his hysterics bursting out in wheezes and snorts as they topple over and lay on the floor. Sherlock finally catches his breath.

“We should run a few more of the rats through, see if it repeats itself.”

“Yea, ‘course. But first things first.” Sherrin props himself on an elbow and points at him menacingly. “Get your clever arse to bed, young man. You haven’t slept in nearly four days and I don’t need your exhaustion putting errors in the data.”

“What?” Sherlock cries. He’s nearly shaking with the adrenaline coursing through his system, the victory crackling his synapses. “I couldn’t possibly sleep right now.”

“Fine, humor me then, go sit on your bed for a few minutes, go into your bloody mind palace and meditate or something. I’ll set up the next trials.” He pulls on gloves, all signs of sleepiness gone.

Distractedly, Sherlock obliges. Just as he’s settled himself on the bed, Sherrin swoops over him, pressing something damp against his neck.
“Sherrin–” Sherlock gasps, aghast. “Did you just dose me? What the fuck was that?”

“TD-1b, little brother. My potent sleep aid, minus the nightmares, newly stabilized. I do some work at the lab, you know. How else am I to take care of you?”

Sherlock, incredulous and furious, tries to push himself up to argue, but realizes he can’t actually lift his arms. The bed is rushing toward him, a wave of sleep tumbling him over and over. Sherrin’s voice comes to him from under water.

“Sweet dreams, Billy. You’ll thank me for it in the morning.”

...

Sherlock wakes slowly, blinking lazily to late-morning sunlight, a pleasant dream of Victor still hovering at the edge of memory. He can smell bacon, beans and toast. An incongruent plate of breakfast is steaming on the worktop. He rolls out of the tangle of bedclothes toward the food, stomach audibly grumbling, single-minded in his sleepiness.

Reaching for a slice of toast, he sees a little folded card by the plate. Someone’s scribbled a yellow smiley-face doodle onto it. Beneath it is one word written in Sherrin’s nearly illegible scrawl: Sorry.

Son of a bitch. He remembers last night with a pulse of anger and nearly throws the plate. But his stomach growls, the lure of food outweighing his temper. Sitting with a huff and shoveling down the beans, he glares at the lopsided smiley face. He remembers their victory with Morpheus, the jubilation that followed, Mycroft’s anger.

Suddenly the whole thing feels laughably ridiculous. This is how my pirate chemist brother takes care of me. He brings me illegal puzzles for my entertainment and drugs me when it’s past my bedtime. He’s nearly cleaned the plate when there’s a knock on his door.

“Come in, you sorry sot,” he shouts, “it’s okay, I won’t throw anything at you.”

“Well, I’m reassured to hear that,” replies the unexpectedly unctuous tones of Mycroft. “Sherrinford left an hour ago.”

“Oh hell, what do you want?”

“It’s Gran. They’re bringing her here tomorrow. To stay.”

Sherlock is as startled by the news as Mycroft’s blunt telling of it. And since when has he called her Gran?


“Dementia. Very rapid onset. She can’t even recognize Mum.”

The food solidifies into a lump of concrete in his stomach.

“She can’t remember?”

“It’s not as though her mind’s been erased. She apparently has excellent recall of her childhood. Other things come and go sporadically. But faces, recent events, they’re unreliably available to her. She frequently forgets where she is and becomes alarmed. They’re bringing her
Sherlock stops listening, mentally leaping through his knowledge of dementia and the brain, but he doesn’t know enough about the catalyst of her memory loss. He needs to do research, he needs to do it now. He jumps up, already forgetting about Mycroft, reaching for books on his shelves, making a frantic mental tally of what he needs.

Mycroft sighs and folds his arms, eyes roving over the bedroom lab.

“You can’t fix her, Sherlock.”

“Oh, of course I can.”

Mycroft sniffs. “The greatest minds in modern medicine have yet to crack this code. What on earth makes you think a fifteen-year-old can do it? You’re simply in denial brought on by shock.”

Sherlock feels a cold shiver, his eyes snapping back to his brother with fury.

“You’ve already given up on her. Because caring is inconvenient for you. Too distracting. Too messy.”

“Age takes us all, Sherlock. She has lived an admirable life.”

Sherlock glares at him. “She isn’t dying, Mycroft, she can’t remember. That’s fixable.”

Mycroft rolls his eyes and turns away, striding back to his room. Sherlock, suddenly realizing his doorway is empty, pounds over to it and slams the door shut, locking it. He turns blazing eyes on his bookshelf, his thoughts a maelstrom that settle on a single horrible fact.

She won’t remember me.

She’ll look at me with her beautiful, crinkled gray eyes and she won’t see her precocious grandson. She won’t remember any of our adventures, any of our talks. It’s all gone. But she isn’t. How can such a thing be?

Eyes burning, he flops onto his unmade bed and curls into a ball, staring at the wall, tears sliding down his cheeks.

Sherlock slips into his memory palace, away from the grieving body, into the cool, unemotional safety of their corridors. It is such a relief. The central hallway stretches on infinitely, doors leading off to a honeycomb of rooms that defy gravity and geometry. He runs his fingers along their unique surfaces as he slowly walks past: solid maple, rough iron, filigreed gold, crumbling plaster. Memories rest in these rooms, as perfectly preserved as the moment he lived them. He imagines, with horror, the whole palace crumbling beneath his fingertips, the data irretrievably lost.

It was Grandmere who taught him the trick of it, of taking information, an emotion, an experience, and building a place for it in your mind that you could go back to anytime you like.

When he was little, he’d listen to her stories as she pulled one after another from her seemingly limitless collection, all perfectly intact. Hers was always a garden, brimming with flowering trees and fruit-bearing bushes, mossy stone walks wandering beneath willows. There was a hedge maze populated by a topiary menagerie, each trimmed boxwood holding vital information.

He can picture her, quietly appearing to meditate in her favorite overstuffed chair, tending to her memories in her garden. In her mind she had shears in her apron pocket, floppy sunhat tied
beneath her chin with a chiffon scarf.

Her apiary was his favorite, full of hives where she cataloged and organized her dreams. They made the best stories. As a boy staying for a weekend, he’d beg for another and another while helping himself to more honey cake.

“I have a disproportionate number of dreams about the circus and of falling off of bridges,” she’d explained, “and absolutely no idea why.” Her face would crease into a thousand wrinkles when she smiled, her gray eyes sparkling between the folds.

Is she lost in the garden, unable to connect back to the body that contains it? Or is she stuck in one greenhouse? Is she happy there? He can’t imagine her feeling happy knowing there are hundreds of thousands of her treasures she cannot reach. But does she even know they are there to be missed?

He spends the day in bed, wandering his mind palace, dipping into old chests full of childhood oddments, passing by walls covered floor to ceiling in tiny library catalog drawers, each holding vital facts and details. He moves between them on a rolling ladder.

He rests briefly at the tree that sprouted up in the middle of a marble-floored ballroom during his first trysts with Victor, the trunk identical to the sway-backed elm that had been their particular hangout. He notices the leaves are yellowing, falling to the floor and crunching underfoot.

When he has gone through his favorite rooms, reassured that everything is intact and just as he left it, he ventures down stone stairs to the musty catacombs where the taunts and jeers of schoolmates, the crushing sensations of not belonging, slumber in vaults. When he unlocks their iron doors, the barbs and stings are as fresh as the day they were thrown at him. He wallows there a while, then seals them up again and heads back up to the light. Even the bad memories are worth storing. They have their uses.

From far off, he can feel his body nagging him for attention. As he trots to a door that will bring him back, he passes by a wall safe he’d hastily built the day Sherrin showed up. Twisting through the combination, he tugs open the heavy door to find a chain-wrapped wooden box brimming with his anxiety over Project Redbeard. He pulls a ring of keys from his belt and unlocks several padlocks, snaking the chains away. He doesn’t open the box. He knows what he’ll find. But he looks at it for a very long time. When he finally closes the safe, he does not lock it.

He’s made up his mind.

…

“What do you mean, you’re not working on Redbeard anymore?”

Sherrinford scowls at him.

“I’m done. It’s rubbish. I won’t make something that inhibits memory.” The proclamation tumbles from him. Sherlock feels equally righteous and heartbroken for what this will do to his brother.

Sherrin stares at him, then nods, realization dawning.

“This is about Gran.”
“This is about what’s right,” Sherlock snaps, kicking at a clod of mown grass. They’re walking across the manor lawn at dusk. Sherrin’s just come back from work, still wearing his nametag with the little bird silhouette logo, a plastic bag of groceries dangling from his hand. He’s tired and bewildered, the news of their grandmother unsettling him, but Sherlock could not wait a moment to confront him with his raw decision.

“Let’s go inside,” he sighs. “Have you eaten?”

“Not since breakfast,” Sherlock mutters. “Thanks, by the way.”

They walk silently into the manor, Sherrin dropping his bag by the umbrella stand and kicking off his shoes wearily. Sherlock follows him to the kitchen and automatically begins helping him assemble the ingredients for chicken curry, his brother’s specialty.

After several long quiet minutes, Sherlock can hardly take it anymore.

“Are you upset? That I won’t help?”

Sherrin looks up from the meat he’s slicing into thin strips, his shirtsleeves rolled up, curly dark hair getting in his eyes. He smiles his unexpectedly warm grin that disarms Sherlock every time.

“Sherlock, you’re a free man. You can do anything you want. I respect your reasons for bowing out. I’ll figure it out from here. Thank you. For all your help. I’ll pack up the rats and have them out of your space in the morning. Dice those a bit smaller, would you?”

Sherlock nods, chopping the bell peppers more carefully, digesting his brother’s patient acceptance. He had expected more of a fight and feels deflated. Plus, he hadn’t really processed that Sherrin wouldn’t be working in his room anymore.

“I want to reverse it,” he says quietly into the silence. “I’ve been doing some research. It’s risky, but part of what we learned with TD-12 might actually apply to it.”

Sherrin suddenly clacks the knife down onto the counter. Sherlock looks up startled to find him glaring at him.

“What?”

“Sherlock,” he seethes, “don’t you dare think of giving anything to Gran. You let. Her. Be.”

“I–”

“You’re brilliant, Billy, but you’re grieving, and that’s a dangerous place for an inventor. Don’t let your emotions cloud your judgement.” He slides the raw chicken into the hot spiced oil in the pan. The sizzling and hissing makes it impossible to talk until Sherrin dumps in a can of coconut milk and caps it with a lid.

He leans against the counter, appraising Sherlock as he sits at the table chopping peppers.

“Sherlock, our formulas are preliminary, they’re unstable, with limited efficacy on rodents. I tested Pearl and Simon today. Pearl lost her memory after six hours, Simon never did, likely won’t. It’s too early to think we’re really on to something.”

“Simon never did?”

“Promise me. Let her be. All she needs from you is kindness.”
“But Sherrin, we could actually crack this—”

“Yes. Let’s,” he says firmly, holding Sherlock’s defiant stare. “For the next decade. Let’s get grants and proper facilities. Let’s get you more education, any kind you like. If we crack it, we’ll dedicate it all to Gran.”

Sherlock fumes silently at his peppers. He knows he’s being childish, but somehow, he thought Sherrin would validate it.

“I’d… like that,” Sherlock says quietly, the anger cooling. Sherrin’s thunder evaporates and he smiles warmly. He rubs his palm on their mum’s apron before extending his hand.

“Partners?”

Sherlock’s heart squeezes and he takes his hand in a rush, relieved to be on the same side again.

“Partners.”

...

His room feels empty the first few days without Sherrin, no rats stinking of cedar and urine, no bulky mazes taking up all the extra floor space. He misses him fiercely. But gradually he falls into his old rhythm of immersive research, filling notebooks with formulas, scribbling half of them out.

There is a new element to his summer holiday that he comes to cherish: afternoon tea with Gran. As a boy it had been a special ritual for them, and some echo of that seems to reside in her. She won’t suffer a drop of it with Mycroft and chases off her nurse. Only Sherlock will do for tea.

Mum says routine is good for her, so at 3:00 every afternoon, Sherlock winds down his work and heads to the kitchen to boil water and put together a plate of the savory fennel biscuits his Gran loves. He brings it to her on a tray on her bedroom’s little balcony, rolling down the awning if it’s raining.

For Gran, each tea-time is like the first. He deeply suspects that though her body is on a kind of autopilot, asking the same questions and giving the same answers, his true Grandmere is within, hidden in the dense hedge maze trimming her topiary, her precious collection of memory at her fingertips.

He aches for his old Gran, wishes she’d return, but he is fifteen, an inventor of secret serums, no longer a virgin. He begins to lay her to rest with his childhood. His brilliant Gran is securely preserved, her sprawling gardens duplicated to the best of his ability around his own mind palace. He walks there often, puzzling through his research. Tea with this new Gran is an opportunity for practical observation and he fills whole greenhouses with his study of her behavior.

One afternoon he gets a postcard from Victor showing the forbidding tooth of the Matterhorn, the card detailing adventures in Switzerland that cost him a broken ankle. He includes a strange collection of characters he calls an E-mail address. Write immediately. Bored. Horny.

Within an hour, Sherlock has configured his computer and established his own email account, starting a long string of correspondence with Victor that, while lacking tactile stimulation, rapidly
develops the creativity of his erotic vocabulary.

While waiting for his next filthy email, Sherlock begins to poke around the University of Oxford’s online research databases. He’s so deep into the newborn internet that he nearly misses tea with Gran the following afternoon.

…

To: redbeard001@ox.edu
From: wssh1875@iol.com
Subject: Guess who!
10.07.93   22:45

How’s Morpheus? Any recall yet?

…

To: wssh1875@iol.com
From: redbeard001@ox.edu
Subject: Re: Guess who!
10.07.93   23:31

Jesus, Billy, how did you get my Email address? Nevermind. Glad we can keep in touch this way. M had recall yesterday, but wasn’t well afterwards. Putting him on hiatus. Pearl in good health, no recall yet. Maybe M is just old. Having a 40% success rate. Need to prove 70% stability by next week. Tinkering with the tertiary nerve cluster catalyst. Wish me luck.

…

To: wssh1875@iol.com
From: redbeard001@ox.edu
Subject: Re: Re: Guess Who!
10.07.93   23:39

Good luck. I mean it. (Look into that synapse regeneration theorem we talked about.) Sorry about M. Give him some scone.

…

To: wssh1875@iol.com
From: redbeard001@ox.edu
Subject: 60!
12.07.93   23:58

60% success. I’d dance if I wasn’t so exhausted. Thanks for the tip (I thought you weren’t interested
anymore…) Stay tuned.

...

To: redbeard001@ox.edu
From: wssh1875@iol.com
Subject: Re: 60!
13.07.93 1:15

Well done!

Took my own advice about the synapses. Got a few things to talk to you about. When are you coming round?

...

To: wssh1875@iol.com
From: redbeard001@ox.edu
Subject: Re: Re: 60!
18.07.93 12:02

Mergatroid hasn’t had recall in almost a week. Starting to think I killed the memory. No ratty’s gone that long. Maybe dinner this weekend.

...

To: wssh1875@iol.com
From: redbeard001@ox.edu
Subject: Re: Re: Re: 60!
18.07.93 22:15

RECALL. Healthy.

...

To: wssh1875@iol.com
From: redbeard001@ox.edu
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: 60!
18.07.93 22:24

YES!

Are you coming tomorrow night?

...
To: wssh1875@iol.com  
From: redbeard001@ox.edu  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: 60!  
18.07.93   23:14

Sorry, Billy, got loads of paperwork to prepare for my presentation this week. You sure you don’t want to come out here and do it for me? >:

Write me the gist of your idea.

How’s Gran?

…

To: redbeard001@ox.edu  
From: wssh1875@iol.com  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: 60!  
19.07.93  4:15


Gran’s okay. She tells me these bawdy stories at tea sometimes, it’s terrifically embarrassing because she thinks she’s twenty and I’m just some bloke she’s never met before. But it’s fascinating, too, hearing what her life was like when she was young and crazy and rebellious. She was sad the other day. Hadn’t talked for a while, was really confused. I played my violin for her, I didn’t know what else to do and I had to practice. She started humming along and waltzing around the room, her whole face lit up. When I was done, she looked at me and said, “Oh Sherlock, that was just beautiful.” Later she forgot me again.
Sherrin, do you realize what these means?? Musical memory stimulates the hippocampus!!!

…

To: wssh1875@iol.com  
From: redbeard001@ox.edu  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: 60!  
19.07.93   4:22

Congratulations on your leap – I have absolutely no idea what that means. Amazing about Gran. Sad, too.

Go to bed, little brother. Your brain will work better with sleep. Don’t make me drive out there and dose you.

…

To: redbeard001@ox.edu  
From: wssholmes1875@iol.com  
Subject: EUREKA  
22.07.93   10:07
Sherrin, I’ve done it. Three of my rats, with synthesized dementia, have regained memories and retained them for over 24 hours. I need to talk to you. Immediately!!!

…

To: redbeard001@ox.edu
From: wssh1875@iol.com
Subject: Re: EUREKA
22.07.93   15:07

IMMEDIATELY

…

To: redbeard001@ox.edu
From: wssh1875@iol.com
Subject: Re: Re: EUREKA
22.07.93   17:10

I swear to god Sherrin if you didn’t work in a top secret location I’d hitchhike there RIGHT NOW.

…

To: wssholmes1875@iol.com
From: redbeard001@ox.edu
Subject: I’m alive
23.07.93   7:32

Cool it, kiddo, I’ve been poorly. Don’t freak out. I’ve lost a few hours. Must’ve been careless when administering the last rounds. Morpheus died. I’m more broken up about it than I should be for a scientist.

Sorry, if I don’t leave now I’ll be late. Big presentation today. Hope I make it out alive! (lol) Looking forward to hearing about your breakthrough.

…

To: redbeard001@ox.edu
From: wssh1875@iol.com
Subject: Re: I’m alive
23.07.93   11:45

Did you forget to wear gloves again? A rat’s dose could still give you a nasty timeslip. Curious what you’ll recall in a few days.

How did your presentation go? Free yet?
Sherlock squints at the code on the screen, breaking out in a cold sweat. In less than a minute he’s worked out the basic Ceasar cipher – Sherrin must have been in a terrible rush to use something so rudimentary.

‘Danger Destroy all Redbeard records You know nothing I am so sorry I will always be proud of you.’

He bolts from his chair. Sherrin took almost everything when he relocated to the lab, but Sherlock still has a lot of his original scratchwork in a pile under his bed. He drops to the floor, scrabbling out the rumpled pages, mind racing.

He’s in trouble bad, maybe dying. What can I do?

Listen to the message, idiot, he’s trying to protect you.

Sherlock’s eye catches on the notebooks he’s been filling with his research on Alzheimers and his formulas. They’re based enough on TD-12 that they could be risky, but he can’t bear to lose all of the work he’s done.

He races to his closet, arms full of papers, and dumps the pile on top of his grass-stained trainers and discarded shirts to pry up the carpet and the loose board beneath. He shoves in the stack, then carefully replaces the flooring and scatters his clothes to look natural. He glances at his clock, sweating and shaking. It’s time to boil water for Gran’s tea.

“What is your name, young man? I apologize, my memory is not what it once was.”

“Sherlock, ma’am.” He’s stopped reminding her they’re related, it just confuses her and once made him cry. It’s easier to be newly-introduced acquaintances. Though his stomach is in knots about Sherrin, he forces himself to go through the routine of tea. His summer has suddenly shifted nightmarishly off-kilter. Keep up appearances, remain calm. My god, what have they done to you?

When the sleek black car slides up their drive, Sherlock pours Gran another cup of tea, though his hand is shaking as he does it. When the men in dark suits emerge to talk to his mother, he listens with all of his might while Gran monologues about her time as a spy gathering intelligence aboard a
British torpedo boat, but the men’s voices don’t carry. Mum’s body language does – her hands fly to her face.

*Sherrin. I abandoned you.*

*This is all my fault.*
Chapter Notes

To the seven or so people in the universe keeping an eye on this story, firstly THANK YOU I’m grateful for each and every one of you and secondly SORRY I fell off the map for a bit. Summer is nutty, this section is angsty and hard, but I’m on a peaceful little holiday and getting some writing in while the hubs and boy-o go gallivanting. (High tide is literally lapping at the dock outside my window, and that BREEZE.) I hope to be able to post a few shorter chapters while I’m away. (Damn but I love writing young Sherlock.)

I know where we’re headed, I just need to get us there!

xo - mama-o

“Sherrin,” Sherlock croaks roughly. “Can you hear me?” He gives his brother’s shoulder a little shake. “Wake up, you sot.” There is no response. His eyes prickle and he drags his sleeve across his face.

Hospital monitors beep and purr. Sherrin looks like he’s asleep, except he’s in a pale, blue-checked hospital gown with wires attached to temple and chest. And completely unresponsive to stimuli.

Sherlock can just make out the doctor’s words as she talks to his parents in the hall. Collapsed unexpectedly at work... unresponsive... fever... running tests... could be a virus...

Virus? Not bloody likely.

Pushing the frantic worry into the catacombs of his mind palace, he stares hard at his brother, absorbing minute details, extrapolating and theorizing automatically.

Of particular interest is the bruising. The marks he received as souvenirs from the card sharks have healed to a mottled greenish brown on cheek and brow. The cuts from his aggressor’s rings are scabbed and nearly healed, so the bruising on his shoulder, just visible under the gown, catches his attention. It’s brighter, vividly purple, just a few hours old, made by small, strong hands.

The aggressor was shorter than Sherrin. He visualizes the attack, the trajectory of his fall. With a quick glance over his shoulder to verify that his parents are distracted, he twitches up the blankets to study Sherrin’s left knee and thigh. Also vividly bruised from where he must have landed. Is that when they administered TD-10? When you were knocked down and distracted?

But why has he gone so deep? He responded normally before. Have they tampered with the formula?

There must be more to this. He looks around briefly for supplies to take a blood sample, but of course they don’t just leave needles lying around. His fingers begin to race over Sherrin’s unconscious body, along his chest and neck, peering at his fingernails, breathing deeply over his hair. It’s not adding up. When he hears his parents’ footsteps approaching, he leaps back and slumps into a chair at the bedside, painting a somber expression on his face, but his mind is churning with his half-formed deductions.
Mum sees him looking dejected and runs a hand down his cheek, kissing his temple.

“Will he be okay?” Sherlock asks for naïve effect.

“The doctors are doing everything they can.”

Sherlock nods sadly.

“Why don’t you go get something from the vending machine,” she asks quietly, pushing a few pounds into his hand. “Get me something with chocolate and nuts while you’re at it.” She smiles at him, and he knows without any doubt that he is being sent on an errand to give her some time alone with her eldest son. She thinks he’s dying. He nods and slips out.

This is bad. Really bad.

Sherlock retraces his steps to the lift. On the way down to the lobby, he leans heavily against the wall and rubs his palms into his eyes. I know they did this to you, but how? Why? Maybe something went wrong at his review. And so Sherrin sent a warning, maybe just as they were coming into his lab. But what happened? Sherlock tugs at his hair irritably. Need more data.

The lift pauses to admit an orderly who gives him a sympathetic look. They ride in silence.

He scans the orderly automatically, knowing he’s had beans on toast for lunch that he didn’t enjoy, seeing the cat at home and his recovering sprained knee. He can just glimpse the Tshirt he’s wearing under his scrubs and feels a pang as he recognizes the wild black hair and pale face of a character from a comic Victor had been obsessed with last summer.

Morpheus, the Sandman. Sherlock had read a few and liked his brooding nature. Victor thought he was hot – the similarities between himself and the Dream King had not been lost on him. He feels a sudden pang for Victor, wishing his summer could magically go back to simple.

As the lift doors slide open and the orderly steps out, a realization hits him with a jolt.

Morpheus.

The only rat exposed to both serums. The only rat that sickened and died.

Sherrin had complained of a time-slip only a few days ago, of feeling poorly. Likely he was being sloppy with his procedures and accidentally got one of the rat’s doses of TD-12. And then something happened and they gave him a dose of TD-10 to quiet him…

What happens if you’ve got both serums in your bloodstream?

Oh, bloody hell.

The doors slide open on the lobby. Sherlock shuffles out, numb with the realization that they’re witnessing the result of a chemical mistake, not an attack. They wanted to quiet Sherrin, though to what end… and instead they’ve sent him inexplicably to the hospital in a coma. At least they didn’t send him home in lots of little labeled boxes. Sherlock scrubs at his face.

It was better, he admits to himself, when this seemed nefarious and clever, something for him to fight. Now, it’s just horrible, mindless chaos and he feels adrift in it. These are my bloody formulas. This is my fault. Why didn’t I ever test this eventuality?

Sherlock slouches miserably through the uniform rows of lobby chairs. A familiar figure is
leaning into the vending machine, punching at the buttons. The standard barbs automatically spring to mind, but they’re drowned in an uncomfortable surge of sympathy for Mycroft who always seeks out sweets when he’s nervous.

“Get two of those,” he mutters, appearing so quietly at Mycroft’s elbow that his brother startles, then nods, adding more money to the machine. Sherlock notes that his button-down shirt and pleated chinos are unusually rumpled.

“Getting anything?” Mycroft asks. Sherlock shakes his head. He almost wishes he were a stress eater; his stomach is all acid and knots. Mycroft scoops up the candy, handing one to Sherlock. “Before you bring that back to Mum, step outside with me a moment.”

“Why?” Sherlock furrows his brow suspiciously. Mycroft rolls his eyes.

“Because either I’m about to brutalize you in an alley, or I’m simply offering you a space to be that isn’t in this horrible place while we await our parents.” Sherlock shrugs and follows. He’s surprised to realize that he doesn’t want to be alone.

Mycroft leads him behind an outbuilding on the hospital grounds near the A&E entrance, the peanut butter Lion bar consumed before they’ve reached it. Sherlock’s not surprised when his brother pulls a trim metal cigarette case out of his pocket and snaps a lighter to one of the thin cigarettes. Mycroft’s clandestine smoking has been painfully obvious to him for years. A plume drifts over him and Sherlock wrinkles his nose.

“Bloody hell, Mycroft, is that a menthol?” Mycroft shrugs. The noncommittal gesture twists Sherlock’s stomach. The candy, the cigarette, the inclusion and complete lack of rancor. He’s really worried. Sherlock almost wishes he could divulge his deductions – Mycroft can sometimes help him see what he’s overlooked… when he isn’t being a complete prat.

With a huff, Sherlock drops to his haunches and leans against the brick wall, poking at damp cigarette stubs on the ground, trying to guess their brand from the filters. His mind is racing.

“Brother mine,” Mycroft croaks around a mouthful of smoke. Exhaling with force, his voice returns to its usual nonchalant tenor. “You know something about this.”

It takes all of Sherlock’s skill as a charlatan to keep his head from snapping up in surprise. He’s glad it’s not him hooked up to a heart monitor. It would have surged. He tries for a combination of imperious, hurt, and quizzical.

“I wish I did.” It’s not even a complete lie. They lock eyes for several heartbeats, Mycroft boring through his façade. He breaks the stare first, taking another drag and continues in his same bored manner.

“Clearly you fear repercussions. Perhaps you’ve made an oath you’re loathe to break. But mark this, Sherlock.” Steel slides into his voice and Sherlock tries to parry it with a defensive, wounded slouch. “Our brother is dying. If you have any notion of why he is ill, it is paramount that you divulge the information to someone.” He flicks ash onto the grubby concrete. “Hard as it may be for you to believe, you may tell anything to me without fear of reprisal or judgement.” His voice goes oddly soft. “I just want him to recover. It’s maddening being so in the dark.”

“Oy, lads,” they both snap guiltily toward their dad’s voice at the entrance of the alley, the cigarette disappearing lamely behind Mycroft’s back. “Thought I’d find you here. Pass me one, would you?”
Mycroft studies their dad for a moment before slowly bringing the half-smoked cigarette out of hiding. He passes over the silver case and lighter.

“Ta.” Blowing out a plume of smoke, their dad looks sternly at his sons in turn. “Not a word of this to your Mum.” They nod mutely.

“I should… um.” Sherlock holds up the candy bar. “For Mum. She asked me ages ago.” His dad claps him unexpectedly on the shoulder as he slouches past, giving him a squeeze. Sherlock glances up at his father. More salt than pepper in his close-clipped curls, worry lines crinkling around his eyes, and yes, a hint of moisture at the lids. Bloody hell, everyone’s falling apart. He escapes down the alley, back toward the sunlit carpark.

He hadn’t really intended to go back up to Sherrin’s room, not when his mum is in there, but now he doesn’t know where to put himself. The anxiety worms in his belly. He begins to walk the perimeter of the carpark, retreating into his mind palace, trying desperately to understand what would happen to the brain if the two formulas overlapped…

“How is he?”

Sherlock jolts out of his train of thought, blinking as he reenters the world around him, realizing he’s been pacing in front of the A&E. The candy bar is gripped in his fist and getting mushy in its wrapper.

The voice belongs to an unfamiliar young woman, barely older than him. She stands a few paces away, arms crossed, her trim gray business jacket and skirt incongruous on one so young. She reeks of organization, of superiority. Her well-funded childhood glares in a hundred tiny details from the calf muscles of a life-long equestrian to the hints of extensive orthodontic work on too-bright teeth.

“Who are you?” Sherlock narrows his eyes.

“Your patron,” she smirks, but no humor touches her eyes. An alarm goes off in his lower mammalian brain that would usually signal a predator. He takes a step back.

“I… don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t have a job.”

“Oh, don’t play dumb, Sherlock.” She rolls her eyes. “It doesn’t become you.”

A thrill passes through him. His first contact with the mysterious organization… they’ve sought him out today of all days. Not good. Does he know too much? Will he be dosed? Kidnapped? Killed on the spot? She looks like she could do the job. He rattles through his options and their probability of success. Run; deny everything; fight her; get information…

“Fine. Why are you here?”

“On behalf of our employer. We’re worried sick about the welfare of one of our most promising formulators.”

“So worried you’d beat him, then dose him into a bloody coma?”

She gives him a coy smile.

“I wasn’t speaking of Sherrinford, Sherlock.”

His stomach clenches. He takes another step back, but she swoops close, threading her arm
though his. He goes rigid at her touch. *Don’t panic. Find out what she wants.* She leads him down the sidewalk as if they were two Victorian bosom chums out for a stroll. The scent of her perfume is too strong. He doesn’t know which one it is, has never made a study of perfumes, and notes somewhere in the back of his anxious mind that he must remedy that if he survives this encounter.

“*It’s a very distressing situation for you. Your hero, in the prime of his youth, now mysteriously on death’s door,*” she wrinkles her brow at him sympathetically. “*All because you abandoned him when he needed you most.*”

Sherlock’s breath hitches. He doesn’t deny it.

“*Poor, hapless Sherrinford,*” she tents her eyebrows theatrically. “*Our employer saw such promise in him. But he just couldn’t deliver. We were very nearly about to neutralize his project when the most remarkable thing happened.*”

Sherlock wonders how much of Sherrin would have been *neutralized,* too, then realizes she’s waiting for his response. *Play her game.*

“What happened?” he asks in a tight voice.

“*Results!*” she trills, squeezing his arm, “*And so suddenly. We looked into this unusual change in behavior and lo and behold, who did we find?*”

“*Who.*”

“We found *you,* duck!” She scrunches her nose at him as if he’s adorable. “*My employer was fascinated to learn that his lackluster hire had actually led him to a child-prodigy, a diamond in the rough to polish.*”

“I’m not a *child,* I’m probably older than *you.*” He stops, shaking his arm out of her grasp, confronting her on the sidewalk. He realizes she’s led him quite far from the entrance to a quiet corner of the lot blocked by rhododendron bushes. *Shite.* “Look, it’s not what you think. I hardly contributed anything, I just helped him think it through a bit.”

“You underestimate yourself. I’m told your theorems were quite revolutionary.”

“It was a mistake, I just wanted to… I stopped,” he stammers.

“Oh, we know.” She rolls her eyes. “*The moment you got cold feet, progress completely floundered.*” She crosses her arms, looking bored. “*Sorry, Sherlock, there’s no lounging away your summer holiday reading chemistry and writing smut to boys. We need you back to finish what you began.*”

“I won’t work for you,” he seethes, cheeks flushing crimson. **Idiot, they’ve seen everything you’ve written.** “It’s horrible, what you people do. Find someone else to polish.”

She moues her lips in a pout.

“Oh, but Daddy wants *you,* Sherlock. And what Daddy wants, he gets. I tried to tell that to Sherrinford today. But he was so *protective* of little Billy.”

There is a dangerous purr in her voice that makes him very aware of how isolated they are. He takes in the subtle lines of her musculature, the very flick of her eyes. *Not an equestrian, a fighter.* She’s powerful, clearly dangerous, probably been training since she was just a kid. The skill and angle of Sherrinford’s bruising suddenly makes sense.
“We understand how these things go with creative minds,” she purrs. “You need to be properly motivated.” Suddenly all of her airs drop and she is steel and honed edges. “It’s ridiculously simple, Sherlock. Deliver us the completed formula, Sherrinford wakes up. Refuse us,” she shrugs, “we let him linger a while before we kill him, give your poor Mum something to hope for. Suffering is excellent for motivation.”

Sherlock sneers at her. *Checkmate.*

“You don’t have that power. You unknowingly mixed the formulas and he’s had a bad reaction. This was an accident and you’re trying to turn it into a clever move to blackmail me.”

She crosses her arms, smirking at him dangerously.

“Oh, we knew exactly what we were doing. Your little e-mails were ever so fun to read. So informative.” Sherlock scowls as his theory is challenged. “We’re very clever. And we know exactly how to snap him out of it.”

“You’re a liar,” Sherlock seethes, fists squeezing at his sides.

“You’re a gem, Sherlock, but you’re not the only clever boots Daddy’s got in the lab.”

A shiver of fear goes up his spine. Is it the truth, or a power play? He can’t tell – it’s like she’s wearing an impenetrable mask. His stomach drops. The *checkmate* was against him all along. He stares out over the carpark for several long breaths, looking for a loop hole. His shoulders slump. There isn’t one.

“If I do… how do I know you’ll keep your word?”

“You don’t,” she says breezily. “But it’s more to our advantage to earn your trust. I’d like to think we just got off on the wrong foot.”

“You’re monsters,” he whispers, shaking, the emotion crowding out of the catacombs and threatening to overwhelm him. “Making these drugs, doing this to him, just to get to me.”

“Sherlock,” she grins impishly, “we’re the good guys.”

She presses a slip of paper into his palm and folds his fingers over it, holding them like iron for emphasis, looking all the world from a distance like a flirtatious, overdressed teenager giving him her number.

“You have two weeks. Send your results to this address. We’ll keep him stable. Do as we ask and the doctors will uncover the cause within 12 hours of receipt.” She shakes her finger in front of his face and says in a sing-song, “And don’t try to wake him. That would be disastrous.” She gives his hand an extra squeeze that threatens to snap his fingers, moving close to whisper into his ear. “Breathe a word of this to anyone, he dies. We see everything. Hear everything.” She pulls back, sounding like a bored teenager. “Believe me, your brother Mycroft is putting us to sleep.”

It shouldn’t be a surprise that they’ve been monitoring him all this time, but it still makes his skin crawl. She releases his aching fingers and snaps into a cheery guise that’s almost more terrifying than the fierce one.

“Right then, pip pip, off you go.”

There’s nothing left to say. Sherlock forces his leaden feet to turn away from this predator and walk stiffly back to the entrance. When he glances back, the sidewalk is empty, no sign of the girl in
the business suit. He glances down at the slip of paper in his fist, the crushed candy in the other.

*I'm in too deep, Sherrin. Much too deep.*
Magpies

His mum cries soundlessly the whole ride home, his dad grips the steering wheel with white knuckles. Mycroft casts him a few meaningful glances, but stares out the window for most of the trip. Sherlock slumps in his seat, weighing the potential outcomes and risks of his choices over and over. His nerves suit the situation perfectly and do not have to be disguised.

Back at the manor, Sherlock finds his bedroom transformed. A tidy stack of familiar notebooks rests on his workbench: their research on TD-12. A crate full of shockingly high tech apparatus is hidden just out of sight beneath the worktop. The rat terrariums hold familiar old rodents, Mergatroid and Pearl, among others. (The absence of big, tawny old Morpheus jolts his stomach.) What’s most suspicious is the thin, matte-grey flatbed scanner already wired to his computer.

He thinks about looking for the hidden cameras and microphones, but worries tampering with them could be seen as a transgression. Sherrinford’s well-being hinges entirely on his behavior from this moment on. I’m the caged rat, now.

Digging up his notes from under the closet floorboards, Sherlock gets to work.

…

Eight days later, he has stabilized the formula to 73% success of localized memory-loss six hours after application. None of the rats have had recall for four straight days. That seems long enough. He uses the new scanner to send his revised formula to the email address on the slip of paper given to him by the young assassin. Seething with nerves, he waits.

…

He’s at tea with Gran, half listening to her U-boat spy story, half immersed in his mind palace combing the data for errors, when his mum walks in suddenly, her face glowing with relief. Gran looks up, annoyed at the intrusion. Before she can become irate, Sherlock leaps to his feet, begs an apologetic exit, and pushes his mum back through the balcony door.

“What is it?” he asks tensely.

She squeezes his hands, tears sliding down her cheeks.

“The hospital’s just phoned. Sherrin’s woken.”

Sherlock falls into her arms and suddenly begins to weep against her shoulder. Perhaps as surprised by his outburst as she is by the news, his mum pats him on the back.

“Yes, it’s been very hard. But they feel he’s turned a corner.” She hugs him tightly. “They’re sending him here, to recover.”
Victor –

Sorry I’ve been so quiet. Things have been bloody awful. Sherrinford fell ill suddenly. A coma, from a virus. He was dying, but the doctors found a cure. He’s home now, getting better. Sort of.

Strangest thing is that it affected his memory. He can hardly remember the summer. His memory is full of holes. He tells me stories about magpies that make no sense. He and I spent a lot of time together the last few months and it’s maddening that I remember it, but he doesn’t.

No sultry missives from you lately. Should I take this as a sign? It’s okay, you know, if we part ways. No hard feelings. It’s been great. I think it will be better for you to not be tangled up with me. I’m a bloody mess right now.

-sh

Sherlock hits send, trying to mash the ache deep out of range, deep in the catacombs with his rage for his employer. It’s safer for Victor to be far, far away from him, better for the organization to think he isn’t a pressure point.

Oh yes, they’d kept their promise, Sherrin had woken right on cue and kept his life.

They’d never said anything about keeping his memory.

Sherlock re-reads the awful email, hoping his snooping patron will see the double meaning meant for them: Sherrin’s forgotten it all. Leave us alone.

“Hey, Sherrin. Breakfast.” Sherlock sets the tray down on the side of his brother’s childhood bed, giving the sleeping lump a shake. The mound of blankets groan. A shaggy black mane pokes out, blinking blearily and yawning hugely.

Sherrin’s got a thin beard and deep shadows beneath his eyes. For the last week he’s been asleep more than awake. The memory holes are getting worse. Yesterday he couldn’t recall the combinations for their elements game. He got angry and confused when Sherlock tried to discuss some of what he was reading in Gibbs. Mum is on the phone with doctors constantly, her eyes red all the time.
The assassin had said suffering is motivation. Is this a punishment for Sherrin… or their next move?

“Is it morning?” Sherrin asks hoarsely, rubbing his eyes and reaching for the cup of tea.

“No, mid-day, but I couldn’t get you to wake up earlier. So, brunch?” He tries to keep his voice light.

Sherrin turns to him, squinting.

“When is my brother coming?”

Sherlock huffs a low laugh.

“You want Mycroft to sit with you? That’s mental. You haven’t heard the news, or if you did, you’ll have forgotten. He’s got a new job, an internship running errands for someone in the government. He spends the week in London now. You’ll see him Saturday.”

“Mycroft?” Sherrin wrinkles his nose, shaking his head a little too roughly. “No, Billy. I want to see Billy. There’s something I need to tell him.”

A wave of cold spreads through Sherlock. Bastards.

“Sherrin,” Sherlock says slowly, trying to keep the quiver out of his voice, “It’s me. It’s Billy. Listen to my voice, I’m right here.”

Sherrin, who can deduce nearly as well as he can, runs his eyes over Sherlock, probing fiercely. He screws up his whole face, looking a bit like a toddler about to throw a tantrum.

“NO, you’re NOT.”

Sherrin stands so quickly that the tray topples onto the floor, eggs and toast spilling out onto the carpet. Sherlock kneels to scoop it up, his hands shaking and eyes prickling with tears, but Sherrin grabs him by the wrist and hoists him to his feet. Sherlock grimaces from the pain, trying to stay calm.

“Get out of here,” Sherrin growls into his face. “I know you’re one of them. Leave. Tell the magpies I need to see my brother or I won’t finish the work.”

He releases Sherlock’s wrist and pushes him toward the door. Sherlock glances back quickly as he stumbles into the hall, the anger blazing at him from his brother’s eyes. Sherrin slams the door behind him.

Sherlock leans against the hallway wall, his breath coming in shallow gulps. He waits one minute. Then five, then five more. Steeling himself, his hand shaking as he turns the knob, he reenters Sherrin’s room.

Sherrin, still in his pajamas, is sitting at his desk holding his head, the breakfast tray still overturned on the floor.

“Sherrin? Hey, it’s me, it’s Billy. They… they said you wanted to see me.”

At the sound of his voice, Sherrin’s head snaps up. He runs to Sherlock. Bracing himself for fists and a roar of rage, he gives a choked cry when he’s seized into a hug.

“You’ve got to get me out of here, Billy,” Sherrin mutters against his shoulder. “They’re
poisoning the food, sending in doubles of you. They’re trying to make me think I’m home.”

Sherlock pats his back gently.

“It’s okay, Sherrin,” he whispers. “I’m working on a plan. Just be patient.”

“Billy,” Sherrin whispers against his ear, “listen… I know they’re doing this to me. I know they’re listening. All the time. It’s the magpies, Billy. Do not trust them. They’re going to…” Sherrin pushes away from Sherlock with a frustrated growl.

“What?” Sherlock whispers.

Sherrin spins to face him, pulling at his hair, face tragic.

“I can’t remember.”

Sherlock gently takes him by the shoulders. “It’s okay–

“It’s not okay–”

“Right, no. It’s not. This whole thing is shite, Sherrin. Utter and total shite. So look. In case they try to trick you again, lets agree to a signal, so you always know it’s me.”

Sherrin blinks, nods, then leans close, whispering, “C. R.” He pulls away, giving him a wide-eyed meaningful look. Chromium. “That,” he whispers. “Signal that and I’ll know it’s you.”

Sherlock nods, trying not to feel too hopeful that Sherrin’s recalled some of their old game, wondering if he’ll even remember this conversation in an hour.

“Hey, I’ve got to clean up the food. I’ll bring you some, stuff I made, so you’ll know it’s safe, okay?”

Sherrin nods, turning distractedly back to his desk. Sherlock glimpses his notebook open, the page covered in a half-finished formula.

“What’s this?”

“Not sure… been dreaming about it. Doesn’t make any sense.” He slumps at his desk, raking his hair with his fingers. Sherlock hurriedly picks up bits of cold egg from the carpet, the scribbled formula coming to life in his mind. Of course. I’ve been so stupid. What did you uncover? What are they trying to erase from your mind?

...

At 3am, Sherlock paces his bedroom, thinking.

He prods Sherrin’s incomplete formula in his mind where it’s spinning slowly in space. It looks similar to his own work on DT21…

He was making an antidote. Against their wishes? At their request? But he can easily tell that it would be ineffective. It was probably the last straw, the last request, and he had to do it on his own. He’d have been terrified – he’d have known they’d come for Sherlock.
He can hear the young assassin’s voice. *We nearly neutralized his project when he wasn’t delivering results.*

*So. This is neutralized.*

*Efficient, clever. Monstrous.*

Kill two birds: Sherrin forgets the work, sounding like a paranoid nutter when he can recall anything, and Sherlock gets blackmailed to do anything they want in return for his brother safe and whole.

Of course they’d read every email he’d sent to Sherrin, all his excited gibbering about reversing the effects. Sherlock slams his hands down on the workbench. Every step of this game of chemical chess has been poised to grip his heart, to force him to act.

What will make the little unpolished diamond dance? What will deliver a complete antidote?

Give him back his brother with a broken memory.

Of course. It’s so very simple. The steps are right there, all he has to do is dance.

Sherlock is watching his hands as if they belong to someone else. They unlock his poisonous chemicals cupboard. They take the vial of DT21 off a shelf and measure a dose into a glass of water. He’s feels his legs taking him down the hall and into Sherrin’s room. As if from behind one-way glass, he watches his brother blink at him sleepily. Sherlock’s hands flash the signal for chromium, his heart clenching at the trust and relief that wash over his brother’s face. Sherlock watches him take the glass and gulp down the water automatically, then flop back to sleep.

Only then, with the deed done, does Sherlock begin to occupy his body. He slumps down into the chair at the bedside, feels his blood roaring in his ears, his hands shake, his stomach clench, the adrenaline finally flooding him. Sitting there in the darkness of his brother’s room, he folds into himself, hugging knees to chin, and waits.
“Billy. Hey, wake up—”

Sherlock gasps awake, sliding out of the bedside chair. His brother’s quick hand catches him.

“Whoa, easy now,” A warm chuckle.

Sherlock, now completely awake, watches Sherrin closely, his pulse pounding in his head.

“Thanks — I must’ve dozed off.”

“Just glad you got some sleep. I’m starving. Any breakfast on?” Sherrin pushes back the blankets and stumbles over to tie on his dressing gown. His eyes are clear.

No time like the present.

“Sherrin… are you going in to work today?”

Scratching his scalp sleepily, Sherrin suddenly snaps awake.

“Oh shite what time is it?” He whirs, seeing the clock. “Shite shite shite I’ll have missed the bloody train—”

He stumbles to his wardrobe and grabs a shirt off a hanger, but just as suddenly as his frantic rush began, he freezes, shirt dangling, one hand lightly pressed to his temple.

Sherlock gets up, approaching him cautiously as if he might bolt.

“Sherrin? You okay?”

His brother lets the shirt drop to the floor, then turns heavily toward him. His face is stricken.

“Sherlock, my god — I’ve got to get the police, the press, somebody. I’ve got to stop them — before it happens—”

“Before what happens? Who?”

“My employer! The Magpie Collective! Jesus Billy, we have to act fast. How long have I been out of it?” He suddenly growls with frustration and begins to pace. “Goddamnit they dosed me, how long was I out? And —” His eyes grow wide as they take in Sherlock. “Ohh no, no-no-no, what did those bastards make you do? Shite!”

Sherlock, stunned, begins to catch up with his mind’s observations. Sherrin is well. Sherrin remembers.

It worked.

His words tumble out. “I’m sorry Sherrin — I did whatever they told me to, I couldn’t just let you—”
Sherrin abruptly pulls him into a fierce hug, breathing hard.

“No, stop, you did the right thing, Billy, you used your heart. I’m just—” His voice chokes and the rest comes out as a whisper. “I’m so sorry they did this to you. So sorry. It’s my fault. Utterly my fault.”

Bewildered, Sherlock returns the hug, his eyes wet against Sherrin’s shoulder.

Sherrin whispers almost inaudibly into Sherlock’s ear.

“Don’t speak. They’re listening to every word. They’ll have dispatched a team the moment I woke. It’s not safe here. We have to go. Police. No phones, in person. Now.” He releases him just as abruptly and begins charging around his room, throwing on clothes.

…

The rest of the house is still asleep. They pound down the stairs through the early-morning calm.

“Will they be okay? Should we wake them?”

“It’s us they want, Sherlock.”

Sherlock eyes his brother critically as they run out into the foggy morning. He can detect no signs of confusion, nothing erratic. They fling themselves into Sherrin’s grubby blue Fiat and speed off, raising a plume of dust on the quiet, tree-lined dirt road.

“Can I talk now?” Sherlock asks in a mumble.

“Sure. I haven’t heard of them being able to bug cars remotely yet.”

“What are they going to do?” he bursts out. Sherlock hears the panic in his own voice, tries to squash it down into the catacombs.

“An attack, very public, covered up with TD12, widespread usage. You’ll have completed it on schedule for them, I expect, as the price to wake me up?” Sherlock nods grimly. “Right. They’ll have synthesized gallons of it by now.”

Sherlock nods. Then startles with a horrible realization.

“Sherrin – this isn’t the first time you’ve woken.”

“What?” The car swerves slightly, but Sherrin doesn’t slow their pace.

“I did what they said. I finished it. And you woke up from the coma. Like they promised. They sent you here to recover. But your memory – you lost the whole summer.” He sucks in his breath. “You didn’t know me.”

Sherrin stares ahead, horrified.

“Did they tell you to make an antidote?”

“Not exactly. I… it was implied.”

Sherrin is silent for several heartbeats.
“Your new serum,” Sherrin whispers, wonderingly.

“Um… ta da.” Sherlock says quietly. “Welcome back. Human trial, #1.”

Sherrin slams his hand into the steering wheel, biting back a curse, but he shakes his head quickly.

“Sorry, Billy, it’s just – *jesus*, they played us, completely played us. My antidote wouldn’t hold. It was stalling this plan of theirs, something big. I got wind of it from a friend, another scientist, brilliant woman. She was worried about me getting the axe.” He grimaces. “Looks like I did. *Shite.* Now they’ll have the tools to turn these memories on and off at will. They’re moving ahead with the plan, I’m sure of it.”

They drive in thoughtful silence, Sherlock’s mind spinning as the forest and fields pass in a milky haze, the colors muted. He wonders if they’re in time to stop this attack, if they police will even believe them, what the organization will do if it’s accused.

Suddenly, Sherrin gives a choked little gasp. Sherlock watches, confused, as his face goes slack. A trickle of blood peeks from his nostril. Sherrin’s hands slide off of the wheel.

Panic pulses through him.

Sherlock feels time go syrupy. Sherrin’s head is lolling. The car starts to veer to the left. They’re going too fast. Sherlock lurches to the driver’s side, grabbing at the wheel to jerk it straight, but he overcompensates. He feels the carnival lurch of the car hitting the ditch, rising up in brief flight before landing with a bang so fierce the blackness immediately swallows him whole.

…

*Hospital smell.*

*Hospital sounds.*

*Logical conclusion, in hospital. Not dead.*

*Open your eyes.*

*Don’t want to.*

*Open them.*

Now.

“Ah, little brother, so you’ve come back to us.”

Sherlock blinks blearily at a Mycroft-shaped object at his bedside. His head thuds with a rhythmic pain and as he shifts to sit up, he hears a sudden tutting. Lances of pain zap up his sides.

“No no, don’t move, your stitches are quite fresh.”
Breathing short, hissing gasps, he waits for the pain to ebb, blinking his vision clearer. It’s afternoon. There’s Mum, asleep in a chair, skin gray, hair askew. No sign of his dad.

Mycroft appraises him, waiting for the wave of pain to settle.

“You’ve been in a car accident, Sherlock. Your leg was cut quite badly and you’ve broken a few ribs. Concussion. You’re very lucky to be alive. The doctors say you can go home in a day or two.”

Sherlock stares down numbly at the dressing covering his right leg.

“Sherrin.”

It’s not a question and Mycroft knows it. His pristine brother’s face is waxy, shadows under his eyes, hair mussed, clothing stale.

“Dead,” Sherlock says flatly. Mycroft looks down, swallows hard, and gently rests a hand over his own.

It’s the worst deduction he’s ever made. Sherlock pinches his eyes shut.

And I killed him.

…”

For three days, Sherlock does not speak. His mum gives up trying to draw him out and sits reading at his bedside. Shock they murmur, right in front of him. He can hear them perfectly well.

He eats and sleeps just enough to make the doctors trust they can release him. At home, he sprawls on the sofa, hearing his parents whisper about psychologists. He goes through the motions, but inside he is completely frozen. The voices keep up a steady dirge of judgement.

You gave him an untested serum.

You let him drive a car when the day before he couldn’t even recognize your face.

You did this.

You.

Was he a disposable scientist for the magpies? Or their executioner? Maybe both?

Tidy.
It's going to get gentler soon, I promise.
Brotherly Love

It’s dusk. Crickets keep a steady rhythm over the cascading notes of a hermit thrush. A breeze blows over his face, mussing his hair. Sherlock is in the middle of his new topiary garden, stretched out in the cool grass. His Gran’s meticulously sculpted boxwood menagerie towers over him. He’ll never know what memories they held for her, but he fills them now with Sherrin.

He’s been at it for days. Now, all he has to do is brush his fingers over the prickly foliage of the leaping stag and Sherrin’s warm grin comes back to him, eyes sparkling with mischief and some brilliant, idiotic plan. The tortoise holds his dark moods, the storms Sherlock knows he could have tempered if he’d only been given full access to his brother’s brain.

He rolls over and pulls himself wearily to his feet. Even in his mind palace he’s exhausted. It’s been better to hide here than be outside in his body with his heartbroken family, carrying the crushing guilt that he erased Sherrin from their presence.

Yes, it’s better here. In the topiary, he can push his hands into a tidy cyrus trimmed like a clipper ship and relive feverish, delirious battles with Redbeard, as vivid to him now as when he was six. The dragon brings him back to giddy moments shared at the worktop, a sometimes-successful experiment sprawled messily between them. The entwined conifer lovers remind him that Sherrin was more like him than he’d ever known, even excited for him as he showed his first blooms toward manhood, toward men.

A cloud passes over the sun and he shivers. His body needs him again, bloody nuisance. He plods through the silent crowd of creatures toward the tall, thick hedge enclosing the garden and slips through a wrought-iron gate, bracing himself.

…

Blinking his eyes against a steady patter of rain, he groans. He’s laying on leaf duff deep in the forest behind the manor, wet and shivering in his thin summer clothes. He feels leaden with the tremendous weight that has occupied his body ever since the accident, one that has nothing to do with his injuries, which are healing.

The weight pushes him into the earth – he’s been lying in the forest for hours each day to avoid it. No one bothers him out here, and the proximity to trees makes it easier to visualize his garden.

At first, he anticipated the assassin to find him in the night and finish the job. He kept his bedroom window open to save her the trouble of breaking in. But she never came. No black car with a squadron of suits ever crept up their drive. It bothered him.

His parents, in their fashion, did not ask questions about the accident. The truth, as they saw it, was painful enough. Sherrin and Sherlock, always two peas in a pod and up to mischief, only this time Sherrin’s illness had tangled things, made the innocent act of a morning drive a deadly misstep in judgement. And Sherlock? He was only fifteen, just a boy going along with his brother’s whims. No one ever asked him where they’d been going. The local authorities were deafeningly silent on the whole matter.

At the funeral, Sherlock thought he’d glimpsed the assassin among the throng of black-clad
Holmses and Sherrin’s mob of friends. But Gran had needed a lot of his attention, and when he’d looked back, the familiar flash of blonde hair was nowhere to be seen.

A few days after Sherrin was buried, the Magpies finally made a move. Sherlock had returned from a doctor’s appointment and found all of the high-tech equipment removed from his room, all traces of his work gone. He wished they had left the rats. He logged on to find that his collection of email had been deleted. A virus, the provider had assured him, an unfortunate wrinkle in the system.

Except for an antiseptic vacancy, it was as if the Magpie Collective had never been. He had retreated to his bed, careful of his sutures, and brooded. Erasure was somehow worse than pursuit. They had gotten what they needed and tossed him aside. He was free, but the price had been unfathomable.

Somehow, appallingly, everything is moving on. His parents leave for work each morning. Mycroft goes to London and returns on the weekends. Sherlock avoids him. There is talk of returning to school in a few weeks. The routine, they say, will be good for him. Sherlock retreats to his mind garden where it is easier not to care.

He shivers in his wet clothes and with a huff, decides it’s time to stand. His stiff muscles protest as he pulls himself to his feet and starts to stumble, but he’s suddenly caught by firm hands. Sherlock whirls, agents and spies filling his imagination, but it’s an even more shocking sight to behold beneath the trees.

“Brother mine, come inside. You don’t do him any good by getting pneumonia in the rain.”

“Rain is harmless, Mycroft. Streptococcus causes pneumonia,” Sherlock says flatly, shrugging away from his steadying hands and turning to head deeper into the woods.

“Sherlock, you can’t keep hiding out in the forest. You’re terrifying Mum.”

That makes him pause. “She sent you?”

“No one sent me. I’ve been trying to talk to you for weeks.” Mycroft approaches him cautiously, taking a scone out of his pocket and pushing it into Sherlock’s hand, then taking off his own jacket to swing over his shivering brother’s shoulders.

Sherlock frowns, but doesn’t object. He’s grateful for the warmth and his stomach gives an uncomfortable lurch of hunger. He takes an enormous bite.

“My employment and your recent method of grieving have made it difficult to find you. You don’t know how many times I’ve hunted for you in this damn forest.” Mycroft considers him. “This has been too-long delayed, a transgression that has only added to your suffering these past weeks.”

Sherlock scowls at him while he chews a huge mouthful of scone, confused. Mycroft folds his arms over his rain-spattered shirt and gives his sulking brother a long, aggrieved look.

“Sherlock, for god’s sake. This wasn’t your fault.”

Sherlock flinches, ducking his head. Tears burn his eyes.

“You’re supposed to say that.”

“I do not dabble in the sentimental nor do I say anything to uphold a social script. I simply relate the facts, which you are painfully disregarding, much to your detriment.”
Sherlock looks daggers at him. He feels his skin go suddenly hot.

*Fuck it.*

“You want the facts, *brother mine*?” he hisses, throwing the jacket to the ground and taking a step toward Mycroft. “These are the *facts*. We were working for a secret organization. I made the formula they used to erase his memory. Oh, and another before that. One drop and you’re on the ground twitching with bloody *nightmares*. Mix them together and you’ve got instant *coma*."

He takes a step closer, chest heaving. His voice rings in the damp woods. “*I quit the project. I’m* the reason they made him ill – to force me to finish the formula. *I’m* the one they set an assassin on at the hospital, bugged my bloody room, read all my sodding email, drove away my *boyfriend*!”

Sherlock is inches from him now, shaking with his fury. Mycroft stands perfectly still, watching him as if he were a very rare, dangerous specimen. Sherlock takes a ragged breath and roars into his face.

“*And I’m* the one who gave him the last serum, unstable and untested, when he was losing more memory than Gran.”

His voice chokes. He turns and pulls at his hair, face crumpling. Suddenly all of his rage evaporates, leaving behind a thin, worn, sad boy.

“No one ordered me to. Not like the other time.” He turns and blinks, as if seeing Mycroft for the first time since he’s woken. “It was brilliant. Just for that morning, he was back, everything was okay, we were going to *fix* them.” Tears begin to slide down his face. He doesn’t wipe them away. “I thought I’d healed him. But then my *brilliant* serum fried his bloody brain while he was driving.”

He pulls in a deep lungful of air, meets his brother’s eyes and says softly, “Those are the facts. Now tell me it’s not my fault.”

Mycroft studies him with pained, sorrowful eyes.

“Weaponized aneurism,” he replies quietly.

Sherlock blinks. “What?”

“He had a trigger, Sherlock, in his brain. They put it there, while he was in the coma.” Sherlock squints at him, incredulous. “It’s not new technology, but they have developed a manner of inserting it without incision and activating it remotely from great distances. You don’t think the Magpie collective fires its researchers without including a few safeguards, do you?”

To Sherlock’s surprise, Mycroft briefly grips his shoulder and gives him a little shake.

“They killed him, Sherlock, before he could expose them. But they would like very much for you *to* think you’re responsible. It keeps everything so much neater – you solve their riddle, you dispose of their ex-employee, you keep quiet in your horror and grief.”

Aghast, Sherlock steps back, trying to put the puzzle together that Mycroft has given him, but the pieces don’t fit.

“How could you *possibly* know this?”

“My dear brother, you are a genius, but your rational mind has been obscured by your
emotions. You were easily manipulated. Do not mistake my judgement for rancor. I have been monitoring Sherrin closely ever since he was approached by the Magpie Collective. Once you became involved in project Redbeard, I took certain measures. I do care about you both deeply, in my fashion.”

“But how~”

“I had a connection at the Collective. A researcher close to Sherrin’s work, but higher up. Thanks to her, I was able to discern the level of their surveillance and monitor a great deal of your employer’s activity. I even tried to warn Sherrin with her help, but I was too late.” He suddenly looks away, scowling and biting his lip. Sherlock realizes he’s close to tears.

Mycroft sniffs and pulls his hand out of the pocket of his dirt-smeared chinos, holding out a handful of tiny microphones, their wires cut. Sherlock gapes at the equipment.

“Mycroft, no. If I tamper with them they could~”

“Allay your fears. I’ve arranged for them to be removed.”

“Wait… are you working for them?”

“Oh no,” Mycroft huffs. “that would have been exponentially easier. Alas, admission to that select club is highly exclusive. They would never admit a junior member such as myself. My contact has been invaluable and with her guidance I sought employment in the House of Commons as aid to a certain long-standing member. I rose quickly through the ranks of his staff and was able to access information, manipulate correspondence. As for these,” he rattles the microphones and gives a small, rueful smile, “he gave the order, though he is not yet aware of it.”

“Bloody hell, Mycroft,” Sherlock goggles at him. “Won’t you get caught?”

“My employer is known for his rampant, closeted alcoholism. He will admit to anything if he fears he acted while clouded by intoxication. As for the Collective, they have not been made aware of a third Holmes brother becoming a low-level aid to one of their number. Aids are faceless and change positions constantly. I have an exit strategy and my trail is impeccably clean.”

Sherlock continues to squint incredulously at this creature who looks and sounds like Mycroft, but has just stepped from the pages of a spy novel, minus the heroic outfit.

“Your work was revolutionary, Sherlock, but you were among a sizable staff of brilliant scientific minds developing a variety of secrets. These… events are not uncommon. Sherrin knew the risk.” Mycroft sighs sadly. “I think he relished it, drawn like a moth to a flame. While not all of their work is nefarious, let us simply say that the Queen’s Royal Army is decades behind them and will pay a fine price to catch up.”

Sherlock begins to pace through the leaves.

“Thanks to my revolutionary work, some bloody attack is going to happen, maybe already did.”

Mycroft waves his hand dismissively.

“It would have happened anyway. They do these things all the time, they’re simply on the hunt for new methods. If it eases your mind, this particular plan has been shelved due to shifting political complexities.”
“It’s going to haunt me, though. Someday they’ll use them.”

“And that was the choice you made the moment you prepared your first draft of TD-10.”

There is steel in his voice. “Own your actions, Sherlock.”

Sherlock turns sharply mid-pace and bristles, but it quickly fizzles out. He’s right. Mycroft clears his throat and softens.

“You must understand, no matter what you did, it was never going to end well for him – you don’t disappoint The Magpies and waltz away. He would have been neutralized much sooner had he not inextricably brought a child prodigy into their midst to clean up his mess.”

“You’re saying I bought him time?”

Mycroft rubs at his temples. He looks exhausted.

“I could not prevent the trigger they placed in him. It was only a matter of time. I gave you the summer and kept you as safe as I could – there was certainly no stopping you. After his return home, I had hoped his advanced illness, obviously imposed by the Collective, would keep you out of harm’s way. Be grateful you had the time with him that you did.”

Sherlock thumps down onto a fallen log, replaying his memories of the summer in the blinding light of Mycroft’s information.

“So... in the hospital. You bloody knew. The whole time you knew. Why didn’t you tell us?”

Mycroft sneers. “Don’t be an idiot. Sherrin would never have accepted my help. I had to act from within.”

Sherlock frowns, but doesn’t deny it.

Mycroft hesitantly joins him on the sodden log, still cautious, as if his little brother might suddenly bolt in a fit of tantrum.

“Please believe me, Sherlock, you did not do this. Your serum, while surprising and unplanned, was quite stable.” He gives Sherlock a small smile. “Though I wouldn’t give it to Gran without proper testing.”

Sherlock holds his head in his hands, the data slowly seeping into his mind and reconfiguring events. *I didn’t kill him. Not really. But if I’d been cleverer, I could have prevented it. I’m sure of it.*

It strikes Sherlock suddenly that Mycroft must feel that way, too. They sit in awkward silence, the rain falling gently. Sherlock feels an uncomfortable rush of emotion as cracks appear in the solid armor he’s held up for years against Mycroft’s austere and haughty form of brotherly love.

“You did this, all of this, to protect us.”

Mycroft pushes to his feet, glaring at him, the familiar expression far more comfortable to bear.

“Of course I tried to protect you. The pair of you idiots could have blown up Western civilization if you didn’t have a proper *nanny.*” His bluster dies out and his voice becomes quiet. “But... it was my contact who made my involvement possible. She shared a great deal of intelligence with me before she, too, was neutralized.” He looks away, undisguised pain flashing across his face. Sherlock thinks back, suddenly, to Sherrin’s joke about Mycroft needing a good shag and has the bizarre vision of him trading secrets between the sheets. He clearly wasn’t the only one having an
interesting holiday that ended in shambles.

“Well, thank you, on behalf of the Western World…” Sherlock smiles. “Nanny.”

Mycroft rolls his eyes and Sherlock feels instantly more at ease with their customary dynamic. If they can toss stones at one another, they’re okay.

“Sherlock, these people know what you can do now. It is only a matter of time before they find you again. Though I cannot see into the Collective as I once could, I can monitor their movements via my employer. You have my word that I will do all I can to keep you safe.” Mycroft stuffs his hands into his pockets and glares at the sodden, leafy ground. “And for god’s sake, keep your heart locked in the deepest vault. It is our greatest weakness. Never let them gain access to it again.”

Sherlock feels the emotion stretched thin and taught between them. He looks hard at Mycroft, always cleverer, always the good son in brilliant, troubled Sherrin’s shadow, appalled as his untamed brothers routinely failed to master the system and live above mere mortals.

He wishes he didn’t need his help, but he does. He always has. If it hadn’t been for Mycroft, he’d likely be dead, now, too. He sees it clearly now. Despite all the rancor and rivalry, he is not locked so deeply in Mycroft’s vaults. He pushes off from the log. Mycroft eyes him warily.

Stepping closer, Sherlock feels Mycroft go rigid as he wraps him into a tight embrace. Still several inches shorter than his older brother, he presses his face into his damp shirt.

“Thank you. For what you did. And… I’m bloody sorry. For all of it.”

As the seconds stretch, Mycroft lets out an enormous, long-suffering sigh and returns the hug. Sherlock feels the burning rush behind his eyes and lets it come. The rain continues to patter down on them, Mycroft holds him as Sherlock shakes with sobs beneath the dripping trees.

“I miss him, too, brother mine.”
Thank you so much for staying with me. Your excitement and support for this story means so much. Every comment and kudo brighten my day and remind me that this labor of love is worth it.

This was going to be a longer chapter, but I wanted to get another piece out to you before another week went by. I'm hoping to post weekly and conclude by the end of August.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

221B, the present

Long shadows pool in the corners of 221B, golden light illuminating dust motes. The final words of Sherlock’s tale hang in the air between he and John as they face one another on the sofa, sharing the tartan blanket.

Sherlock’s fingertips fidget at his lips, watching John’s body language: rapid blinking, shoulders tense, brow creased slightly in the center, lips clenching and pursing as if he is about to speak. He flexes his jaw and small pink spots appear near his temples, always a sure sign of John’s rising temper.

Downstairs, Sherlock can hear the muffled warbles of Mrs. Hudson singing along with the radio. His nerves grow taught. He braces himself for the eruption.

When John finally speaks, his voice is surprisingly rough with emotion.

“I wish I’d known you when you were fifteen.”

Sherlock’s fingertips freeze mid-tap.

“Why?” he asks warily. It’s not at all what he was expecting. Maybe, You monster. Or certainly, How could I love the lunatic who formulated my poisons? Or especially, You led your childhood assassin right to me.

“Because,” John gives him a sly little smile and crosses his arms, cocking his head in that way that makes Sherlock’s stomach grip. “I would have made a much better wrestling partner.”

Sherlock blinks at him, breath caught in his throat, the suggestion sending a shiver that runs down his solar plexus to lodge between his legs. Relief floods through him and he begins to laugh. John dissolves into giggles, the tension evaporating.

“John, really! I pour my heart out about my wicked, traumatic childhood, and all you can respond with is that you wish you’d been my first shag?”

“I admit it preoccupied my thoughts,” John says, trying to hold a sober expression and failing.
“Christ, come here.” He shifts across the couch, closing the distance between them, arms outstretched. Bemused, Sherlock lets John pull him tightly against his chest. John’s voice is muffled in his curls, all humor gone.

“I’m so sorry, Sherlock. So, so sorry you had to endure this horrific experience. I’m bloody raging inside that they took such advantage of your mind.” Sherlock can feel John’s hand clench against his back reflexively and leans into him, relief fogging his thoughts. John.

“You were so young and raw and brilliant, and they scarred you.” John sucks in a breath to steady himself. “I can’t believe she’s tortured you all these years. Christ, I could just–” He bites off his words, inhaling sharply, every muscle tense.

Sherlock listens as the rhythm of John’s breathing becomes deliberate. He was right – John is enraged, but not at him. He is baffled by this fierce, protective affection. What should he do? From somewhere in his mind palace Molly shouts, human contact! He tentatively hugs back and matches his breath to John’s self-soothing pattern.

After several long moments, Sherlock can feel some of the tension unspool in John’s back. He huffs and gives Sherlock a little squeeze.

“Okay,” he says shakily, “I’m okay.”

“John, I’m sorry to have burdened you with this, but you needed to know–”

“Burden me? My god, Sherlock, you’ve been carrying this weight for decades. It’s horrific, but it’s, well, I feel incredibly fortunate to get this glimpse of you so young. I imagine not many people have heard this tale.”

“No one.”

“Well, then. Um. Ta.” He clears his throat and Sherlock realizes John is overwhelmed with emotion. This is an aspect of love he had not anticipated – that the sharing of history, of pain, could elicit yet more love.

“I’ve always known you were dead clever behind the microscope, but I never realized…” John chuckles. “Well, if cases ever dry up, perhaps it’s a hobby you should take up again. I can attest firsthand that your TD-10 is quite effective.”

Sherlock knows he’s trying to make light of it, but still scowls and disentangles himself.

“I gave up dabbling with potions after Project Redbeard, John. I continued to study organic chemistry only to aid my detective work. It wasn’t until Rosamund confronted me after my return that I took up formulation again. No, John, it’s much too risky.” He swallows hard. “Look what happened to you – and that was after I modified TD-12 to correct the contraindication with TD-10. It still wasn’t enough.”

“Yes, but you were being bloody terrorized. What if the puzzles were good ones? Just imagine the world of pain you’d ease if you unveiled your memory-loss reversal.”

“No, John. It’s too dangerous. Because of me, you were nearly locked into a coma. Pharmaceuticals are released all the time with horrible known side effects and interactions. I’m not clever enough to see all the ends. People die in the name of healing – I won’t be part of that.”

“But give you enough funding and time, I bet you could make it almost foolproof, I bet even–”
“I willingly made a weapon, John.” His voice rings in the quiet flat.

John pulls him close again without hesitation.

“You saved my life,” he says softly. Sherlock stays burrowed against John for long minutes. “Hey,” John rubs his back. “It was never your fault, what happened to me and your brother. It was them. Always them. You know that, don’t you?”

“I know my part in this, my hands are not clean.” Sherlock squeezes his eyes shut. “If I hadn’t been so selfish, you would never have been put at risk. My… feelings for you have always endangered you. I wanted you, and they hurt you for it. I can’t forgive myself for that, John. Neither should you.”

John gives his head a little shake. Gently, he pulls Sherlock off his shoulder and takes his tear-smeared face in his hands, pressing their foreheads together.

“No,” he says gently. “You have your logic backwards, and it’s no wonder with the scars you bear. Now. I am going to be perfectly clear about this, and I will repeat it as often as necessary. Are you listening?”

Sherlock sniffs, avoiding his eyes.

“Good. Make a special shrine in your mind palace and carve these words in the plinth. Are you ready?”

A minute nod.

“William Sherlock Scott Holmes, you deserve love.”

Sherlock’s face crumples and he sucks in a breath, diving again into the cleft of John’s shoulder.

“You’ve almost died so many times because of it – and it’s always been my fault.”

“No, love, it’s their fault. They are the predators looking for an advantage. Damn them. They hurt us, but they never get to win. Do you know why?”

Sherlock shakes his head, just a tiny movement against John’s neck.

“Because they can burn me alive in a pyre, drug me into a coma, parade me about in a coat of C4. They may make our pleasant routine a bloody mess, but they don’t get even close to touching this.” John slides his hand from Sherlock’s back and presses it gently on his chest, just to the right of the bullet scar.

“But the grief I’ve caused you—”

“—has been worth it.”

Sherlock shudders against him, squeezing tighter.

The shadows grow longer and the sun dips below the line of buildings. They sit in the dim light for a long time, holding and being held.

Gradually, John shifts and whispers, “You okay in there, Billy?”

Sherlock gives a small jolt.
“Sorry, sorry. *Sherlock.*”

“No, it’s just – it surprised me, hearing it like that. No one has called me that since Sherrin died.”

“It’s *his* name for you. I won’t use it,” John says quietly. “But I’m glad to know you have it, had *him.* I wish I could have met him.” Sherlock emerges from John’s shoulder, rubbing at his face and easing away from John’s embrace, surprised that dusk has settled around them.

“He would have liked you very much,” Sherlock smiles, realizing the truth in it as he says it. “A certain lust for danger and disregard for the rules.” He smirks. “We might have even competed for your attention.”

“Oh, bloody hell, that’s just what I need, two mad scientist Holmes brothers leaving tongues in the crisper.” John rolls his eyes dramatically, but Sherlock can see the mirth in him.

“John... thank you. For what you said.”

“Bit better?”

“A bit.”

John gives his shoulder a squeeze, then winces, rubbing at his temples.

“Well, *Dr. Holmes,* if you’re terribly concerned about it, my headache has dropped to a three and I’m ravenous. Will Mycroft’s goons out there permit some takeout be brought to the flat?”

Sherlock grins. “When you were enduring my green concoctions, I promised you tamarind duck.”

John makes an expression of ecstasy.

“And spring rolls. And mango rice. And drunken noodles.”

Sherlock snaps up his mobile and taps out the request. Order placed, he tosses it onto the couch cushions. He eyes John warily. While he’s been distracted, John has stood and is taking a few experimental steps to the light switch. He reaches it, floods the room with light, then turns and wobbles. Sherlock tenses to leap to his side, but John holds up a hand, regaining his balance and completing the trek, finally slumping into his chair.

“Ta da.” He holds up his hands weakly and grins.

John looks worn, but he has more color in his cheeks. Though it is still alarming to see him so weakened, the brief walk is a marked improvement from the limping, supported shuffle to the loo a few hours ago.

Sherlock unfolds his limbs and stretches like a cat, occupying the whole of the couch. He closes his eyes, feeling unusually lighter, as if some great, taloned bird has been roosting on his back and, through the telling and confessing and embracing, taken flight.

“Oh, glad I could make room for you,” John chides affably from his old chair. It warms Sherlock to see him there, tossing his blunt little barbs.

“I’m just keeping your spot warm.”

John chuckles weakly. Sherlock can tell he’s preoccupied, and not just by his exhaustion.
“Sherlock, can I ask you something?”

“Mm.”

“Was Rosamund working for someone?”

“I am under the impression that she is working entirely independently, pursuing her own vendetta against me. The Magpies dissolved after her father’s death.”

“Did she have the only set of new serums?”

“Yes.”

“Does she have them now?”

“I’m quite certain the serums are at your house.”

John nods slowly, digesting this.

“You mean my old house.”

“She fled the country in such a hurry after her unplanned attack on us that they are likely still there, too tricky to travel with. She’ll be back to retrieve them imminently, as well as the evidence she plans to use against me—” His eyes snap to John and he frowns. “Did you just say your old house?”

“My old house,” John grins at him.

“You’ll come back, then —” Sherlock blusters, rising up on an elbow.

John heaves himself to his feet and gingerly takes the few steps back to the couch. He flops next to Sherlock and responds by kissing him lightly. Sherlock blinks through the kiss, then shifts onto his side to make room for John beside him, spooning him from behind and pulling the blanket over them.

“I’m still so bloody tired,” John sighs. “We’ll need to hire some strapping young blokes to move all my stuff in if I don’t snap out of this soon. Not to mention that assassin we need to, you know, stop. Before she kills us.”

“We’ll think of something. You’re recovering quickly. Food will help. It should be here soon.”

They lapse into quiet. Sherlock’s mind is bursting and he grins foolishly, John’s declaration filling him with effervescence. Even with my past out in the open, he still wants to return. But a leaden worry pummels through the excitement. Will the last secret drive him away? John seems to have dozed off and Sherlock soaks up the sweet sensation of his back pressed against his own chest, desire prickling his nerves. Push it down. He has to recover.

Sherlock startles at a knock at the door, realizing he, too, dozed off. Must get sleep tonight to prepare for the final act. No mistakes this time. No errors in the data. Another knock and John startles awake. Sherlock presses his hand to John’s shoulder to make him stay put. He kisses the top of John’s head, then clambers out from behind him, all sleepiness dissolving as he jogs to the door and presses his ear to the wood.

“Who was the son of Tuor and Idril?” he demands.

A deep, muffled voice carries through the door.
“Eärendil the half-elven, Mr. Holmes, sir.”

Sherlock grins.


“I’ve been reading you Tolkien, John,” Sherlock says offhandedly as he unlocks the door, admitting a plain-clothes security guard looking too large for the stairwell and carrying plastic sacs emitting delicious smells. “And as it happens, our chief protector, Geoffrey, shares a passion for the Silmarillion. He has demonstrated excellent recall of highly arcane knowledge. Better than any passcode, highly incorruptible.”

“Mr. Holmes, Eärendil was Elrond’s bloody grandad, everybody knows about him,” Geoffrey rumbles. “You should be more careful.”

“Quite right, Geoffrey, common knowledge. Next time I’ll make it trickier.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Thank you for delivering our culinary salvation.” Sherlock takes the bags and bustles back to the sofa, pulling out cartons and arranging them on the coffee table. The guard nods at John.

“Very good to see you up and about, sir.”

“Oh, um, thank you... Geoffrey.”

Sherlock watches, bemused, as their golem-sized guard gives John a salute, then turns and shuts the door, melting back into Baker Street.

“Did a cave troll just salute me?” John asks faintly.

“Oh please, John, he’s obviously dwarven. Cave trolls have terrible detail retention.”

They tuck into the tamarind duck and sauce-drenched noodles with enthusiasm, eating out of the cartons and chuckling at one another’s reactions to Sherlock’s spicy curry. “They say this is a five?” John wheezes. “My arse is on fire just from this one bite!”

They proceed to dare one another to eat spoonfuls, finally abandoning the curry half-full, noses running, eyes streaming, cheeks blazing red. Despite the light mood, Sherlock monitors John closely. Beneath the good humor, he is taught as a bowstring. *Best stop being greedy, soaking up every last moment. Out with it.*

Sherlock sets the carton of mango sticky rice onto the table with a decisive slap. John, sucking noodles off of his soup spoon, looks up with wary expectation. Now that it’s here, really here, his mouth goes dry. Sherlock looks down into his lap. John groans with exasperation.

“Come off it. Just tell me the bloody news.”

Sherlock glances up at John’s irritated tone, but there is a twinkle in his eye. *He’s excited.*
“Alright. Yes. This, John, is the final piece that I have had to withhold to ensure your safety.” He takes a deep breath. “I will understand if, once told, you want to reconsider your proposal to return to Baker Street—”

“Sherlock, just stop it, already,” John rubs his temples with frustration. “Do you think so little of me? If I sat you down one day and fed you a mountain of my secret history, would it honestly make you question… us?”

Sherlock ducks his head. “I might, if it dealt with why you had seemed to abandon me in my grief for two years.”

John’s scowl falls, the old pain clouding his eyes.

“Go on,” he says roughly.

Sherlock huffs a sigh as difficult memories flash at him from the unlocked rooms of his mind palace, their doors now flung open.

“You know better than anyone how Jim Moriarty baited me with cases. I was weak and could not resist the game he presented. But it was not simply the work of a mad genius looking for the attention of an eager opponent.

“After my Fall, I learned that it was no accident that these cases came to my attention. It galls me to admit that I did not recognize the pattern in the moment. But in truth, nearly every case you and I handled in our first year together was…”

“A mad lark?” John laughs nervously.

All hesitation gone, Sherlock looks right into his eyes.

“An interview.”

Chapter End Notes

....if I could have one fan wish, it would be that someone felt inspired to draw the scene on the couch when their foreheads are pressed together, right after Sherlock is told he deserves love.

((meaningful look))
The Moriarty

Chapter Notes

Please note that things (finally) heat up in this chapter. After waffling back and forth between mature/explicit ratings, I've made some subtle changes to the scene that feel right to me and drift it back closer to the borderlands of mature. This is new territory for me as a writer - I hope you enjoy!

xo Mama-o.

Bart’s Hospital, directly after The Fall

Molly is pushing a covered gurney through the corridors of Bart’s. From beneath his sheet, Sherlock can smell antiseptic and hospital food as he counts the turns and lifts that bring them to the morgue. He can hear the anxiety in Molly’s rapid footsteps. The ribs on his left side ache where the hastily-filled airbag collided with his body, but the pain is only a dull pulse at the edge of his awareness. It is nothing compared to the horrific bedlam inside his mind.

Moriarty’s dead. I’m dead.

I wasn’t supposed to die.

He hears John’s cry, the single keening of his name as Sherlock plummeted from the rooftop. It reverberates through the hallways of his mind palace and does not fade.

You weren’t supposed to be there.

I wasn’t supposed to die.

The double doors bang into the end of his gurney and Molly pushes him through, parking him in an empty space that had minutes before held a cadaver that shared a striking resemblance with him. Not a lot, but enough.

Moriarty’s clockwork mechanism is grinding us through its cogs.

If I obey, you suffer. If I divert, you die.

Molly rips off the sheet and Sherlock erupts from the table. He rubs the fake blood off of his face with his sleeve and pauses just long enough to grip Molly’s hand in what he hopes expresses his deepest thanks. He locks eyes with hers, watery and worried.

“Tell no one.”

She bites her lip and nods. Sherlock turns abruptly. He runs to the service lift to intercept the car Mycroft has sent to spirit him away.

This was Jim’s plan all along – to cut us apart, to push me back onto my solitary path.
I’m dead now. I did that to you. To save you.

And you can never forgive me.

Sherlock bolts across the parking garage toward the suspiciously idling black car. Wrenching open the car door, he is surprised to find Mycroft inside.

Flopping into the seat, Sherlock winces as his ribs protest.

“Should I be flattered that the occasion of my death brings you to me in the flesh?”

Mycroft scowls out his window, addressing his own reflection.

“We’re late.” They ride in tense silence for many minutes. “So, John was present. Most unfortunate. You did try to keep him away–?”

“Yes,” Sherlock snaps testily. “He obviously put two and two together. There is a reason I keep him around, Mycroft.” He scrubs at his face, the exhaustion of the past several days beginning to creep into his vision. “We had prepared for that contingency. I had not expected to need it…” he trails off in a whisper.


“Sherlock, this turn of events is most unexpected.”

“I had no choice, Mycroft. He has snipers on all of them. Once I understood Moriarty was the only variable that could call them off, he… simply removed that possibility.”

Such a senseless waste.

Sherlock realizes with a bolt of shame that a part of him is mourning his nemesis.

He’s really gone. No more dancing.

“If the snipers learn I’m alive, they’ll die. I can’t come back until I’ve ensured their safety.” Sherlock sighs wearily, leaning his head against the window and rubbing his eyes. “I need your help.”

Mycroft looks uncomfortable.

“Sherlock, Jim’s unexpected suicide has set something in motion.”

“What have you been withholding?” Sherlock asks without rancor. He expects Mycroft to always have secrets, even if it galls him.

“Let me be blunt. There is a group, powerful and ancient, who has been monitoring you since you were young. Since Redbeard, to be precise.”

Sherlock goes rigid.

“The Magpies?”

“No, no,” Mycroft waves his hand irritably. “They are but a club compared to this organization. The Magpies work for them, as do hundreds of other individuals and agencies, some less savory than others. Their network is vast. Look into any major turning point in history, British or otherwise, and you will likely find this group’s fingerprints.”
“The Order of Chaeronea?”

“Be serious, Sherlock,” Mycroft snaps. “They have employed many secret societies to do their work, the easier to achieve influence and separation when necessary, but have always been known simply as The League.”

“And this League has been watching me,” Sherlock says blandly, though his stomach grips. *What else will this day bring?*

“They have a need for unique minds, which I will elaborate on momentarily. Your work caught their eye.”

“What are their intentions?”

“Oh, they claim their goal is always the betterment of humankind. They are as responsible for the first London sewage system as they are the fall of Hitler. But, ultimately, like any organization, it can be corrupted by its leadership. There have been … eras of lesser repute. Assassinations, alliances to elevate despots. It is the most elaborate, three-dimensional chess game you can imagine.”

“You must love it, then. I take it you’re on the roster?” With a twinge of concern, Sherlock notices their sleek car is heading out of London. He plays at spotting the undercover escort accompanying them on all sides of the motorway. *Six cars? What hive have I stepped into?*

“Yes. I was admitted fourteen years ago and have risen through the ranks to a junior position of influence. The work was fascinating at the beginning. However, they have taken quite the fall these last years.” He sighs. “Your days of late have been troubled by the genius madman currently at the helm. But Jim was not always this way.”

Sherlock snaps to attention.

*Jim Moriarty was leading the Western World’s most powerful shadow government? How benevolent could they possibly be?*

“When his successor chose him, he was a brilliant theoretical physicist. His mental acuity was, as you so intimately know, accounting for variables and discerning their interconnectedness, determining the most ideal outcome and following the circuitous path needed achieve the goal.

“This skill was highly coveted by the organization. In his early years of leadership, Jim orchestrated political shifts of great complexity. You can thank him for simultaneously averting a world war with North Korea, bringing space flight to the private sector, and the rapid evolution of handheld electronics.”

Sherlock squints incredulously at him.

“We are speaking of the same man? The one who liked to strap C4 to grannies?”

“That was *after*. Eleven years ago, a long and prosperous career lay ahead of young Jim Brook.”

“Brook? But that was just a pen name he created.”

“Alas, no. In his great web of deceit, this detail was true. You see, Sherlock, for as long as there has been a *League*, there has been a *Moriarty* to lead them. This role has existed for a very long time. I myself have known two Moriarties in my tenure with the British government and as junior member. Jim Brook was eccentric, but effective. However, everything began to unravel for him
when we learned—"

Mind leaping ahead, deducing rapidly, Sherlock cuts in breathlessly.
"–he was dying."

"Very good, little brother. Aneurism. Inoperable."

Sherlock’s eyes widen as the starlings swoop through his mind, rapidly organizing chaotic information, reexamining events, cross-referencing.

“He told me on the very first case,” Sherlock says with quiet awe. “He chose to set a murderer after me, one with a ticking time-bomb of an aneurism. But why? Why begin funding petty serial killers, orchestrating smuggling rings? With all of his power, why be a consulting criminal?”

“Why indeed?”

Sherlock feels a thrill as he follows this new thread.

“So. Our brilliant young Jim finds himself suddenly with a looming death sentence. He has felt immortal until this moment, bending the world to his whim, manifesting peace where all others saw anarchy and inevitable bloodshed, thinking in his hubris, perhaps, that he can even outwit death by foreseeing all of the outcomes and avoiding his own demise. But no doctor could fix him. How many did he demand to see?”

“Dozens. It became quite a preoccupation. None could guarantee his survival beyond a meager margin.”

“And so, betrayed by the very brain that has brought him such power, he ceases to see the sense of it. I am assuming there must have been some underlying psychological concerns from the outset.”

“He had an alarming lack of compassion for the players in his chess games, which can be an asset to one in his position. But with the knowledge of his impending demise, young Jim become unhinged. Unfortunately,” Mycroft grimaces, “when you have put a despotic genius in power, it can be very difficult to extricate him.”

“He danced circles ‘round all of you.”

Mycroft frowns ruefully. “Yes.”

“But I still don’t understand, why would he become preoccupied with me?”

“Oh, Sherlock, surely it cannot surprise you. Your abilities were well known within the League. You had made a name for yourself rather young, if you recall. When the customary time arose for the Moriarty to find his successor, you were in the running.”

“He wanted… I’m to be…” Sherlock stammers.

“The screening process for a potential Moriarty is typically highly unorthodox in nature, but Brook’s decline in mental stability brought this to new heights. Sherlock, you have been being tested from the day you and John appeared on the unfortunate murder scene of The Pink Lady, or whatever ridiculous title he gave to it in his blog.”

Sherlock blinks rapidly. “A Study in Pink,” he says distractedly. “They were all…”
“Screenings. Interviews, if you will, for the most powerful job in the Western World. Brooks was deeply taken by you. Your mental acuities suited his desire that the next Moriarty be as like him as possible. In an alarmingly short time, he had brought the League to very regrettable positions. Many long-standing members – some who had seen to the unraveling of Apartheid – had been corrupted for his purposes, others removed. Although there were some, myself among their number, who worked tirelessly to reduce the impact of his aimless destruction as much as possible without drawing attention to ourselves.”

Mycroft’s tone has turned bitter and exhausted. He rubs his forehead and glowers out his window at the passing cityscape.

“He has been the thorn in my side, Sherlock.”

“You… let him get to me. Encouraged it, even.”

“Regrettable as it has been, yes. While there were others on his roster, they quickly lost his attention. It was you he wanted, and nothing I did would have stopped that, even with my death. He was The Moriarty. You were not a bad choice – I hoped, as did my sympathetic colleagues, that you would help us set things to rights. But Sherlock, please know it has caused me untold pain to watch the game play out as it has.”

Hands clenching and unclenching, Sherlock’s tone is quietly livid.

“A game. Innocent people have died. The lives of my friends are in danger. My own life is forfeit.”

“You go on to better things, Sherlock. If you can unravel even half of the political time bombs that Brooks has set in motion, you are poised to help save millions of lives, no hyperbole. His death changes nothing. He was a genius. He could see all ends and weave his web in ways we could not calculate. His loyalists outnumber us, largely because they have been brilliantly blackmailed. It is staggering to imagine the number of traps waiting to kill the children of dignitaries, to erase the life’s work of brilliant scientists. He hoped you were like him, and would continue his chaos.” Mycroft finally turns to look Sherlock in the eye. “Where he failed was in assuming you had no heart.”

Sherlock feels struck like a gong. John.

“If you will forgive me for saying so, dear brother, I daresay he could have nearly been right. He could not have anticipated the random event of your meeting Dr. Watson on the very day of your first interview. You can see it yourself quite plainly. A socially ostracized genius, bitter toward his fellow man, self-medicating his fits of stagnation with powerful narcotics. You were a self-destructive mess. He knew you would leap to his bait.”

Sherlock frowns at his hands and does not contradict him.

“But suddenly,” Mycroft continues, “his flawed genius does something he never anticipates: he finds love.”

Again, he does not disagree.

“And suddenly Jim needs to compete for the attention of his fallen genius, no longer so bitter or driven to self-destruction. This was infuriating to him. He became obsessed with acquiring you, and doing so on his terms—”

“—meant destroying my life. To make me become what he wanted.” Sherlock feels as if he is being pulled by an undertow, unable to stop the insidious drag taking him away from his life. He can
trace every thread back, can see how he danced and twitched perfectly according to plan.

“That was his great weakness. He thought you were kindred spirits. He could not have anticipated the lengths that you would go to for the people you love. The lengths, Sherlock, you are about to go to now.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“As a very minor member of the organization, Sherlock, it is my duty to bring you to a private location to undergo your initiation as the next Moriarty.”

221 B, the present

Sherlock has been staring fixedly at his tightly folded hands during the retelling, but now hazards a look at John’s face across the table littered with the remains of their dinner. Where before Sherlock saw barely restrained rage, he now sees John’s face painted with incredulity.

“Are you for real, Sherlock? All that hell we endured, the mad puzzles, the ridiculous court cases, were the work of an insane leader of a corrupt shadow government?” He laughs, once, without humor. “It sounds like a bad spy movie,” then adds as a soft afterthought, “…the kind you always hated.”

“It was most assuredly real, John.”

“Where were you?”

“Never one place for long. They don’t have a base, per se. Even at my initiation—”

“Hoods? Chanting? Sacrifice a virgin?”

Is John smirking?

“It was at one of their old estates in Pembrokshire. Nothing arcane. Some Welsh dragons on the walls. A lot of bloody paperwork. Nearly half of the League attended remotely. I never met them all – some are incredibly reclusive.”

“Didn’t it bother them a bit that their new leader was believed to be dead?”

Sherlock squints at him, his puzzlement deepening. John doesn’t show any signs of dismay.

“Actually, it suited their purposes,” he answers, warily. “John, you must realize that if I had made contact with you, Brook had arranged for no fewer than nine private organizations to ensure your immediate death.”

“Bloody hell…” John shakes his head, appalled. “Thorough. Seemed to want to keep you occupied.”

“Deconstructing them tested even my considerable mental abilities – I had setbacks. There was also the corruption to unravel. The destruction of Jim Brook’s time will be felt for generations, I fear. Many machines have been set in motion that they will struggle to correct for decades to come.”

John’s forehead furrows as he frowns at the floor.
“It sounds like you did quite a bit of *The Work* while you were gone. The most important of your life.” He pauses for a long, tense moment. “I’m not angry, Sherlock. You had no bloody choice, and frankly I think they chose well. I just…” He lets out a huge breath and leans back in his chair, resigned. “I just wish I could have been doing it with you.”

“John…” he says in a desperate whisper, “it was my dearest wish.”

John’s eyes flick to his, a confusion of grief and pain. “Was it? You always did prefer to work alone. I wonder, couldn’t Sherlock, the Great Moriarty, have at least sent me a message? Surely he could have faked my death? Gotten me under private security? You must have had the power to do so, unless you just didn’t want to…” His voice breaks and Sherlock feels a stab of pain in his chest.

“I tried to reach you, John. I very nearly succeeded. But always my messages were intercepted. The webs were vast…” Sherlock holds John’s eyes from across the small space of their sitting room, his own pain plain to see.

“You won’t recall the first time. It was just a normal morning the autumn after I… died. You were taking the tube to work and there was a delay. To you, it was just some minor annoyance, made you late. John, we almost didn’t stop the sniper set for you when you would have left the tube car.”

John reels back slightly in his chair, eyes widening.

Sherlock launches to his feet and begins to pace.

“*Three other occasions*, John, *three*, each using completely unique methods. Each time I was certain I would reach you. Each was intercepted. We barely stopped them in time.”

Sherlock ticks them off on his fingers as he paces, the stressful memories making his voice rapid and manic.

“Another sniper, this time at the bakery you frequented. We could handle snipers – you were always surrounded by a hidden guard when we tried to make contact.”

“Not always?”

“Security was too easily corruptible. The second: they poisoned the water at your flat. Do you recall that notice from the city telling you the plumbing on your street had been compromised by *e coli*, drink bottled water for a bit, all that?”

John frowns. “You’re telling me that was really—”

“Third: you were infected with a deadly virus. You only had the first symptoms, the fever and malaise. We were able to administer the antidote through your morning tea before the paralysis kicked in and ceased your breathing.”

Sherlock’s breath comes raggedly as he paces. John, he is somewhat relieved to see, looks appropriately startled by this information.

“How did your people get into my bloody flat without my knowing?”

“You were ill, John, it was child’s play. Had you been serving tea to all your widowed aunts you still would not have known our people intervened. *The League* has the best.” His voice grows rough. “Yet still two died that day. Because I insisted, yet again, to reach you against all advisement. The papers reported it as a robbery on your street that ended rather badly.” John’s eyes widen with
recollection.

“Christ… that was you?”

“The extremely negative effects of my actions, yes. I was halfway across the globe. If I came within the city limits, you were at risk. After the virus, I stopped trying to reach you. I put all of my efforts on dismantling the web.”

“You were practically a prisoner,” John says quietly.

“I thought of you as the prisoner, John, and I the only one capable of breaking through the threats that surrounded you.”

“But you did it. You came back.”

“I planned to return the moment I had ensured your safety, even if that meant returning to the ashes of what we once had.”

John stares into the middle distance, his eyes a confusion of pain and disbelief.

“I was going to tell you everything. But…”

“But you returned on the evening I was proposing to a disguised assassin who held me for bloody ransom. Some loose end you’d overlooked, hm?”

Sherlock sags into his chair across from John, resting his head in his hands, addressing the floor.

“Rosamund was the chaos I did not anticipate. I wrongly assumed that the known threats were the only threats. I stopped watching you. It… hurt. So terribly. I knew I could deconstruct the final threat on you and Mrs. Hudson and Lestrade. But at the same time, my last task was to unravel a nest of very tricky international corruption. I was… distracted. Over-confident of how it would end.”

“They–wait. So, what, you’re not the Moriarty anymore?”

Sherlock grimaces. “Nearly. I named Mycroft my regent when I left to find you last year. He has been acting in my stead. They welcomed him. He could easily become the next Moriarty, after a tedious day’s paperwork.”

“They just let you go?”

“I had been Brook’s choice, and I played my role, but I was not exactly a model Moriarty. I ferreted out enough of the cancer to restore the balance largely in favor of benevolence. They want a Mycroft these days, they don’t want me. I was given back my life.”

“Your innocence, reported just before you returned–”

“Newspapers don’t usually just happen to uncover a dead detective’s scandal. But we had not known that as we removed the final threat from your life, another took its place.”

“Mary.”

“Yes. Or as I knew her, Rosamund Moran. Daughter to Sebastian Moran, head of the now-obsolete Magpies, has-been research dogs of The League, and right-hand man to one Jim Brooks.”
Belaruse, 24 months after The Fall

In a dingy operating room far underground, Mycroft sits beside Sherlock’s hospital bed managing to look both bored and annoyed. Sherlock lays on his belly, tangled hair spilling over his face, a month of beard on his cheek. He grimaces silently as a small, wizened doctor stiches up large whip-wounds in his back.

“If you’d given me ten more minutes, I’d have had them,” Sherlock mutters irritably.

“You ran out of time, little brother.” Mycroft is clad in sharp military dress, in stark contrast to Sherlock’s ragged, blood-soaked travelling clothes. “You had your ten minutes, and your extra ten minutes, and even a sympathetic bonus ten minutes. You’ll forgive me if I saw fit to intervene once the executioner was brought in.” He wrinkles his nose and turns away. “God, you smell terrible.”

“I had information on him. I could have turned him.”

“Too great a risk. Sorry, Sherlock, but your field trip is over. You’re done enough here. The ground crew is already cleaning up.”

Sherlock mutters curses into the bed sheet.

“If not handled delicately, all my work here could be for naught!”

“Delicacy is my specialty, brother mine.”

“Getting comfortable making the orders, aren’t you?”

“Don’t get territorial, Sherlock, it’s unbecoming. I’ve been handling half of your obligations from the sidelines while you’ve been scuttling around the globe chasing demons. Your single-minded obsession with overseeing the destruction of John’s assassins has me in mind to compare you to your predecessor.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“To be fair, Sherlock, we have both been… distracted.”

“Oh, what now, has Isis got the bomb?” Sherlock sighs wearily, wincing as the doctor stitches.

“Rosamund, Sherlock.”

Sherlock goes rigid, his eyes flashing to Mycroft.

“We haven’t been able to trace her since I became Moriarty.”

“If you will recall, she was particularly dismayed Brooks selected you to succeed him. I have always suspected that she was terribly hurt he had not chosen her. At any rate, she surely could not have taken too kindly to your assassination of her father.”

“Oh please, I merely introduced the pheromone to his jacket before he went on that horrid tiger hunt. It was hardly assassination. Everyone knows tigers are dangerous creatures, you take your chances.”
“She may disagree as the elimination of Brook’s most influential second in command meant the dissolution of The Magpies, her life’s work and haven."

“Yes. I have made it difficult for my childhood assassin to hold a job in the family business. But she’s industrious. I imagined she just went off and started a civil war somewhere to vent her frustrations. What has she done now?”

“Sherlock. She’s got John.”

There is a crash as Sherlock vaults from the table, his wizened doctor protesting in Belarusian as his supplies go flying. Sherlock takes Mycroft by the lapels, his ragged and unkempt face inches from his brother’s.

“Tell me everything. Immediately.”

...

221 B, the present

“John, Rosamund was by far the greatest threat to your life. I was on a plane that night and in London the next day. I had to find you in the safety of a public place – I had no idea what she was capable of.”

“Of course,” John sighs, rubbing his brow. “When you surprised me at the restaurant, you bloody knew.”

“I couldn’t just burst out that you were being manipulated by an assassin. I had to play her game.” Sherlock sucks in his breath. “It galls me, bitterly, that after two years of interminable suffering on both our parts, I had still not succeeded in keeping you safe, had in fact put you in the greatest jeopardy of all.”

...

London Delicatessen, the night of Sherlock’s return

Sherlock stands on the curb holding a bloody tissue to his nose. Blood has spattered his white dress shirt.

“John, have you quite gotten this out of your system yet?” His voice has a nasal buzz. John, looking shockingly unfamiliar wearing his mustache, rage and betrayal chiseled horribly on his features, storms off muttering and hails a cab.

Mary moves in close, helping Sherlock apply pressure to his bleeding nose, and speaks in a threatening purr that sets his bones on edge.

“Welcome home, O’ honorable Moriarty. Oh dear, you have been a busy one, haven’t you? Cleaning up all of Jimmy’s little messes. I told him he was going too far, but he didn’t like listening
to me. But no matter. I have been patient, I’ve woven my web, and now I have you.”

“What do you want?” he seethes.


“Why.”

“My reasons are my own.”

“Mary!” John calls tersely from farther down the sidewalk, leaning half out of a waiting cab.

“Just a moment! Bleeding’s almost stopped,” she trills, turning back to Sherlock with a predator’s grin.

“You will say nothing of our little arrangement to John Watson or the League. When I have my serums, you get John.”

“Whole, unscathed, mind and body intact.”

“As good as. One hair out of line—”

“And you’ll kill him, yes, I’m familiar with this line of threat from you by now.”

“Oh, certainly, Sherlock, but it’s much better than that,” she coos. “I want you to suffer as I have. I’m going to marry him. Mmm, you’ll simply have to be in the wedding, oh won’t that be delicious. Do make sure he can dance.” She winks. “Then, I carry his child.”

“My god, Rosamund—” Sherlock gapes at her.

“Oo, won’t this be fun!” She grins and wrinkles her nose.

Sherlock is frozen to the street, the wadded bloody tissue flung aside.

“You can’t,” he growls. “He’s done nothing – if it’s me you want, just kill me.”

“Oh Sherlock, but don’t you see?” She tweaks his bleeding nose. “I am.”

“Mary!” John yells.

“Coming!” She turns to leave, dusting off Sherlock’s lapels. “Now, you scurry along and finish what you began.”

“How do I know you’ll keep your word?”

Rosamund laughs as she begins to walk back to John.

“Oh, certainly you remember that you don’t. But what other choice do you have?”

…

221 B, the present
Sherlock leans back into his chair with a huff, the leather creaking. It is full night, streetlight illuminating part of John’s face as he sits across from him, limbs relaxed, face inscrutable.

“And with that, my tale is told.” He spreads his hands out before him and sighs sadly.

John nods. “Thank you.”


“Sherlock,” he sighs. “I have spent a lot of the last few years in a state of near-constant rage. I was furious at the world for giving me you, then taking you away. Furious I’d married the wrong person. Furious with myself for never knowing how to tell you I loved you.”

Sherlock’s breath catches, making John’s lips twitch into a quick smile.

“I was angry when I didn’t have answers. Or thought I knew, and they were all wrong. Sherlock, you have only ever tried to protect me. You’ve been at this tirelessly, hurt in ways I can’t even imagine. I hope, one day, you’ll share more about your time as Moriarty.” He gives Sherlock a meaningful look. “No matter how difficult.

“I can only imagine you weren’t always able to be the good guy. You’re not saying it, but I can see it pains you deeply.” He pushes up to sit on the edge of his seat and looks at Sherlock earnestly. “I don’t think any less of you. I think more.

“I woke today, broken, but free. I took a leap today, and you were there to meet me.” He scrubs at his face and smiles sheepishly. “I want this mess to be bloody done with. I just want… this.” He holds out his hands to take in Sherlock, the flat, their discarded dinner, the piles of books and oddments on the shelves.

Sherlock blinks quickly, heat pushing against his eyes.

“John.” His throat is too tight, he can’t speak.

John leans forward with a small smile, licking his lips.

“Here’s a little secret of my own. You remember my horrible excuse for a stag night, I hope? Haven’t erased it?”

Sherlock wipes his eyes, chuckling ruefully.

“I don’t erase anything concerning you, John, even atrocious nights like that one.”

John grins. “Aside from having my piss measured, getting you out of two bar fights, and waking up in jail after you vomited on a suspect’s carpet, there was a moment with you that I enjoyed. Immensely.”

“When we played Who am I?” Sherlock smiles.

“I tried to make a move on you that night.”

“I know.”

“Course you did,” John says, abashed.

“I was terrified, John. I wanted you to, but you were getting married. Even if I knew it was all
blackmail, you didn’t. I worried you might have some pretty big regrets in the morning.”

“I had very different regrets, Sherlock,” John says with self-loathing. “Like marrying the wrong bloody person. But. That night.” He grins sheepishly. “I was plenty pissed when the idea became a brilliant one, and several sheets further gone when I finally got my courage up enough to act on it. Still, I barely got past cooking up some horrible excuse to squeeze your thigh before that nurse walked in.” He grins, cheeks pinking, and chuckles. “I doubt I’d have stayed awake long enough to even act on anything I’d had in mind.”

Sherlock feels the effervescent tingles up his chest, his respiration becoming shallow and subtly rapid, a flush creeping up his neck and the flimsiness of his old pajama pants become suddenly very apparent.

“What did you have in mind?” he asks quietly.

John slides off the edge of his seat, a Cheshire-cat grin on his lips, catching himself on Sherlock’s right thigh just as he had when they’d been drunkenly playing party games, sloppy contented grins on their faces. Where John grabs, little bolts of electricity zap through Sherlock’s skin.

But this time, rather than pulling back, John slides off his chair fully, landing on his knees and sliding his hand up the long line of Sherlock’s thigh. Hissing in his breath, Sherlock leans forward to pull him into a kiss.

“Too bad we didn’t light the fire,” John whispers against Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock freezes, pulling back quickly.

“I could – I could make one now–”

John pushes his fingers into Sherlock’s hair and pulls him back down, crushing their lips together.

“Next time.”

A next time. He’s really staying.

John’s hands slide through Sherlock’s curls, tickle lightly across his ears to tweak the lobes, and brush along the nape of his neck to deftly slide into his dressing gown. John tugs the fabric apart, rucks up the shirt, and rubs his soft doctor’s palms along Sherlock’s chest. His heartbeat thunders beneath John’s palms. All the while, John’s lips press urgently at Sherlock’s mouth, their breath mingling in little gasps.

Sherlock has been so focused on the kissing and the slow journey of John’s fingertips that he’s been unaware of the rest of himself. His body has acted of its own accord. His legs grip John’s torso. His hands are tugging up his own soft t-shirt that he dressed John in not ten hours ago, when he was lost to him.

The sponge-bath glimpses flash in his mind. He wants to see John, all of him, immediately, but he has the distressing realization that in order to remove John’s shirt, they will need to briefly stop kissing.

John takes charge, leaning back just far enough to quickly tug off the old shirt and toss it aside, their eyes locking and igniting sparks.

Sherlock’s breath hitches at the sight of John’s chest bared only for him. He runs his fingertips
wonderingly through the soft copse of silvery-blonde hair between his pectorals, lingering to rub over the hardening nub of a nipple he never dared to touch during his nursing duties. John’s soft groan has laughter in it. *Ticklish?* He dives in to kiss him and is met with the fierce press of John’s mouth. Sherlock suddenly wants his skin so much closer. He tries to pull him off of the floor to join him in his chair, but John has suddenly become immovable.

Breathlessly, reluctantly, Sherlock pulls away from their kiss to better understand why John isn’t in his lap, only to see his rakish grin.

“First, we do what I had in mind that night,” John says breathlessly, kissing him lightly. Then, much to Sherlock’s dismay, John pushes him back into his chair. His lips feel instantly cold and forlorn. After so many years, he is suddenly, insatiably hungry for John’s mouth. What on earth could John have in mind that is more perfect than this kissing?

Kneeling between Sherlock’s thighs, John deftly tosses aside the lapels of the silky dressing gown, and with a smooth slide of his palms along his inner thighs, Sherlock suddenly realizes what might be better than the kissing. As John grips him through the thin fabric of his pajama pants, he can only think, *he wanted this. On his stag night. He wanted me.*

And then he is arching his pelvis, the easier for John to slide off his flimsy old pajamas and threadbare pants.

*He’s still so weak, still recovering, I shouldn’t let him, he has to rest*—

But John’s lips are already sliding down, down his whole length, tongue lapping and swirling. His face nuzzles into the soft fur between his legs. Sherlock squeezes his eyes shut to endure the waves of intense sensation threatening to overload all of his nerve-endings. *No. Open your eyes. He looks down to watch John’s beautiful mouth take him inside his very body.*

There is a moment of perfect stillness in Sherlock’s mind, a moment between two fast heartbeats as his posterior pituitary gland fires a load of his hypothalamus’ newly-minted oxytocin into his bloodstream. In this moment he feels their bodies joined, moving in rhythm. Surging into.

Being received. *One.*

Sherlock’s head tips back involuntarily. The *sounds* that are coming from his own throat shock him. Guttural, panting. *John.*

But he’s still too far away. He can only reach his shoulders, run his hands through his sweaty hair. Likely driven by the enormous cascade of oxytocin, Sherlock suddenly has the ridiculous, romantic whimsy that, as it’s their first time, they should be *coming* at the same time.

“John, get up here. Please,” he manages to gasp. To his surprise, John obeys, standing wobbily as Sherlock tugs down the interfering pajamas bottoms. Finally, all of John’s skin is there for him to stroke and bite and tug. Sherlock rubs his hands over him greedily, pulling him into his lap until John is straddling him in his chair.

Their mouths pull together magnetically, all the years’ repressed longing spilling out into hard, crushing kisses. As John tucks his legs around his waist and their tender skin presses together, Sherlock feels like a key finally settling into its lock.

John breaks their kiss apart long enough to coat his palm with their saliva, then grips them both in his hands, tugging rhythmically. Sherlock’s fingers dig into his back, keeping him securely planted in his lap while they roll together. Grinning into John’s mouth, a bubble of brilliant laughter suddenly wells up from him, spilling out.
And Sherlock sees it. He understands.

*It has been worth it.*

The moment crystallizes into a perfect, delicate spider’s web in the branches of John’s tree in his mind palace. He thinks of pyrophytic plants that only germinate once their seeds have been blazed with fire. *It brought us here, this web. Through the fire. Perhaps this was the only way.*

In his mind palace, John’s tree is suddenly covered in pale buds the color of his lips and nipples and blood-flushed cock. As they crush together in an earnest rhythm, waves of sensation rush through his body and the buds burst open, covering the tree in vivid red flowers that smell faintly of John’s peppery musk.

He feels John’s back muscles spasm. He cries out into Sherlock’s mouth, pushing him into a bright, violet-tinted rush that builds between his legs and pulses out through his limbs.

Panting into his mouth, fingers slackening between their slick bellies, John finally collapses against his chest and buries his head against Sherlock’s neck, chest heaving, panting *love you, love you so fucking much* over and over.

Sherlock breathes him in, John’s many secretions painting his own skin. The ridiculous notion of being covered in his pheromones, of being marked by his mate, makes him giddy.

As their pulses slow and sweat cools, Sherlock’s lips begin to register their bruising. There is the tricky, ridiculous moment of disentangling themselves from the small space of Sherlock’s chair. Springs creaking, joints popping, they awkwardly stand, swaying and giggling at their unsteady legs. Sherlock leans in to kiss him as they thread arms around waists and stumble to the bathroom. Sherlock glances back at his chair which has ceased to simply be a *chair* and is now a *shrine*.

As the water in the shower warms, John slides off Sherlock’s rumpled, sticky shirt and dressing gown, peppering his chest with tiny nibbling kisses. Sherlock slowly runs his fingers all along John’s skin, grinning when the feather-light strokes raise goosebumps. When they finally notice steam has filled the bathroom, Sherlock holds onto John’s forearm to steady him as he steps over the wall of the tub.

He spends an inordinate amount of time lathering each cleft and mound and curve of John’s body. He feels himself stir again as the water rinses it all away, revealing his skin. John leans into him beneath the hot jet of water, grinning sleepily, his eyelids heavy and drooping.

*Push it down. Don’t be greedy. He has to sleep.*

Somehow, he gets himself clean. Somehow, he manages to turn off the water before he loses all control and drops to his knees to take John into his own mouth. *Patience. You’ve waited years. You can crave it one night more.* They chuckle sleepily as they awkwardly navigate the small space in front of the tub to towel dry, all elbows and dripping hair and nibbled kisses near old scars.

John pads out of the bathroom first, his steps tired, but steadier. He wavers in the hall, his towel wrapped around his middle just as it had been so many afternoons when they were just flatmates and Sherlock had to repress the urge to stride over to him and tug the towel free.

Sherlock can see him look toward the bedroom and hesitate. Before John can glance back to look the question at him, before he can even wrap on his own towel, Sherlock comes up behind him. Threading his arm through John’s, he gently, gallantly leads him toward—

*“Our bedroom,”* he says quietly against John’s ear as they pass through the doorway. John
smiles at him, leaning in to kiss his swollen lips. As Sherlock breaks away, stepping quickly to his dresser to scrounge for a soft shirt and pants for John, he sees John’s glance flick across the tables covered in apparatus, microscope, test tubes. John crosses his arms over his bare chest and bites his lip. The sleepy, post-coitus daze hardens into a stormy frown.

“This ends,” John whispers tensely to himself, and Sherlock knows he is not referring, for once, to his haphazard combination of housekeeping and lab work. “You don’t get to hurt us anymore.”

Sherlock returns with the pajamas, but John doesn’t take them. His eyes still have the pained, faraway fire in them. He turns to Sherlock, blinking as he returns to himself, and asks, “Aren’t you wearing any?”

“I usually prefer not to.”

John shrugs and smiles, the storm drifting away.

“Then neither do I.”

“Well, at least I won’t have any nightmares,” John smirks, tugging off his towel and pulling Sherlock gently to bed.

Despite Sherlock’s concerns, they settle beneath the blankets, chest pressed to back, Johns arms around him.

Sherlock’s eyelids droop. Surrounded by John, he sleeps.
Ambush

John wakes to the insistent insect buzzing of Sherlock’s mobile on the bedside table. It’s early dawn, pale light just beginning to turn the shadows of the bedroom into soft greys and purples.

Their bedroom.

He rolls carefully onto his side, finding Sherlock still deeply asleep, his lips lightly parted, eyelids twitching with dream.

It is a precious sight. Certainly, he has seen Sherlock asleep: balled up on the couch after a strop; recovering in hospital; even sharing a bed while on a case that required travel and close quarters.

What he has never seen is Sherlock, completely at peace in his sleep, dreaming, naked beneath the sheets, and utterly his. He desperately wants to kiss his parted lips, but can’t bring himself to break the spell. While they have been sleeping in their guarded cocoon, Rosamund has been moving ever closer. Who knows when he’ll rest again.

The phone gives a final desultory buzz and lays still. Beside him, Sherlock heaves a long, shuddering exhale and rolls over in his sleep. John gingerly eases out of bed. Making as little noise as possible, he pads down the hall to use the loo.

Standing before the toilet, it occurs to him that he’s just walked from the bed to the bathroom without any hesitation. His balance has returned, his head feels clear, and yesterday’s sagging, debilitating exhaustion is a shadow of its former self.

Brilliant.

He’s brushing his teeth and planning a pot of tea (if he can find the kettle in the wreckage of the kitchen), when he notices the mark on his shoulder’s reflection. Toothbrush dangling, he twists to examine it in the mirror, realizing with a sudden warm flush that it’s a little rosette-shaped kiss mark from the night before. Then he spots two others, closer to his neck.

What would he deduce from these, were I a stranger? ‘Obviously,’ Sherlock’s voice says pragmatically in his mind, ‘due to the proximity to neck and head, the recipient was providing the fellatio, not receiving it, and was clearly inciting rather a lot of feeling due to the frequency of the marks and depth of suction seen in the dark colorations. Clearly a fervent sexual act after long repression.’

John grins foolishly at his reflection in the mirror.

He finds two of Sherlock’s dressing gowns hanging on the back of the bathroom door and chooses the cozy plaid flannel in favor of the blue silky one. Tying it on, the scent of Sherlock puffs up from the fabric. He heads to the kitchen to make tea, a jaunty little hop in his step.

…

John pads quietly back into their bedroom holding two steaming cups of tea, Sherlock’s trim laptop tucked under his arm. He sets down a mug on Sherlock’s bedside table, feeling slightly self-
conscious. Sherlock sleeps, curled on his side.

John balances his own tea and eases next to him on the bed, hip pressing against the curve of his back. Even this small contact is delicious. Flatmate John, Blogger John would have waited for him to wake up from the careful distance of his chair in the sitting room. This John is not having Sherlock wake up in bed alone.

Sherlock’s mobile begins to buzz again. John reaches for it in case it’s Mycroft with news. The phone is on top of his old, worn copy of Return of the King. He smiles. Somewhere in his subconscious memory is Sherlock’s voice reading him Tolkien. The bookmark is three-quarters of the way through. When this is over, he will ask Sherlock to finish reading it to him, curled up on the couch, with the fire going properly. I bet he’d do all the voices.

Glancing at the screen, John sees that it isn’t a text, but a preset alarm demanding to be noticed. His breath hitches as he reads the customized alarm title: 5:30. Feed John Breakfast.

This time yesterday, he was still locked in nightmares, Sherlock doggedly going through the routine of his care. He set alarms. He read to me. He bathed me. He held me when I was inconsolable.

The idea floats up unbidden. Christ, but he’d make a good father.

His stomach twists with familiar grief for the child he won’t know, they won’t know. We could have been dads together. The alarm screen goes blurry and John sets the mobile back on Return of the King, letting his tears fall freely.

After several minutes, John wipes his face on the sheet, a dangerous resolve taking root in his mind. Sherlock will not be pleased, but the more he considers it, the more he knows he has to convince him it’s the only way.

If anyone is going to catch Rosamund off guard, if anyone has any chance of keeping the baby alive, Sherlock alive, it’s him. Only him.

He opens the laptop, a sleek, futuristic model he doesn’t recognize. Clearly being The Moriarty has its perks. The screen lights up. Expecting a password, he’d been running possibilities through his mind while the kettle boiled, but finds it’s a fingerprint scan. Sherlock suddenly rolls over, nestling into John’s side, draping a hand over his thigh. Too easy.

John gently takes Sherlock’s limp hand and presses the pad of his index finger to the sensor. It lights up and unlocks. John carefully replaces his hand, feeling intimate and devious, and taps the browser. He realizes, with a puzzled grin, that tab after tab hold sites researching bees. Odd. Some case he’d been working on while he was unconscious, perhaps.

John opens a new browser tab to read the news. Taking a sip of tea, he scans the headlines quickly, suddenly choking on his swallow.

Media Mogul Memory Returns:
Says Magnusson, I was Drugged, Framed

John feverishly reads the article, then searches for anything else he can find on the subject. He’s read through three other sources by the time Sherlock begins to stir against him. John grins
softly as Sherlock’s fingers emerge from the blankets and rove over his chest, feeling the texture of the fabric and bumping into the laptop and mug. The fingers push under the lapels of the robe to lightly stroke John’s skin. With a hum, John leans over to kiss Sherlock’s temple.

“My dressing gown feels good on you,” Sherlock rumbles sleepy, his face still hidden against John’s hip. “My laptop is clearly not secure enough. Tea for me?”

“Your side table. Should still be hot.”

Sherlock surges up from the sheets, startling him. John quickly catches the sliding laptop and tries not to spill half his tea onto the bedclothes as Sherlock takes his face in his hands and kisses him with a thirst. After a long, tangled moment of tongues and lips, Sherlock rubs his nose against his. John sucks in a breath, blinking with a dazed grin.

“Good morning,” Sherlock purrs, his voice deep with sleep.

“Morning,” John says quietly against Sherlock’s lips. “Much as I want you to act on every single impulse I am clearly seeing in your eyes, you need to read this.”

Sherlock frowns, slouching close to John against the pillows propped up on the headboard, turning the laptop toward him. His eyes scan the article rapidly. Suddenly he begins to laugh.

“Remarkable, isn’t it?” John grins.

“I had wondered when Magnusson would come to,” Sherlock muses, tugging John’s mug-hand to his lips to sip his tea.

“I did get you your own,” John chides, grinning.

“This one tastes like you.”

“Does this complicate things?”

“No really. So, Magnusson recovers his memory and recalls that Rosamund drugged and betrayed him. He tells the police he’s been framed for my attempted murder, and uses all of his media mite to demonize her. It will certainly make it tricky for her to get through customs now that there’s a warrant out for her arrest, but I sincerely doubt it will impede her very much. Magnusson is a mosquito to her. The police won’t find her until we do.”

“But what proof do they have? He could be making it up.”

Sherlock raises an eyebrow at John.

“I may have used my influence to provide a chemical fingerprint to the police, enabling TD-12 to be detected in his bloodstream. It leaves a signature for weeks, you see.”

“And they believed you?”

“John,” he smirks smugly, “I’m The Moriarty.”

“Bloody hell.” John blinks rapidly, absorbing this. “You could come in handy. So you knew this would happen?”

“I saw the possibility of the outcome as a favorable one.” Sherlock grins like a cat with a mouthful of canary. “She’s rather spoiled her plan to frame me with planning a mass terror attack. Using a memory-inhibiting drug to avoid being connected to my attempted murder will not gain her
credibility with the League. Dear, dear, Rosamund certainly put her foot in that one when she was dancing with chaos.”

“Incredible,” John huffs. “Is the tracker still working? Where is she now?”

Sherlock takes the laptop from John’s knees and begins typing rapidly, pulling up a screen showing a pixelated map of the earth. A faint orange trail crosses India, Iran, Turkey and Italy, growing pale as it heads west, ending over France and blinking as fitfully as a firefly.

“This is her?” John asks warily.

“Her tracker has almost completely broken down. She’s back in the air. We might have a day left before we need to stage the ambush.”

“She’s… close.”

“Breakfast?” Sherlock quips, suddenly vaulting naked from the bed, draining John’s mug and picking up his own as he walks toward the kitchen.

Scowling at the screen, John shouts, “Since when do you eat on a case?”

“Since when have I had the honor of morning-after breakfast in bed with John Watson?” he calls back. “I’ll bring you more tea.”

John’s smirk fades. He bites his lip. He’s worried. Trying to keep it light.

Sleeping? Eating?

It’s unnerving.

John suddenly snaps the laptop closed and pushes out of bed, walking resolutely to the kitchen where Sherlock is mixing eggs in the bucket.

“Sherlock, we need to talk about this ambush. I know you won’t like this, but—” John’s fierce demeanor suddenly cracks and he crosses his arms, chuckling and blushing. “Really, there is absolutely no way I am going to be able to talk to you seriously like that.”

Sherlock waggles his eyebrows and pours the egg mixture into the hot, buttered pan. It spits and sizzles.

“Oh, come now, this is just a hazard to my interests,” John scolds, tugging one of Mrs. Hudson’s frilly aprons off the hook and, brushing a kiss on Sherlock’s shoulder, tying it around his waist.

“Thank you, doctor, safety first,” Sherlock sing-songs as he stirs the eggs. “Toast?”

“Is there still a toaster in all this?” John indicates the worktop cluttered end to end with pots, beakers, apparatus, and unwashed tea mugs.

“Yes, under the centrifuge.”

“Is it better centrifuged?”

“Not really,” Sherlock wrinkles his nose, scooping scrambled eggs onto mismatched plates and balancing them on sealed, unmarked drums of questionable industrial origin.

“No eyes in those, right?”

“Dimethyl Sulfoxide. Don’t worry, it’s not that toxic. In small doses. Tastes a bit like garlic.”
“Sherlock,” John tries to sound serious, but the view of his nude chef from behind is too much. “You must promise me that when this is all over, we’ll get the toxins out of the kitchen.”

“Of course, John.”

Too agreeable. Not good.

“You know, we could move upstairs into my old room, turn your bedroom into your lab so you’re close to the sink and all of your books.”

John pinches an exposed cheek as Sherlock passes, earning him a quick kiss, but Sherlock whirls out of reach, his yellow apron spinning with him. John is given a healthy glimpse of what lies beneath as Sherlock shoves the centrifuge into the oven and pops slices of bread into the toaster. The kettle begins to whistle and he spins back, clearly showing off his dancer’s reflexes. It makes John grin despite the seriousness of what he needs to discuss. Is he worried? Or… happy?

“Us upstairs? Not possible.”

“Why not?” John frowns.

“John, having any chemicals in this flat is much too dangerous. I was thinking your old room should be the nursery.”

“You don’t have to get rid of all of them – wait, what?” John stares incredulously at Sherlock, who has become very focused on dunking the tea bags into their steaming mugs.

“Nursery, John. For your baby.”

“We don’t know if it’s my baby, Sherlock,” he says, quiet and tense. “We don’t know if there even still is a baby.”

“No. Not conclusively. But the odds are quite good, thus we need to plan for this… contingency.”

Suddenly quite pale, John turns from him and retreats back to the bedroom. He can feel Sherlock’s eyes on him. He sags onto the bed and holds his head in his hands. It had been better not to hope. Hoping hurt like hell. He’d convinced himself that it was foolish to set his heart on a person currently the size of a kumquat, who might not be his, growing inside an assassin wanted for multiple murders who might not live through the day.

For all he knows, the pregnancy has been terminated, but somehow, he thinks not. Mary–Rosamund– was fiercely possessive. She would not part from this child lightly. And while John does not doubt she was quite capable of conceiving a child with another man, something in his gut repeats over and over, it’s mine. Because, quite simply, that would inflict the most pain.

“Forgive me, John,” Sherlock says gently. John’s head snaps up. He had not heard Sherlock come to the door. He’s traded his saucy apron for the silky blue dressing gown, his expression somber. “I… shouldn’t have treated this so lightly. I just thought, you should know I’d been thinking about it, that it was okay if…”

“Would you?” John croaks, speaking over him in a rush. “Would you really… raise a child with me?”

Sherlock comes to him quickly, his expression smoldering, intense, and kneels at John’s feet,
wrapping his arms around him and looking up into his eyes.

“Yes. Of course, yes.”

“Even if it was hers—”

“It would be ours.” He pushes up to sit closely next to John on the bed and wraps him into a tight embrace. That does it. The hot, painful surge behind John’s eyes breaks through the dam. “John, if this child is not genetically yours, it will need parents. Rosamund has no remaining family. We could find the child a home. The League has excellent resources.” John sniffs and shudders. “Or… we could be its parents. It is because of us that it exists at all. I admit I feel rather like it’s our accomplice on this insane journey.” He grins into John’s hair. “This baby would be the second thing to make this whole horror worthwhile.”

John shakes with a silent sob, leaning into Sherlock’s arms, croaking, “What kind of bloody parents would we make?”

“Parents who are devoted to one another. Who love one another fiercely. Who have been through enough pain and turmoil to know what matters most. Who have an excellent comprehension of which poisonous plants to avoid tasting at the park and how to administer CPR and handle a fever. Parents who will provide an environment in which to learn multiple foreign languages, offer countless forms of STEM stimulation, and have excellent pirate-fort making skills.” John begins to chuckle through his tears against Sherlock’s shoulder. “John, this child would be loved. Would we really do so much worse than any other?”

John grips him back. “You’ve really thought this over. But what’s happened? Since when are you the baby-wanting type?”

“Since it had anything to do with you.” Sherlock rests his chin on top of John’s head. “I had rather a lot of time to think while you were… sleeping. I had decided that no matter what, I would find your child. For its sake. For yours.” Sherlock’s voice grows rough, “Even if you never woke, I promised myself I would raise your child, with all the love I had for you.”

John’s chest heaves and he looks up at Sherlock with pained, watery eyes.

“But what about The Work? How could we possibly juggle an infant and hare after criminals?”

Sherlock runs a hand over John’s back soothingly. John can hear him swallow nervously.

“John… as I said, I have had an inordinate amount of time of late to think. I have been thinking a great deal about the future, and that is not something I would have done before I met you. Sherlock Holmes was not interested in self-preservation.

“I need to be realistic. I am no longer a free agent. I have someone to preserve myself for, as far into crotchety old age as I can manage. I am not as spry as I once was. My injury will never let me fully regain my previous stamina. I find more and more that to maintain a clear mind, I need to feed my transport, to sleep. My chest seizes with pain if I run a city block.” John leans back, considering him with sorrowful, red-rimmed eyes. “I have been trying to find the words to tell you. That even if I could continue The Work, I don’t know that I would. The idea of you, or our child, being manipulated in some criminal game… I will not risk it. Never again.”

“Won’t you miss it?” John asks, his voice rough.

“It was brilliant,” he whispers. “It kept me alive before I met you. And once I met you, it was
our foreplay, our sex, if I may be so bold as to apply the metaphor.”

John chuckles quietly. “You may.”

“I do not pretend that our life will be free of risk. I have made many enemies and require significant protection from The League. Though frankly, I can think of nothing so terrifying or dangerous as attempting to raise a human being from scratch.” Sherlock smiles sadly. “I’m tired, John. These years have weathered me. I crave something very different than I once did.” He pulls him close and nuzzles the top of his head. “You may not believe me, but there are vital puzzles to occupy my mind that don’t necessarily involve murderers. But. I worry about you. You’ll very quickly get bored with this domestic version of me.”

“No,” John whispers fiercely, “I won’t.”

“Maybe you could join an ambulance team. Get you out of that dreadful office. Plenty of adrenaline, lots of people needing your skills. Get you home in time for dinner, no endless stakeouts.”

They sit for a long moment leaning into one another on the bed.

“Yes,” John finally whispers. “We could have the nursery upstairs.”

“Excellent.” Sherlock kisses him gently. “Can we have breakfast in bed now?”

…

Sherlock tucks John back into bed.

“Stay. Read. Masturbate. I don’t care what you do, just stay put.”

“I told you, I feel fine – better than fine.”

“I don’t care. It isn’t properly breakfast in bed if you’re already dashing about. It’s supposed to be delivered. Sit.” Sherlock thumps the paperback onto John’s chest and whirs out. John laughs quietly to himself, thumbing open the book, but his mind can’t concentrate on the words.

The hope has rekindled, burning brighter for the mad notion of raising a baby with Sherlock, mingled with grief at the idea of Sherlock no longer taking cases, all to make that life possible, to keep them safe.

*He will do anything for us.* John looks at that future set before them like a delicate, crystalline structure that could fall apart with the slightest breath.

Domestic life with Mary had been a horror, not because it was mundane, but because they had made no sense together. If he is honest with himself, the long, quiet mornings at 221B with Sherlock were some of his happiest, but they were made all the more interesting when a day’s pent up desire could be expelled chasing a thief or a murderer together, watching Sherlock’s mind leap and dole out justice. *Metaphoric sex, indeed.*

Feedings, diapers, tantrums, first words… with *Sherlock.* Mornings with Sherlock, like this, bantering in bed, tussling over the papers and tossing them aside spontaneously to make love. Tramps in the highlands they’d never managed to get around to. Libraries Sherlock had mentioned that he’d never taken him to.

He is stunned at how very much he craves it, the ache of it tangible in his solar plexus.
Not the adrenaline of the chase. Him. He is the adrenaline.

John stares out the window of their bedroom, eyes unfocused on the brightening day, a torrent of possible moments, parent’s moments, lover’s moments flooding his inner sight. His eyes well up again, but suddenly he blinks, hard.

It is a fantasy, a daydream until we are truly free of her. This is mine to complete.

Minutes later, Sherlock returns, interrupting his reverie by placing a steaming mug in his hands, a plate on his lap, his expression curious and soft as he reads John’s eyes. Settling next to him under the covers with a contented little sigh, they tuck into scrambled eggs gone cold and toast left too long in the toaster, saved by jam. John accepts it gratefully anyway, the food improved by how happy Sherlock is to simply sit next to him in bed and eat it.

John waits until they’ve emptied their plates and Sherlock has gotten drawn into an article on his mobile before popping the tense, quiet bubble.

“It should be me, who confronts her tonight,” John bursts in without preamble. Sherlock looks up from his phone, brows knit in a frown. “Not you, Sherlock. She’ll kill you on sight. But me… I feel strongly that I may be the only chance we have of catching her off guard, however briefly.”

“No. Absolutely not.” Sherlock faces him incredulously. “She has no reason to protect your life anymore. She would take joy in destroying you if it caused me pain.”

“You have to trust me that this will work. I need five seconds of confusion, that’s all. If we’re to save the baby, we need her healthy, not riddled with holes by Mycroft’s snipers. Five seconds, that’s all I need. And a dose of TD-10.”

Sherlock stares at John angrily, then expelling his air in one long jet, he nods.

…

John’s home in Wembley, the present

John walks along the sidewalk of his old suburban neighborhood at dusk, carrying two plastic bags of shopping. Inside are the ingredients for that thing with the mushrooms that made Mary’s nausea a little more bearable. Mary, not Rosamund. She was Mary, back then, his wife, and damn him, but some part of him loved her. He can do this, he can pull this off, if he remembers that.

The neighborhood is quiet. Kids have been called inside, televisions flicker through windows, someone’s barbeque is cooling on a porch, still smelling of charred steak. Crickets chirp and a dog carries on a few blocks away. Nothing at all seems out of the ordinary. You can’t tell at all that at least twenty highly-skilled and very armed operatives wait for the signal if John’s little plan fails. That was Mycroft’s contingency, of course.

His house is dark, the lawn tall and unkempt after a week of neglect, the postbox crowded. It looks like they’ve been on holiday and forgotten to call the yard service. John stuffs the junk mail and bills into one of the shopping bags and heads for the front door, fishing in his pocket for his keys.

It’s only been a week, a week, and his home feels alien, the smells immediately pulling him back to the afternoon he’d left to help Sherlock with his final round of IV antibiotics, grateful to have
a reason to be out of the house. Mary was going baby-thing shopping, a task he loathed as she always contradicted his opinions and got whatever she wanted, anyway.

The door is still locked from the last time Mary had turned the key, heading into her day of crib research before picking him up at Sherlock’s to go to their obstetrician appointment. God, it sounds so normal, while just under the surface the whole act was anything but.

We were going to hear the heartbeat that day. They had been excited. And nervous. John had been confused, as usual, his heart both recoiling from his life and craving it desperately.

He opens the door to the foyer, their kicked-off shoes mingled by the umbrella stand, laundry still half-folded in piles on the sofa. He’d promised to finish it up that night. None of them had come back.

John sets the shopping down on the kitchen island and gets to work. The automatic repetition eases his nerves. He turns on lights. Fills the dishwasher with the stack of dirty dishes in the sink. Pulls out the shopping and begins dicing and mixing. He leaves the ingredients conspicuously out on the worktop and puts on the rice.

While it cooks, he walks the piles of laundry into their bedroom and goes through the familiar ritual of putting everything away. The scent of Mary is still strong as he opens her drawers and replaces the tunics and stretchy pants she’d begun wearing to accommodate the first bulge of the pregnancy.

John is suddenly reminded of a similar afternoon over two years ago when he had gone to help Mrs. Hudson clear out Sherlock’s things. It was an awful day, because it meant he’d finally given up hope that this was some mad lark, some horribly gone-wrong plan. Sherlock would have contacted him by now. John had stopped looking meaningfully at homeless people he encountered, stopped obsessively checking his mobile for cryptic messages.

Sherlock was dead. His things needed sorting. And John had settled into all of the mundane tasks that must be done even during crushing grief. He’d been doing okay, boxing up most of the sitting room without thinking too much, but as he’d opened a dresser drawer, he’d been overwhelmed by a sudden heady whiff of Sherlock from his folded shirts.

He’d sunk to the ground and stayed there for some time, using an old, soft Sherlock-scented t-shirt to mop his face, until Mrs. Hudson had found him and pulled him away for a strong cup of tea in her flat.

John comes back to himself, shoves in the last of Mary’s socks, and snaps the drawer shut. Sherlock is now positioned two houses down, the occupants legitimately on holiday, using his League access to turn it into their operations headquarters for the evening. The tiny microphone John wears just under his belt is completely undetectable and carries every sound to him. The dose of TD-10 is in his wedding ring, or at least a quickly and cunningly-created duplicate with a tiny compartment cleverly activated with a coded tap-pattern. Thanks for the inspiration, Rosamund.

They had followed her trace as she landed at Heathrow. Customs had been no problem for her. They were looking for Rosamund Moran, not one of a hundred aliases she could have randomly chosen and expertly performed.

The earpiece in his ear canal is nearly invisible, less than an eyelash-length of hair-thick transmitter. It only communicates tone, not voice, and will only sound if Rosamund is detected to be moving toward the house. Her trace had finally failed as she approached Wembley on the Bakerloo line. It’s anyone’s guess what she will look like.
It is reassuring to know that though he feels alone in the shell of his old life, Sherlock is not far, his new life, the right life, almost within reach.

The rice is cooling on a back burner of the stove and John is simmering the mushrooms in their cream sauce. He’s opened a beer and taken a few casual sips. He takes two more bottles, opens them, and hastily empties them down the sink drain, leaving the empty bottles visible on the counter. If John Watson had been home, worried sick over the whereabouts of his pregnant wife, he would be at least three beers deep by now.

He’s just turned off the heat to the cream sauce when the soft tone chimes in his ear. For an instant, all of his nerves fire, but he breathes long and deep, controlling it. He thinks back briefly to when he had stood before Mangusson’s security camera, audacious and high on the thrill, the game of it, proving to Sherlock he could not be left behind.

He had been leading me there, he recalls. He'd wanted me there, to learn everything for myself.

The bloody game is on, and John wants nothing more than to be done with it.

As the tone in his inner-ear fades, he moves the pan of sauce to the back of the stove, banging it harder on the burner than necessary. What is the use of doing this? his actions say. So you’ve made the dinner, you pathetic idiot, what makes you think this will bring her back? John runs his hands over his eyes and leans heavily against the stovetop. He hears the front door open. Muscles clench, senses sharpen as adrenaline surges through his system. He sucks in a breath, stumbling away from the stove.

“–Mary?” he says quietly, anxious, confused, then louder. “Mary! Jesus, Mary is that you?” He lurches from the stove and stumbles toward the foyer, his eyes meeting Mary’s, not Rosamund’s. Rosamund is well concealed. His face is a mess of anger and relief, pain and incredulity. Very little of it needs to be feigned. Anger bubbles up first. “Christ, Mary, where the hell have you been? I’ve been worried fucking sick–”

John can detect the tiniest flicker of confusion as he approaches his weary-looking wife, shadows under her eyes, hair tucked under a floral scarf, dressed in the same tunic and leggings she’d worn the last day he saw her.

Yes, dear, I need you off balance for just three seconds more. Have a good long thought about how I could possibly be here, instead of in a coma. Be baffled that I remember nothing of your transgressions. Bloody faulty formulas. Ache for just the tiniest fraction of a moment for this husband who loves you, who has been led blindly into your trap, all for a game of revenge.

Just three more seconds, that’s all I need.

“John–” he can see her eyes flick to the counter, taking in the ingredients for her recipe, the empty bottles. Her eyes actually pool with tears and for an instant, John has no idea if she’s also acting, if she’s genuinely pained by what she’s done, or if the two are so deeply intertwined that she could never know the difference herself.

“When you didn’t show up for your appointment, I thought—Jesus I thought you’d left me. Mary, are you okay, what’s happened to you? Please tell me you’re okay.”
“You made the thing with mushrooms,” she says softly, bemused.

John is one step away, his arms outstretched.

“I’ve made it every night. Since you didn’t come back. God, I just hoped, I hoped you’d walk through that door–” He folds her into his arms. She comes willingly.

*One second more.*

John’s thumb tap-ta-taps his ring just as his fingers slide over the nape of her neck. The droplet of TD-10 lands on her skin, and Rosamund Mary Watson Moran crumples into his arms.

John holds her weight, his breath suddenly coming in huffs as he realizes he’s done it.

Warily, he eases her down onto the carpet and takes a step back as if from a subdued tiger he expects could wake at any moment. She looks like she’s just dozed off. John prods her with the toe of his shoe. No response. He does not envy her the headache she’ll have when she wakes in custody thirty minutes from now.

*“Redbeard complete,*” he whispers hoarsely, knowing the signal will send operatives swarming through the back door in less than fifteen seconds.

He crouches on his haunches and pats her down, finding a gun tucked into her waistband, a sleek little pistol that could have easily taken his head off at close range. He puts it into his own waistband… just in case. He checks her pulse which is steady and rapid as the drug does its work. Her face twitches minutely, a tiny frown forming between her eyebrows as the first of her nightmares begin.

John’s fingers brush an oddly rough bit of skin on the soft underside of her wrist. He bends close, holding it up to get a better look at it in the kitchen light. A circular patch is adhered to her skin, the color blending in almost perfectly. There is a small bump beneath. John picks at it with his fingernail, peeling the patch back like a bandaid, and finds a tiny, clear oval capsule, no bigger than a peppercorn. He covers it back up with the patch, wondering what horrors its contents would have unleashed if she’d been able to administer it to him. Or herself.

The back door suddenly opens and the kitchen and living room fill with civilian-clad operatives, all looking like they’ve just wandered into the house for a casual dinner party. *We’re very good, John,* Sherlock says in his mind. Only the fiercely-toned lines of their bodies and the efficient, military-trained surveillance gestures give them away.

The first makes a bee-line for John. He nods and steps away from the unconscious assassin.

“Here,” John says, handing over the pistol. “This was on her. And there’s some kind of capsule stuck to her inner left wrist.”

The operative, a strong woman clad in a red t-shirt and cargo pants, deftly cracks open the gun, pours out the small bullets, and stuffs everything into a clear evidence bag. She crouches at Rosamund’s side and fully removes the patch, delicately handling the capsule with a pair of tweezers spirited from one of her pockets. These go into a thick glass bottle and another evidence bag.

Her own thorough search results in two forms of completely unique identification, a polymer blade attached to her calf, and something suspicious in a pencil-thin aerosol adhered to the small of Rosamund’s back. She then pulls a black, leather-like ribbon and a small silver apparatus from her own side pockets and quickly wraps restraints around Rosamund’s wrists and ankles. Once affixed, the material is skin-tight and has no visible closures.
“We finally found her on the Heathrow security cameras,” the operative says in cool, clipped tones. “Looked like a ninety-year-old woman. She performed quite the costume change en-route.”

Three operatives sweep around the room, checking closets and behind curtains. Another three head immediately upstairs. John can see others circling the house, looking like guests meandering around his unkempt garden for a breath of air after dinner. His operative speaks rapidly into her wrist-piece in a code John doesn’t understand, then turns and briskly salutes him. Startled, John salutes back.

“Well done, Captain Watson,” she says in a steady, military-trained voice.

“Thank you. I... I’m just relieved it’s over. I can’t quite believe it. Where will you take her?”

“Sorry, confidential. You understand.”

“The baby–”

“All necessary precautions will be made to ensure the health and continued safety of the pregnancy, Captain Watson.”

“Oh. Good,” he says simply, lamely.

Red t-shirt is joined by three others carrying a trim stretcher. He quickly steps out of the way, watching them shift Rosamund onto the board and attach more restraints. On a quick command, the four lift her up and carry her briskly through the kitchen and out the back door where no neighbors will notice the unusual goings-on as she is spirited into an unmarked vehicle.

As quickly as Rosamund appeared, she is gone.

Where is Sherlock? At least ten more operatives are swarming through the house, looking through cabinets and under furniture, behind framed photos and under the insoles of trainers. They’re looking for the serums, he realizes numbly. The exhaustion begins to press down on him as the adrenaline wears off. He’s shaking and crosses to the couch, sinking down into the cushions an operative has just thoroughly explored for hidden compartments. Focused on their task, they completely ignore him.

He has no idea what to do now. It’s still his house. Does he offer them anything? Ridiculous. He thinks he’s probably in shock. His eyes wander over all of the flotsam of his life with Mary.

You didn’t shoot me on sight. But you could have. You didn’t press that capsule into my skin when I held you, or grab for that aerosol. Why didn’t you?

Because I was right. Some part of you, some small, aching human part of you, forgot itself when you came home to the life you’d left, thinking for just an instant that your life was normal, that a husband could worry after your welfare, make your favorite dinner, forgive your blunders because, simply, he loves you.

It is all the more heartbreaking because it was never what they’d had. But some part of them had dearly wanted that fiction.

His attention is caught by a disturbance in the back garden.

“Let me through, damn you. I don’t care if you haven’t finished clearing the area. I’m the sodding Moriarty. Let me through.”
John grins at Sherlock’s deep and commanding voice. Coat swirling, he rushes through the back door, eyes sweeping around the dim kitchen, past the single-minded operatives hunting through his pantry, until they land on John sitting on the sofa in the shadows.

“John–” Sherlock rushes to him, and John has hardly stood before he’s nearly knocked over by the force of his hug. They cling together. John’s chest heaves with relief, with unspent anxiety, with grief.


John does not respond, he simply clings.

Several long moments later, a small, familiar throat-clearing catches John’s attention. He feels Sherlock twitch impatiently.

“Not now, Mycroft. We’re celebrating.”

“Suffer me but for a moment, Sherlock, and you may have all the long years ahead to embrace and ignore me.”

John lifts his head from where it’s been buried in Sherlock’s coat, stepping away carefully to face Mycroft, customarily immaculate in his perfectly-fitted suit and mahogany-polished shoes, leaning on a matte black umbrella with a smooth, ergonomically shaped handle. John feels bone-weary, wrung out, but after all Sherlock has told him in the last two days, he is insatiably curious to take in the Mycroft he now knows so much about. He finds he rather likes him a bit more than usual.

“John,” Mycroft smiles, with as much warmth as he has ever seen on his pinched features, “I am so relieved to see you recovered and,” his eyes flick briefly to Sherlock, standing protectively at John’s elbow, “in your rightful place. At last. You have our deepest gratitude for your brave and selfless actions tonight. I admit I had serious concerns about the validity of your plan, but time and again, we see that human error is the chaos even our most skilled tacticians cannot easily predict.”

John scowls. “Thank you, Mycroft. That means a great deal from you.”

“What now?” Sherlock asks him.

“She will be brought to a private, highly secure location and cared for during the length of her pregnancy while undergoing trial. If she is found guilty for her many serious transgressions, as we all know she will, she will be removed to a high-security prison after the birth of the child. It goes without saying that she will be found unfit to have custody of the baby.”

“Request a paternity test be performed during her health screenings.”

“Of course. And if the results are not as anticipated…” Mycroft trails off.

Sherlock’s eyes flick to John’s, who knows exactly what he’s asking. His stomach twists. He nods, minutely. Sherlock tightly twines his fingers into John’s.

“Either way, prepare for the release of the child’s custody to John and myself, should the pregnancy continue without incident.”

Mycroft’s face contorts into a baffled sort of grimace.

“Very good,” he says quietly. The emotion is quickly suffused and Mycroft returns to his clipped composure. “John, we will require access to your home until the serums are found. At that
time, you may return and do as you see fit.”

“So…” John breathes, “it’s over.”

“Yes, John,” Mycroft smiles, actually smiles, at the two of them. “You are both free.”

…

After packing a small bag of his belongings, all scrutinized by an operative, they are released from the house.

“We’ll wash up,” says one cheerily. “Unless you’d like to take the food–”

“No, thank you,” John says hurriedly, scooping up his laptop bag. “I think I’m off mushrooms for good.”

He and Sherlock walk slowly down the sidewalk through the dark, away from John’s old home, toward a sleek car waiting two houses away to spirit them back to 221B. Their security detail is significantly lighter, but Mycroft isn’t quite ready to set them loose in the underground.

“What,” John smirks, seeing the imposing car. “No private jet?”

“John, I am on sabbatical. The hover-car is in the shop.” Sherlock snakes his arm around John. “Dinner?”

John grins, threading his arm around Sherlock.

“What, two meals in one day?”

“What can I say?” Sherlock squeezes him close, “Seeing you single-handedly outfox our tormentor and would-be killer gives me a raging appetite.”

“I had some help. Couldn’t have done it without your mad science.”

Sherlock frowns. “It is because of my mad science that we’re here at all.”

“Here? You mean, right here?” John stops, dropping his bags to pull Sherlock to him. “This place, right here? I can thank your mad science for this?” He grins a challenge into Sherlock’s stormy face, fingers sliding beneath the coat, burrowing and tugging until they touch the soft skin of his lower back. John tips up his chin to kiss him, pouring all of his relief into the hungry crush of their lips. “If so…” he whispers, coming up for air, “I am deeply indebted to it.”

Their noses nearly touching, Sherlock studies his eyes.

“Angelo’s?”

John’s face cracks in a grin. “What, a proper date?”

“I thought we should fit a few in before we begin a life of parenthood.”

John’s grin grows wider and he leans in to kiss him again.
“Brilliant.”
The Tree

Chapter Notes

As reward for sticking with me through all the angst, I bring you a chapter of pure milkweed fluff. I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Baker Street, the present

Geoffrey pulls the sleek, purring car up to the curb at 221B. Glancing in his rear-view, he finds his passengers still engaged in a fair bit of snogging behind the tinted glass separating him from the back seat. They’ve been at it for most of the ride. He shakes his head. At least they’re still clothed. With a sigh, he taps the glass, startling them enough to clear out with muttered, flushed-faced thanks.

...

While John settles his things, Sherlock changes into the midnight-blue shirt that brings out his eyes and finds John waiting for him at the door in that black and white striped thing that makes him look youthful and adorable. He hasn’t worn it in ages. Sherlock grins and holds out his arm for John to take and leads him down to the street.

“Always loved you in that color,” John says warmly.

As they walk, Sherlock catches a glance of them in a storefront as they pass. He glows with pride at the sight of John so close, so his. But it’s clear they’re worse for wear. John looks worn out from the strain of the day, not to mention having only woken from his drugged sleep two days prior. And Sherlock himself is as peaky as a recent gunshot victim could be expected to look after a month of convalescence. *Best make it a short date, then.*

The aromas of buttery garlic bread and oregano hit them before they’ve even reached Angelo’s door. Sherlock’s stomach growls and John gives him a playful squeeze.

“I just might fatten you up yet,” he smirks as they step into the narrow, dimly-lit restaurant. Sherlock smirks back, feeling amazing, feeling incredible, to be walking into an Italian restaurant with John, *his date*, at his side. They dawdle in the foyer waiting for a server. Sherlock feels an effervescent ripple pulse up his arm as John casually twines his fingers into his own.

“Sherlock!” Angelo booms from the back, emerging from the kitchen with steaming trays. “And your good man, John! Sit anywhere you like!” This causes a small ripple among the other customers who turn to look. Sherlock notices that John’s hand tenses in his, but he does not pull away.

It occurs to Sherlock that this is their first real public outing since John has woken, since the
wall that Rosamund forced between them has crumbled, since they’ve become a thing. They will need to deal with the people in their lives who still think John is a happily married man with a baby on the way. He quickly steers him toward a shadowy alcove with plenty of privacy.

“Alright?” Sherlock asks gently.

John furrows his brow and laces his fingers together tightly.

“I want to do this… it’s just… suddenly a lot. Being around so many people. After everything.”

Sherlock leans across the small table and covers John’s hands with his own.

“We can go, we can turn around right now and go back home. Or anywhere you like.”

Angelo appears beside them, beaming with his usual rosy warmth. “Always so good to see you, my friends, it has been some time, yes? Anything you like, free, free…” His dark eyes flicker to their intertwined hands and he gives Sherlock the tiniest of secret smiles, which Sherlock gratefully returns. “I’ll bring wine, yes?”

Sherlock squeezes John’s hands and gives him a questioning look. John sighs with his whole body, closing his eyes, and nods.

“Yes, thank you, Angelo,” Sherlock says quickly, “very kind of you. Caprese salad to start, please, and some of that garlic bread I could smell halfway down the block. We’ll share the pasta fra diavolo.”

Angelo pours them wine and bustles off with another wink.

“You’re sure–”

“I’m fine, sorry, it’s all fine.”

Sherlock grins.

“What?”

“You said that before. Here. Four years ago.”

“I did? Bloody hell, the memory you have.”

“I had just told you that girlfriends were not my area, indicating boyfriends were, yet I was married to my work.”

John chuckles and takes a sip of wine, raising his eyebrows high.

“Ah. Yes. That. I remember that quite well.”

“I was terrified, honestly,” Sherlock keeps one of John’s hands gently twined with his own and drinks his wine. “It was the stupidest thing I could have possibly said, but I was so frightened of ruining it. I liked you so much right away.”

“You did?” John gives him a bemused smile.

“I admit I have never been very practiced at these kinds of exchanges, the mating rituals and proper banter. I panicked when it seemed you might be interested in me.”
“I was. For the record.”

Sherlock smiles a little sadly. “What would have happened, I wonder, if I’d kissed you that night? In the hall, after our mad chase?”

“After you cured my limp, you mean.”

“I wanted to.”

“So did I.”

“I want to now.”

“So do I,” John smiles warmly and leans across the table to press a gentle kiss to his lips.

“Don’t wonder. It is what it is. We’re here, now, and we won’t make a mess of it. We can’t. We’ve almost lost this too many times.” John sits back with a resolute huff. “Please be prepared, Sherlock, because I am never letting you go.”

A flush of giddy desire swells through him, quickening his pulse. Sherlock bites his lip and squeezes John’s hand hard, muttering low, “Let’s go back to the flat. Now.”

“Sherlock,” John chuckles, “you’ve just convinced me to stay, we’ve just ordered dinner!”

“Why do people do this?” Sherlock’s feet and fingers tap manically. “Why sit out in public to eat with all of one’s cravings tethered? I’d take you on this table this very moment if it wouldn’t end up in the papers tomorrow.”

John pinks and gives him a leer. “Couldn’t you just get it hushed up?”

“I’m not that powerful, John.”

“But see, that’s the fun. Dinner out is like a game. Shaking up a bottle of seltzer, but you can’t take off the cap til you’re safely behind closed doors again.”

Sherlock feels the color in his own cheeks and slides his hands under the table to grip John’s thighs, making him inhale sharply.

“If this is fun, John Watson, I am going to play your game very hard until we are safely abed.”

At that moment, the server appears with their salad and bread. Sherlock coyly retrieves his hands and drains his wine glass.

The food distracts them for a while. John’s feet casually pull his toward him and stay entwined for the rest of the meal. With an effort, Sherlock shifts his attention away from the twenty or so places on John’s body he’d like to bite, to the words he is actually saying.

“–hello? Still with me?”

“Sorry, just… mentally eating you. Please, you were saying.”

John’s eyes glitter. “I was saying, Don Juan, how odd it feels to be, well, done with The Work. Tonight was the end of it, wasn’t it? I just… I understand, I do. But it will take some time to understand how we exist separately from it.”

Sherlock looks down at his hands, tapping staccato on the wine glass, already empty again. When had that happened? John’s is as well. He fills their glasses, buying time.
“Sorry, if you’d rather not discuss it – I shouldn’t talk work on our first proper date.”

“I was casting my net very narrowly, John. My mind does need work, but I can give it all manner of puzzles, important enough problems. They just won’t get me – or you – killed for the trouble of defending someone’s innocence.”

“The Sherlock I knew would say that’s boring.”

“That Sherlock,” he says, suddenly quiet, “had not spent two years keeping the love of his life from being murdered every time he so much as looked his way.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“John, perhaps there will come a time when I can do this work again. But I need time before I can chase after it. A lot of time.”

“We both chased it,” John says wistfully. “We were brilliant together.”

“We are brilliant together,” Sherlock says firmly. John’s eyes jump to his a little guiltily. “I will warrant that our mutual addiction to danger has been extremely entertaining for us and useful to others in a roundabout way. But the cost, John… Sherrin lost his life on this path. Even if it took me years to listen, I have not forgotten his advice to me: Chasing danger may not be the best professional compass.

“To be perfectly honest, until I met you, each time I dashed down some alley after a thief or tracked down a murderer, I would hear his voice in my mind. But I didn’t care. Because there was only myself to lose. And then, with you, well, it seemed justified, if we were doing it together.”

“Sherlock,” John mollifies, “I won’t lie. I’ll miss it. But it’s a small price to pay. We’ve helped a lot of people. But it isn’t the only way to help them.”

Sherlock sighs. “I know what you’re going to say. Heal the world with chemistry.”

“No, no it wasn’t,” John says a little over-emphatically. Pink spots have appeared on his cheeks. His glossy eyes and softening precision make Sherlock grin inwardly. John is fascinating when he is drunk, his hard edges becoming putty. Hell, how far gone am I, then? “I just mean, there’s loads of evil out there to set to rights. But not all that evil will turn about and aim a gun at your head if you try to stop it. Or toss me into a pyre to prove a point. I see you sorting that all out, you know, a bit at a time.”

At that moment the server swoops in, clears their plates, the two empty wine bottles, and leaves behind a single slice of tiramisu and two glasses of champagne.

“Angelo insists,” she smiles. “And says to say he is very happy for you.” John and Sherlock gawk at her for a moment, then grin and thank her as she slips away.

“John, it’s simple enough to retire from The Work, but we are going to need to find some way to share the adjustment in our… relationship. And say what we can about Mary. Some idiot who thinks you’re a nice little married man is going to get a shock if they see us snogging on the street.” He lights up. “Oh! You should write a blog about it.”

John blinks at him incredulously. “You’re actually suggesting it? Well, I’m chuffed. ‘Have to start thinking up titles.” He waggles his eyebrows.

“Keep it clean, John.”
“S’a good idea,” he nods. “Oughtta tell Molly and Mrs. Hudson in person, though. Or they’ll be livid.” He looks down. “There’s only one fork.”

“I’ll ask for another—”

“No,” John smiles. “He’s a rascal, Angelo. We’re meant t’eat it with one. Like this.” And John scoops up a bite of the coffee-soaked cake and hovers it in front of Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock crinkles with a smile, belly warm with wine. Not taking his eyes off of John’s, he slowly pulls the bite off the fork with his lips, licking them and grinning.

John grins wickedly, feeding him another bite.

“Give it here, my turn,” Sherlock says, licking the fork suggestively.

“You are a very bad man, Sherlock Holmes.”

“John, really,” he smirks, “I’m just shaking up the seltzer.”

…

Full to bursting, heady with wine, flush with teasing, they make their way through the warm evening back to Baker Street with arms tightly wound about the other’s waist, partly for support. Heads bobbing close with each step, they chuckle and mutter together, oblivious to the world around them.

They are near 221B when they hear a shriek close by. Their heads dart up to look for the source of the problem. Sherlock catches a glimpse of floral print speeding toward them in the dim light and a familiar scent of lemon cleanser and cinnamon as they are suddenly besieged by Mrs. Hudson, half hugging them, half whacking them about the arms with her shopping.

She steps back, face cracked into a grin.

“Finally, you ridiculous boys! It’s about bloody time.” With each word, she strikes them on the arms for emphasis.

“For god’s sake, woman,” Sherlock crows, “cease your attacks!”

“Mrs. Hudson,” John grins sheepishly, putting a hand on Sherlock’s chest to quiet him. “Yes. As you have guessed, we’ve finally seen sense. I’m to move back in. Just. So you know. We are very much in love. In a relationship. That Um,” he ends lamely.

“Of course you are! My word, it’s been driving me half mad watching you two dance about one another all these years.”

“Yea,” John grimaces. “M’sure it was bloody awful.”

“We’re making up for lost time,” Sherlock grins, feeling his wine, his anger forgotten. “Been on a date.”

“Well, in that case,” she smirks saucily, “I’d best turn up the telly tonight.” She cackles in reaction to their shocked faces. “Oh, go on, go on, you’re both half-pickled by the look of you. Come down for tea tomorrow, once you’re decent.” She pats their shoulders and bustles off.

“Well. There’s that done,” John mumbles. “Coulda gone worse.”
“Not really. She accosted us in the street.”

“Could’ve found out by walking in on us… you know, in the act.”

“Still plenty of opportunity for that incident, John.” Sherlock steadies himself on John’s shoulder as they walk into 221B, nearly knocking him down. They stumble up the stairs in a fit of giggling, still catching their breath as they clatter through their door.

“Come here,” John is suddenly close, whispering into his ear, sending little bolts of electricity along his neck. Sherlock does. John presses him against the wall next to the coats, kissing him deeply.

“Mm, not here, bed,” Sherlock half-yawns, realizing mid-way he should cover it up.

John smirks and pulls him down the hall by the hand toward their bedroom.

“Look at you, you’re done in.”

“No m’not,” Sherlock leans in too fast to kiss him at the exact same moment as John, their trajectories all wrong.

“Oh bloody hell,” John groans, holding his chin where Sherlock’s jaw has cracked it. “Sorry. You alright?” He holds Sherlock’s face gently to examine his cheek and kisses the red mark lightly, Sherlock fretting over John’s bruised chin.

John appraises him as soberly as he can. “Sherlock, this is ridiculous. Let’s just go to sleep.”

“No! John!” He flops onto the bed, arms outstretched. “Our seltzer! It’s all shooken up!”

John considers him, his eyes half-lidded, smile soft. He suddenly shrugs with his whole upper body

“Allright. If you’re up for it.” He stands for a too-long moment thinking hard, the effort visible on his face. “Look, I’ll be back in a dash.” John pads off toward the loo, his steps unsteady, then quickly returns, pointing a finger at Sherlock. “Naked. You, now.” He disappears down the hall again

Relaxed on the bed, Sherlock listens to the distant sounds of John peeing for an age, washing, singing quietly to himself.

Sherlock wants to be naked. It seems like an extremely good idea. But the bed is so soft and he really must be well-rested for what he’s been envisioning doing to John all during dinner. He’ll just close his eyes for a moment. Didn’t he read somewhere about the restorative properties of minute-long naps? Edison or something? Yes, just a teeny, tiny little rest…

“Do you have any lube?” John calls out too-loudly.

Sherlock scowls. “No, why would I—shite.” He knew there had been something he’d meant to pick up at the shops. Bachelorhood and the distraction of assassins have left him woefully unprepared for this.

“S’okay – I’ll look ‘round.”

“John, Jooooohn. I don’t have any,” he calls back

“I’ll just pop down and ask Mrs. Hudson for olive oil—”
“Don’t you dare!” Sherlock bellows, face mashed into his pillow.

“Joking.”

“Jus’ come back to bed. We’ll make do without.” His eyelids are elephants, which makes absolutely no sense because an eyelid could never be a pachyderm.

“We certainly will not. Hang on, let me pop through the cupboard. My god, you still have these crisps? Sherlock these are ancient–”

By the time John shuffles triumphantly back into the bedroom with a dusty bottle of olive oil, Sherlock is snoring softly on the bed, still fully clothed, face slack. John chuckles.

“Told you, said you were knackered,” John mutters with a grin. He abandons the oil on the dresser and gently removes Sherlock’s socks and trousers, rolling him over to unbutton the too-tight shirt that had looked so lovely with his eyes tonight. “Never done this bit before,” he says out loud. “Must try it again when you’re awake.” Still fully clothed, John flops next to Sherlock, pulls the blankets over them both, and burrows against his soft, warm skin.

Moments later, they are both snoring

In the quiet of their bedroom, the too-loud sound of Mrs. Hudson’s telly drifts up from below.

…

Sherlock wakes with a start. The doorbell has been buzzing its way into his dreams.

“Boys! You awake?” Mrs. Hudson calls from the front door. “The doorbell’s been going for ages! Molly’s here! Says you were to meet!”

“Shite,” Sherlock mutters. John has lurched awake next to him. “Completely forgot. Told Molly to come by and get the lab equipment. What time is it?”

“Ten,” John says blearily, squinting at his mobile. “Quite the lie-in.” He frowns and touches his temple lightly, then looks down at himself with a chuckle. “What a couple of light-weights we are. I’m still in my bloody clothes.” He grimaces. “Ugh, I taste awful.” Sherlock is crawling on the floor looking for his trousers, squinting against the sunlight. Suddenly his head snaps to the bed, the previous night returning to him.

“Oh. John. I fell asleep. I’m so sorry–”

“Oh, John. I fell asleep. I’m so sorry–”

“Please, it’s fine.”

“But the seltzer,” he says, stricken.

“Sherlock, we were exhausted, as well as pissed,” John says with a sweet smile, handing him his trousers. “You were frankly adorable. I fell asleep against you in moments.”

Sherlock continues to look abashed as he pulls on a clean shirt, his hair disheveled. Just as they are about to venture out, John pulls Sherlock to him gently.

“It was a lovely first date. Thank you. There will be time for afters. But as we’re both rather
hungover, I’d like to suggest an afternoon of lying about under the same blanket and watching something horrible on the telly.’’

Sherlock gives him a small, contrite smile. “Into battle, then.”

... 

Mrs. Hudson stands in the kitchen, chatting with Molly who has already begun boxing up the equipment. As John rounds the corner, Molly gasps and runs to him, squeezing him into a tight hug that he returns with a kindly smile.

“John, it’s brilliant to see you awake. I was so afraid–”

“It’s alright, Molly. I’m fine. And I know it all now. Not sure how much you knew…”

Mrs. Hudson leaves them, heading to the sitting room to harass Sherlock.

“John,” Molly says in a tight voice, “I’m so sorry I had to keep so much from you. Those years he was gone, it was a horror watching you grieve. But if I told and you came to danger, I just–”

“It’s okay,” he soothes. “You were in a terrible position. You did right, though. I’d have blundered off like an idiot and very likely endangered all of us. I’m quite sure I’d be dead.”

“I knew about Mary, too,” she continues, aggrieved. “I helped him with his research, getting the trials worked out, troubleshooting the errors.”

“Then I have you to thank for keeping my memory intact when the new serums crossed in my system,” he says, smiling gently. He holds her at arm’s length and looks at her seriously. “Thank you,” he says quietly. “Thank you so much for... helping him. So many times. When I couldn’t.” He hugs her again. “You have saved us.”

“Is it us then?” she asks hesitantly, with a grin in her voice. “You both came out of the bedroom just now.”

“Yes,” he grins at his feet. “Quite so. We have a lot to tell you about. Will you stay for a bit? I’ll help you gather up what you need – it must be all over the flat…”

... 

“It was so quiet last night,” Mrs. Hudson trills to Sherlock as they give John and Molly a moment in the kitchen.

“I wouldn’t become accustomed to it,” Sherlock quips dryly.

“Oh, I won’t mind, dear, I’m just so glad you’ve both found happiness. Finally. But Sherlock…” she whispers dramatically, “if you don’t mind my asking. What of the baby?”
Sherlock smiles shyly, his annoyance evaporating.

“Safe. And ours. After the birth. We’re to be—”

“Oh, *Sherlock*!” Mrs. Hudson exclaims, squeezing him and hopping on her toes. “I’m to be a *granny*!”

Startled, John and Molly look over to see a bemused Sherlock patting Mrs. Hudson’s back, wrapped in her exuberant embrace.

“Yes, well, that’s *one* big bit of the news,” John says mildly to Molly, whose face crumples into a grinning sob as she hugs him fiercely.

“You’ll be *dads*! Does that mean I still get to be Auntie Molly?” She releases John and strides over to Sherlock, hugging him along with Mrs. Hudson. “And Sherlock! Why did it take a bloody *coma* for you to see *sense*?”

John pulls his mobile from his pocket. Smirking at Sherlock, surrounded by so much love, he snaps a picture.

…

It’s another hour before John and Sherlock finish helping Molly fill her car with the boxes of equipment and see her off.

“Everyone is so… *happy,*” Sherlock says, bewildered, as he and John tramp back up the stairs to their flat.

John grins, closing the door and locking it for good measure.

“Sherlock, this is your *family.* They’ve wanted this for you for a very long time.”

“Have they? *Why*?” he asks, genuinely curious. “They didn’t mind me so much when I was a free agent.”

“Because they love you, despite what a total git you could be when you were a *free agent.*”

Sherlock becomes lost in thought and settles into his chair, fingertips tented below his chin. John lets him be and puts on tea.

The kettle boils and Sherlock makes no move. *Mind palace? Or dozed off?* John sets the tea down by Sherlock’s chair and pulls out the laptop from his small pile of bags still by the door. He should start settling in, he thinks, but the hangover keeps him slouched in his comfortable chair.

“Sherlock,” he asks gently several minutes later, staring at a few sentences on the screen. “Are we still under surveillance?”

“Just Geoffrey,” he replies without missing a beat. “He’s been assigned to us as my personal bodyguard while I’m on sabbatical, maybe after.”

“After… what?”

“I retire, of course. Now that Rosamund is in custody, it’s finally safe for me to fully relinquish
the job to Mycroft.”

“Bloody hell, don’t you think that much power will corrupt him?”

“No, he’s too boring,” Sherlock sighs. “He’s exactly the kind of mind they need.”

“Hm. Well, Good. That’s good. That you’ll retire.”

Sherlock sips his tea while John glowers at his laptop, striking a few keys, hitting delete.

“This is bloody difficult,” he mutters.

Sherlock is up and out of his seat in a moment, standing behind John’s chair and, fingers poised, begins to massage his shoulders. At his touch, John’s eyes slide closed and he gives a little groan.

“Jesus that feels good…” he breathes as strong violinist fingers knead the knots.

“You’re working on the blog post,” Sherlock muses, peeking over his shoulder.

“You’re amazing at this. Why have I never learned this before?”

“Too risky,” Sherlock grins, sliding a hand into John’s shirt to tweak a nipple. “Couldn’t trust myself to, you know, keep to the boundary.”

“Mmm…”

After several minutes, Sherlock kisses the top of his head and steps away to retrieve his tea. John blearily opens his eyes, smiling wanly. Suddenly he snaps the laptop closed

“Sod this. Let’s go for a walk.”

…

They stroll along Regent Park’s familiar central path. The sun is unexpectedly hot. People sprawl on blankets in the grass and little children splash beneath the bronze mermaids in Triton Fountain.

Sherlock’s mobile pings. He glances down at the screen and groans.

“It’s Lestrade. He wants to come by and get a few things clear.”

John smirks. “He’s been talking to Molly. Tell him to come by later. Let’s make him dinner.”

“John, must we?”

“Sherlock, he’s our friend. After all he’s done for us, it’s the least we can do to explain the whole mess to him.”

Sherlock considers this. “I would rather like to see his expression.”

“What is it?” Sherlock asks, tense.

John’s face goes through several complicated expressions.

“It’s Mycroft. He has the results of the paternity test. Sherlock,” John’s voice cracks and his eyes fill. “Jesus, Sherlock, it’s mine.”

Sherlock grins widely and pulls John to him, hugging him with a fervor, then kisses him on the path amidst the crowd.

“Pidgey, pidgey go to water!” A little girl in grubby, wet shorts runs by, single-mindedly pursuing an agitated pigeon. She bumps into them, startling them apart.

Bemused, they watch the girl race off after the harassed-looking bird, oblivious of the collision, attempting to coral it toward the fountain.

Spell broken, chuckling, they walk on. John gives Sherlock a squeeze as they pass through the squalling bedlam of wet and splashing urchins.

“You sure you want your own version of these?”

“They’re certainly easier to understand than the older models,” Sherlock muses, watching as the little girl somehow scoops up the pigeon and sits with it in the fountain with a splash. “I’m frankly terrified, John.”

“Me, too. But we’ll figure it out. Everybody does.”

John is startled as Sherlock suddenly pulls away from him to drop to all fours by a trim flower bed, his nose practically in the zinnias.

“Stopping to smell the roses?”

“Zinnia angustifolia, John, not roses. Those are over in Queen Mary’s Gardens.”

“Figure of speech, Sherlock. What are you doing?”

“Observing. Come down and see.”

John creakily settles on his belly in the grass next to Sherlock and looks into the bed of vivid yellow, pink and orange flowers.

“What am I looking at?”

“John, as ever you see but do not observe. Look.”

Ruffled, John sighs and stares into the flowers. After a few minutes, he becomes preoccupied by the movement of an insect.

“It’s not… are you staring at that bee?”

“Apis mellifera mellifera – a British Black.”

“Ah. I’d noticed you’d been reading up on bees. Didn’t realize you were such an aficionado.”

“John, this is remarkable,” he whispers reverently, eyes locked on the bee. “This beauty was unique to our fair isle from the Ice Age until 1919 when every single bee was thought to have been obliterated by the Spanish Flu.”
“Really? A flu killed them? All of them?”

“Britain rebuilt its bee population with species from other countries, but none adapted to the climate as well as these right here.”

“So… wait… you’ve just discovered the first since 1919?”

“No no, they found survivors that had been living in a Northumberland church for a hundred years. They’ve been introducing them to apiaries around the country. A city hive must have them. I’ve never seen one – see how their banding is so much darker?”

“Mm, yea, I think so.”

Sherlock gets to his feet and pulls John up with him. As they continue their stroll, Sherlock laces their fingers together.

“I’ve been fascinated by them ever since I was a child. My grandmother kept hives and taught me how to be among them without hood or smoke and never get stung. She’d have been astounded to see that little lady.”

“Lady? How can you tell?”

“John, really. All worker bees are female.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I’ve been interested to learn what makes these bees so different that they could survive an epidemic.” He is quiet a moment, then says soberly, “The bees are disappearing, John. It could be catastrophic to every ecosystem their pollination sustains if we lose them, not to mention our own food system. I’ve found the subject fascinating – no one knows quite why they’re dying, though theories point toward the weakening impact of pesticides to their immune systems. Did you know they can be trained to detect bombs and can distinguish human faces? There’s actually a Knightsbridge bee walk I’d like to do one day, if you’d like to come along.”

“Why not?” John grins at Sherlock, seeing a glimpse of the manic vigilante he loves. “This could actually turn out to be the biggest mass-murder case you’ve ever taken. Told you, you’ll never really give up The Work.” John frowns. “Do I even still have a job?”

“Mycroft’s people arranged a long-term medical leave. You can’t return until you have a doctor’s permission, and frankly, John, I think you have a long recovery ahead of you.” He grins.

“Well, doctor, I would not say no to some time to get my head back together. I could use quite a lot of time to catch up with my boyfriend.”

“Is that what we are? Boyfriends?”

“Why not?”

Sherlock wrinkles his nose. “It sounds silly. Temporary.”

“So, what then, partners?”

“Too professional.”

“Lovers?”
“John, I don’t want to advertise.”

John laughs, exasperated. “Companions?”

“For god’s sake John, you’re not a seeing-eye dog helping me cross the street.”

“Fuck-buddy? Swain? The object of my affection?”

But Sherlock is apparently ignoring him, staring off at a large, flowering tree with a little smile.

“I don’t believe it. This is the kind of tree I keep in my mind palace for any memories pertaining to you. I must have seen this on walks before and remembered it.”

“I get my own mind palace tree?” John grins

“Yes,” Sherlock says reverently. “When you woke, and we kissed, my archives exploded into a giant like this one, but with red flowers.”

“That’s… christ, Sherlock, that’s beautiful.”

They stroll toward the tree, set in a quiet patch of park with few people around. Sherlock stares at it, awed.

“Husbands.”

He is met with silence. Sherlock turns, worried, seeing John’s shocked face.

“Not good?”

John blinks hard. “Did you just… propose to me?”

“Did I? I was simply brainstorming the most accurate, socially acceptable label for our relationship status, one that implies the greatest level of commitment.” Sherlock frowns. “But it does come with a lot of trappings.” He pulls a face. “Serviettes. Color-coordinated frocks. Speeches.”

John stares at him, bemused. “It doesn’t have to.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sherlock, there is nothing traditional about you, about us. If you… wanted to go… that route… well, we can do it any way we like. But, I mean, love, we’ve only been at this for less than 72 hours. Bit sudden.”

Sherlock turns and stares into his eyes.

“4 years, 5 months, 22 days.”

“Pardon?”

Sherlock tugs him between hanging branches where the bows of lobed leaves create a more cloistered space. He steps close to him, deep-voiced and tender. “4 years, 5 months, 22 days… Since we first met, John. Since I fell in love with you. And you with me, if I’m any kind of consulting detective.”

John holds his gaze. “Yes,” he says quietly, his voice rough with emotion.
“If anything,” Sherlock continues, “we have delayed much too long, have had time stolen from us by forces we could not control. I am… extremely eager to make up for that lost time.”

Sherlock very suddenly swoops onto one knee and takes John’s hand, making him laugh.

“What are you playing at?”

“John,” Sherlock says deeply, all playfulness gone, “John Hamish Watson, I love you. I want you in my life for all of it, at my side, in our bed, raising our child, loving me. Beneath this tree, which is a perfect metaphor for the depth and strength of my love for you and the heights we have yet to reach, I pledge my whole self to you. Utterly.”

John gapes at him, then falls to his knees in front of Sherlock in the soft grass, hidden with him among the boughs. He holds his hands tightly.

“Sherlock,” he says hesitantly, their faces inches apart, “William Sherlock Scott Holmes. You have saved my life. More times than I care to count. Please save me for all time: love me, be with me, for all our days. Yes, to everything you just said, yes to all of it. And more of it. I love you, I pledge my whole self to you, utterly.”

Their eyes are tender, aching, hopeful. In the same instant, they close the space between them, kissing deeply beneath the tall, flowering tree.

Finally parting, cheeks flushed, Sherlock whispers, “Husbands.”

With the sweetest grin Sherlock has ever seen on his face, John whispers back, “Husbands.”

Chapter End Notes

((I'm not crying. you're crying))
The flat is filled with the smell of slightly burned bacon as John putters in the recently-scoured kitchen, fixing *that thing with the peas* Sherlock had liked in their early days. Fettucine boils on the cooker.

“Sorry for the delay,” John calls over his shoulder into the sitting room. “Got a bit preoccupied making the kitchen fit for human consumption.”

“Aw, no worries, mate,” Lestrade soothes from John’s chair, “just appreciate you havin’ me by.” He smirks at Sherlock sitting across from him and whispers, “Oh, I’m sure that’s all you lot were up to.” He winks.

Sherlock grips the arms of his chair with irritation and rolls his eyes. “Lestrade, we have been hungover and preoccupied most of the day. There was no sex to delay the tea.”

“Sherlock!” John snaps.

“But John assures me we will remedy this after you leave.”

“Oy!” John stands in the doorway looking daggers at Sherlock. “How about you finish up in here if you can’t make civil conversation?”

“Lestrade made an inaccurate inference, John!” he crows. “It’s unbecoming in a detective! How am I to train him to function independently if I don’t point out his errors?”

John sighs. “Well, there’s *that* out. You’d better tell him the whole backstory so he doesn’t think I’m a bloody adulterer.” He points his wooden spoon at Sherlock menacingly. “Behave.” He stalks back to the worktop, muttering.

Lestrade grins at Sherlock. “At least give me a bit of credit for noticing the change in your household, old boy.”

Sherlock gives him a small smile. “Yes, well done. What gave us away? I’ve been trying to keep my distance on purpose.”

Lestrade shrugs. “It’s the eyes. Loads more eye contact. And not the way you’d both been looking at the other all pent-up, but with, well, contentment.”

“Really? You saw all that?”

“Oh, sure. Plus the love bites on John’s neck while his wife is mysteriously *out of town* this week, or so he texted me.” He grins wickedly. “Didn’t expect that marriage to last a New York
Sherlock tents his fingers at his lips. “It is… a bit more complicated than it seems, though your intuition was accurate. We were going to share this news at dinner, as well as a number of other recent developments and clarifications.”

“You’d best. But truly, congratulations, mate,” he grins smugly. “‘Bout bloody time. Now don’t cock it up.”

“If by that you mean no more fake suicides or overdoses–”

“–as well as being a generally decent human being.” He lowers his voice and glances quickly to the kitchen. “I doubt there would be much in this world that would shake him from your side, mate, but, you know, be good to him. Remember his birthday, don’t dope his tea, all that.”

“No more doping.” Sherlock grabs his phone from the side table and flashes it at Lestrade. “And significant events have already been preloaded with automatic reminders two weeks prior.”

Lestrade grins, shaking his head. “Well, that’s bloody romantic. For you. But what’s this you’re saying about training me?”

Sherlock sighs expansively. “Greg, can I get you a drink? I don’t believe you would say no to an old fashioned.”

“Oh – cor, yeah, that’d be brilliant–” he stammers, taken aback. “Did you just call me by my first name?”

“Indeed. ‘Greg’ is your name, isn’t it?”

“Well, I’m chuffed to bits. Didn’t think you remembered it.”

Sherlock moves to the shelf to examine bottles and begins sniffing their contents. “While that may be popular opinion, I assure you I take the time to know the names of those who are most important to me. Now, Greg, due to your immense dislike for working out of doors on days below 5°C, I’ll wager you would prefer your drink neat rather than on the rocks?”

“Cheers, yea…” he says, bemused.

Sherlock pulls a heavy marble mortar and pestle from under a stack of books. “Now, first things first. Your assumption that John forgot the details of my shooting due to shock was ludicrous. Really! A war veteran, who has witnessed worse things happening to me and remembered every detail–” he looks quickly at the kitchen, but John is preoccupied.

“Alright, so what was it, then?”

“He was drugged.”

“By who?” Lestrade shifts to the edge of his seat.

“His wife. Just after she shot me.”

“Oh, shite, no.” Lestrade goggle at him.

“Didn’t you see the papers yesterday morning?”

“What? No – I’ve been on a stake-out! Sherlock, explain.”
Decanting a precise amount of whiskey into a beaker, Sherlock does.

…

“All right you lot,” John says cheerfully as he strides into the sitting room, toweling off his hands. “Come eat while it’s hot.” He takes in Lestrade’s look of angry bewilderment. “Ah. I see you’ve filled him in. Ta. Makes dinner easier.”

“John, bloody hell,” Lestrade jumps from the chair and rounds on him, gripping him by the shoulders. “To think we all sat through that wedding like it was perfectly normal. Christ, what you’ve been through. And Sherlock out there with snipers tailing us for two years…”

John pats his back. “It’s been… horrific, Greg. I don’t even really know how to put it into words yet. But. We’re all still here, safe and relatively sound. An we’ve got her. She can’t hurt anyone anymore.”

“Thanks to you, John,” Sherlock mumbles from his corner of the sitting room, hunched over something at the table.

“And thanks to Sherlock, we stayed alive all those years he was dead.” John suddenly glances over Lestrade’s shoulder and scowls. “Sherlock, what are you doing?”

Sherlock looks up guiltily from the ingredients he’s been meticulously measuring into Lestrade’s tumbler with a pipette. “What?”

Bemused, John walks over to inspect the operation. “You offered him that drink at least twenty minutes ago. It’s an old fashioned, love, not alchemy.”

“Just being… precise.”

“And I suppose you used the mortar and pestle for the sugar cube?”

“Of course. How else would it have been fully homogenized?” He returns to his pipette.

John gives him a baffled smile and kisses him lightly on the temple. Returning Lestrade’s smirk, he stage-whispers, “That’s why I cooked the tea. Come on then. Tuck in.”

They leave Sherlock to his work and sit around steaming plates at the kitchen table.

Lestrade takes a polite bite, then puts down his fork, shaking his head.

“Still can’t believe it. I knew things had been dodgy with you two for weeks. Sherlock wasn’t returning my texts. Tried coming ‘round and a bloody giant said you weren’t at home. Jesus... you must’ve still been out of it, then.”

Sherlock joins them, placing Lestrade’s drink by his plate.

“Cheers, mate, this should be something.” He sips and nods appreciatively. “Cor... that’s good.”

They set to eating, the kitchen quiet but for the clinks of forks on plates. Lestrade stares into the middle distance, shaking his head. Finally, he heaves a sigh.
“Well, with that bloody mess cleaned up, I expect you’ll be asking for a case any minute now.”

“Actually,” John says to his plate, “we’re, um, taking a bit of a breather.”

“I’m retiring,” Sherlock says bluntly.

“You’re what?” Lestrade sneers. “I don’t believe it. You? Never. No. Not you. You won’t last the day before you’re sending me a hundred texts begging for a new one.”

“But it’s true,” Sherlock blinks at him. “I have other things to occupy my time now.”

“Sherlock…” he huffs bleakly. “What the bloody hell am I going to do?”

“Greg,” John soothes, “you’ll be fine.”

“He won’t.”

“Sherlock.”

“You’ll be fine, Greg. I have somewhat updated my position on retirement. I admit this evening is far more pleasant than I anticipated. I will offer my consultation assistance, as a friend, but only at the flat. If you get truly stuck, come by for a meal and talk it through. Talking only. Photos if you have them. No locations. It’s time we trained your eye and sharpened your line of inquisition.”

“Blimey.” Lestrade rubs his hands over his face. “I can’t believe it. End of an era, this.”

Sherlock reaches over and grips John’s hand. “Beginning of another, that’s how it generally goes.”

Lestrade stares at them both for a moment, then cracks into a grin and raises his immaculately-mixed old fashioned.

“Congratulations, mates.” He takes a sip. “Eh, Sherlock, that’s really bloody good.”

“It’s about precision, Greg. Oh, also, we’ll be raising John’s baby.”

Lestrade chokes on his swallow.

…

**July 29th**

“Two-hundred and fifty-nine comments? That’s preposterous. You only posted it last night.” Sherlock tosses his newspaper onto the blanket and slides closer to John on the bed, peering at his laptop.

“That’s just those who commented. It’s had over two thousand hits already.”

“What are they saying?”
“Mm, haven’t read them all, but so far a mixture of shock, relief, I’m taking the piss, and many happy returns.”

“Hm. What’s this one called?”

John smirks, “The Blessing in Disguise.”

“Rosamund in disguise… and the unexpected blessing it brought to us in the form of a child? That’s awful.” Sherlock frowns. “But clever.”

“Ah, ta, love,” John rolls his eyes. “The ‘blessing’ covers our new circumstances too, not just the baby.” He absently pulls Sherlock’s hand to his lips to brush with a kiss.

“Read me the end again.”

John pretends irritation. “I’ve read it out five times already. Read it yourself if it makes you all weak-kneed and daft.”

Sherlock grins sleepily. “It only makes me daft when you read it.”

John sighs, but smiles. “Fine. It will come as no surprise to anyone (but us) that through this horror, Sherlock and I finally realized we’d each been going through our days harboring much more than friendship for the other. A spark has kindled a brilliant blaze.

We have always had a symbiosis, a natural synergy that, no matter how we chafe one another, we would die for the other, no exaggeration. He is my best friend, yes, and he is also the greatest love I have ever known.

Dark times are behind us. We embark on a new journey, and I could not be happier, or more honored, to have my husband Sherlock Holmes at my side.”

Sherlock has closed his eyes and leaned against John’s shoulder. John runs a hand through his curls. Both jump as someone begins to thunder on the front door.

“Mrs. Hudson,” they say in unison.

“Clearly she hasn’t had her herbal soother today,” Sherlock muses, then winces. “You did tell her about the husbands thing beforehand?”

“I thought you were!”

“Bloody hell.” Sherlock launches out of bed. “We’d best both go deal with this together. She can’t throttle us at the same time, and if she goes for me, you can pull her off.”

They scrabble hurriedly on the floor for discarded pajamas and dressing gowns, the banging coming louder. As they hasten down the hall toward the door, Sherlock lightly touches his back.

“Be strong, John. No serviettes.”

August 9th
“What are you doodling over there?” John asks, looking up from his laptop. Sherlock’s been curled into his chair, squinting at a pad of paper he’s been scratching at for the better part of an hour.

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“Not finished yet.”

“So I get to see it?”

“When it’s done John.”

“And you may never have the chance if you do not cease your inquisition,” he growls, not taking his eyes from the page.

“Ah, the mercurial moods of the artist,” John chuckles. “I’m parched. You want a cuppa?” Sherlock doesn’t respond. John clicks his laptop closed and saunters to the kitchen, setting out two mugs anyway. He’s preoccupied opening a new box of tea when suddenly Sherlock is pressing close behind him, one hand sliding over his eyes, voice rumbling close to John’s ear.

“Finished.”

“Well, that didn’t take long. Do I have to guess, or–”

Sherlock uncovers his eyes, wrapping both arms around John’s middle and resting his chin where it fits nicely into his shoulder. John blinks. The yellow legal pad has been propped up in front of him on the worktop, showing a line drawing of a tree growing from a double infinity symbol. John marvels at it – he’s never seen Sherlock draw so much as a stick figure, and now here’s this intricate, expressive sketch.

“Oh – wow, that’s incredible, love.”

“You like it?” Sherlock asks shyly against his ear.

“Course I do. It’s beautiful. Like a single line all woven together.”

“Two lines, actually. I was thinking it could go over our… scars.”

“Wait… you mean… like a tattoo?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Oh wow. I’m. Huh.”

Sherlock sags against him. “Never mind, it was a stupid ide–”

“Wait, just hang on,” John quickly snakes his arms back around Sherlock to keep him from bolting. “You’re a hundred paces ahead of me, as usual. Okay. So. Pretend I haven’t been sitting in your mind listening to your internal dialog the past many days.”

The kettle whistles and Sherlock eels from his grasp to fetch it, pouring steaming water into the mugs and efficiently opening the box of tea. John leans against the worktop, watching with a small smile.

“Ta.”
“I don’t want us to conform to any antiquated marital standard we don’t find meaning in, John. We’re clear on that. I have no love for a band of metal worn on the hand to encapsulate our connection. They get in the way, get lost, make my fingers itch. But. I have been thinking, it would be… good… to somehow physically embody the permanence of our intentions.”

“Is that the tree, then, the one you keep for me in your mind palace?”

“Yes. And the interconnected infinity symbol, well, that’s fairly straight-forward.”

“This is because of the dressing-down Mrs. Hudson gave us, isn’t it?”

Sherlock huffs, pouring the precise amount of milk he knows John takes in his tea.

“No. I was thinking of it before that. But I admit her insistence that we commemorate our connection was not lost on me.”

“We already scheduled the court date, so we’ll be properly hitched in the eyes of the law for your adoption procedures. We even agreed to a nice takeaway at the flat with our motley little family afterwards so they feel included in the whole transition.”

“Yes, but that’s for everyone else. The system, the friends.” Sherlock sidles back up to John and begins to fuss with his shirt buttons. “I want to know that when I unbutton one of your plaids, or you wash me in the bath, we’ll see this mark, meant just for each other, above the scars that prove we lived to be worthy of it. When we sleep with my front curved to your back, the marks will align, or nearly.”

John swallows hard. “You’ve thought this quite through.”

“I have.”

“Yes.”

“Yes?” Sherlock grips his shirtfront.

“I love it. Let’s do it. There must be a tattoo artist who owes you a favor.”

“Two!” He whirls abruptly out of the kitchen, already tapping out a message on his phone and hastily turning to a new page on the legal pad. John follows in his wake with their tea and watches fondly for a while as Sherlock becomes absorbed in his drawing, making draft upon draft.

…

**September 10th**

A key crunches into the keyhole, the tiniest rasp at the edge of his hearing. 6:37, tube was delayed. Stretched out on the couch in pajamas and dressing gown, Sherlock listens for the tempo of John’s shoes on the stairs to indicate how tired the day at the clinic has made him.

2/4, with a bit of staccato. Not such a hard day, with some anticipation at the home-coming.
The door swings open. A beat as John notices him on the couch. He keeps his eyes closed as he listens to the four phases of John’s entrance: jangle of keys returning to bowl, thump of bag on the floor, rustle of coat on the hook, plonk of shoes landing on the mat.

He is harder to track in socks, but even with his eyes closed, Sherlock can feel the subtle shift of the room’s eddies as John moves toward him, tiny pops of ankle and knee joints as he endeavors to move quietly, breath held, a lick of lip and–

The coming-home kisses. In all his years away, aching for him, Sherlock had not factored in the sweetness and relief of these kisses. He stops the charade and fills his hands with John, pulling him down with a creak of couch springs.

“Welcome home,” he says quietly, foreheads pressed, arms wrapped about the other.

“Good to be home.” John sighs. “What a–”

“Ah ah ah, no hints,” Sherlock scolds playfully and John grins, pushing off his chest. Sherlock makes room for him on the couch. John settles and waits, a glimmer in his smile, for their little ritual to begin. Sherlock fixes him with steady, searching gaze, reading the shadows beneath his eyes, the fibers of his shirt, the messy fingerprints of his day scattered all over him.

After a few moments’ long scrutiny, Sherlock moves in close to sniff his hair, his hands, his chest. Sherlock grins because John is always stirred by this bit.

“Egg salad for lunch, purchased from a street vendor,” Sherlock says decisively, pulling away with a quick nip on the earlobe that makes John’s breath hiss. “Birthday for one of the nurses… likely Conrad who would be the only one to want a pistachio-frosted cake. You didn’t eat your piece, but brought it home for me. Millie was out, old Dr. Brecht took her place by the way his cologne lingers about your person. One wart frozen off. Five, no, six cases of influenza requiring prescription treatment.”

John laughs with delight. “How do you do that? The number, christ, it’s fantastic.”

“The prescription pad leaves a certain tracing of powder on your sleeves which accumulates depending on the number of times a sheet has been torn. I’ve made a study of this.”

“But influenza? How did you see that? It’s not even the season for it.”


John holds his wrist close to his eyes, peering at the skin.

“Well, look at that. Too low to have washed off between patients.”

“But you had one today who stumped you.”

John nods, grinning.

“You bite your left thumbnail when you’re puzzled. It’s rough while the others are smooth. I’m assuming it’s recurring nose-bleeds. Had one right in your office. The speckle, there, on the front of your right thigh. You’re concerned it’s due to more than atmospheric conditions.”

Sherlock lightly circles a fingertip around the tiny speckle of blood on John’s trousers. John fixes him with a soft, bemused smile.
“Gave her a recommendation for a specialist. Brilliant.”

“The tube was also delayed this morning and you were able to read more of the paper on your commute than usual.”

John laughs, furrowing his brow. “Now come on, how could you see that? Is there more ink in my fingerprints than usual?”

“Easy. I was there.”

“What? When I left the flat you were still in bed!”

“I motivate quickly. I had a sudden need to get to the shops—”

“Ah ah ah, my turn.” He studies Sherlock for a serious minute, lips twisting with concentration, then jumps up to make a circuit of the flat. He changes his clothes to soft pajamas in the bedroom. While he’s in the kitchen he pops a bag of rice into a pot to cook and takes out the cold chicken curry from the night before. That done, he walks the perimeter of the sitting room, then returns to the couch where Sherlock has become absorbed in his laptop.

Nudging him aside with a rugby-trained shoulder, John pulls the computer from his hands, makes a few quick taps, then sets it on the coffee table. Settling back onto the couch, he traps Sherlock beneath his outstretched legs and laces his hands behind his head. Sherlock grins. It’s incredibly endearing when John makes attempts at deductions.

“What would have gotten you up in such a hurry? Can’t believe I didn’t see you on the tube—”

“It was crowded.”

“—you were wearing a false beard. It’s on your dresser. Bloody obvious one, too, practically Gandalf.”

“Hiding is best done in plain sight.” *Best not to dwell on that, bit too close to recent events.*

“The things you do for your jollies…” John says with warmth. “So, you evade my attention. You want to be getting somewhere in the same direction as the clinic, but you don’t want me to know. And you want to get there bright and early. But why Clifton Green’s market? The bag is in the kitchen bin on top.”

John chews his thumbnail. Sherlock grins, but says nothing.

“There’s no fresh fruit or veg in the refrigerator, much as we could have used them. We’re out of milk, too, so you didn’t have replenishing supplies on your mind. You had something specific to do.”

“Oh. You won’t have milk for your tea in the morning. I’ll go out now—” Sherlock says guiltily, squirming to get up. John holds him down with his legs.

“You won’t. I’ll survive, I’d rather you were here. Well, once you returned, you settled into your post-Moriarty retirement and put on your pajamas again, leaving your costume strewn about the bedroom. You made the bed and read for a while, judging by the imprint on the blankets and the new position of your bookmark. Mrs. Hudson must have been out since you had a second cup of tea in bed and finished the milk. Your cup is still on the bedside table.

“You did the washing up – ta – cooked an egg, and got riled by something in the newspaper. There’s crumpled pages behind the desk. You spent a significant portion of the day researching
apiaries within driving distance of London, the benefits of breastmilk, read my blog again, and had a bit of a toss, which is why you changed your pajamas again before I arrived. They’re in the bathroom.”

“John, browser history is cheating.”

“How’d I do?”

“Admirable. But what about Clifton Green’s?”

“I assure you I cannot explain why a ripe passion fruit is currently on the bookshelf, sitting on your scarf.”

Sherlock grins. “Clifton’s was the only fruit market I could find carrying passion fruit within a tube ride, and I had to go quickly lest they sold out. I… couldn’t help thinking a great deal about what you’d said the other day about the oddness of the baby growing apart from us.”

“Like ordering away for a fancy fruit basket,” John quotes himself quietly, puzzled, then blinks hard, “Oh. Oh. Jesus, what week are we at?”

“Twelve.”

“And it’s… is it the size…”

“Of a passion fruit.”

A grin blooms on John’s face.

“I thought,” Sherlock says shyly, “if we cannot be within any kind of proximity to the fetus as it develops in utero, we can keep a kind of awareness of it by tracking its current size with the ridiculous fruit chart from the books.”

“And your scarf, it’s like a little nest. Almost like a shrine.” John scowls with the wave of emotion this brings, sniffs hard, and moves in for a long hug and longer kiss.

…

**October 3rd**

“*Sherlock,* have you seen my gray tie? Christ, I can’t believe we’re going to be late to our own wedding.”

“Government paper signing, John. We’re already wed. And you *know* there will be a cue. It’s in my closet. The tie, not the cue.”

John thumps past him quickly to the bedroom, eyeing him approvingly in a new dark suit. He’d had to buy it one size larger than usual to accommodate an increase in flesh John says is still only a half-step above wraith.

“It’s my fault, John, I detained you longer than I anticipated in the bath,” Sherlock smirks into
the mirror, adjusting his own dark tie, giving a long look at the artichoke currently ensconced in his scarf on the shelf. John has playfully added a child’s pirate eyepatch to it.

“Did you call in the delivery for lunch?” John yells from the bedroom.

“Texted it, yes.”

“And you’ve got the folder of documents?”

“For the fourth time, yes.”

John jogs from the bedroom and joins him at the mirror to fix his tie, looking fit in a coal gray suit, but clammy despite the shower. Sherlock furrows his brow and slides behind him to knead his shoulders.

“You’re all nerves. This is paperwork.”

John sags back against him. “I know. I know. I know. But it’s still affecting me. Declaring it to a judge, joining our names. Having a little party with our friends, just for us. It’s a big step, you can admit.”

“John, our appointment with Henri was a big step.” He lightly brushes his fingers over John’s left pectoral where his tattoo sits freshly healed over his scar. Sherlock’s own mark is near his heart, the bullet scar disappearing into the whorls of ink.

John turns, looking sobered, and kisses him, mussing his hair. When he pulls away, he is considerably calmer.

“You’re right, husband. Let’s just go get this done.”

…

In the cab, John receives a text from Mycroft. He blinks at the phone, nonplussed.

“What is it?” Sherlock scowls. John hands him the phone to read for himself. “Do we want a scan? What does he mean?”

“Sherlock, the baby is old enough that they can scan for the gender. He wants to know if we’d like to know.”

“Why on earth would we?” Sherlock frowns.

John shrugs, smiling. “Don’t have to. Some people wait to be surprised. Most don’t. It could narrow the naming options down. And just, you know, give us a glimpse into who they’ll be.”

“How on earth is their genitalia a glimpse into who they’ll be?” Sherlock snaps. Then, seeing John’s expression, softens. “John, I want to know our child. Fiercely. But I don’t mind waiting for it to share that with us in person rather than constructing some social stereotype for the next four months. Let the well-wishers buy us green and yellow and fox-printed jammies if they’re too flummoxed by a non-gendered fetus. Besides,” he grins, sliding a hand down John’s thigh. “I like coming up with the names.” John stares out the window. Sherlock bites his lip. “I’m sorry. I’m being bullish. If it’s important to you, we can find out.”
“No – it’s… I’m not upset with you. I’m fine to wait, really. I’m just… a bit overwhelmed. You keep surprising me, with the way you think about things. It’s… this is a very lucky child, Sherlock Holmes-Watson.”

“Watson-Holmes.”

“Oh, don’t start that again.”

…

**November 18th**

A chill, damp day weighs heavily outside the flat. Inside, the fire crackles in the hearth and John is half-dozing on Sherlock’s lap, both stretched out on the sofa beneath the tartan blanket. Hot toddies sit half-drunk on the table and Sherlock’s deep voice rumbles as he reads aloud from a worn paperback:

“They were clad in warm raiment and heavy cloaks, and over all the Lady Eowyn wore a great blue mantle of the colour of deep summer-night, and it was set with silver stars about hem and throat. Faramir had sent for this robe and had wrapped it about her; and he thought that she looked fair and queenly indeed as she stood there at his side.”

“What about Eowyn?” John interrupts sleepy.

“Well, she’s very unhappy to be left out of the fray,” Sherlock reasons, “but she’s falling in love, so it’s worth the sacrifice in the end. I can commiserate.” He kisses the top of John’s head.

Eyes half-lidded with drink and the warmth of the fire, John grins.

“No, silly, I meant for the baby. If it’s a girl.”

“Oh.” Sherlock sets the book down, holding the page with his thumb. “Eowyn. Eowyn. Clean up your chemicals this minute, Eowyn, before you mix your acids and bases!” He wrinkles his nose. John scowls.

“No, perhaps not. I still like Octavia.”

“Mm, yea, bit stuffy, though.”

“We could call her ‘Tavia,”

“I was thinking of Melissa,” Sherlock muses. “From the Greek μέλισσα for honey bee. Melissa was a nymph who learned the trick of getting honey from bees. She took care of baby Zeus, but rather than feeding the baby milk, Melissa fed him honey straight from the bees.”

“Melissa! Did you bring this pigeon into the house?” John nods appreciatively. “I like it. We could call her Lissa, too.”

“And Hamish if it’s a boy.”
“Oh, you’re a riot. How about Willy, then, if you’re so keen to drag us into it,” John chuckles. “I like Leander. And that one, from the wood elves…”

“Sylvain. It’s my favorite of the lot.”

“Yea. That’s the one. Sylvain. For god’s sake, Sylvain, no mixing soup in the toilet.” He sobers, chewing his lip. “I was thinking of the middle name… for boy or girl… I’d like it to tie to your family, like an homage…”

“Dear lord, not Mycroft.”

John wheezes with laughter. “No, though it would vex him beautifully. No, I was thinking of Sherrin. Or Sheron, if it’s a girl.”

Sherlock sucks in his breath and goes rigid beneath him. The fire crackles. John stays very still, letting this sink into him without pushing too much right away.

“Melissa Sheron Watson-Holmes,” Sherlock rumbles quietly.

“Sylvain Sherrin Holmes-Watson,” John adds, squeezing his hand. “Hey, pass me my drink, will you? I want to hear what happens to Frodo.”

“You know.”

“But I’ve never heard it through you. Your Gollum voice positively gives me chills.”

“You should hear my Smaug.”

“Oo, let’s read The Hobbit next.”

Smiling faintly down at him, Sherlock scoops up the mug, presses it into his hand, and continues to read.

…

December 18th

“What are you up to, over there?” John asks, looking up from the instructions for a crib he’s been puzzling over for the last twenty minutes. “Christ, I swear they didn’t include all the hardware. I’ve got about fifteen bendy bits and only nine knobbles.” After several minutes of Sherlock’s continued silence from his desk, John gives up the project and tiptoes behind him to peer over his shoulder.

“Is that the baby book Molly got us?”

“It is,” Sherlock almost growls. “And it is woefully lacking in essential prompts.”

“What are you adding there?” He gives a little whistle, seeing the ‘family tree’ page filled margin-to-margin with tight, neat clusters of names, dates, and connecting branches. “Jesus, how many generations back does that go? It only asked for the great-grandparents.”
“How will this child have any sense for its place in its lineage if it has no notion of its roots? John, you have ancestors from royalty – though deposed over 500 years ago – but it’s vital information!”

“You’ve included Rosamund’s.”

“The child shares half her genetics. It’s fair to know of its mother’s line, is it not?”

“Yes, I just… hadn’t really considered yet how we’ll tell that story.”

Sherlock is quiet a moment, his pen suspended over the page. “Nor I. We’ll figure it out. Lineage doesn’t tell the specific story. The child can hear of its mother’s Welsh great-great grandmother and not know its own mother was an assassin.”

John nods, then peers at the page and grins. “You’ve got your own tree in there, as well.”

“Well, even if not by blood, they will still be a Holmes.”

John ruffles his hair and kisses the top of his head.

“It’s brilliant.” He nods over at the shelf. “The little acorn-squash is very lucky to have you as its father-historian.”

“I wonder,” Sherlock muses, chewing his pen. “What should the child call us? It will be confusing if we’re both Daddies. I don’t want to be Father.”

“I’ve always rather liked papa,” John hums. “You can have dada.” Sherlock pinks a bit and ducks his eyes. He carefully pens in the clarifying titles above each tree. Dada. Papa. Mother.

“I wonder if I should write it out… the story. Our story. For the child to read later, when it’s much older…”

Sherlock cranes around to consider him. “That would be… good.”

John peeks behind the earlier pages in the baby book, all crammed with Sherlock’s extensive details. “You’re going to be ace when we take it to the pediatrician for checkups. You’ll have charts detailing the color and consistency of each nappy’s contents.”

Sherlock huffs irritably. “There’s no page for it in this blasted, simpleton book! I’ll have to make my own.”

“Are you going to be like this with everything?” John asks mildly.

“Oh John, you know what they say. I’m sure I’ll barely make a note for the second.”

“Second?”

“Only joking.”

…

January 23rd 2015
John unlocks the door to 221B and finds several large parcels in the entryway. Mrs. Hudson bustles out of her flat.

“Oh, John, glad you’re home! The delivery people brought your boxes to my flat again. I didn’t bring them up, they’re so heavy, and Sherlock hasn’t been answering the door all afternoon.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Hudson. Sorry for the bother. More baby things. It’s uncanny how much stuff you can be tricked into thinking you need to keep one small person clean and fed.”

“John… the strangest sound was coming through the door of your flat – not that I was spying, I couldn’t help but overhear. Perhaps he’s working on an experiment…”

“Don’t worry about Sherlock, I’m sure he’s just been lost in his research. What with the new job at the apiary, he’s up all hours again. It’s a bit of a comfort, I admit, seeing him so immersed in something.” He glances upstairs. “Actually, I’m glad you caught me alone. I’ve been wanting to talk to you about something. Please keep it quiet.”

“Oh,” she trills, “of course, dear.”

“Sherlock’s given up so much to make this new life of ours work. I’d like to rent out 221C to convert into a lab for him.”

“Ooo,” she hums fretfully. “Would there be actual living bees in the flat?”

“No no,” John soothes, “he deals with the living ones at the apiary. This would just be a place he could do his research, keep his equipment. Nothing explosive, just lots of dead insects and microscopes and the like. A place of his own where he wouldn’t have me scolding him to keep it out of the baby’s reach all the time.”

She smiles, relieved. “Well, if that’s all, why not? But John, forgive me for asking, can you afford it on what you’re making? I understand Sherlock is volunteering, not really a proper paid job at all.”

“It’s okay. We’ve sold the house in Wembley. We’re comfortable.” Better to let that suffice, he thinks, than get into the stipend Sherlock will receive for life as a retired Moriarty. “Thank you, you’re a love. Next time he’s out, I’ll pop down and go over the details, sign the necessary papers. Let’s keep it a surprise.”

“How sweet, dear,” she pats his arm. “As if that will work.”

John scoops up the boxes with a grunt and heads up the stairs. “Of course he’ll know, but it’ll be touching for him to think that I’m trying to surprise him. Come up for tea tomorrow, yea?”

“Cheers, love, I’ll bring the honey biscuits he’s been so partial to.”

“Til then,” he nods and begins to lug the boxes up the stairs.

“Oh, John,” she coos with loaded innocence. “You don’t have any clues for me yet, do you dear? I’d love to crochet a baby blankie or two, and you know, pink or blue, it would be nice to know…”

John’s smile is a little forced. The question comes up every few days from someone.
“Still a mystery, Mrs. H. Any color will do. Pick your favorite.” He smirks, waggling his eyebrows. “How about a rainbow?” She swats at him playfully and turns to go back to her flat.

“Not a bad idea, really…” she muses as she walks away.

John struggles up the last of the steps, balances the boxes on a hip and awkwardly lets himself into their flat. The pile obscures his view, but he can hear what Mrs. Hudson was describing. A rhythmic, mechanical whirring that immediately puts him in mind of something he perhaps shouldn’t be walking in on. But he’s made so much noise, surely Sherlock won’t be caught too off guard…

He plops the packages on the table and receives a grand view of Sherlock in his chair by the fire, bare chested in a silky dressing gown, wearing a complicated looking bra hooked up to tubes and emitting a regular pulsing sound. Sherlock’s eyes are closed and he looks blissful.

John goggles at him.

“What on earth are you on about?” John bursts. “This some new kink we’re to try?”

Sherlock’s eyes snap open and his head flies up. “Witch’s tit, John!”

“Witch’s what?”

“Tit!”

John shakes his head, even more confused. “As in… cold as a…”

“Yes, colloquially. But it comes from the phenomena of a man producing milk for an infant when no mother is present. This actually happens, John. Well, historically. If the male mammary glands are given enough stimulation, especially in the presence of the hungry baby, he will actually produce milk, providing sustenance to the child. It’s a hidden evolutionary survival necessity!” Sherlock beams, elated.

John hesitantly points to the beefy, rectangular bag at Sherlock’s feet where the whirring is coming from. Thin, clear tubes run from the bag to plastic cups sealed against his chest with the bra.

“Wait. So that’s. That’s a–”

“It’s a breast pump. And a hands-free pumping bra, very efficient. I’ve been at it all day – a bit chafed, but it’s actually quite a pleasant sensation.” He frowns, peeking into the plastic cups pushed against his nipples. “No luck yet, but then, it’s only the first day. The aubergine on the shelf doesn’t really inspire the same hormonal stimulus as a real baby. I’ve been reading the health reports from Mycroft, trying to draw inspiration. No luck yet.”

“Sherlock.” John massages his temples. “Are you saying you intend to breastfeed our child?”

“Yes, of course, Sherlock, but–”

“But who is to say the milk has to come from the mother? Since, due to the security risks, we are not able to procure milk from Rosamund, why not go for home-cooked instead of defaulting so quickly to formula?”

“No luck yet.”

“The immune benefits are endless! Not to mention the bonding I’d have with the baby. Of
course, John, there is no reason at all you couldn’t make your own as well.”

“Sherlock.”

“What?”

“You win.” John runs his hands through his hair, chuckling wearily. “We’ll sign up for the damn milk bank.”

Sherlock smirks, a victorious glint in his eye. “Are you sure wouldn’t like a try? It’s quite stimulating.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” John huffs, heading into the kitchen. “I think I prefer my mammary stimulation the old-fashioned way.”

…

February 6th, 2015, 11:35pm

“It’s taking too long.”

“No, Sherlock, it’s not. Babies can take hours to be born.”

“We’ve been here ages.”

“We arrived an hour ago. Look, just come over here, you’re pacing like a bloody stereotype.”

“Why are you so calm?”

“Because,” John sighs. “I’m a doctor. This is what I do when things get medically stressful. Tomorrow,” he points a finger at Sherlock, pacing around the small hospital room, “I’ll be a wreck. And you can put all of your research to good use when we can’t get the baby to stop crying.”

“Five S’s: swaddle; side; shush; swing; suck,” he rattles off by rote, gritting his teeth. “This is maddening.”

“You keep this up and I’ll be forced to distract you in that tiny loo over there,” John quips casually, “and won’t that be a fine way to be found when they come to tell us the babe’s been born?”

Sherlock doesn’t laugh and John feels a prickle of anxiety. Though they’d been anticipating the call, been on tenterhooks since the start of the new year, Sherlock had become well and truly panicked earlier that night after Mycroft’s text: a car is on its way to collect you, bring baby things. Sherlock would have bolted right then and there – John had quite the time getting him out his pajamas and into clothes, collecting their things. Thankfully they’d remembered the infant seat, the meticulously prepared baby-bag, and Sherlock’s laptop. But forgotten the violin and the laptop charger.

Due to the highly-secure nature of the facility, there were no windows in the comfortable, if claustrophobic, back seat of the car. After an hour of driving, even Sherlock had lost track of the turnings. John had tried to make him sleep, then failing that, tried soothing him, drawing him out
with little teases, even goading him into deducing previous passengers by the state of their compartment. But nothing got through the shell he’d pulled up around himself. Sherlock sat balled up, locked in his mind palace until the car finally slowed to a stop.

Sherlock’s nerves had continued to fray as they’d been brought from the dark car through a subterranean garage, John feeling very out of place toting a bag full of baby things past so many armored vehicles. They’d been led by their driver up a rattling utility elevator, then through gray, silent halls to their tiny, fluorescent-lit hospital room.

Watching him pace the length of their small hospital room, John has a sudden fierce stab of worry. Perhaps the journey reminded him of some past trauma he’s not ready to divulge, especially during the birth of their child. Or maybe it’s the proximity to Rosamund.

Sherlock’s laptop was brought with no charge. They didn’t think to grab a book. There’s no phone reception. John’s eyes dart around the room for something to distract him. It’s empty but for a stripped bed and a plastic chair, not the most comfortable accommodations.

But then, they shouldn’t even be here. Sherlock had called in two favors from Mycroft to assure their presence at the birth, or at least nearby. In order to bond with the child as soon after the birth as possible, Sherlock had reasoned. John has not articulated it, but he knows they both fear the baby being anywhere near Rosamund without them.

Two doors down the hall, Rosamund is laboring. He tries very hard not to imagine what must be going through her mind as she strains to bring forth a child she will never know. Then he thinks about all the horrors she has put them through. The pang of sympathy wanes.

On Sherlock’s next circuit around the room, fingers jittering at his sides, eyes flashing, John puts all of his barely-repressed nerves to use and tackles him into a fierce embrace, pushing him against the wall and holding him tight.

“John, let me go,” he seethes, struggling futilely.

“Breathe,” John commands. “You look me in the eye, Sherlock, and you suck in a big gush of oxygen or your magnificent brain is going to overheat. That’s certainly not the state I need you in, tonight of all nights. Now. Look at me.” John pushes onto his tiptoes and presses his forehead against Sherlock’s, muscles straining to keep him from moving.

Reluctantly, Sherlock locks eyes with him. John inhales a big, loud breath and exhales it with force onto Sherlock’s face. After a few of these, he feels his husband’s chest begin to follow his rhythm, his own exhalations becoming strong on John’s lips. The panicked-animal eyes begin to soften, reason returning. John slides one hand from its grip on the wall to lightly stroke his neck and surreptitiously feel his pulse.

After several minutes of breathing, John eases his hold. Sherlock’s pulse is calmer – still elevated, but not the sharp rhythm of an anxiety attack.

“Good, very good, love.” He kisses him lightly and steps away. “Better?”

“Yes,” Sherlock croaks somewhat sheepishly. “Sorry. Did we pack water?”

“I should have expected this and been better prepared,” he soothes, digging into one of the side pockets of the baby bag and passing him a bottle. “This is not the most pleasant of ways to receive one’s child.” He watches Sherlock drain the bottle and decides to take a chance. “Is there anything especially bothering you? I haven’t seen you like that in an age.”
“There’s nothing to do for it,” he moans, more aggrieved than angry. “Nothing to solve. I don’t like being out of control, not with her,” Sherlock sighs, his exhaustion finally bleeding through. “I just feel so helpless. I know it’s irrational, but I’m terrified she could harm the baby somehow.”

“The medical staff are all trained operatives.”

“We’ve seen what she does to operatives.”

“Then let us hope childbirth will for once distract her from nefarious schemes.” He tries for a change of subject. “Nice place your brother got for us to wait. Could have included a tea kettle, maybe plugged in a telly.” Sherlock gives him a weak smile. Better. “Now look, this could take ages and we’ve got nothing to take your mind off it. Stretch out, try to rest. You’re knackered.” He settles into the plastic chair and pats the bed.

Sherlock sags against the wall, looking lost out of John’s clinical embrace. “What are you going to do?”

“Make sure you relax.”

“I can’t sleep. Play a game with me.”


Sherlock flops onto the stripped hospital bed. “That one where we put names on our foreheads and have to guess.”

“What, ‘Who Am I’? Seriously?” John eyes him warily, but warms at the notion of Sherlock suggesting they pass the time playing. “Fine, but you must promise to only pick people you know.”

Chapter End Notes

When I was pregnant with our didn’t-know-he-was-a-son-yet-son, we found the best way to test a potential name was to work it into something we might yell. If it could work in a parent freak-out, it could probably hold up anywhere. :) 

Thank you for enduring the Witch’s Tit scene. I was having much too much fun.

The Eowyn bit is taken directly from JRR Tolkien’s Return of the King

Incredible thanks to all of you who are patiently reading along with me as I write. Your kudos and comments are so wonderful to receive. <3
They’re well into the seventeenth round. John is starting to fall asleep sitting up. He stretches, his legs propped up on the bed, shoes off, Sherlock rubbing them absently where he lies sprawled on the mattress upside down, his own sock feet resting on the wall. Their questions hardly make sense anymore; twice the tension has dissolved into exhausted, hysterical laughter, especially when Sherlock tried having him guess Mycroft’s bum. There are no windows in the room and his phone is out of reach in the bag, but John can imagine it’s well past 3am.

So. Your birthday will be February 7th.

Sherlock’s foot-rubbing hits a ticklish spot and John startles more fully awake.

“Do I play the trumpet?” Sherlock asks.

“Do you know anyone who does?”

“No.”

“You don’t play the trumpet.”

“Am I…”

But before Sherlock can ask his next question, the door suddenly opens on their midnight purgatory, an entourage of blue-clad nurses filling the tiny room. John and Sherlock are instantly up, at attention in their socked feet, hair tugged into peaks, eyes deeply shadowed.

John’s insides writhe. The first three nurses shuffle in, not saying anything, their expressions inscrutable behind face masks. I should ask why they’re here. But a sudden irrational fear seizes him as he realizes they may not be here to deliver good news. He grabs Sherlock’s hand to steady him, as well as himself.

At the end of the blue-clad parade, a nurse finally wheels in what looks like a filing cabinet with a clear, low-walled tank on top. Within the padded tank is a small, tightly swaddled being. John’s head goes very light and the ground feels like it’s lost its gravitational bearing on his body. It is Sherlock’s turn to ground him, wrapping his arm tightly about his waist.

The first nurse pulls down his face mask and grins at them.

“Congratulations, gentlemen. May we introduce you to your healthy, newborn daughter.”

“Daughter…” Sherlock breathes, stumbling forward a step as if tugged magnetically to the wheeled crib. The paralysis in John’s legs suddenly breaks and he rushes forward, Sherlock in tow, heart thudding in his throat. They crowd the crib to look in.
“We have a daughter,” he croaks in barely a whisper. “My god, Sherlock–”

John reaches for her, but hesitates, looking his question at the nurses. It feels so odd – this child is his, this daughter, but she has yet to pass through the membrane into their life.

A nurse – there are six of them, her security detail, he realizes – passes them individually-wrapped sterilizing sponges. They quickly crowd into the cramped loo to wash their hands.

“There,” says the most matronly of the set as they rush back. “Now, of course you can hold her. We’ve just given her a bath and her routine examination. Everything looks perfect.”

And even before the words have left the nurse’s mouth, John is reaching down into the tank-crib, slipping his fingers around this impossibly small creature who is so well wrapped she does not even appear to possess arms or legs, just a bright, squashed pink face poking out under a pink knit cap and a cocoon-like swaddle of blanket.

And just like that, John is holding their baby. Their daughter. And Sherlock is wrapping himself around both of them, kissing the tiny face, kissing John, and they’re weeping and laughing and then the baby begins to howl, a beautiful protest.

“Sherlock?”

“With the baby, John.”

“Right, of course. Let’s… here, can we get another bed in here?”

Two nurses bustle off and return wheeling in a second bed and some linens. They wedge them together, make up a modest bed, and quietly slip away as Sherlock strips off his shirt, unbuttoning John’s as he gingerly holds their baby.

John is dimly aware that two nurses are stationed outside their door. He carefully unwraps the blanket from the howling infant, now only in a ridiculously small diaper, her umbilical cord stumped in gauze, her whole body red with the effort of crying.

Without even realizing he’d begun, John is hushing and tutting her soothingly. He carefully lays her onto Sherlock’s bare chest, the fresh tattoo disappearing beneath her. Sherlock gasps as their daughter’s soft warm skin touches his for the first time. Without any bidding, Sherlock begins to mimic the breathing pattern John had forced him through hours earlier, with an added shhh sound thrown in that makes John think vaguely of the sea.

John tentatively rubs little spirals onto the baby’s back, her skin the most impossible softness he has ever felt. Gradually, the baby’s cries mellow to little hiccups. Sherlock eases a pinky fingertip into her mouth and laugh-sobs when she begins to suckle hard, all upset suddenly forgotten.

“Oh my god, she’s perfect,” Sherlock bursts.

“Yes, hullo love,” John coos. “Welcome to planet earth. You must be knackered. We’ll get you some proper milk, course we will.”

As if on cue, a nurse slips back in with a small bottle and sidles up to the family pile. “We’ve expressed the colostrum – would you like me to show you how to feed her?”

At Sherlock’s insistence, John is given the first feeding. With the floppy little thing cradled
against his own bare chest, John nudges the bottle nipple into the babe’s mouth until she begins to suckle. John and Sherlock crow and praise her. Sherlock pulls out his mobile and starts snapping ‘first feeding’ photos. Seeing a thin bar of reception, he immediately sends one to Mrs. Hudson, Molly and her new girlfriend Edith, Harry, his parents, and Lestrade.

After the bottle, they’re shown proper burping position and the tiny creature drops into a milk-fed slumber on Sherlock’s chest. John pulls out a soft blanket from the bag and tucks it around them.

“We’ll bring another bottle around in an hour or so. We understand you’re working with a milk bank, yes? We’ll send you home with enough to get you through the 24 hours, as well as formula in case you have need of it. There’s nappies, cloths, all the basics in the drawers of her crib, take what you want. We’ll help you pack her up at 9:00. A car will be by then to bring you home.”

They nod the nurse out.

“Jesus, just like that, they send us home with her,” John muses. “Seems unreal, giving us this incredibly fragile person, and just ta, here’s your nappies, don’t forget to feed it…” He realizes Sherlock is not really listening and gives him a poke. “So, what do you think, now that we see her in person? Better than the aubergine?”

“I am undone, John,” Sherlock whispers. “I did not know anything so beautiful having anything to do with humans could exist in this world.”

“Yea, I know what you mean,” he hums, stroking the tiny fingers which automatically curl at his touch.

“Doesn’t look much like a Willy.”

“Nor a Hamish,” John retorts.

“When she cries, she has your brow, perfectly.”

“Oh god, poor love. Hope she doesn’t get my ears, too.”

“Why? I love your ears.”

There is a long pause as they both consider they tiny bundle on Sherlock’s chest, this creature who, in the span of mere minutes, in a process as mysterious as a caterpillar transmuting into a moth within its cocoon, has transformed them from a couple into a family.

“Melissa,” they say in unison. Their baby makes a curious goose-like sound in her sleep. John chuckles. “Well, that’s settled then.”

The nurses come and go. John loses track which is which as they monitor the baby’s temperature, administer a vaccine, bring papers to be signed, and ply the new fathers with water and vending machine food.

…

“Excuse me, Misters Holmes-Watson—”

John jolts awake where he’d been dozing, mashed against Sherlock’s bare chest where he could feel the puffs of breath coming from their sleeping daughter’s nose. One of the nurses is standing over them again, the one, he thinks, who’d first announced they had a daughter. He’s
brought in a basket wrapped in yellow tissue paper.

“Watson-Holmes,” Sherlock absently corrects, feeding a sleepy Melissa her second bottle. John’s mobile says 6:47am, but it feels like they’ve been in a weirdly timeless cocoon since she arrived.

“Your brother begs his apologies for not being here in person, Sir, but sends this along in his absence.”

Sherlock scowls. “Oh, that’s very—”

“—kind. Please, send our thanks,” John finishes for him quickly. The nurse slips out.

“Well, go on,” Sherlock points with his chin, his arms full of feeding child. “See what The Grand Moriarty deems appropriate for a baby gift.”

John unwraps the yellow paper to find a large wicker basket. Inside is an eclectic array of children’s books, among them one that makes Sherlock gasp as John holds it up, recognizing it from his childhood. His cranky façade slides off and he actually beams.

“The Miniscule Millicents. My god, that’s been out of print forever. I can’t believe he found a copy. I must have read it a hundred times. Tiny people, living in the garden, that sort. I used to look for them in Mum’s rose beds until he told me off.”

John pulls out a soft, crocheted pastel-rainbow blanket, a plush elephant, a fuzzy bee-striped jumper and matching hat, espresso – “Oh, very funny.” John grins. “Look, Sherlock.” He holds up a greasy-looking paper cone wrapped in newsprint. “Chips! Now tell me your brother doesn’t love you.” John pops a chip into Sherlock’s mouth to keep him from uttering a smart retort. He can see he’s touched.

“Still warm,” Sherlock muses. “Where on earth do they get chips around a maximum-security hospital?”

“Must’ve helicoptered them in from London,” John smirks.

Sherlock sets down the empty milk bottle and moves Melissa into the burping position over the cloth on his shoulder. After a few taps it’s clear she’s asleep again. He passes her to John for a cuddle and peeks into the basket.

“Here, there’s a card.” He tears open the pale green envelope and finds more cartoonish bee-themes on the cardstock, the inside crammed with Mycroft’s thin, spidery writing.

John watches Sherlock’s face become inscrutable. Finally, he passes the card to him. John takes it gingerly with his right hand, the left wedged under Melissa and going a little tingly. He begins to read aloud.

“The blanket is from Mrs. Hudson, who implored that it be delivered at the baby’s birth.

I am not a poetic person, but I came across this poem which is most applicable. The subject being celebrated, Melissa, was a benevolent sorceress and prophetess who lived in Merlin’s cave. The excerpt below expresses, more than I could, the happiness I have for you, my brothers, on this very important day that we welcome a new soul to our family. With love, Uncle Mycroft

Ode, On Melissa’s Birth Day – excerpted from the poem by Thomas Blacklock.”
John scowls at the card. “Hang on, Sherlock, did you tell him we were considering Melissa as her name?”

“I did, but only as one of the many options. Perhaps he learned the gender and didn’t tell us, then deduced the name he thought we’d pick. John, he’s The Moriarty for good reason.”

Baffled, John continues to read aloud:

“Tune, shepherds, tune the festive lay,  
And hail Melissa’s natal day.  
With Nature’s incense to the skies  
Let all your fervid wishes rise,  
That Heav’n and Earth may join to shed  
Their choicest blessings on her head;  
That years protracted, as they flow,  
May pleasures more sublime bestow;  
While by succeeding years surpast,  
The happiest still may be the last;  
And thus each circling Sun display,  
A more auspicious natal day.’


“John, don’t curse around the baby.”

“Oh, we’ll see how long you hold to that.”

Sherlock retrieves the soft, spectrum-toned blanket and tucks it around the tiny sleeping baby in John’s arms.

“Here, take her a bit, could you? I need the loo.”

Sherlock scoops up the infant, swaddles her loosely in the blanket, and cuddles her against his chest as naturally as if he’s done it a hundred times. John’s vision goes a bit blurry as Sherlock proceeds to walk her around the room, his shirt loose and unbuttoned, a stark contrast to his manic pacing hours earlier.

Shaking the pins and needles from his arm, John quickly pads into the tiny loo. While he sits, head in his hands and marveling, he has a sudden stab of guilt, realizing he has not given a thought to Rosamund since the baby arrived. The nurses have said nothing, but he can imagine that by now she has been cleaned, clothed, and rapidly moved to her next destination at a maximum-security prison while they have lain here, at peace and besotted with her daughter.

No. Our daughter.

John shakes the dark thoughts from his mind, finishes up, and emerges to find Sherlock still gently pacing the room, Melissa’s puckered little face just visible in the crook of his elbow behind the pastel-tinted rainbow blanket. His heart clenches fiercely at the sight of Sherlock holding their child, absorbed in her.

As Sherlock turns, John sees his eyes are red, cheeks wet. He catches John’s eyes and a bolt passes between them. John’s own eyes well up and his throat tightens too much for speech. He just smiles at him, and hopes the pride and love are clear.
Sherlock comes close, stoops to press their lips together, and at that moment a small explosion takes place in the baby’s tiny diaper, startling them both.

John’s eyebrows peak into his forehead.

“Did our little creature just make that enormous sound?”

Sherlock carefully peeks in the back of the nappy. “Ah, excellent. Her meconium is passing – the thick, tarry excrement—”

“Sherlock, I read the books, I know,” John giggles, wiping his eyes.

“Good, then look in those drawers for a load of wipes. This is going to be like cleaning treacle off a newborn rabbit.”

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At 9:00 sharp, Melissa’s retinue returns with bottles of milk in a portable cooler, a bulky bag of infant supplies, and helps speed the changing and dressing. John and Sherlock had not quite been able to cram the tiny limbs into the soft outfit they’d brought from home without distressing her, but the nurse handles it with minimal fuss, tucks her into the carrier on Sherlock’s chest, and speeds the bleary fathers out of their curious room which, while loathed at first, has begun to feel like a sort of cocoon.

The six nurses flank them through the gray maze of empty corridors and down the elevator, their arms betraying the tight muscles of medical operatives and the bulge of weapons visible just beneath their scrubs.

The sleeping baby is efficiently secured into her carseat, the luggage stowed, and with kindly farewells, the Watson-Holmes family, just six hours old, heads for home.

…

“Sherlock, don’t bang on the glass like that, you’ll distract the driver,” John scolds.

“He’s driving like a madman! Slow down!” he yells through the glass, which is clearly sound-proof.

“He’s not, you’re just overly sensitive. Shh, you’ll wake her.” He tugs Sherlock back against the seat. “Smell her head with me. I know people always say it, but christ, it does smell incredible.”

Sherlock huffs, but obliges, leaning close to inhale the new-baby scent, grinning despite his nerves.

“See? Lock that one up in your mind palace.”

“There must be a pheromone released near the skull to increase bonding and induce a soporific effect on the parent,” he muses sleepily. “I’ll look into it once we have reception again.”

Leaning back into the seat, the baby asleep between them, they doze off into exhausted
slumber for the remainder of their journey home.

...

**February 10th**

“Hoo-oo! Anyone awake?” Mrs. Hudson stage-whispers from the front door. Slouched onto the sofa, John startles up, a bottle rolling off his lap and clattering under the table. Sherlock has stretched out, taking up the majority of the couch, a finally-sleeping Melissa tucked into the crook of his arm on his chest. They don’t stir.

Mrs. Hudson pads over to them, settling down a full tea tray with a basket of muffins on the coffee table, nudging aside an open bin of wet-wipes and a half-full packet of infant nappies. Burp cloths and small outfits are draped on every available surface. A white noise machine whirrs softly near Sherlock’s head.

“You’re a saint, Mrs. H,” John whispers.

“Don’t try to get up, but here,” she nudges the ottoman to him so he can put up his feet and spreads the tartan blanket over him, a bit stained with dry spit-up. “Get some more sleep, if you can. I heard her up more than half the night, poor love. Colic?”

“Maybe. Who knows. Sherlock says her brain is going through a huge transition at the moment, something about all her senses becoming aware of one another.” He shakes his head blearily.

“Looks like a proper new-baby household in here,” she teases.

“I know we should expect it, but the quantity of diapers she fills seems out of proportion to the amount of milk we put in,” John chuckles. “Stopped bothering putting her in clothes, she hates it. Sherlock’s been the only one so far to get her to settle since we got home. She won’t have anything to do with the crib. It’s his chest or nothing.”

“Well, some babies are just sensitive at the start. You’ll all adjust. Could be worse places to feel at home.” Mrs. Hudson beams mistily at the sight of the baby, naked but for her diaper and the rainbow blanket on Sherlock’s chest. “Oh, but she’s an angel. And making one out of him, too, that’s no mistake.” She pats John’s foot. “I’ll bring up some shepherd’s pie later, maybe hold the baby for a bit if you both need a nap.”

“What on earth would we do without you?” John hums sleepily.

“You’d manage, but a good deal less well-fed.” Her eyes sparkle as she turns to go. John can’t recall ever seeing her so happy.

The white noise and Sherlock’s deep breathing lull him back into sleep.

...

When John finally wakes, it’s with a jolt from a nightmare. The sitting room is full of sunlight.
Sherlock and the baby are gone. For a single panicked moment, he fears his dream was real, but the nightmare dissolves as he hears Sherlock’s mellow baritone coming from the nursery upstairs.

Getting up from the sofa creakily, wondering when he last had a shower, John tiptoes to the foot of the staircase, straining to listen.

Sherlock is singing.

“I have seen where the wolf has slept by the silver stream.
I can tell by the mark he left, you were in his dream.
Ah child of countless trees, ah child of boundless bees…”

After a few lines, he recognizes the song as Cassidy, a strange choice, and he’s replaced the some of the lyrics. He creeps up the stairs, avoiding the squeaky one, and looks into the nursery to see Sherlock in the rocker, the remnants of Melissa’s feeding strewn on the table beside him.

The baby is stretched onto his lap facing him, his large hands cupping her tiny head, rocking her with a steady rhythm. From his angle, John can see her gazing up at him with that disarming, sea-blue, thousand-year look they’ve glimpsed a few times since arriving home. John slumps against the doorframe, listening.

“What you are, and what you’re meant to be
Will fill our days, for you were born to me,
Born to me, Lissa-Bee…”

Lissa-Bee. Three days in and he’s nicknamed her. A bubble of ridiculous joy fills John’s belly.

She’s here. This child he had hoped for, given up as impossible, then craved so fiercely, wishing he could pluck her from her dangerous womb into his own by some feat of modern science.

A tension he had not realized he’d been carrying finally dissolves. He feels light. Sherlock turns his head toward him at the door. Their eyes meet. Slow, warm smiles bloom on their faces.

“Lissa-Bee?” John asks as he joins him by the rocker, gazing down at their full, contented baby.

Sherlock ducks his head, grinning, abashed.

“It just sort of… came out. But if you don’t–”

“Hush. It’s lovely.”

Sherlock eases off the rocker and passes their daughter to John. “Here, baby, go to Papa. Dada needs the loo.” Stretching and popping vertebrae in his neck, Sherlock scuffs sock-footed down the stairs.

When he returns, mugs of hot tea in hand, he grins to find John gently swaying at the window with the baby in his arms, singing in his soft tenor, “...Lissa in the sky-y with diamonds…”

Chapter End Notes
I was utterly nonplussed when I discovered the poem Mycroft quotes, 'Ode on Melissa's Natal Day.' You can read the whole thing here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melissa

I was that hokey hippy-raised mama who sang Cassidy to her baby moments after he was born, (plus Sweet Baby James... yet he is neither named Cassidy or James. I later wrote him is own song. yeah, I'm that hokey) -- though to be fair I fell in love with Suzanne Vega's cover of the original by the Grateful Dead. If you've never heard Suzanne's, it's lovely - Check it out here, after her cover of China Doll: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBebEQPkQrg
February 21st

John storms out of the doctor’s office three steps ahead of Sherlock, shoving at the glass-plate door harder than necessary.

“Uh oh,” Sherlock whispers conspiratorially to the wide-eyed baby nestled in his chest carrier.

Sherlock catches up to him at the lift, standing a careful distance away. While they wait, he gently sways side-to-side, patting Lissa’s back.

“That is the sixth pediatrician you have insulted,” John seethes, gripping the strap of the diaper bag with white knuckles, keeping his glare fixed on the closed lift door.

Sherlock sighs with exasperation, but keeps his voice neutral.

“He had yellowing, tobacco-stained fingernails. A fatty middle. A flask hidden behind the tongue depressors. All indicate unhealthy habits despite his line of work. Also, the texts on his shelf were fifteen years out of date. I don’t want someone like that giving me health advice about our daughter.”

John huffs to himself, shaking his head with bewildered exasperation.

“He has excellent credentials. A gentle demeanor. I swear, Sherlock, if you can’t live with the 7th, I’ll have to doctor this child myself.”

“And what’s wrong with that? You’re an excellent doctor.” The lift dings, the doors slide open, and they hastily move their argument inside its private confines

“I didn’t study babies!” John snaps, punching a finger on the button for the ground floor.

“Can’t be that hard,” Sherlock drawls. “I bet I could do it.”

John turns sharply, finally looking at him.

“You’ve been angling for this the whole time. I see that now.”

Sherlock turns his focus to the baby, avoiding John’s fierce gaze.

“I… I admit I am very particular when it comes to her care.”

There is a beat. John blinks hard, takes a small step back, the anger changing course in mid-
“You mean,” John says very softly, his fire extinguished, “– you mean her safety.”

Sherlock cringes, his voice is barely a whisper.

“Yes.”

The lift pauses to admit an elderly woman in a blue cardigan. They budge over to give her space and smile politely as she coos at the baby, then studies the two fathers with a too-curious look they are becoming very familiar with.

John reflexively takes Sherlock’s hand, puffing up his chest a little to speed along her assumptions. To his surprise, the woman grins at him, giving him a shy little thumbs-up as she gets off at the next floor down. He smiles a little, then sighs into the silence.

“I’ll pick up some texts, brush up on pediatrics, if it will make you feel better.”

Sherlock’s eyes jump to him and he bites his lips.

“I… could try a seventh. I can’t pack her in a bubble.”

John studies him with a pained look. He stands on tiptoe to kiss him over Lissa’s head, then nuzzles the downy top of the baby’s smooth cranium.

“Okay,” he hums, “we’ll try a seventh.”

…

March 12th

“Gents, we’ll be fine, us ladies,” Edith coos in her Irish brogue, cuddling Melissa. The baby’s wide, blue eyes try to focus on the mass of curly hair above her in the carrier, swatting a small, pudgy hand at a loose strand and tugging hard. “Ow! Wow, great grip, sweetie! Molly, babe, do you have a hair tie in your bag?”

“There are three bottles of milk ready on the top shelf,” John repeats.

“She likes to be walked about after her meals and bounced in the carrier to Vivaldi, or anything in 3/8 time,” Sherlock adds.

John brushes the baby’s cheek.

“Do try to put her down at seven, but odds are extremely good she’ll just cry, so you might need to walk her or bounce her til she gives it up—”

“Got it. Milk, bounce, Vivaldi, seven. Remember, gents, I’ve got three little siblings. Second nature, this. But never fear,” she waggles her phone at them, “we have your numbers on speed dial.”

Molly joins her on the landing with a warmed bottle, burp cloth draped over her shoulder.
Edith slides an arm around her waist. Glowing, Molly pecks her on the cheek and pulls a goofy, exaggerated face that makes Lissa coo, little hands grabbing her nose.

The dads watch this sweet tableau with misty smiles. Exctricking her nose from a pudgy fist, Molly pulls Sherlock’s scarf from the coat hook and pushes it into his hands.

“*Go,*” she demands, giving them both a little shove toward the door. “We will be *fine.* See you late. As late as you like.”

Sherlock barely has time to brush a last kiss on Melissa’s head before Molly gives him a look and shuts the door in his face. He and John stand on the landing, bewildered.

Sherlock gasps. “I didn’t tell them about the white noise–”

“No. Let’s go.” John firmly turns Sherlock to the stairs. “She’s right. We’re fussing. Come on, reservation’s in ten minutes.” He laces their fingers together as they stump down the steps to the street.

“I already *miss* her. Oh, it hurts – it’s *visceral,* John,” he groans. “I haven’t been away from her since she was *born.* Is this how you feel when you’re at the clinic?”

John holds the street door for him and they step out into the chilly evening.

“Yes. Every day,” John sighs, tugging him in the direction of a sushi place they’d wanted to try. “Come on, let’s go be those obnoxious parents who go on dates just to talk about the children.”

…

They step off the tube in Vauxhall, bellies full of sashimi and salted edamame, heads abuzz from warm saki.

“Where are we going now?” Sherlock asks.

John threads his arm through Sherlock’s, glancing up with a gleam in his eye.

“Don’t you know already? Look at me. Look around us. Goodness, all the 2am feedings are making you *soft.*”

Sherlock stops, lightly affronted, and studies John with a scowl. His attention snaps to the street. He blinks rapidly, a slow grin growing on his face.

“We’re going… dancing?” John only waggles his eyebrows and tugs him further down the pavement where a bass pulse is emanating from an industrial-style club set beneath a railway arch. “At the *Fire*?“ Sherlock suddenly swoops over John, knocking him back into a graceful dip, kissing him showily for all to see. Someone in the cue whoops at them. “John,” he whispers against his lips, “we’ve *never* gone dancing before.”

“And it’s a crime,” John giggles as Sherlock sets him back on his feet, cheeks pinched from more than the raw March air.

“The last time we even came close was…”
“When you taught me. In the flat,” John says simply. “But tonight,” he whacks Sherlock’s bum playfully, “we will not be dancing like that.”

Sherlock’s eyes positively glitter as they hasten toward the cue for the club.

…

“How are you still going?” John moans as, two hours later, they scuff along the pavement away from the club, the throng inside still pulsing to dubstep. “My feet are killing me.” He talks a little too loudly, both from one too many Manhattans as well as the auditory numbing effects of the two hours spent immersed in heavy bass. “You didn’t sit any out! God you were gorgeous. I knew you had moves, but not like that.”

“You didn’t sit out many, as I recall,” Sherlock hums contentedly, his arm twined tightly around John’s waist as they walk.

“Pfft. Woulda been a bloody feeding frenzy if I left you out there on your own. Had to stake my claim, didn’t I?”

“I’m glad you did. I love dancing with you.”

“Me and my two left feet, you mean?”

“Oh, I thought you made excellent progress this evening.”

John blushes. “I’d not’ve thought those sorts of moves were acceptable in public if the whole crowd hadn’t been doing ’em too…”

“Yes, it was very much a mating ritual for our modern times.” Sherlock leans into John’s shoulder, eyes half-lidded, a look of sweet contentment on his face. “We must do that again. Before she’s, you know, at uni.”

John snickers. “Molly sent a picture. I didn’t want to show you before, afraid it might spoil your mojo, but since we’re nearly home anyway, take a look at this.”

Sherlock’s grin slides off his face as he takes in the picture on John’s phone.

“You have got to be kidding me. Did she manipulate that?”

“Mm, not likely.”

“In her crib?”

“Asleep since 7:30, out like a light, perfect angel, all that.”

“But when I put her in there she screams bloody murder!”

“Well, that’s because you’re her Dada,” John shrugs, hugging him a little closer as they scuff along the pavement beneath the streetlights, breath puffing in the chilly air. “She knows she can bend you to her wants.” He chuckles. “I don’t expect that will end anytime soon.”

Sherlock giggles. “It’s only eleven. The ladies are likely enjoying their time playing mums.
Let’s pop over to one more place before we turn in.”

“Oh? Where?”

Sherlock tips his head slightly so he can see John’s eyes.

“Don’t you know? Not going soft, too, are you?”

Sherlock steers him through the gates of Regents Park, the trees shadowy above domes of lights dotting the path, the city skyline glittering.

John raises his eyebrows and grins.

“Our… tree?”

Sherlock gives him a little squeeze.

“This going to become our new trysting spot?” John grins mischievously.

“A brilliant deduction,” Sherlock hums close to his ear, and their steps quicken.

...

April 5th

I’m such an idiot. I never should have gone.

Sherlock shoves a handful of notes at the cabbie and erupts onto the pavement gripping his overnight bag. He dashes for the door of 221B, all of his senses alert.

Knocker still askew as I left it. No sign of forced entry.

In the entryway, he pauses for the space of one deep breath to get his bearings and settle his pounding heartbeat. This is no way to approach a potential crime scene. He needs to be calm and focused and see everything.

Hudders. Her flat is silent, umbrella gone from the stand, only the residual scent of apples and cinnamon to indicate baking within the last five hours. He’d phoned her flat a dozen times today, each unanswered ring adding fuel to his panicked thoughts.

Suddenly Sherlock scowls, groaning. Idiot. It’s Thursday – she would have gone over to Mrs. Turner’s that morning for their weekly, her baking in tow. Nothing alarming there.

So why hasn’t John been reading his texts since 10:06 last night? Why has he sent him nothing? Til then, there’d been a steady stream of Lissa photos, anecdotes, complaints, and an occasional saucy suggestion. It had all ended very abruptly at 10:07.

Dead battery? Impossible, John is meticulous about keeping their phones charged, in the event they ever need to call for an emergency. He’d even bought extra chargers and left them near spots they tended to get stuck under their sleeping baby. Sherlock always texted John at the clinic when
Melissa was asleep on him – it was a whole new playing ground for flirting – and John had caught on to the habit.

It’s been raining since Sherlock left on Tuesday, but no boot prints mark the boards, not that he’d expect John to have gone out with the baby in this weather, but perhaps if she’d gotten sick… but if she had, he certainly would have texted him. He’s stayed in. So why the silence? A dozen horrible scenarios fly through his mind’s eye and he banishes them to the catacombs of his mind palace. Go away, you’re not helping.

He tiptoes up the stairs to the flat, sidestepping the two that creak, and silently opens the door, bracing himself for… what? A murder scene? A kidnapping? Sudden untimely death? The flat is in the same state of disarray as when he left two days ago. No infant crying, which is in itself suspicious. Melissa has been inconsolable for days – even his inexplicable ‘baby magic’ had not been helping their child. Colic, the new pediatrician had said, and asked if they’d heard of the 5 Ss, which of course Sherlock had. She’d even praised them for pursuing the milk bank. Sherlock had liked her immediately.

But John had insisted that he go to the conference anyway.

‘Mrs. Hudson can give me a break if it keeps up,’ John had soothed. ‘It won’t do any good to have us both sleepless and ineffectual. Go, mingle with the bee people. Come home refreshed and I promise I’ll hand her over and take a nap.’

No texts could mean she’d been in a fit of crying that had gone on for hours before falling asleep, but Melissa never slept past 5:30am. He should have gotten sleepy baby pictures this morning. Instead, just more maddening silence.

Sherlock’s eyes take in the chaos of the sitting room. Little has changed – the basket of laundry to be folded is slightly emptier; the blanket on the couch is rumpled into a ball; the white noise machine is on, soothing no one. A new empty tea mug on the coffee table catches his eye and he stoops close. The cup is empty, the level of the tea marked three times on the interior of the cup, indicating it had been forgotten over several hours and drunk even when cold. He rubs his finger along the inside with a squeak. The rings don’t budge, so it’s over 12 hours old. John would have had tea this morning. Where’s the mug?

Sherlock suddenly hears a faint buzz and pounces on the sofa, pushing his fingers between the cushions to retrieve John’s mobile from its depths, 2% of its battery remaining and each and every text from the last night and today waiting to be read.

His heart squeezes with worry and, pocketing the phone, all stealth forgotten, he runs to their bedroom. Bedclothes rumpled, but no sign of a struggle. No John, either. He takes the stairs to the nursery two at a time and finds–

John. In the rocker. Asleep. Melissa peacefully sleeping on his chest, snuggled close in her carrier.

Safe.

Sherlock slumps against the doorframe as the stupid, blind relief floods him. Of course they’re safe. Idiot. Spun yourself into a right state for nothing.

John suddenly rouses, blinking blearily. He sees Sherlock in the doorway and grins with such sweetness that Sherlock rushes in, but John holds up a cautioning hand that stops him in his tracks. John nods lightly to the sleeping baby and gives him a wide-eyed expression that clearly says, ‘For
the love of god, do not wake her.’ Sherlock slips off his shoes and sock-pads to him, pressing a hard kiss to his temple.

“Home early?” John whispers, gripping Sherlock’s back in his best attempt at a hug slouched in the rocker beneath their sleeping baby. “Didn’t expect you til tonight.”

“I… nothing interesting on this afternoon.”

John studies him wisely. “No, you left early. You were worried. About us.”

Sherlock blushes and ducks his eyes. “I don’t know why I try to hide anything from you.” He hands John his phone. “I didn’t hear from you since last night. I… may have jumped to conclusions.”

“Oh shite, where was it? I misplaced it ages ago.”

“In the sofa, between the cushions.”

John soothes his free hand over Sherlock’s back and cranes his neck to kiss him.

“I’m so sorry I worried you. I’ve been in such a fog. She’s been crying for hours at a time, tiny fitful naps in between – finally crashed after a feed. She missed you.”

With a little mewl, Melissa startles in her sleep and John swears under his breath. The baby blinks awake.

“I’ll go warm up a bottle–”

“No, she needs you.” John kisses her on the nose. “Hey sweetie,” he hums gently to her. “Feel better? That was a nice nap, let’s do that again sometime, hm? Got a beautiful surprise for you, look who’s back.” Sherlock helps him unfasten the carrier and gently cradles her to his own chest, the milky scent of his sleepy baby flooding him with relief. John stands and stretches, neck vertebrae popping audibly, groaning as he arches his stiff back.

“I wouldn’t say no to a neck massage later,” he says over his shoulder as he walks stiffly to the stairs.

As Sherlock snuggles her, swaying from foot to foot, the bitter ball of fear and tension loosens. He kisses her smooth, round cranium and nuzzles her nose with his own, feeling a trifle silly to have raced out of the conference.

He wonders when this will ease, the panicky feeling always lurking behind the sweetness of their days, the fear that safe things are not as they seem, that Rosamund is conspiring against their happiness. Perhaps install a camera in the flat... Get Hudders a mobile. Careful to keep his chin stubble from rasping her skin, he kisses Lissa’s downy head and realizes she’s in need of a fresh nappy. We’re fine. She’s fine. Sherlock pushes the nagging fear back down into the catacombs.

He follows John downstairs, kissing the back of his neck as he passes through the kitchen to her changing table tucked beneath the cow skull. Lissa babbles ‘ahbp ahbp ahbp’ over and over, waving her hands as Sherlock deftly cleans and dresses her in a soft blue button-up sleeper. He marvels that she doesn’t cry during the usually-loathed procedure.

He listens to her little repetitious sound, watches her flapping arms.

“My dear, I do believe you have passed through your eight-week transition into pattern recognition. And what a lovely brain development that is. Oh, the wonders the world has in store for you. John! Look at this! Lissa’s studying her own sound patterns.” Sherlock bends close and babbles
back to her, matching her rhythm. She whacks at his face with delight.

John comes to him, burp cloth draped over a shoulder and, threading his arms around Sherlock’s middle, beams wearily down at their contented child.

“That’s brilliant. She’ll be humming Vivaldi any day. Think she’s through the rough patch, then?”

“Ahb-ahb-ahb! Perhaps. There’s another coming, of course. Week 18, get ready for her to start dropping her toys over and over.”

“Why?”

“She’ll be experimenting with long-term events.”

“Ah. And crying nonstop? Refusing to be put down?”

“Generally. It’s how they cope with major mental transitions. It’s a sign of trust, John, that she seeks us out to help her feel safe in her alarmingly changing world.”

*More alarming than you even realize, love. But I’ll keep you safe.*

Settling with her on the sofa, Sherlock accepts the cloth and warmed bottle from John, who plops into his chair and props his head on his arm to watch them with sleepy, half-hooded eyes.

“I am sorry I worried you, but I admit I’m grateful you’re back. We both missed you. How was it?”

John doesn’t mention what Sherlock had feared. What they both fear. He knows. They don’t speak of it. Most days they can ignore it well enough.

Holding the bottle for the hungrily-suckling baby, Sherlock shrugs.

“Boring, most of it. Very little I hadn’t already learned myself. Met this one interesting bloke from Brighton, though, who had a much-discredited theory I was very curious to hear about.”

He talks at length about the man’s theory of cyclical population collapse. Setting the empty bottle down on the coffee table and easing Melissa onto his shoulder for a burp, he realizes John is fast asleep, face pressed against the arm of his chair. He smiles softly, gently patting the baby’s back.

“Now, Lissa-Bee, you must understand that it is most inappropriate behavior to keep your Papa up for hours on end like this.” The baby gives a tremendous belch and Sherlock settles her on his lap, propping her up against his knees.

Clutching his index fingers in her strong fists, her big blue eyes widen to focus on his face as she gives him a toothless smile that could be gas, or could be happiness. Either way, it makes him grin at her with a ridiculous pulse of affection.

“I’m sure you would love to know more about his theory. Well then, since you asked, I’ll tell you.”

…
May 10th

In the darkness of their bedroom, the baby monitor chirps to life. Melissa’s distorted, reedy cry snaps John from his sleep with a jolt.

He moves to roll out of bed, but Sherlock is already awake, gently pressing him back down.

“Sleep,” he says croakily, pecking a quick kiss to his temple. John starts to protest, but Sherlock has already launched from the bed, dressing gown swirling out the door, leaving just a warm spot on the mattress. Glad as John is to stay horizontal, he wishes it held Sherlock, instead.

He glances blearily at the bedside clock – 1:47am. She’ll have her bottle and Sherlock will fall asleep with her on the sofa, or in the rocker, and he won’t see him again till morning. Not that John will be awake to miss him, but still, he misses waking up next to him.

All things in time, he muses, but wonders sleepily if it would feel different if they’d had ages and ages of time, just the two of them, before becoming parents.

Sherlock’s soft baritone floats tinnily through the monitor, singing in Italian. It’s one of Lissa’s favorites. Just another thing he can thank their baby for – helping him discover Sherlock’s singing voice. Tomorrow’s Sunday. I’ll ask Mrs. Hudson to take her for a long walk, have an hour or so with him, all to myself.

John’s thoughts drift down various desultory avenues and soon he’s snoring lightly.

…

No.

This can’t be happening again.

The freezing water is up to his chin and climbing rapidly. He struggles against chains restraining each arm and leg.

How did I get back here? This isn’t real –

John pulls against his bonds, feeling the water creep up his face. It’s cold and wet. The chains pinch painfully at his skin.

Feels bloody real.

“Sherlock!” he cries, the single shout bouncing around the walls of the mossy well just as the rising water surges higher, covering his mouth and nose with a garbled choke. He thrashes, his whole head under water, his breath tight in his chest.

It’s not supposed to end like this. He should be here.

Panic is lancing through his limbs. John holds his breath painfully, fighting against the chains. Giving one last fierce tug, his right arm suddenly breaks loose from the chain, fist clenched, arcing out of the water and through the air –
– as the nightmare jolts abruptly into waking.

In the split instant that John feels a flood of relief, his fist, still flying, punches solidly into something warm and meaty.

There is a grunt, a loud metallic clatter, and John is leaping out of bed, gasping. Someone is sprawled on the bedroom floor in the dim light of the hallway.

*Oh christ, I’ve hit him, shite shite–*

Confused by the blurred, panicked realities of dream and waking, guilt crashing into his gut, John scrabbles over the bed to help Sherlock up, babbling, “I’m so sorry love oh my god are you okay please be okay–”

He skids to a stop, sucking in his air, panic exploding in his brain as he sees not his husband sprawled on the floor, but –

His wife.

*Jesus, fuck, fuck –*

With a wild pulse of horror, John throws himself onto Rosamund’s prostrate form as she stirs, regaining consciousness. He pulls her arms tightly behind her back and finally finds his voice.

“SHERLOCK!”

He hears scrabbling over the baby monitor, a muffled “John?” as if Sherlock has just woken.

*Lissa will cry. Rosamund’s going to hear her. She’s come for her Jesus no no –*

Rosamund struggles against him. John roars at her, pushing her into the floor with all his strength. With no warning, Rosamund flips John off effortlessly, his head crashing into the bedside table. He sees bright spots and grits his teeth against the pain. Scrabbling to face her, he suddenly freezes, crouched against the mattress, as he hears the distinct click of a gun.

“Stop–” he gasps.

“Shut up!” she hisses, aiming a kick at his ribs and pushing the gun into the back of his head.

In the frenzy of his panic, a calm, quiet voice cuts through. He’d been expecting this. And here it is, at last.

*This is it, then. This is how she wins. Shoots us in our sleep. Takes our child.*

*Well, cocked that up a bit for her, didn’t I?*

But even if she’s been slightly deterred, even if Sherlock is coming to his aid, he’s half-awake, unarmed. Rosamund still has the upper hand.

In that instant, Melissa begins to cry, a plaintive keening over the monitor. The pressure of the gun against his head softens as Rosamund hears the cries of her baby.

*She’ll kill us. She’ll take her. They’ll never find them again.*

Suddenly he hears Sherlock’s feet thundering down the stairs.

But… he knows they’ve both been quietly fearing this for months.
Sherlock will think fast, if I can warn him –

Throwing away all caution, the gun still pressed to his head, John bellows, “She’s got a gun!”

Despite the forewarning, or perhaps because of it, the door explodes open and Sherlock charges in, hair sleep-mussed and dressing-gown flapping, eyes wild. He slams his hand on the light switch, blinding them.

_Curious choice of weapon, but well-played._

John feels the pressure of the gun disappear as she aims at Sherlock.

John has seconds. He is hunched over, briefly forgotten, cradling his head with one hand, his other out of sight. He slides it deftly beneath the mattress and boxspring.

_She’ll draw it out a bit, now she has us at her whim, defenseless. One last humiliation._

Sherlock is stuttering at her, begging, hands half-raised.

“You sons of bitches,” she whispers menacingly. She’s in baggy cleaner’s coveralls squinting against the bright light, face haggard and drawn. “Tore my child from my body. Stole her from me. _No more._”

“How did you escape?” Sherlock blusters, the tiniest flick of his eye to John speaking volumes.

_He’s giving me time._

She ignores him, her eyes on the monitor as the baby’s cries become hiccupy. Melissa has never gone this long before without one of them coming to her aid. It twists John’s heart.

_Can’t cock this up. She’s too little. She won’t remember us._

Crushed beneath the mattress, John’s left hand closes on metal. He squeezes his eyes shut with relief. He has one more second, maybe two.

“I’d so looked forward to killing you in your sleep,” Rosamund baits, “but now, now I see, this is so much better. John dear, don’t fret, you won’t be without him for long.” From the corner of his eye, John sees her aim wobble. The baby’s cries appear to be affecting her precision. “Sherlock,” she hisses, steeling herself, “this time I won’t miss.”

There is a blur of motion by the bedside table.

Two shots explode in the room. The bedroom light shatters in a spray of glass and everything goes dark.

“JOHN!”

…

Sherlock lunges into the dark to where he’d last glimpsed John crouching. _Two shots._ There is a terrible roar in the room as he scrabbles on the floor, his head colliding with the mattress. He realizes what he’s hearing is his own voice, a growling rage spilling from him that he can’t stop. He feels hands grip him in the dark, John – _John_ is suddenly there, close, gasping his name.
She’s shot you – I have to get an ambulance – she’s still in here – and Melissa – I have to –

“Sherlock!” John’s face bumps against his in the dark, his hands pressing urgently to his chest, running along his limbs, his voice pitched too high. “Where are you hit? Jesus, where?”

As John’s hands pat over him, realization dawns, and with it, a bubble of hope.

“You’re not hit, John?” he gasps. “You’re okay?”

“I’m fine – you, where–”

“What? No – she didn’t get me–”

“Then–” John whirls out of his arms and Sherlock springs to his feet, fumbling for the bedside lamp, Melissa’s cries still howling through the monitor. In the sudden glow of soft light, Sherlock sees the gun still gripped in John’s hand. He follows the trajectory of John’s bullet, realizing his error.

Rosamund is crumpled on the bedroom floor, her weapon – heavy, security-guard issue – loosely held in her fingers. Her body is limp.

Lifeless.

Sherlock watches, rooted to the spot as his synapses carry the information sluggishly to his brain.

We didn’t fail. It’s over.

The pool of blood growing around her and the gore on the wall seem abstract, something from a case file he’s ferreted away in his mind palace. The cool, calculating consulting detective sees the window she’d climbed through, somehow scaling the wall. It sees the deep red mark on her temple, from John’s fist. It admires the speed and precision of John’s shot. It looks perfectly planned, though they had never spoken a word.

John steps gingerly through the shattered glass on the floor, crouching by her side. He’s taking her pulse, looking at her with a mixture of disgust and rage and pity, closing her wide, horrified eyes with a brush of his fingertips. His chest is heaving.

Then he is standing, his shoulders squared, jaw set. He glances at the gun in his hand as if he’d forgotten he’d been holding it, places it gingerly on the bed. And then he is pulling Sherlock out of the room.

He follows mutely, his brain suddenly coming back online. They’re running up the stairs into Melissa’s nursery, rushing to the howling, red-faced infant, indignant in her crib. He scoops her up, hushes and bounces her as John wraps himself around them both, one hand cupping the back of her soft head, uttering a soft string of relieved profanity.

They stand locked in this fierce embrace until Melissa begins to calm. Sherlock’s mobiles pings. He tugs it out of his dressing gown pocket and sneers at it with disgust.

“Mycroft is alerting me that Rosamund was just discovered to have escaped her high-security prison. Our security will be tripled.”

There is a sudden flurry of banging on the door downstairs that makes them both jump.
“Just stay with her, soothe her,” John says, “I’ll take care of it.”

“No, I’m staying with you.”

John doesn’t protest. Together they run downstairs, Melissa burrowing her tired little face into Sherlock’s chest.

“It’s okay, you’re safe now, ‘Bee, you’re safe…” he coos, over and over, as much for her benefit as theirs.

John unbolts the door and Geoffrey storms into the flat looking furious and somehow smaller in his civilian clothes, gun drawn.

“Misters Watson-Holmes—”

“Stand down, Geoffrey,” Sherlock says wearily. “She’s in the bedroom, quite indisposed.”

Baffled and put-out, their security giant bolts down the hall, his gun still drawn. John hears him curse and begin talking rapidly into his watch-phone.

Sherlock becomes aware that, while he’s standing rooted to the sitting room floor, rocking their drowsy baby, John has begun to pace, his left hand clenching, the tiniest trace of a limp in his leg. The immediate threat seems to have passed, but there is still work to do.

He confronts John mid-pace and crushes him into a hug.

“We’re okay,” he whispers. When John doesn’t respond, he steers him to the couch.

“Sit,” he orders gently, ensuring John obeys by easing the dozing Melissa into his arms. Sherlock squeezes next to him, holding him tightly, as much of his body touching John’s as possible.

They wait, just breathing together, waiting for the wave of authorities to invade their nest.

…

_He’s holding me together._

Around the solid grip of Sherlock’s arms, John feels the shock covering him like a heavy drift of snow, sound and sensation coming from far away. Melissa is dozing on his bare chest in her striped green and white sleeper. He looks down at her as if from a great height, at all of them, his little family knotted together, the sofa like a raft adrift in a chaotic sea.

A single thought has worked its way through the gauze.

_The nightmare._

As if Sherlock is reading his thoughts, he mutters close to his ear,

“You struck her. In your sleep. That’s what turned the tables. She never saw that coming.”

_He wants me to talk, to process this. Christ, why did I start sending him to Ella?_

“How did you know?”
“Obvious. She had a mark on her temple, I saw it as soon as I entered the room. I know how hard you hit in your sleep, John. It gave you time to call out, wake me upstairs. You must have thought you’d hit me, at first. That must have been awful.” He gently strokes John’s back, and John takes a moment to marvel at this, the two of them working through a horror together, for once not driven apart to suffer separately. *This time, we get to do it properly.*

Sherlock reaches out, lightly touching the bleeding cut that’s begun to swell on John’s forehead. “She knocked you into the bedside table.”

“She would have shot me then, right then, but Melissa began to cry.” He kisses the sleeping baby’s head. “It froze her, for a moment. Just a moment.”

“I’d heard you shout. I woke terrified.”

“We expected this,” John whispers.

“Yes.”

“When you came in, and hit the light, that was good. Brilliant. It startled her – gave me a moment to–”

“–pull out the firearm that’s been hidden beneath the bed.”

“Had you known?”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t say anything.”

“I… didn’t want to bring up the fear we both seemed to be living with. There is another, in the kitchen, is there not?”

“Behind the old crisps,” they say in unison, and John presses his forehead to Sherlock’s.

“Do you want ice for your head?”

“No. Don’t get up, please.” He swallows. “I didn’t know if I’d have enough time. But Melissa, poor love, she just kept crying and crying – it confused Rosamund. For an instant I was back at Magnusson’s, but this time I stood a chance. A small chance. The stakes were so much higher. *Just keep crying, love,* I thought. And I thought, too, if this doesn’t go right, it won’t be me, or you, who goes to her, soothes her.” John’s chest heaves. “And then… I aimed, I shot – I heard her gun fire and thought I was too late. The light exploded, I couldn’t tell if you were hit. God, it was horrible.”

“I feared you’d been hit, that your bullet shattered the light. But you shot an instant before she did. The force of it pushed her back, directed the trajectory of her bullet upwards–”

“Instead of into you. Jesus, Sherlock, *Jesus*…”

Sherlock grips John tighter, and realizing that his husband is shirtless and shivering, tugs the tartan blanket off the arm of the couch, pulling it around both their shoulders.

“There, shock blanket.”

John huffs a humorless laugh against Sherlock’s shoulder.
Sherlock smooths his palm over the nape of John’s neck, up into his hair, over and over, as if he could somehow massage out the horror of what John has just done for them.

…

Geoffrey returns to the sitting room looking sheepish.

“Sherlock, sir, you have my most heartfelt apologies for not being present at the time of the break-in. I was a block away on patrol, ran as fast as I could when I got the all-points notice.”

“Don’t feel responsible, Geoffrey. It worked out in the end. No one thought she was a legitimate threat anymore.” He squeezes John and murmurs softly, “Almost no one.”

Sherlock’s phone buzzes and he fishes it awkwardly from his pocket, snapping it to his ear irritably. John can just make out Mycroft’s worried voice.

“Yes, thank you, Mycroft, we know she’s in the neighborhood. As it happens she popped by to kill us and take the baby, but fortunately John’s shot her in the head. Please send a team ‘round to clean this up, hm?”

He taps the phone fiercely and tosses it onto the sofa.

“It’s not Mycroft’s fault.”

“I know. But it’s safe to be angry with him. I need to be angry at someone right now.”

Within five minutes, the flat has filled with the Moriarty’s operatives, no police for this job. Some are familiar to them. One waves. The friends we keep these days. John sinks into silence, pressing his face into Melissa’s soft, sparse hair, letting Sherlock answer their questions. Once their information is provided, they are left alone.

In a series of efficient moves reminiscent of their ambush months ago, the body is removed from the flat, bagged on a stretcher. A team is cleaning the glass and gore from the bedroom. Another repairs the window. Their captain is pacing around the kitchen giving orders into his phone, clearly organizing a wide search in the neighborhood and along her suspected escape route through the countryside, looking for suspicious activity that might indicate a network. The prison is abuzz with the scandal of their first escapee in a dozen years. She’s had inside help, he overhears, as the captain learns of witnesses confessing to Rosamund’s deadly coercion.

Mrs. Hudson suddenly bursts into the buzzing flat, eyes bright with alarm, still tying her fuchsia dressing gown tightly, her hair set in bright green curlers.

“Boys! What on earth is happening up here? I woke to a terrible commotion –”

“Mrs. Hudson, please – it’s alright, please sit–” Geoffrey rumbles, regaining all of his honor, in Sherlock’s eyes, as he guides her by the elbow to John’s chair and quietly appraises her of the night’s events. She cries out, wrings her hands, but listens raptly.

Sherlock pulls John closer to him, gray and mute. What he needs is sleep, but there is little chance of that tonight.

Suddenly, Mrs. Hudson is towering over them.
“You, all three of you, out of here this instant. Down to my flat.” She glares at an operative who has the good sense to look abashed. “To think of it, keeping you up here! In the midst of all this!” Her indignant fury flashes in her eyes as she helps Sherlock heave John and Melissa off the couch. Sherlock notes the tension in John’s arms. It would take a great deal of strength for anyone to pull their baby from him tonight.

The blanket slips from John’s shoulders and Sherlock tucks it around him more securely, leading him down the stairs, out of the efficient, official chaos of their flat with its horror story being scrubbed from the walls.

…

Mrs. Hudson steers them into her sitting room.

“There, best have you both out of the way of all that. No need to fuss, I have nappies down here. I’ll go up for her milk later. I doubt you’ll be able to sleep, but stretch out on the sofa, there’s a love.” She squints at John. “Let me get something to clean your cut with, dear.”

Sherlock settles them in relatively the same position they’d been in one floor up on their own couch. He is infinitely grateful for her good thinking. She’s the cleverest of us in a bad spot. With a satisfied nod, she turns abruptly to the kitchen. Sherlock hears her making tea.

Tea.

What else would you do when your sons have nearly escaped murder and kidnapping?

“John—” Sherlock breathes into his ear, once they’re alone. “It’s okay. We’re okay.”

John shudders, eyes squeezing, and Sherlock holds his breath, waiting.

“I know. It’s just... there were so many what ifs. I… I just keep running it all through my mind. What if I wasn’t having a nightmare? I wouldn’t have hit her, she’d have killed me in my sleep, then you. What if I’d never hid that gun. I’d have been as defenseless as I was at Magnusson’s. She’d have shot you. You’d be dead. What if Lissa hadn’t started crying – I wouldn’t have had time to get my gun.” He shudders. “It’s all so much chance.”

“John, love—” Sherlock squeezes him tightly, dimly aware of the whistling kettle in Mrs. Hudson’s kitchen, “You were brilliant. You kept your head.” Melissa makes a soft honking hum in her sleep. “You saved us.”
Healing

May 24th

Sherlock wakes alone in bed. He lays for a moment, blinking in the dim light, his limbs taking up much too much of the mattress. He listens to the hum of traffic below on Baker Street.

5:30am. Time to find John.

He disentangles himself from the blankets and finds John’s dressing gown on the hook. He ties it on, enjoying the smell of him on the fabric, eyes darting briefly to the too-clean place in the corner where, two weeks ago, their nemesis was finally overcome.

They have not come out unscathed.

Shuffling down the hall, he sees his assumptions confirmed. John is asleep next to the sofa, curled into a tight ball on the floor beside Melissa’s portable bassinet, fully dressed, sleeping fitfully. An empty baby bottle is on the floor near his feet.

At least he slept.

John’s taken on the 2am feeding, saying his insomnia ought to be put to good use. Since the attack, he rarely sleeps.

Sherlock’s heart squeezes painfully at this sight. He carefully eases onto the sofa above him and, watching the tableau of his little sleeping family, tents his fingers before his lips. He studies John and thinks.

A tired groan pulls Sherlock from his mind palace. Dawn is gently filling the sitting room with cool light. Sitting up from the floor, John looks around, blinking and confused.

“Morning,” Sherlock says softly from behind him, but John jumps anyway.

“Christ, you startled me.”

“Sorry. Here, let me help you up.”

Sherlock reaches down, wincing as John flinches from his touch. Sherlock eases away as if from a skittish animal, giving him space, his breath tight in his chest. John seems unaware of what’s just happened. He leans over to check that Melissa is sleeping and absently rubs at his right shoulder.

“Sore?”

“Yea. Didn’t mean to fall asleep on the floor. Just wanted to… be close to her.”

“John, I’m going to touch your shoulder, is that okay?”

“What? Oh, sure, of course.” He frowns. “You don’t have to ask.”

Sherlock scoots until he’s sitting on the edge of the couch, John just within reach, and gently presses his fingertips into his back. He massages the tight shoulder lightly. Gradually, John unspools like a tight spring and leans back between his legs, relaxing into the pressure.
“Feels amazing.”

“Good. Here, I’m going to work on the left shoulder now, okay?”

“Sure, do that,” John leans against his legs and closes his eyes, the first smile he’s seen in days playing on his lips.

“I’ve been thinking,” Sherlock begins hesitantly. “It might be good to take a break from the flat.”

“What?” John tenses beneath his fingers, but Sherlock applies pressure until he sags against him again.

“My grandmother’s cottage. In Sussex. I want us all to go there. For a while, a long holiday. The summer, maybe,”

John blinks, still fuzzy with sleep, considering this.

“But this is our home.”

“And it will still be. But John… you bear a wound we cannot easily see. I do not believe you are going to heal well here with the memories so present.”

“Sherlock, don’t be ridiculous. I’ve had some hard nights, sure, but it’ll pass—”

“You jump at my lightest touch. We haven’t been physically close since the incident 2 weeks ago. You call off work more days than not and text me constantly when you’re gone. When you’re home you rarely let Melissa out of your sight. You haven’t slept more than a few hours at a stretch and frequently wake from nightmares. You rarely eat. You do not sleep in our room, or even go into our room for any reason you can help. Even your limp has begun to reappear at times.”

John glares at the floor, lips pressed together tightly, but doesn’t refute the string of evidence. Sherlock continues to knead his shoulders.

“I love you,” he quietly adds. “Please, let me help you.”

“Ella’s idea, this?”

“No. It’s mine. But she agreed with me, when I brought it up last Thursday. She gave me the name of a friend in Sussex, who works with trauma. You could talk to her, while we’re on our… holiday.”

After several long moments, John eases up from the floor, pulling away from Sherlock’s massage. He slides up next to him on the sofa, wrapping him in a tight hug that Sherlock had not expected. Face buried against his chest, Sherlock eases them down until they’re both laying on the couch. Sherlock pulls the blanket over them, his own internal spring releasing with the weight of John on his chest, their breathing gradually synchronizing.

They lay together for a long while, the baby making little snuffles in her sleep nearby. Sherlock thinks John may have drifted off as well, when he hears his hoarse whisper.

“You’re right. We should go.”

Sherlock rubs his fingers through John’s short, soft hair and kisses his temple.
After a week of rain, the sun burns through the fog and sets the raindrops glittering on the little ivy-covered house.

Sherlock leaves shortly after breakfast to take advantage of the good weather and see to the hives. After a few hours’ good labor, he returns from his beekeeping, sweaty and contented, to find John and Melissa in the topiary, Bee on a blanket in the grassy shade working on her downward-dog. She pushes up onto tiptoe with pudgy limbs, then clambers into a standing position using John’s knees as he chuckles at her and snaps photos with his phone.

“I’m sending these to Mrs. H next time we’re in town and get some reception. She’ll be coming on Sunday, by the way. We should all go to the shore.”

Sherlock marvels at this specimen of his husband, his cheeks tanned and ruddy, hair bleached silver-blonde, eyes crinkling with smile-wrinkles, relaxed and chuckling at their baby. He tuts cheerfully as he extricates a clod of turf from her mouth and emphatic little fist.

It hasn’t come easy, but then, Sherlock hadn’t expected the little cottage to fix John overnight.

No one has lived here for almost twenty years. He’d hired a crew to clean it and mow down the waist-high garden, but the place had felt forlorn. Gradually, the delighted cackles of their baby, the clank of dishes in the sink after breakfast, the whistle of the kettle, the rustle of newspapers, the raucous din of Melissa’s baby-sized instruments, and gradually, at night, the song of their lovemaking, began to fill the cottage with life.

Sherlock can easily imagine his wry, wise grandmother holding court in her overstuffed chair, still in its place of honor by the fireplace, a warm smile on her face.

Always knew you’d make a good father – and husband, she whispers to him.

Bit by bit, John has healed. He doesn’t jump at Sherlock’s touch, begins to surprise him with ambush-snogs while Melissa plays happily on the floor at their feet. He sleeps more regularly, aided each night by a pungent, herbal infusion Sherlock plucks from his grandmother’s overgrown perennial herb beds.

The nightmares persist longest – might not go away for ages, the counselor says – as John’s subconscious continues to rigorously, misguidedly, prepare him for impending attacks. But if Sherlock’s strong arms don’t restore peace to him in the night, he finds that his violin does.

Without ever having to discuss it, Melissa’s basinet stays in their room. They all sleep better for it. There is a smaller, adjoining bedroom Sherlock had stayed in as a boy, its single bed accommodating their late-night need for privacy.

Quite by accident, they begin to bring Melissa into the bed to sleep with them. Though no longer getting her nightly bottle, she wakes in the night wanting comfort. One night, Sherlock, unable to get her to settle no matter how much he walks her, rests on the bed with her, just to give his back a rest. They all wake the next morning, Melissa cuddled between them on the bed and realize how well they had all sleep curled together hearing one another breathe. It is well worth the occasional kick in the nose Bee might deliver in her sleep. Each day they wake to her chubby,
shining face.

At first John goes into town three days a week to talk to the counselor, then two. Now it’s just phone calls, as-needed.

He’s started journaling again in a handsome, leather-bound notebook Sherlock had picked up for him at the shops, along with a black-inked pen that writes like butter. John sits in the garden, filling its pages while Lissa crows on Sherlock’s knees for a fifty-seventh round of trot-trot to London town. John sits at the shore filling its pages while Sherlock stacks round stones for Lissa to knock down, squealing with glee. John fills the pages while Lissa sleeps next to him in the shade on Mrs. Hudson’s rainbow blanket. Sherlock attacks the weeds choking the garden, or restores his grandmother’s old hives, long in disuse and overgrown with ivy.

There is no television connection at the cottage and cell reception is abysmal, so except for the papers they buy in town, they live in a kind of timeless island, largely unaware of daily world events, consumed by the growing babble-vocabulary of their daughter, the progress of the bees, the harvesting and processing of herbs and vegetables from the garden. Even Lissa seems happier, her crying jags becoming almost a memory. John has a theory that she’d been absorbing their anxiety all those months, never quite believing them when they said all was well. Sherlock doesn’t doubt it.

Some evenings, they walk his gran’s sizable topiary garden, still in top shape. It had been bequeathed to the village and maintained by an eccentric gardener named Eleander. Though they see little of the shy man, he occasionally leaves little gifts for them – a basket of sweet buns on the doorstep, a jar of dill pickles preserved in his kitchen, a wheeled wooden dog that has become Melissa’s favorite teething accessory.

Eleander has done wonders with the menagerie. Sherlock leaves him five jars of freshly-harvested honey as a small token of his thanks. One evening, while they stroll the paths, John brushes his hands over the conifer mermaids, memory dawning in his eyes, and turns to Sherlock, his voice wistful.

“He’d be so proud of you, of us, you know.”

Sherlock doesn’t have to ask who he means. He ducks his head and kisses John for a long time until Melissa protests her exclusion by grabbing at their cheeks.

Sherlock senses a shift as the August nights became cooler, the vines in the topiary garden turning vivid red, the beach stormy, reflecting their own sudden restlessness.

John writes to Mrs. Hudson that they’ll be back the first of September. Sherlock has found another research position with an apiary in London. They want him to work with a certain fellow from Brighton, testing a theory about cyclical population collapse accelerated, as Sherlock speculates, by manmade environmental factors.

After the incident, John had quit the surgery, much to Sara’s dismay. To Sherlock’s delight, John announces at dinner one night that he’s been offered a position with a team of first responders back in London, three nights a week, just at first.

Good. He needs to get back to saving, using his skills to push back at the chaos.

The hives are settled for the winter. The house is closed up snug. They cram the last of their bags, Melissa’s impossibly large collection of stuff, and a dozen jars of honey into the boot of the rental.

As they drive down the lane, John grips Sherlock’s thigh.
“We should go back next summer. Every summer we can. It doesn’t feel like home, exactly. It’s a kind of paradise. I want Melissa to grow up knowing this. It’ll help keep us right.”

John notices a light kindling in Sherlock’s eyes as they drive through crowded London toward Baker Street. The hum and bustle of the city is a little alarming to him at first, and he feels Sherlock’s eyes on him more often, assessing his state.

“I’m fine. It’s good to be back. Haven’t had a proper curry in months.” The joke seems to soothe Sherlock.

“I’ll run to the shops tomorrow, there won’t be a drop of food in the flat. We can get takeaway tonight.”

Pulling up to the curb, they swiftly change gears from the long, meditative drive into the flurry of unpacking the car. John is sure to give Sherlock the task of handling Melissa as he grapples with a heavy suitcase. Sherlock had cut his thumb rather badly pruning the raspberry canes before they’d left, and John is enjoying babying him a bit.

“Oh, love, before you bring Bee to Mrs. Hudson, she said something about a leak in 221C. Could you pop over quick and see what she’s on about?”

Dutifully, Sherlock carries Melissa into the hall, John close behind, thumping down the suitcase.

“John, I was thinking we should get tamarind duck from that place, you know, with the dumplings – oh! Melissa’s eating solid food now! She can have her first proper London dumpling! And then–”

Whatever culinary trifle Sherlock is about to describe fades on his lips as he pushes open the door to 221C, his eyes taking in the new cast-iron bee knocker.

Wait for it… wait for it…

Of all their years together, John will always delight in recounting this moment, the one and only time he was able to surprise Sherlock Holmes. (Sherlock begs to differ – he claims he hadn’t been expecting their first kiss, not at all.)

“John, what – Has Mrs. Hudson taken on a new tenant?”

John smirks wickedly, watching Sherlock’s deductions run and run as he tries to make sense of the shining stainless steel workbench, the shelves of his apiary books neatly arranged in his preferred order, his microscope perched proudly on the bench in front of a comfortable lab stool. All of Sherlock’s chemistry paraphernalia – and several pieces John had Molly help him purchase new so he’d stop nicking them from Bart’s – are neatly organized in rows and on shelves.

John has even had the walls decorated with a few framed pieces – a degree Sherlock had hidden away in the closet, several photos of Melissa as a baby and a more recent one of the three of them on the shore. And, most prominently, a photo Mycroft had found of Sherlock, aged fourteen, grinning into the camera next to their handsome, somewhat scruffy eldest brother, their arms around the other’s shoulders, clearly laughing at some private joke.
“John—” Sherlock breathes. It is utterly worth the last two months of subterfuge to see the look of genuine, deeply-touched surprise on Sherlock’s face. “You… you did this for me? I had no idea – no idea at all—” John ruefully notes that this seems to both please and vex him.

“Obviously, I’d never have been able to pull it off if we’d been living here. But still, I had to be really careful. Molly and Mrs. H handled all the heavy lifting, the contractors and equipment and such, with a little guidance from me—”

John’s words are abruptly cut off as Sherlock swoops in, snogging him hard, Melissa trilling delightedly on his hip.

“I take it you like it,” John whispers, breathless, when Sherlock finally breaks away, his eyes wet.

“It’s perfect,” he hums, and brings Melissa within range of the bench. “Bee, love, let Dada show you how to look through a microscope.”

Melissa very seriously considers the large, black and shiny object placed within her reach. Beneath a shock of white-blond hair, a little frown line appears on her brow that Sherlock says makes her look just like John. She pulls herself toward the eyepiece of the microscope and begins to stoically teeth against the hard metal. Sherlock beams at her, then carefully pulls her off and hands her the wheeled wooden dog from her bag.

“Actually, Bee, that ones for your eyes, but I’m sure we can set up a very interesting taste experiment for you with samples from our takeway tonight.”

She happily accepts the trade, drool coating her chin and the toy. Her eyes suddenly lock onto something and she lunges her upper body toward it. Sherlock places her on the floor, grinning as she speed-crawls to the case of butterfly and bee specimens on the wall, tugging herself onto her feet and whacking a moist hand against the plexiglass. Sherlock crouches down to recite the genus and species for her.

“Funny,” John grins fondly, watching them. “I designed this as a place you could be alone, spread out your poisons and breakables without Melissa being underfoot, but I see now. She’ll be joining you down here as soon as she can hold a pipette.”

“She’ll be the first in her preschool to classify acids and bases from common kitchen ingredients,” Sherlock says fondly.

John’s phone pings. He smirks, reading the text.

“It’s Lestrade. Did you text him we were coming home? ‘Hi gents, welcome back. Would very much appreciate if I could come by for tea asap, if you understand my meaning.’ Guess I’d better order enough for three.”

Sherlock’s eyes glitter. “A new lab and a case—” he holds up a hand summarily – “to advise of course, strictly to advise.” He leaps to his feet and pulls John into a classic ballroom spin, hugging him to his chest. “Oh love,” he sighs, “it’s Christmas.”
“Dada, Lyra’s whiskers tickle!”

Sherlock looks up from the clutter of papers on his worktop and smiles at the sight of Lissa feeding the rats, the latest addition to the family, the brown one cupped in her hands. His daughter’s face glows in the brightly-lit lab with its warm, honey-colored walls. Outside, rain pours down, the gray day just visible from the half window set high in the wall of the basement flat-turned-lab.

“Don’t squeeze, she can nip.”

“I’ll be careful,” Lissa says soberly, the familiar serious expression creasing her brow beneath the flyaway strands of pale hair that have come loose from her braid.

Sherlock resists the urge to stand and push the wayward hair behind her ear, but she’s in serious scientist mode and wouldn’t appreciate the coddling gesture.

It’s a big day. For her 5th birthday, Sherlock had promised to let her run the rats through their new maze. He’d been up very late making adjustments to the serum they’ll be testing. He doesn’t want to hope too much, but as his eyes flick to the framed photo of he and Sherrin, laughing into the camera, his stomach grips with nerves. He’d given the rats their dosage early this morning. He tells himself not to be hopeful, to exhibit detached, even-tempered scientific behavior for Lissa’s sake. And his own.

“Ready yet, Dada? Ready? Look, I’ve got my safety goggles on, and my laboratory gloves. And I know not to squeeze the rats, I do, I’ll be so gentle – could I please place them into the maze when it’s time? Please? And could I please give them their reward when they’re through? The peach muffins Hudders made?”

Sherlock chuckles at her nonstop stream of questions, gets up from his stool and leans down to kiss her forehead above the incongruously oversized goggles.

“Of course, Bee. Let’s start with Lyra, since you have her out. Then Fili, then–”

“Frodo!” she squeals, because the tawny rat with the black spot near his tale is her particular favorite. “Now, Dada?”

“Yes, love. Go ahead.”

With very deliberate caution, Lissa scoops the cream-colored Lyra from her lap and walks her to the large balsawood maze they’d all constructed together last week.

“Right, Lyra,” she says very seriously to the rat, holding her up to look her in the eye. The rat sniffs her cheek. “You were tops on this maze last week. Then Dada made you forget. I bet that felt really weird. But he says there is a high prollybility that the new med’cine will help you remember. Are you ready?” The rat sniffs energetically at her nose in response, making Lissa giggle.
She looks to Sherlock, holding his stopwatch and clipboard, who nods, then places her onto the starting point. Lissa withdraws her hands quickly and watches the rat with rapt attention.

“Go on, girl,” she whispers under her breath. “You can do it.”

For a moment, Lyra does nothing but sniff, inspecting her new confines with great interest. Then, with a squeal from his daughter, the rat speeds off, taking each turning with complete confidence and accuracy.

In less than 30 seconds, she’s done it. Lissa scampers to the other end of the maze, face aglow beneath her goggles, and reaches into a pocket of her little lab coat (a birthday gift from Mycroft) for a crumbly lump of muffin. She watches with frank adoration as the little rat devours her prize.

“She did it, Dada! Can I text Papa?”

“He’s out in the ambulance right now, love. Why don’t we wait and give him a full report when he comes home for tea.” He watches the storm clouds form in her eyes and smoothly crouches down by her side, their eyes level. “I know it’s difficult to keep good news inside, but it’ll be a really good story if we wait just a bit.”

She bites her lip, frowning.

“You can show him Lyra running the maze all by yourself, if you like.”

Lissa suddenly beams at this, nodding vigorously. He breaths a little sigh of relief to have avoided a powerful bout of temper that would have put off the rest of the experiment for at least an hour.

Lissa has retained a passionate, fiery temperament that he and John find admirable, if exhausting.

Sherlock, for his part, tries to contain his astonishment. The new serum is completely different from the version he’d used on Sherrin so many years ago, following a line of research he’d read about last summer at the Cottage, kindling his curiosity and, bit by bit, pulling him out of his stubborn fear.

Perhaps… with the right research partners, with the right group backing him, perhaps it would be alright to play mad scientist…

“Dada,” Lissa startles his reverie, looking up at him from beneath her serious brows as she gently places Lyra back into the terrarium. “That was good. But we need more data. I’ll get Fili out next.”

Sherlock honestly can’t tell what brings him more joy that drizzly afternoon in 221C – the hint that his formula may have promise, or his daughter exhibiting such excellent scientific behavior.

... 

July 3rd, 2020, the Cottage
John and Sherlock sit reclined in bed, leaning on pillows propped against the headboard in a warm pool of light. Outside the cottage, rain patters in the darkness, tapping on the leaves of the nasturtiums growing in profusion from a flowerbox below the window.

Sherlock has removed his reading glasses and rests against the pillows with his eyes closed, face relaxed as he listens to John reading from the black, leather-bound journal he’d given him four summers ago.

He’d never asked John what he wrote in it. Never peeked. John had seemed to appreciate this. That night, after Lissa had finally fallen asleep in the next room aided by six books, three songs, a cuddle, a kiss, and a fist-bump, John had held up the journal and said, ‘It’s time.’ Sherlock had been shocked.

“I think I’m finally ready to share this with you. I thought of giving it to you to read on your own, but it feels better this way, reading it out. We can experience it together.”

“John,” Sherlock hums, his throat tight with emotion. “Of course, yes – whatever it is, I want to hear it.”

John smiles shyly. “It’s… well, it’s our story.” And with a quick clearing of his throat, almost as if he’s nervous that if he doesn’t start immediately he’ll lose his courage, John begins.

His voice warms and mellows after the first few sentences. Sherlock closes his eyes, losing himself in the tale that is so familiar, so beloved, but so fresh when told through John’s eyes.

…

The crickets and katydids are creaking in the darkness. John is on the last page.

“Sometimes I wake in a panic and I forget. I think he’s still gone. I think she’s still here. But then I’ll hear him breathing in his sleep, feel his back pressed up against mine, and I remember with a wave that tumbles me with the relief of it. He’s safe. He’s here. He loves me.

“I roll over and hold him tightly. My fingers brush the flowering tree over his heart, the double infinity helixes on our bodies declaring what will never be hidden again.”

The little clock on the bedside reads 1:14 am. John closes the notebook with a long sigh. Sherlock hasn’t uttered a word through the whole thing, rapt, lost, deep inside the story – their story.

“Read the last part again,” Sherlock says sleepily. “Please.” He curls against John’s side.

John chuckles, combing his fingers through Sherlock’s mussed hair and kisses him.

“Okay, love. Okay.”

Chapter End Notes
I can't express enough how grateful I am to all of you for reading along with me these last 8!! months.

This has truly been a phoenix experience for me, waking my long-dormant writing. I'm overjoyed to say... it's here to stay. I love it so much. Hours melt away. I'm not afraid any more, because no matter how hard it can get, I've had this incredible experience of diligently writing for you, never sitting still, working through the hard bits and realizing so many things about the process because I HAD to get the next installment out for you!!

What a gift you have given me.

This story is my humble gift to the fan community who shares my love of the Johnlock universe. No matter what the show writers choose to do, if anything at all, I feel deeply content in my bones that the story and characters I love have been brought to a healing place in my own mama-orion way.

We will leave this Watson-Holmes family, for now. I really, really love this AU. There are so many scenes and stories still untold. Perhaps in time I'll add extra ficlets to the Watson-Holmes scrapbook.

I would love to hear if there are certain moments or stories you'd especially like to read. I love a prompt. Their night of dancing. The trysting tree. Getting their tattoos. Lissa at the frog pond with her dads. Please let me know in the comments.

In the near future I'll be posting the 'untwisted' timeline, if you're curious to see how the events unfolded without the hindrance of TD10 and TD12. I'm also going to draw their tattoo. ;)

Hugs to you all. This has been magnificent.
Appendix: Story Art

The tattoo! as part of the new cover image for Sacre Coeur I doodled up tonight with some inspiration from tattoo artists: I think this will show it!
I’m no meta-writer, lit major or johnlock connoisseur, but I had some fun weaving in a few fandom easter eggs, mirrors (cof cof Sherrin + John), symbols, and factoids. Here’s a handful I was able to find:

1. **The burning heart**

The title Sacre Coeur, or sacred heart comes from the religious symbol of a heart surrounded with flames. In this story, sacre couer is both the code name for Jim’s plan to ‘burn the heart out of Sherlock’ and reference to Sherlock’s deep love for John.

2. **John and Sherlock play Paper Rock Scissor**

Unintended easter egg!! I had no idea at the time that the Russian TV version of Sherlock is called ‘Rock, Paper, Scissor.’ This bit got written in Chapter 2 because anytime I play the game with my partner of 18 years, we usually make identical plays over and over. It occurred to me that Sherlock would always be able to deduce his opponent’s play based on their personality, previous moves, and the limited variables of the game. I thought it would be sweet for Sherrin to have made a more difficult version for Little Sherlock with chemical compounds and 2-handed plays. Shortly after writing this scene, I stumbled upon the Russian show and blustered for a while about 'the universe rarely being so lazy.'

3. **John’s Mind Tree**

When Sherlock and John share their first kiss, Sherlock creates a tree for John in his mind palace to store all of his love and memories of him. This rapidly growing, intertwining tree of life is from the Ghibli movie Totoro.

4. **Death by Tiger**

Rosamund’s father, Sebastian Moran, once-head of The Magpies and responsible for Sherrin’s death (as well as dozens of other scientists), is killed while on a tiger hunt, ultimately because Moriarty-Sherlock introduced a tiger pheromone to his jacket that instigated the deadly attack.

In the original ACD stories, Sebastian Moran was known as an expert marksman and big-game hunter.

5. **wssh1895@iol.com**

In 1993, during those innocent early days of the internet, young Sherlock’s first email address is wssh1895 for William Sherlock Scott Holmes and the year ACD first tried to kill off the beloved character, to much outcry…and brought him back. Also in 1895, a London jury sent Oscar Wilde to
prison for 2 years just for having a gay relationship. You can speculate all you want about the interconnectedness of these events. I do.

6. **The Ceasar cipher**

In Sherlock and Sherrin’s email correspondence, his message really does use the Ceasar cipher. Thank you, internet

Sherlock: Qnatre Qrfgebl nyy GQ erpbeqf Lbh xabj abguvat V nz fb fbeel V jvyy nyjnlf or cebhq bs lbh.

*Danger Destroy all Redbeard records You know nothing I am so sorry I will always be proud of you.*

7. **Lion bars**

The candybar Mycroft stress-eats in the hospital, a peanut butter Lion bar, was really a sweet sold in the UK in the early 90s.

8. **Morpheus, Greek god of dreams**

Of course Sherlock & Sherrin name their lab rat Morpheus when working on a formula to induce dreams (albeit very nasty ones). I liked to think of young Sherlock and Victor reading Neil Gaiman’s Sandman comics, starring Dream/Morpheus, right about the age I did.

9. **The Order of Chaeronea**

After Sherlock’s Fall, Mycroft begins to explain the secret organization led for hundreds of years by a Moriarty.

< “No, no,” Mycroft waves his hand irritably. “They are but a club compared to this organization. The Magpies work for them, as do hundreds of other individuals and agencies, some less savory than others. Their network is vast. Look into any major turning point in history, British or otherwise, and you will likely find this group’s fingerprints.”

“The Order of Chaeronea?” >

Cheeky Sherlock. The **Order of Chaeronea** was a secret society for the cultivation of a homosexual moral, ethical, cultural and spiritual ethos. It was founded by George Cecil Ives in 1897, as a result of his belief that homosexuals would not be accepted openly in society and must therefore have a means of underground communication.[1]

10. **Pidgey, go to water**
While there is a Triton Fountain of mermaids in Regents Park, I have no idea if little children splash in it on hot days, though I very much hope they do. On a trip to London several years ago, I overheard a little girl in Green Park chasing after a pigeon by the Canada Memorial. This bit is wholeheartedly true:

<“Pidgey, pidgey go to water!” a little girl in grubby wet shorts runs by, single-mindedly pursuing a pigeon…> 

11. “Apis mellifera mellifera – remarkable, a British Black.”

This story of the British Black bee that was nearly obliterated by the Spanish flu in 1919, but rediscovered ~100 years later in an old church, is entirely true, as were the other bee facts, brain science, London geography, and baby development I wove in. Thanks again, internet!

12. Dr. Brett

<“Egg salad for lunch, purchased from a street vendor,” Sherlock says decisively, pulling away with a quick nip on the earlobe that makes John’s breath hiss. “Birthday for one of the nurses… likely Conrad who would be the only one to want a pistachio-frosted cake. You didn’t eat your piece, but brought it home for me. Millie was out, old Dr. Brett took her place by the way his cologne lingers about your person. One wart frozen off. Five, no, six cases of influenza requiring prescription treatment.”> 

When Sherlock is deducing John’s day at work, he briefly references Dr. Brett, a teeny tiny shout-out to Jeremy Brett who so beautifully portrayed Sherlock in the 1984 TV series. Brett was my very first Sherlock and holds an iconic place in my mental story archives.

13. The goddess of bees… and my dorky baby names

<“I was thinking of Melissa – from the Greek µέλισσα for honey bee. Melissa was a nymph who learned the trick of getting honey from bees. She took care of baby Zeus, but rather than feeding the baby milk, Melissa fed him honey straight from the bees.”

“Did you bring this pigeon into the house, Melissa?” John nods appreciatively. “I like it. We could call her Lissa, too.”

“And Hamish if it’s a boy.”

“Oh, you’re a riot. How about Willy, then, if you’re so keen to drag us into it,” John chuckles. “I like Leander. And that one, from the wood elves…”

“Sylvain. It’s my favorite of the lot.”>

While it has been suggested that I keep the baby’s name Rosie in this fixit, I felt that in this remix Sherlock and John should name their child on their own. Knowing the assassin-mother was named Rosamund, they would never have considered the name ‘Rosie’ for the child as the show did. To keep Sherlock’s canon retirement into beekeeping alive and well, I thought he’d enjoy naming their daughter after the goddess of bees while becoming obsessed with Colony Collapse Disorder (the greatest murder mystery of our age).
Leander and Sylvain were in my finalist list as names for my son. A neat side effect of being a writer is getting to use all of those cool names without the additional morning sickness and diapers.

14. **Smaug and Bilbo**

< “Hey, pass me my drink, will you? I want to hear what happens to Frodo.”

“You know.”

“But I’ve never heard it through you. Your *Gollum* voice positively gives me chills.”

“You should hear my Smaug.”

“Oo, let’s read The Hobbit next.” >

I couldn’t help weaving in the UK’s most celebrated fantasy writer and one of my dear ol’ favorites. I always imagined LOTR would have captured both Sherlock and John’s imaginations as youths. This is a rather blatant nod to the actor’s roles together as Smaug and Bilbo.

15. **February 7th**

Melissa’s birth date is February 7th, 2015, five years after John blogged *A Study in Pink*.

16. **Lyra**

The lab rat in the epilogue, Lyra, is a teeny tiny shout-out to Phill Pullman’s Lyra, my other most favorite love story of all time... even though he sundered them so painfully (as he tends to do. Sally Lockhart anyone?) This injustice catapulted me into my very first fanfic over a decade ago, when I didn’t even know what fanfic was, reuniting Will and Lyra at the end of their lives in the land of the dead. I should clean it up and post it someday.

17. **The Magpies**

This secret, shady organization run by Moran & Daughter handles development work for The League and introduces the crippling events that will emotionally scar Sherlock for years. Magpies appear in the subtext of the show, connected to Moriarty – like his wax seal - and used frequently as imagery during John’s wedding (weird...). As collectors and thieves of shiny things, magpies seemed like an appropriate namesake for a group that collects brilliant scientists and researchers for their own nefarious purposes.

Thanks for reading this far, and for all of the lovely comments and support of this story. This completes the Appendices. Sacre Coeur ficlets follow! First up: Some parentlock sweetness in Pond Stomp.

~mama'orion
An entry from Sherlock’s scrapbook of mind palace memories.

“I’ve got one!” Lissa squealed, holding up the frog triumphantly, knee-deep in the pond. “Dada, look how big she is!”

Sherlock stepped off the bank into the shallow pond, the muddy bottom sucking at his tall, black wellies as he stepped with care toward his daughter. A light spring rain pattered on their raincoats, bright flashes of yellow in the gray afternoon light.

“A fine specimen of amphibian, order of *Anura.*” He chuckled. “You hold that frog any closer, Bee, you’ll soon find out if it’s a prince.”

“Or princess. Let’s keep her,” Lissa said thoughtfully, holding her squirming frog at eye level, close to her nose. “I’ll call her Anura. That’s lovely.”

Sherlock sucked in his breath, preparing himself for a fierce battle of wills.

“She’ll be happier here, Bee, where she has everything she needs.” Lissa scowled, a tremor suddenly quaking her lower lip. “You can visit Anura every day, and you’ll hear her singing from your bedroom window.”

Lissa stared longingly at the frog. Then, with a sudden shuddery breath, she nodded. “Right. I wouldn’t want someone taking me out of the cottage. Or the flat. I bet she has dads in the pond who would miss her, just like me.”

Sherlock felt a pang deep in his gut. Five years later and it was still his greatest fear that Lissa might be somehow spirited away from them, though the threat of Rosamund was gone. Though he and John didn’t speak of it, Sherlock found it very interesting that Lissa had come to this conclusion so quickly on her own.

“Well done, love, that wasn’t easy. But it was very kind.” He bent down to kiss her damp hair. “Study her a bit, see if you can find something about her you’ll recognize next time.” Lissa squinted at her wriggling frog, turning on her considerable six-year-old powers of observation.

Sherlock took a deep breath to steady his nerves. *Be present,* he reminded himself. The rain smelled good. It was so green, the ferns already towering over Bee’s head, the drooping elms and
shaggy conifers making a little haven beneath their bows where a trickling stream fed the pond. The trill of frogs had silenced as they’d approached, but as they stood quietly, his child studying the frog as if it were the first of its kind, a few brave *anura* began to chirrup again. A little more of the tension in his chest loosened.

**Sherlock** thought fondly of their first summer here five years ago, when it had been **John** who had so badly needed the solace of the cottage. Each summer found them back, pottering in the garden, running into the hedge maze after their increasingly mobile daughter, caring for the bees. There was never a question about coming, but some years, like this one, it became too easy to put off.

**Sherlock**’s work on the serum, now as senior researcher with a considerable team at his beck and call, had been at a fever pitch that spring. It had been **John** who sat him down and firmly announced that for the sake of all their health, their marriage and their daughter, they head to Sussex. Immediately. **Sherlock**, fixated on his goal of the first round of human trails, had protested, but **John** would have none of it.

“They’ll all still be here when you get back, I promise you.” He’d smirked. “Don’t worry, most of the subjects won’t even realize you’ve gone.”

“Unless it *does* work,” **Sherlock** had pressed. “All of the rats regain their memories.”

“Then you’ll want your *excellent* interns pulling their weight, gathering lots of data, and compiling it all into reports for you to review. This is what senior researchers do, love.”

“Dada? Dada! I’m stuck!” **Lissa**’s urgent voice pulled him back to the pond beneath the pine copse, his child, his husband just up the hill making tea.

**John** had been right, of course.

Still clutching her frog, **Lissa** tugged at her own little wellies, well-submerged and full of murky water. She was well and truly mired in the pond muck.

“Hold tight, Bee, I’ll give you a tug.”

**Sherlock** steadied his daughter’s shoulder, the frog seeming resigned to its captivity, and plunged a hand into the cold water to fish around for her little green boot. He located a pull-ring and with a satisfying slurch, freed each boot. **Lissa** giggled.

“That sounded *rude.*”

“Come, let’s get Anura back to her two hundred cousins for her tea. Papa’s making chowder and he’ll not be pleased if I keep you out in the rain too long.”

“Dada, I’m already wet. To my knees!” She pressed her nose to the frog’s little pointed olive-green head and gently eased it back into the water. They watched it swim away with graceful kicks.

“She had a red spot.”

“Pardon?”

**Lissa** threaded a cold, damp hand into his own. “A spot, just below her left eye. That’s how I’ll know. When I see her again. I’ll know it’s Anura.”

“Ah. Well done, Bee.”
Together they splashed back through the shallow pond, water-striders skating around their calves. As they made their way through the reeds and into the little copse of trees, Lissa’s boots sloshed comically.

“Wait, sit here a moment on this log. Let’s leave some of the pond here for the frogs, hm?” Lissa sat on the log humming while he tugged off each little boot, dumping a small pond’s worth of water into the pine needles.

“Look, Dada, jumper beans!” Before he could get the boots back onto her feet, Lissa dashed off the log, impervious to the prickly forest floor. She’d gotten solid callouses running half-wild during their holiday.

Sherlock followed, boots dangling from his fingers, and crouched next to her by a bushy hedge of jewel weed. The little orange snap-dragon flowers were bright in the gray light. Together they hunted for the fattest seed pods, crowing as the slightest pressure of a fingertip set the pods springing open, flinging the seeds in a very satisfying way.

The sodden afternoon light was fading and Lissa had scoured the patch for every last seedpod when he heard John calling from the cottage yard.

“Let’s bring one to Papa!”

Sherlock grinned. *No roses at this cottage. Here, we bring our beloveds self-propagating marsh plants.*

With Lissa’s eagle eye, they found one untouched pod and, as if the thing were a stick of unstable dynamite, pulled up the plant. Lissa delegated the tricky job of transport to Sherlock and ran ahead through the damp grass toward the cottage, the soles of her pale little bare feet flashing.

Sherlock watched as John caught sight of her bright yellow raincoat sprinting from the woods and ran out to intercept her. Boots in one hand, explosive plant in the other, Sherlock followed slowly, taking in the sight of John swinging their daughter around and around in the fading dusk, then gathering her up tight and crying in mock-dismay as he, too, was covered in pond muck.

Sherlock’s heart squeezed. Another thin layer of tension melted away as he carefully tucked the memory into the expansive topiary of his mind palace that held so many cottage moments.

When Sherlock finally reached them, John was holding Lissa, a heavy armful, snuggled close to his jumpered-chest as she bubbled with her story of Anura.

“And we brought you a hopper bean! Just for you!” Sherlock reverently held out the plant for John. Their eyes met, crinkling into knowing smiles. John ceremoniously squeezed the little pod and they all cried out as it sprung into a perfect projectile, the seed flying up over their heads.

“Thank you, Bee,” John said. “My day was missing a jumper bean. Is your day missing ginger nuts? Because I’ve just taken some from the oven.”

Cheering, Lissa squirmed out of his arms and ran across the garden, disappearing into the cottage, singing about biscuits.

Following more slowly, John and Sherlock snaked their arms around one another. John gave him a squeeze.

“Good pond stomp?”
“Yes. It was… peaceful.”

“You look refreshed. We always do seem to find our rhythm here.”

“Yes, but I was still feeling incomplete.” He pressed a kiss to John’s temple as they walked through the dripping garden toward the warm glow of the cottage. “My day was missing ginger nuts, too.”

End Notes

Find me on tumblr as mama-orion

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!